

Overview

A Sharpened Focus on Learning

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

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

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

The Community College Student Report

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

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

Public Reporting: Results and Impact

From the outset, *CCSSE* made a commitment to public reporting of its survey results. This commitment is critical because *CCSSE* aims to be a reliable source of information, a catalyst for open discussion of quality and performance in community colleges, and a tool that community colleges can use both for public accountability and to improve their practices.

Because our data are public, we ask that the information be used responsibly. Please read our policy statement on responsible uses of *CCSSE* data.

When data are public, and used responsibly, the impact can be dramatic. Consider *CCSSE*'s current and potential future impact.

- Community colleges nationwide now have a reliable and appropriate tool for assessing institutional quality as it directly pertains to the student learning experience. Within their own campus communities, participating colleges are using the concrete feedback provided by the survey to identify and implement needed changes in policy and practice.
- *CCSSE*'s national and consortium benchmarks will make it possible for community colleges to compare their own performance and practice to that of other similar colleges — large or small, urban, suburban, or rural.
- Some states and community college systems already are adopting *CCSSE* as part of statewide performance, quality improvement, and/or accountability systems.
- Regional accrediting associations already are making their institutional members aware of the value of the survey as part of institutional self-study and quality improvement.
- Researchers at The University of Texas at Austin and elsewhere will have unprecedented opportunities to describe and analyze the performance of U.S. community colleges and their impact on students.
- The combined databases from *CCSSE* and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which surveys students at four-year colleges and universities, eventually will provide important insights about the higher education system within states and nationally.

Brief History

CCSSE was established in 2001 as a project of the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin. Major grants from the Houston Endowment, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the MetLife Foundation, and The Pew Charitable Trusts have supported the work.

CCSSE works in partnership with NSSE, a survey that focuses on four-year colleges and universities. Established in 1998, NSSE is directed by George Kuh and headquartered at Indiana University in the Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning. The NSSE survey, administered to first-year and senior students in four-year institutions, emerged in response to concerns about quality in American undergraduate education and about the lack of emphasis on student learning in the major (and highly visible) college rankings in the United States.

From the beginning, though, there was a recognized need for a student engagement survey specifically designed for community and technical colleges. Thus, *CCSSE* was launched in 2001, with the intention of producing new information about community college quality and performance that would provide value to institutions in their efforts to improve student learning and retention, while also providing policymakers and the public with more appropriate ways to view the quality of undergraduate education.

Project Governance

CCSSE is led and staffed by a team headquartered in the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, there are two national advisory groups. The National Advisory Board is chaired by Peter Ewell, vice president at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Members include representatives from key partner organizations, five community college presidents, and two state directors of community colleges.