



Starting Right

A First Look at Engaging Entering Students

Acknowledgments

Sincere gratitude is due to the 22 colleges that volunteered to participate in the pilot administration of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*). These are institutions in which presidents, faculty, staff, and especially students have contributed to new learning about how community colleges work with their entering students — and how, through improvements in practice, those aspiring and diverse learners might be better served.

Further, we wish to acknowledge the pioneering contributions and valued collaboration of two respected leaders in higher education, John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot, executive director and co-director, respectively, of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, and their colleagues at the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Through this initiative, we intend to learn from and, we hope, build upon their work.

And finally, we extend special thanks to the foundations providing critical support for *SENSE*: Houston Endowment Inc., Lumina Foundation for Education, and MetLife Foundation. That support enables us to maintain a high level of quality and credibility, build toward national scale and impact, and develop an unprecedented body of useful knowledge about ways community colleges can produce more successful outcomes for larger numbers of students.

Very importantly, support from colleges and funders enables *SENSE*, along with *CCSSE*, to continue bringing *student voices* to the fore and to learn systematically from the learners themselves about what matters most in colleges' efforts to promote the students' success.

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“Community colleges play a vital role in securing the future, both for their diverse students and for their communities. Learning from data and the voices and experiences of entering students, community colleges can identify innovative ways to give their students the extra help they need to start right, stay the course, and reach their goals.”

— Sibyl Jacobson, President, MetLife Foundation

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Foreword

Beginnings: A New Focus on *Starting Right*

We Americans — we *human beings* — love beginnings.

We celebrate births, weddings, the new year — and also that ritual at the *end* of college that we call *commencement*, for all that it portends.

We cut ribbons, crack champagne bottles over ships' bows, applaud when a college president and board chair stick shovels in the ground to start a new building.

We anticipate kick-offs, tip-offs, first pitches.

We write political slogans: New Deal, New Frontier, Morning in America.

We talk about, sometimes long for, fresh starts, clean slates, second chances, turning over a new leaf. We even hum that song that says "... we can start all over again."

All of these things are part of the language, the fabric, the customs of our lives.

And of all manner of beginnings, one of our favorites is the beginning of the school year. Especially for those of us in education, the start of the fall term — even more than New Year's — brings with it a sense of newness, of renewal, of another chance to get things just right.

Given all of this tradition and ceremony, how is it that so many of our community and technical colleges have given so little attention to what it must be like to be an entering student? A beginner. A novice. A starter, in the most literal sense of the word.

Why do we seldom think about entering students as a distinct cohort with unique needs?

Why do we not track their progress and experience more carefully so we really know what happens to them?

Why have we not thought more systematically about how we are organized to greet them, serve them, connect them to the college, meet their needs, ensure their success?

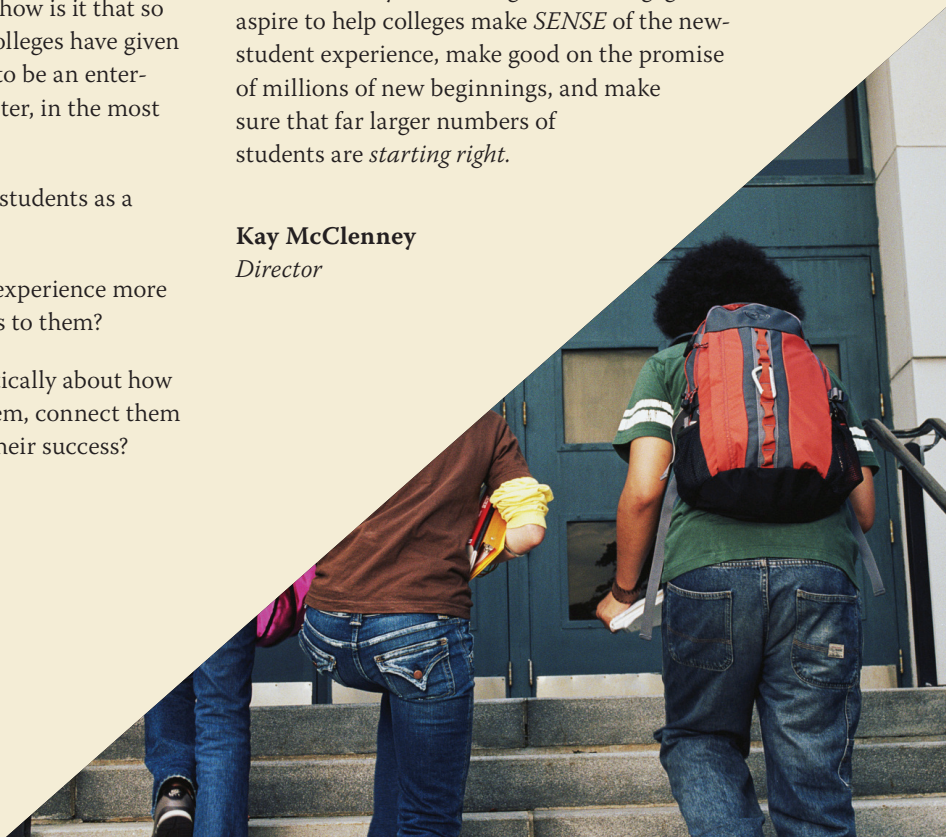
Why have we not more rigorously evaluated our programs and services, using the results of those evaluations to revise or wholly redesign our work?

To the extent that we currently understand them, our realities are sobering. Through their open-door policy, community colleges admit escalating numbers of students, diverse on every dimension. Many of those students bring significant challenges with them to college, but about all of them we should assume this much: All students bring aspirations and the hope of finishing what they start.

Available data show that the proportion of entering students who attain successful outcomes in their first term of college is far smaller than it should be — smaller than what students need and smaller than what institutions would like to see.

And so this report introduces a new community college initiative — sharply focused on entering students, firmly committed to systematically eliciting student voices in regard to their earliest collegiate experiences, emphasizing the well-established relationships between student engagement and student success, and promoting the value of data in targeting institutional improvement. Through the new Survey of Entering Student Engagement, we aspire to help colleges make *SENSE* of the new-student experience, make good on the promise of millions of new beginnings, and make sure that far larger numbers of students are *starting right*.

Kay McClenney
Director



Understanding What Happens at the Front Door

This report presents preliminary findings from the 2007 pilot of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*). Why focus on entering students? Community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the students' second college year. This level of attrition is dramatic — so dramatic that it demands the attention of everyone interested in helping more community college students succeed.

Who is dropping out of community colleges? National data show that students with certain characteristics are at greater risk of leaving college before their second year. Those who drop out are, for example, disproportionately students of color, low-income students, and academically underprepared students.

And who is staying? *CCSSE* data consistently show that when there are differences in engagement between low- and high-risk students, the students typically described as high-risk are *more engaged* in their college experience than their low-risk peers. At first, these results may seem unexpected, but they quickly come into focus upon closer inspection.

Because *CCSSE* surveys students who typically are in at least their second term, these data indicate that among high-risk students, the highly engaged typically are the ones who survive to the second term. In other words, exceptionally high engagement levels may be *essential* to retain high-risk students. And therefore, maximizing early engagement for high-risk students is critical.

How do we change the odds? Increasing the numbers of students who succeed is critical — not only for the individual students but also for their communities and the nation. *SENSE* helps community colleges focus on the front door of the college experience — what entering students see, hear, and do from the moments of their first interaction with the college — to increase engagement and improve persistence and success. Grounded in research about what works to retain and support entering students, *SENSE* collects and analyzes data that can help colleges understand students' critical early experiences, gauge the

progress of successful engagement strategies, and identify gaps in engagement that should be addressed.

Community colleges have little hope of significantly increasing student success rates if about half of their students leave after only one or two terms. But focusing improvement efforts on entering students — and changing the way colleges and their students approach that first term — can yield impressive results.

Current research indicates that helping students succeed through the equivalent of the first semester (12–15 credit hours) can dramatically improve subsequent success rates. Specifically, research shows that successfully completing the first semester improves students' chances of returning for subsequent semesters, reaching key milestones, and ultimately earning certificates and degrees.

SENSE: Quantitative and Qualitative Data

SENSE has two major components: the survey, which provides detailed quantitative data, and the MetLife Foundation *Starting Right* initiative, which provides qualitative data.

“They need to remember that they hold this person's future in their hands ... and with one wrong action or one wrong word, you can totally turn them off and they'll turn around and walk out the door and never come back.”

— Female student

The survey is administered during the fourth and fifth weeks of the fall academic term in courses most likely to enroll entering students. The survey asks students about institutional practices and student behaviors — those that research indicates are associated with improved student success — during the early weeks of college.

Each year, the *SENSE* survey instrument will include both the core survey, which will be the same from year to year, plus several optional item modules. Each module delves deeply into a key issue related to entering student engagement. The 2007 pilot survey included two modules — goal commitment and student success courses — that were

administered by all but two participating colleges. In the future, there will be a menu of modules from which colleges may choose.

In addition to the quantitative data from the survey, *SENSE* works through the **MetLife Foundation Starting Right initiative** to conduct a qualitative study of the entering student experience. Through focus groups and interviews, the *Starting Right* initiative hears the perspectives and viewpoints of new students as well as faculty, student services professionals, and presidents — elevating their voices and painting a more complete picture of the entering student experience. Ultimately, the initiative will share promising practices identified through this work.

SENSE's rich survey data help colleges better understand *what* is happening. And data from the focus groups and interviews can help them figure out *why*. Throughout this report, quantitative and qualitative findings are presented side by side because each informs our understanding of the other.

CCSSE and *SENSE*

SENSE is one of three surveys administered by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*). All *CCSSE* surveys are tools that assess student engagement — how engaged students are with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with their studies — and help colleges improve their educational practice so more students will succeed.

Why student engagement? Research shows that the more actively engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn, to persist with their studies, and to attain their academic goals. Student engagement, therefore, is a valuable yardstick for assessing the quality of colleges' educational practices and identifying ways they can help more students succeed.

CCSSE, now in its sixth year, surveys more experienced students in order to gather information about their overall college experience. *SENSE* focuses on the first three weeks of students' college experience and assesses practices that are most likely to engage entering students and encourage them to stay in college until they attain their academic goals. The third survey, the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (*CCFSSE*), provides faculty perspectives on student experiences as well as their own work.

Together, *SENSE* and *CCSSE* offer complementary pieces of the student success puzzle, with *CCSSE* providing a comprehensive look at the overall quality of all students' educational experiences and *SENSE* offering a focused snapshot of new students and their earliest college experiences.

Overview of the 2007 *SENSE* Pilot Respondents

The 2007 *SENSE* pilot survey was administered in 22 community colleges and yielded 13,233 usable surveys. The survey was administered in classes randomly selected from the population of all first-college-level English and math courses and all developmental education courses (excluding ESL courses).

Both entering students (those in their first term at the college) and returning students responded to the survey, but the preliminary findings in this report focus on entering students.

The data presented in this report represent the pilot sample only. This comparison of characteristics of entering and returning students offers a preliminary indication of which students may be at greatest risk of leaving college before starting their second year. For example, 44% of entering students are male, but only 39% of returning students are male.

Characteristics of 2007 Pilot Respondents

Characteristic	Entering students	Returning students	All respondents
Male	44%	39%	41%
Female	56%	61%	59%
Enrolled part-time	32%	40%	36%
Enrolled full-time	68%	60%	64%
Traditional-age (18–24)	85%	66%	77%
Nontraditional-age (25 and older)	15%	34%	23%
Work more than 20 hours per week	42%	54%	47%
Report that English is their first language	79%	74%	77%
Married	10%	19%	14%
Have children living with them	21%	30%	25%

Race/Ethnicity of 2007 Pilot Respondents

Race/ethnicity	Entering students	Returning students	All respondents
Latino/Hispanic	36%	40%	38%
White	37%	33%	35%
African American	17%	16%	16%
Asian	5%	5%	5%
Native American	1%	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian	<1%	<1%	<1%
Other	4%	5%	4%

Note: In the pilot sample, full-time students are overrepresented — a result of the course-based sampling process. The relatively high number of Hispanic students most likely is due to the number of Texas colleges that participated.

Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

SENSE 2007 Preliminary Findings

Organized from the student perspective, these preliminary findings trace the steps students follow as they interact with their college: first impressions, entry processes, orientation and student success courses, and classroom experiences and academic support.

Of course, many of the engagement strategies discussed in this chronology cut across multiple aspects of the student experience. For example, having relationships with others on campus is known to be a powerful motivator for retention. Also, a growing number of colleges are introducing first-year experience programs designed to engage entering students and help them make connections to the college. These programs often involve some combination of advising, orientation, and student success courses. An increasing number of colleges also group entering students in learning communities.

The chronology, however, underscores the fact that colleges have opportunities to engage students — or to lose them — with each and every interaction.

The findings presented here include quantitative data from entering students' responses to the survey, qualitative data from student and faculty focus groups, and examples of strategies that the pilot colleges are implementing.

It is important to note that all colleges get both positive and negative feedback from students and faculty, and both are reflected in the comments presented in this report. Both kinds of feedback can help colleges chart a course to improvement.

For example, students report having a sincere commitment to succeed, yet many faculty members say that students have no idea what it really takes to succeed. Some faculty members further assert that students behave in ways that make it impossible for them to succeed.

Both students' level of commitment and faculty observations about student behaviors offer insights that can be useful in moving forward productively. For example, if students tell us they struggle as they try to navigate the system, can and should colleges intentionally, systematically be more proactive in helping students negotiate their entry into college? Can and should colleges take responsibility for helping students understand and adopt the attitudes and habits that are essential for learning? Can and should colleges ask themselves and their students how the college can help students understand what it takes to succeed — and then act aggressively to help students move in the right direction?

“To me, it was like, ‘Wow, this place is really busy.’ All you see is a whole bunch of people. It’s like life flashing before your face ... you see one person, then the next minute they’re just flashing by.”

— Female entering student

First Impressions

Some students do not set foot on their college campuses until registration begins. Others may have visited with a sibling or friend. And others may start interacting with their colleges much earlier, as community colleges increasingly are reaching out to high school students through dual enrollment programs and high school/college partnerships that focus on preparing students for college.

Whatever the starting point for contact, students begin forming their impressions of college immediately, and initial thoughts quickly become firm opinions. So, ideally, colleges act with the understanding that *every* action can either engage or alienate a student. Do students receive a helpful answer on a phone call or are they transferred multiple times? Are they greeted with warmth or indifference when they walk onto campus? Can they easily find what they need? These impressions — whether solid or shaky — are the foundation on which student engagement is built.

“When I came here, I never knew what to do or where to go. I came on my own; my mother doesn’t know anything about college. But [there were] the big signs around the school ... I was able to say, ‘Admissions. Okay, I think I should go there.’”

— Male entering student

Preliminary Findings from the 2007 Survey

The *SENSE* survey includes items about students' general impressions and their experience in accessing the information they need to enroll.

- ★ Asked whether they agree with the statement, "The very first time I came to this college, I felt welcome," 20% of entering students *strongly agree*, and 1% *strongly disagree*.
- ★ In response to the statement, "I was able to access the information I needed to complete the enrollment process (admissions, registration, financial aid, etc.)," 32% of entering students *strongly agree*, and 2% *strongly disagree*.

In addition, students' expectations affect their impressions, so items from the goal commitment module offer a useful perspective.

- ★ 68% of entering students say they *strongly agree* with the statement, "I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college." Disaggregating these data

may point colleges toward entering students who need additional support: 67% of traditional-age entering students versus 78% of nontraditional-age entering students *strongly agree*; 63% of male entering students versus 72% of female entering students *strongly agree*.

Looking Behind the Numbers

In *Starting Right* focus groups and interviews, students express the range of expectations and emotions they bring to their first interactions with their colleges. Some can hardly contain their enthusiasm, proclaiming, "I was excited, ready to get started!" Others are more cautious, saying, "I wondered what I was getting myself into," or "How are they going to treat us?"

Overall, however, students say they are extremely committed to finishing what they start, and they truly believe they will do so. At the same time, some students acknowledge that if they were to drop out, it would be because of lack of finances or having too many demands on their time.

On the other hand, faculty and staff focus groups and interviews reveal that many faculty members question the level of students' commitment and their understanding of what it takes to succeed. As one faculty member notes, "Students have unrealistic expectations about what they can and can't do. They don't know what it is to be a college student." Others say students are overcommitted or "stretched pretty thinly."

Other staff and faculty members express concerns about students' behavior with comments such as, "They don't care," "They don't want to be here," "They aren't willing to work." Some faculty and student services professionals report that students "transfer high school behavior to college." One laments, "The students think they can do anything they want. ... Sometimes they do the work ... or don't."

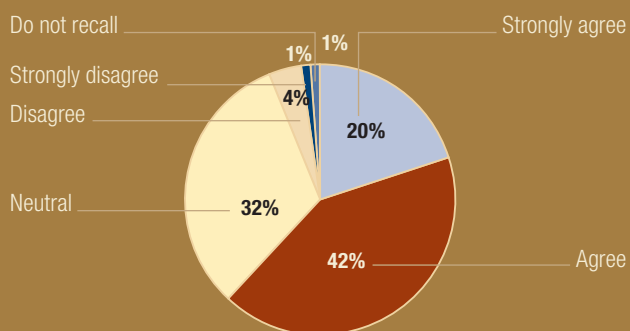
Colleges Focus on Starting Right

The **Lone Star College System (TX)** reaches out to high school students — 3,500 students in 13 Houston-area high schools — through its Bridge Partnership. Beginning in the 10th grade, students are recruited to take a standard college-readiness exam. Then college advisors meet with each student and with high school staff to review the assessment results.

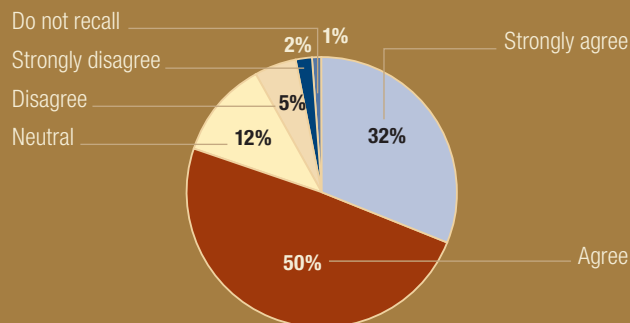
College-ready students are encouraged to start their college education prior to high school graduation through dual enrollment and/or AP classes. Advisors help students

Entering Students' First Impressions of Their Colleges

The very first time I came to this college, I felt welcome.



I was able to access the information I needed to complete the enrollment process (admissions, registration, financial aid, etc.).



Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
Source: 2007 *SENSE* pilot data.

who are not college-ready review material and take the test again with the goal of becoming college-ready in reading, writing, and math prior to high school graduation.

During grades 11 and 12, advisors help Bridge students identify a career goal, select a college, and develop a plan for successfully transitioning from high school to college. Bridge students also receive college ID cards that entitle them to use Lone Star College System tutoring services and learning resources, including the college library.

The first group of Bridge seniors graduated in May 2006. Post-tests showed that 94% were college-ready in English and 38% were college-ready in math. Among students who were not college-ready in math, 41% tested into the highest level of developmental math. In addition, 82% of the students completed at least one college class while they were in high school or during the summer immediately following high school graduation, and 100% indicated they already had started college or would start the following fall term.

Questions Raised by the Data

Colleges and others committed to improving student achievement might ask the following questions:

- ★ How can we strengthen connections with high schools in ways that help more students become college-ready?
- ★ When should we make our first contact with students, and how personal should that contact be?
- ★ What can we do to make students feel more welcome?
- ★ What can we do to build relationships with new students quickly?

Entry Processes

Entry processes, particularly for new students, can be a maze of forms, lines, and confusion. Before starting classes, students must negotiate admissions, assessment and placement, academic planning, registration, and financial aid. Students, even those at the same college, report widely varying experiences with these processes.

At its best, the entry process offers opportunities to build relationships with students, help them set academic goals, bolster their commitment to attaining those goals, and provide critical academic advising and planning services. At its worst, the entry process is messy and confusing enough to alienate students or even drive them away.

Preliminary Findings from the 2007 Survey

The importance of academic advising and planning is well documented, so the *SENSE* survey asks students about several aspects of advising, including how much contact they have with their colleges' advisors and where they turn for planning advice. For example, entering students who report that friends, family, or other students were their primary source of academic advising outnumber those who report that a faculty member served in that role. Only one-third of entering students report that an advisor helped them set academic goals and create a plan for achieving them.

- ★ 31% of entering students say a faculty member was their primary source of academic advising from the time of their first contact with the college through the end of their first three weeks of classes.
- ★ 40% of entering students indicate that "friends, family, or other students" were their primary source for advising.
- ★ 33% of entering students report that an advisor helped them set academic goals and create a plan for achieving them.
- ★ 23% of entering students report that a specific person was assigned to them so they could see that person when they needed information or assistance.
- ★ 41% of entering students say they never used academic advising and planning services.

The importance of advising is called into sharp relief by the results of placement tests. Three-quarters of entering students (75%) say they were required to take a placement test.

As a result of those assessments, entering students report the following needs for developmental education:

- ★ 40% needed developmental reading,
- ★ 36% needed developmental writing,
- ★ 64% needed developmental math, and
- ★ 23% of students needed developmental classes in all three subjects.

SENSE asks students about financial aid planning services because lack of finances is among the top reasons students say they might leave college. Responses indicate that about

two-thirds of entering students were told they could apply for financial aid, but fewer than one-third received help analyzing their need for financial aid.

- ★ 67% of entering students report that they were told they could apply for financial aid.
- ★ 29% of entering students say that a financial aid staff member helped them analyze their needs for financial aid.

Fewer than half (44%) of all entering students say they used financial aid advising at least once, and more than half (53%) say they never used it. Disaggregating these data indicates that at-risk students may be more likely to use financial aid services:

- ★ 52% of the most academically underprepared entering students (students who tested into developmental education in three subjects) versus 38% of academically prepared entering students used financial aid advising services at least once.
- ★ 51% of first-generation students versus 38% of students who are not first-generation used financial aid advising services at least once.

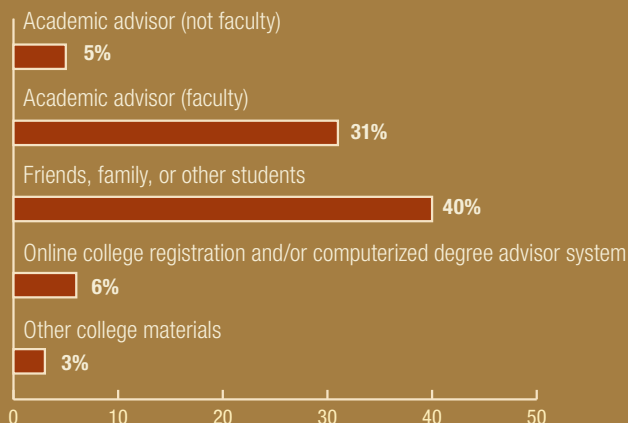
Looking Behind the Numbers

In focus groups and interviews, some students talk about a speedy registration process during which placement test scores were immediately available and advising happened instantly. Some received phone calls or e-mails from the college before they came to campus so they knew what steps to take. But others describe “chaos” and “disorganization” or say, “I had no idea; it was very confusing.” Some students were especially frustrated with financial aid advising, complaining about long lines and the need to continually return with more information. “When you finally get everything, you feel like you got that ‘A,’” one student recalls.

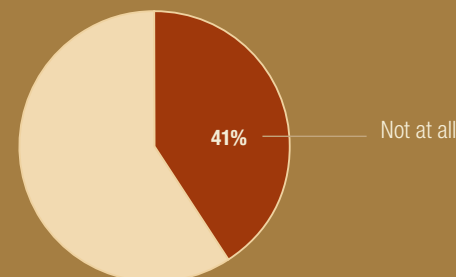
Many faculty and staff members echo students’ concerns about the admissions process. “It’s painful ... when they come in for the first time, they think it’s going to be easy, but then they see it is huge and there are so many steps to be registered.” Another advisor expresses concern that students could register online without seeing an advisor, saying, “I think they need advising. They don’t understand the balance of working and going to school, how this semester might affect the second semester and taking things in sequence.”

Academic Advising: Where Do Entering Students Turn?

Thinking about the time from your first contact with this college through the end of the first three weeks of your first academic term at this college, what has been your primary source of academic advising (academic planning, course recommendations, graduation requirements, etc.)?



Thinking about the first three weeks of your first academic term at this college, how often have you used academic advising/planning services?



Source: 2007 SENSE pilot data.

Students have mixed reactions to advising. Some students report that they were required to see an advisor before registering and were positive about the experience, saying their advisors asked about their goals and tried to discover what was important to them.

Other students indicate that their experiences with advisors were not positive. They experienced extended wait times in long lines. Many met with a different individual each time they wanted to see someone — and they sometimes received conflicting information from different advisors. One student recalls that he finally followed his friend’s advice about what classes to take. Another says, “I felt like I was another number. They didn’t even take time to sit down with me to see what my goals were, and they didn’t ask me any questions.”

Colleges Focus on Starting Right

Northeast Lakeview College (TX) requires all new students to attend a group advising session prior to registering for classes. Created to streamline enrollment and registration processes, the group session explains procedures, helps students understand course and program options, introduces services and resources available on campus, answers questions about financial aid, and provides step-by-step guided enrollment.

Because they are in a small group setting, students receive focused and personalized attention. Student feedback indicates that the small groups have additional benefits: Students find it helpful to interact with one another and hear others' questions.

Since introducing group advising, NLC has seen a decrease in the number of entering students who need individual attention to address common issues, such as correcting problems with financial aid or sorting out confusion about test scores or course prerequisites.

More than half (55%) of entering students at **Wharton County Junior College (TX)** test into at least one developmental education course. After reviewing its data, however, WCJC turned some attention to the 45% who tested into college-level classes. The college discovered that many of the students who placed into college-level classes were struggling to successfully complete these gatekeeper courses — 34% did not successfully complete entry-level history, 24% did not successfully complete entry-level English, and 20% did not successfully complete college algebra. These findings suggest that WCJC's testing and placement procedures were not identifying all students who need developmental education.

Focus groups indicate that faculty perceptions are consistent with the data, as faculty members report that significant numbers of students were enrolling in college-level classes without the knowledge and skills to succeed.

To address this concern, WCJC is reviewing both state regulations and college practices with a goal of improving entering student assessment and placement. Specifically, WCJC wants to determine whether placement policies are consistently implemented across all student groups (e.g., full-time and part-time) and whether assessment test cut-off scores are appropriate.

I was greeted by a line of people trying to register on the day I came ... a long 's' curling line. I waited maybe an hour and a half before I got to the counter. If you had to see an advisor, not only did you have to wait [the first time], but you had to wait another two hours just to see the advisor. You almost have to wait in a line to wait in another line.

— Male entering student

Questions Raised by the Data

Colleges and others committed to improving student achievement might ask the following questions:

- ★ What options can colleges consider to ensure that every new student goes through an initial academic planning, goal-setting, and advising process in the first weeks of college?
- ★ What is standing between students and the advising they need (to ensure they have a goal and a plan, are enrolled in appropriate classes, etc.)? What can we do to remove these barriers? What are the creative options for serving large numbers of students?
- ★ How might entry processes be redesigned to address oft-expressed student concerns about long lines, misinformation, and impersonal contact?
- ★ How can colleges work more closely with high schools to set expectations and start assessing students while they still are in high school?

Everything is really mapped out for you when you come. You know what you're supposed to do. If you need help, you don't have to hesitate to ask. There's always somebody there willing to answer your question.

— Female entering student

Orientation and Student Success Courses

Orientation and student success courses offer students information and strategies to ease their transition into college and approach their coursework in ways that will help them succeed. They also are powerful opportunities to forge connections, as these activities help students build relationships; develop a sense of belonging; and learn about resources that can help them find advice, academic and personal support, and peer groups on campus.

There is growing evidence that supports the value of both student success courses and relationships. An Achieving the Dream study of student success courses in Florida indicates that participation in these classes is associated with improved student outcomes. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) found that Florida community college students who take a student success course are 8% more likely to earn a certificate or associate degree than are students who do not take such a course. CCRC reports that all but two of the 28 Florida community colleges are seeing positive results from these courses.

Findings from focus groups show the critical role relationships play in student persistence. When students participating in focus groups are asked if they ever have considered dropping out of college, many students say they have. And when they are asked what helped them stay in college, students' answers, almost without exception, are about relationships.

They talk about a specific person, whom they mention by name — a faculty member, an advisor, an administrative support professional — who inspired them to stay. More and more, particularly at colleges that encourage study groups or other student interaction, focus group participants cite relationships with other students. And sometimes, the connection is with an individual who is not directly related to academics — at one college, for example, several students mentioned a woman who served food in the college cafeteria — supporting the notion that every person working at a community college can play a role in helping students succeed.

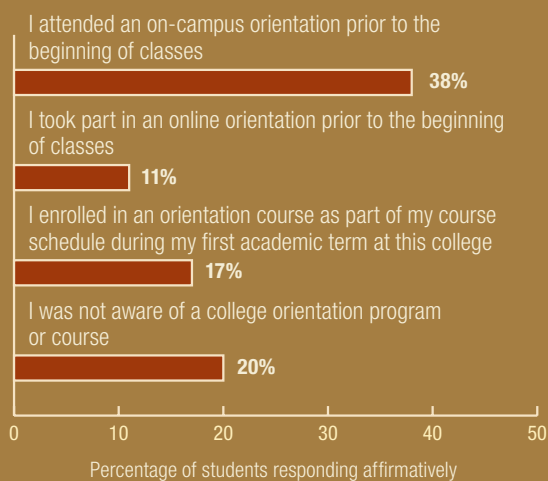
Preliminary Findings from the 2007 Survey

While a growing number of colleges are expanding orientation programs, and many are making these programs mandatory, *SENSE* data indicate that one out of five entering students are not even aware of an orientation program. Slightly more than one-third of entering students (36%) say they have participated in a student success course.

- ★ 38% of entering students report that they attended an on-campus orientation program prior to the beginning of classes.
- ★ 11% say they participated in an online orientation prior to the beginning of classes.
- ★ 17% say they enrolled in an orientation course as part of their course schedule.
- ★ 20% of entering students say they were not aware of an orientation program or course.
- ★ 36% of entering students report that they have participated in or are currently participating in a student success/student development/student life skills course.
- ★ Among entering students who took a success course, 46% report that the course helped them *very much* to gain knowledge or skills important to their success.
- ★ Among entering students taking at least one developmental course and a success course, 48% say the success course helped them *very much* versus 38% of academically prepared students.

Entering Students' Participation in Orientation

Regarding the college's orientation program for new students:



Source: 2007 *SENSE* pilot data.

SENSE also asks students to report the quality of their relationships with people at the college — other students, instructors, and administrative personnel and offices — during the first three weeks of their first academic term. Students use a scale of 1–7, with 1 designating *unfriendly, unsupportive*, and *sense of alienation* and 7 indicating

friendly, supportive, and sense of belonging. Students are more positive about the quality of relationships with faculty than they are about relationships with others.

- ★ Regarding other students, 52% of students classify their relationships as 6 or 7; 4% report 1 or 2.
- ★ Regarding instructors, 61% of students classify their relationships as 6 or 7; 2% report 1 or 2.
- ★ Regarding administrative personnel and offices, 46% of students classify their relationships as 6 or 7; 6% report 1 or 2.

Looking Behind the Numbers

Focus groups tell us that while students sometimes grumble about having to attend orientation or take a student success course, most of them see the value of these activities after they have participated. Students indicate, for example, that orientation helped them feel more comfortable and alleviated fears about getting lost or being late. As one student reports, for example, “Two students walked us around the school, and they showed me everything, so I feel like I’m well prepared to go here.” Indeed, during some focus groups, after a few students described orientation, other students who had not attended orientation began to wonder aloud if they should have.

Similarly, some students complain about taking student success courses that are not credit-bearing. Yet most students clearly feel good about the skills they have developed, saying, “I learned about learning styles” or “I learned how to manage my time.” In some focus groups, the quality of the courses receives mixed reviews. Students, for example, are not always positive about the instructors, but even then, they acknowledge that they are learning things that are helping them be more successful in college.

Colleges Focus on Starting Right

Butler Community College (KS) forges connections with entering students through “Camp Grizzly,” a five-day program held during the first week of classes. Returning students, all selected through a rigorous interview process, serve as Camp Grizzly counselors who work with groups of entering students to familiarize them with BCC and identify the resources and services available to them.

“They just pretty much showed you around. They introduced a couple of teachers, suggested how you were going to be treated in the college by a lot of the professors, and to be honest, they were pretty accurate. Everybody’s really nice and everybody’s here to help you if you go and seek it. But they’re not going to come to you. They’re not going to baby you like they did in high school.”

— Male entering student

Perhaps most important, students participate in a series of 12 fun events that help them make connections with other students, staff, and faculty.

El Paso Community College (TX) created a three-credit-hour course, Mastering Academic Excellence, to support students’ transition to a college learning environment. The course helps students expand their knowledge of academic strategies, develop successful skills for learning and critical thinking, identify personal learning styles and career choices, and become more proficient with computers. Also, throughout each semester, the college offers workshops on study skills, time management, motivation, and other topics related to student success.

EPCC complements this effort with a variety of academic and support services. For example, the college incorporates supplemental instruction (SI) in its high-risk courses — those in which at least 30% of students historically have had final grades of D, F, and W. In the SI program, trained peer leaders meet outside of class with students to deepen their understanding of the material and help students develop effective study techniques.

Questions Raised by the Data

Colleges and others committed to improving student achievement might ask the following questions:

- ★ Which students absolutely must participate in orientation and success courses? Based on what data?
- ★ Are those students participating? If not, what is standing in the way? Will working to increase awareness fix the problem?
- ★ What evidence would convince us that participation in orientation and/or success courses should be mandatory?
- ★ What are the most effective ways to integrate these experiences into the first-term instructional experience (e.g., developmental learning communities and first-year experience programs)?

Classroom Experiences and Academic Support

Everything students experience before walking into the classroom — entering processes, advising, orientation — ideally will improve the likelihood that they will succeed in their coursework. Yet because most community college students tend to spend limited time on campus, the classroom offers the best opportunities to engage students and nurture behaviors that promote persistence and learning.

Colleges are implementing strategies that aim to maximize in-class engagement. For example, current research shows a positive correlation between attendance and learning so many colleges are stressing the importance of attendance, and a growing number are tracking attendance and contacting students who miss classes. Many colleges also have early alert systems that help faculty members identify students who need academic or other support — and alert student services staff so they can contact the students.

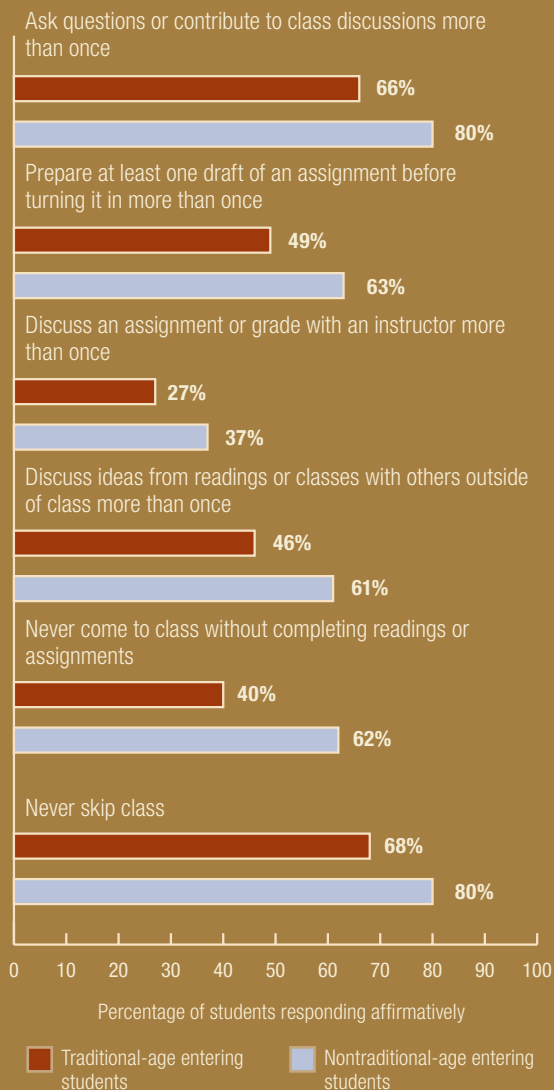
Preliminary Findings from the 2007 Survey

A number of survey items assess how engaged entering students are, both in and out of their classrooms, and how often they are using key academic support services. The data indicate that students are more engaged in the classroom and less likely to work with other students or take advantage of support services outside the classroom.

- ★ 74% of entering students report that they worked with other students on a project during class *at least once* in their first three weeks of class, while 23% indicate that they *never* did so.
- ★ 32% of entering students report that they worked with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments *at least once* in their first three weeks of class, while 66% indicate that they *never* did so.
- ★ Asked whether they agree with the statement, “Instructors had activities to introduce students to one another,” 62% of entering students *agree* or *strongly agree* and 19% *disagree* or *strongly disagree*.
- ★ Asked whether they agree with the statement, “Instructors clearly explained the academic resources and services available at this college,” 76% of entering students *agree* or *strongly agree* and 8% *disagree* or *strongly disagree*.
- ★ Three-quarters of students (75%) say they *never* used peer or other tutoring services, and 57% say they *never* used skill labs (writing, math, etc.) during the first three weeks of the term.

Nontraditional-Age Entering Students Are More Engaged

During the first three weeks of your first academic term at this college, did you:



Source: 2007 *SENSE* pilot data.

Disaggregating data about classroom activities shows a gap between the engagement of traditional-age (18–24) and nontraditional-age (25 or older) entering students. On the whole, younger students are less engaged in their studies, both in and out of the classroom. For example, 49% of traditional-age entering students versus 63% of nontraditional-age entering students prepared at least one draft of an assignment before turning it in on more than one occasion; 40% of traditional-age entering students versus 62% of nontraditional-age entering students never came to class without completing assignments or readings.

In my experience, I've noticed that there are some very incompetent teachers. Like in math — they know the work, they know how to do it, but they can't convey it to students in the classroom setting ... they're not really equipped to actually teach.

— Male entering student

Looking Behind the Numbers

Students typically know what works for them in the classroom — and whether or not they have received it. For example, students in focus groups generally are positive about icebreakers and other strategies instructors use to help them get to know one another. They also clearly identify instructional strategies, such as collaborative projects and learning communities, that get their attention and keep them engaged. Perhaps most noteworthy, students' statements match what research confirms are the practices most effective in engaging students.

Faculty members talk enthusiastically about strategies they use in the first few classes to get to know the students and to help students become comfortable with each other. Some faculty members, however, also discuss their struggles to keep students engaged and talk about the difficulty of balancing the delivery of content with more active approaches to learning.

Colleges Focus on Starting Right

Most entering students at **Kingsborough Community College (NY)** participate in freshman-year learning communities — cohort-based programs that link an English course, another content-area course, and a student development course. Central to the KCC strategy is connecting academic and student developmental courses while also providing intensive advising and counseling services. KCC ensures that the various elements are connected by having the instructor for the student development course serve as the case manager for students in that learning community.

MDRC, a social policy research organization, conducted a gold-standard study of the KCC approach using random assignment of students to learning communities and control groups. MDRC followed cohorts of students who participated in the learning communities from 2003 to 2005 and found that these students “substantially outperformed control-group students during their first semester at Kingsborough, achieving higher course pass rates, particularly in English.”

KCC's internal studies found greater freshman-year retention among students participating in learning communities. In 2006–07, the fall-to-spring retention rate for students in learning communities was 89% as compared to 78% for nonparticipating freshmen. As a result, expansion

of learning communities became a top priority for KCC. By 2010, the college plans to extend learning communities to 40 cohorts each semester, enough to serve 80% of incoming freshmen.

The freshman learning communities are part of the Freshman Year Experience (FYE), which begins during admission. At that time, students meet with advisors and receive information about their placement examination results, file their financial aid information, are advised about classes, and complete online registration for their first semester. FYE also includes a new-student orientation and celebratory activities.

I can go to my professor and ask her a ton of questions ... you can always go to her if you're not clear about something. And ... if she sees your potential and knows that you're trying to do better, she doesn't crush your ego or your confidence. ... She makes you want to learn and do better in her class.

— Male entering student

Questions Raised by the Data

Colleges and others committed to improving student achievement might ask the following questions:

- ★ Community colleges' best opportunity to engage students is in the classroom. What can we do to better engage students when they are in class — and to use the classroom to inspire or require engagement (e.g., the use of services) elsewhere?
- ★ What professional development opportunities would equip faculty with effective strategies for delivering content in ways that engage students?

Key Challenges and Next Steps

Challenges for Colleges

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the importance of early engagement for community college students. And the data do not surprise college faculty and staff members who interact with students in their earliest days of college — many of them know how overwhelming the transition to college can be. As one student services professional said, “Many times we lose students between applying and registering.”

Is it acceptable that the process of starting college can be daunting enough to extinguish a student’s interest in attending? Is it acceptable that a significant percentage of beginning community college students never successfully complete a single credit? Is it acceptable that large numbers of students who begin in developmental education never make it to college-level classes? Is it acceptable that half of the students who begin community college work are gone before the beginning of their second year? Is it acceptable that students from some demographic groups are lost at disproportionately high rates?

Colleges that recognize these realities and want to alter them must face tough issues, answer difficult questions, and in some cases, rethink longstanding philosophies and procedures. But in this process, they likely will renew their commitment to helping students succeed. And they likely will move from questions based on external factors and loss (“What factors make students leave?”) to a more proactive perspective — one that raises questions such as, “How can we inspire them to stay?”

Following are some key challenges and issues colleges might address in their efforts to engage entering students.

1. Understanding the power of campus culture and language. Even a casual visitor can walk onto a college campus and know, almost instantly, whether the college is a welcoming place — and whether the college community *believes* that all students can learn. Further, institutions that expect students to perform well use language that communicates students’ value and potential. Do

the college faculty and staff look at students in terms of assets or deficits? Do faculty members talk about difficult subjects or difficult students? The students’ ability to learn or their right to fail?

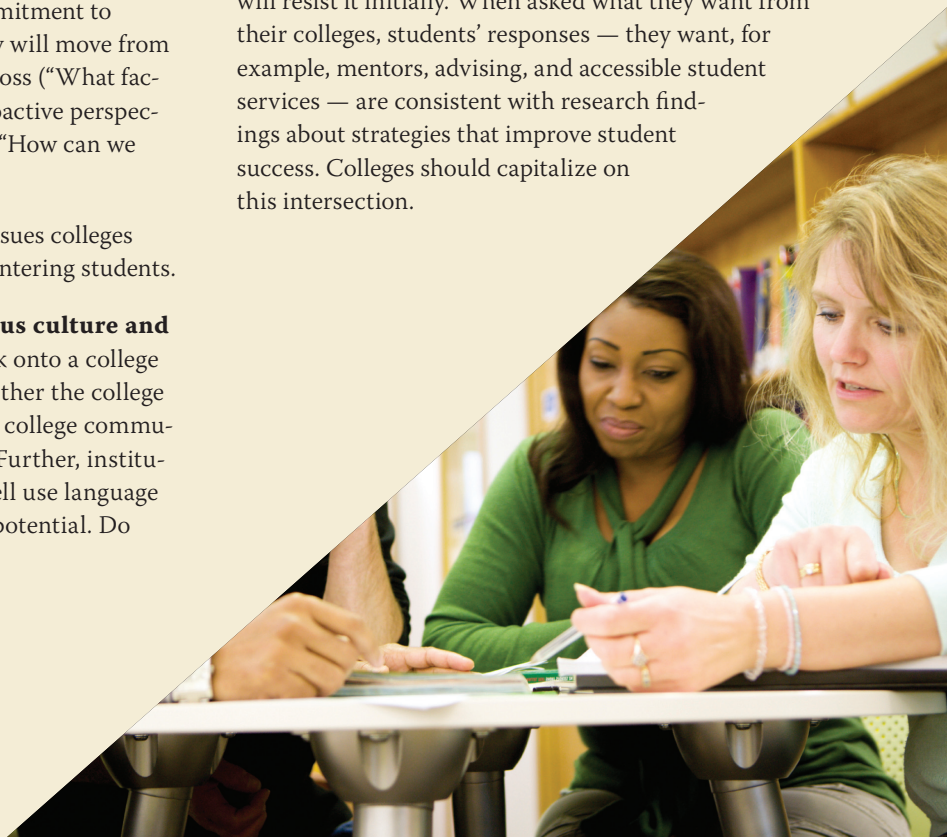
Language can help set high expectations — and it is contagious.

2. Knowing what matters and doing it for all students. High expectations should go hand-in-hand with high levels of support. Yet many colleges make advising, orientation, and other critical experiences optional even when there is evidence that students who participate likely will be more successful than those who do not. These colleges might help more students succeed by rethinking what they will *offer* and what they will *require*. How can colleges implement effective practice on a larger scale?

“We can show you how to get to your classes, we can show you where to go, but you actually have to pick the book up and read.”

— Faculty member

Colleges should note that students often know what will help them — even though, to be sure, they sometimes will resist it initially. When asked what they want from their colleges, students’ responses — they want, for example, mentors, advising, and accessible student services — are consistent with research findings about strategies that improve student success. Colleges should capitalize on this intersection.



3. Addressing students' need for developmental education. Collectively, community colleges cannot avoid the plain fact that the majority (sometimes the vast majority) of entering students are academically underprepared. How can colleges serve them more effectively — and help them move successfully to college-level classes rather than exiling them to a remedial hinterland from which too many may never return?

4. Doing a better job of sharing information and integrating services. Many colleges provide an array of disconnected services, offered by committed people who too often do not talk with one another. Moreover, too often, even college staff and faculty do not fully understand the college's resources, but novice students are expected to navigate the maze and figure it all out. Better communication is one step toward improvement. A second step would be developing strategies to integrate a variety of academic and support services. A third step would be designing educational experiences so that new students cannot escape involvement in academic and support services that are critical to their success.

5. Addressing data deficits. Too many colleges do not know who leaves, when they leave, and why they leave. Very few colleges examine data about students who leave before the census date. An important step is commitment to longitudinal student cohort tracking — following every full- and part-time credit student who enters the college. The next critical step is engaging faculty and staff in discussion of those data and then engaging the college community in designing fact-based strategies for improvement.

Community colleges that address these and other challenges can begin to better engage entering students. As a result, they can help more students succeed and have fewer who feel like the student who, asked to describe her college, says, "My college is like an airport in a foreign country. There are a lot of other people rushing around, looking as though they know where they're going. But even when I see a sign telling me where to go, it's written in a language I don't understand."

Next Steps for *SENSE*

In the coming year, *SENSE* will administer a national field test and expand the tools and services it offers to participating colleges.

- ★ **2008 field test.** The *SENSE* 2008 field test will be administered in fall 2008 at nearly 100 community colleges. Before the field test, the survey instrument will be refined based on the pilot administration, psychometric analysis, and extensive student interviews. Accompanying the field test will be additional focus groups and interviews conducted with students, faculty, staff, and presidents through the MetLife Foundation *Starting Right* initiative.
- ★ **Entering Student Success Institutes.** At these institutes, teams from participating colleges learn about understanding and using survey results. They work with their *SENSE* data, learn about strategies that can help improve the entering student experience, interact with other college teams committed to similar goals, and develop an action plan. The institutes are conducted in cooperation with the Community College Leadership Program/Achieving the Dream.
- ★ **New tools.** *SENSE* is developing new print, presentation, and video tools for participating colleges.
- ★ **Benchmarking tools.** In early 2009, *SENSE* will unveil an interactive Web site that allows participating colleges to conduct a variety of online analyses and benchmarking comparisons.

“Many people go by the philosophy that students have a right to fail. [We] don’t abide by that philosophy. We think they have a right to learn to succeed.”

— Edith Alderson, *Developmental Reading Professor*
Kathleen Perryman, *English Professor, Joliet Junior College*
(courtesy of *Discounted Dreams: High Hopes and Harsh Realities at America’s Community Colleges*,
produced by John Merrow, *Learning Matters, Inc.*)

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SENSE Member Colleges

For a list of colleges that participated in the *SENSE* 2007 pilot,
visit www.enteringstudent.org.



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