2009 Institutional Report
Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*) utilizes a set of five benchmarks of effective educational practice in community colleges. These benchmarks allow member institutions, with missions focused on teaching, learning, and student success, to gauge and monitor their performance in areas that are truly central to their work. In addition, participating colleges have the opportunity to make appropriate and useful comparisons between their performance and that of other groups of similar colleges.

Community colleges differ significantly—even dramatically—from one another on variables including size, location, resources, enrollment patterns, and student characteristics. It is important to take these differences into account when interpreting benchmark scores—especially when making institutional comparisons. Furthermore, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement has adopted an official policy on "Responsible Uses of *CCSSE* Data." Please review the policy, which is provided as an appendix to this report.

CCSSE's Benchmarks

The five benchmarks encompass 38 engagement items from the *CCSSE* survey that reflect many of the most important aspects of the student experience. These institutional practices and student behaviors are some of the most powerful contributors to effective teaching, learning, student retention, and student success.

As before, *CCSSE* has used this year a 3-year cohort of participating colleges (2007 through 2009) in all of its data analyses, including the computation of benchmark scores.[1] This cohort is referred to as the 2009 *CCSSE* Cohort throughout all reports and documentation.

This approach increases the total number of institutions and students contributing to the national dataset, which in turn increases the reliability of the overall results. In addition, the 3-year cohort approach minimizes the impact, in any given year, of statewide consortia participation.

The benchmarks are briefly described below.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are actively involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Through collaboration with others to solve problems or master challenging content, students develop valuable skills that prepare them to deal with the kinds of situations and problems they will encounter in the workplace, community, and their personal lives. The seven survey items that contribute to this benchmark are these:

During the current school year, how often have you
- ★ Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
- ★ Made a class presentation
- ★ Worked with other students on projects during class
- ★ Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- ★ Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)
- ★ Participated in a community-based project as a part of a regular course
- ★ Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)

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[1] For returning participants, the college's most recent year of participation is included in data analyses. For example, if a college participated in 2008 and 2009, only the 2009 data would be used in the 3-year cohort.

Student Effort

Students' own behaviors contribute significantly to their learning and the likelihood that they will successfully attain their educational goals. "Time on task" is a key variable, and there are a variety of settings and means through which students may apply themselves to the learning process. Associated with this benchmark are eight survey items indicating student behavior in these terms:

During the current school year, how often have you
- ★ Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in
- ★ Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources
- ★ Come to class without completing readings or assignments (reverse coded)
- ★ Used peer or other tutoring
- ★ Used skill labs
- ★ Used a computer lab

During the current school year
- ★ How many books did you read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment
- ★ How many hours did you spend in a typical week preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, rehearsing or other activities related to your program)

Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Ten items from The Community College Student Report correspond to components of academic challenge including the nature and amount of assigned academic work, the complexity of cognitive tasks presented to students, and the standards faculty members use to evaluate student performance. Specifically, Academic Challenge includes the following items:

During the current school year, how often have you
- ★ Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations

How much does your coursework at this college emphasize
- ★ Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory
- ★ Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences in new ways
- ★ Making judgments about the value or soundness of information, arguments, or methods
- ★ Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
- ★ Using information you have read or heard to perform a new skill

During the current school year
- ★ How many assigned textbooks, manuals, books, or book-length packs of course readings did you read
- ★ How many papers or reports of any length did you write
- ★ To what extent have your examinations challenged you to do your best work

How much does this college emphasize
- ★ Encouraging you to spend significant amounts of time studying

Student-Faculty Interaction

The more contact students have with their teachers, the more likely they are to learn effectively and to persist toward achievement of their educational goals. Personal interaction with faculty members strengthens students' connections to the college and helps them focus on their academic progress. Working with an instructor on a project or serving with faculty members on a college committee lets students see first hand how experts identify and solve practical problems. Through such interactions, faculty members become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, lifelong learning. The six items used in this benchmark are about students' experience in these areas:

During the current school year, how often have you
- ★ Used email to communicate with an instructor
- ★ Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- ★ Talked about career plans with an instructor or advisor
- ★ Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with instructors outside of class
- ★ Received prompt feedback (written or oral) from instructors on your performance
- ★ Worked with instructors on activities other than coursework

Support for Learners

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and

cultivate positive working and social relationships among different groups on campus. Community college students also benefit from services targeted to assist them with academic and career planning, academic skill development, and other issues that may affect both learning and retention. The seven survey items contributing to this benchmark include the following:

How much does this college emphasize
- ★ Providing the support you need to help you succeed at this college
- ★ Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
- ★ Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
- ★ Providing the support you need to thrive socially
- ★ Providing the financial support you need to afford your education

During the current school year, how often have you
- ★ Used academic advising/planning services
- ★ Used career counseling services

Understanding and Using Benchmarks

What are benchmark scores?
Benchmark scores provide a useful way to look at an institution's data by creating groups of conceptually related items that address key areas of student engagement. As described above, these areas are active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners. These are five areas that have been shown through research to be important in high-quality educational practice. Through examining empirical results of factor analytic models and with input from its Technical Advisory Panel, *CCSSE* grouped survey items related to each of these areas.

In order to create the benchmark scores, the survey items associated with each benchmark are first rescaled so that all items are on the same scale (0 to 1). Next, the benchmark scores are computed by averaging the scores of the related survey items. Finally, the scores are standardized around the mean of the 3-year cohort so that respondents' scores have a mean of 50, weighted by full- and part-time attendance status, and a standard deviation of 25.

Benchmark scores are then computed by averaging the scores on the associated items.

Rescaling scores increases the value of the scores in the following two ways:
1) all of the benchmarks are on the same scale, enabling comparisons across benchmarks; and
2) the scores provide information about how an individual institution is doing relative to other institutions.

Having scores on the same scale makes comparisons across benchmarks more meaningful than comparisons using raw scores. The limitation of using raw scores is illustrated by the fact that there are some aspects of student engagement that will nearly always take place with greater frequency than others. For example, students may typically engage in activities such as homework more frequently than they engage in talking with instructors about career plans, so raw scores will always be higher for homework than for talking with instructors. Without knowing what a typical score is for each of these engagement areas, college faculty and staff have little basis for determining where their institutional strengths and weaknesses may lie.

Knowing that all benchmarks are on the same scale makes it immediately obvious that a particular college's scores are either above or below those for other participating schools. Knowing that the mean is at 50 across all students in the sample enhances the score's usefulness for benchmarking, as the score contains information about whether an institution's performance is better or worse than average−and how much better or worse. For example, benchmark scores of 55 on Student Effort and 42 on Student-Faculty Interaction would indicate to a college that the institution is performing relatively better in regard to Student Effort than in regard to Student-Faculty Interaction. Further, the benchmark scores allow the college to understand that the results are above the average for participating institutions on one benchmark and below average on the other. Thus the data may be used both to identify relative strengths and to zero in on areas in which the college may need to improve.

What can a college do with the benchmarks?
There are a number of ways college leaders might choose to use the benchmark scores and the comparison information provided in this report.

Examples are provided below:

A starting point for understanding your campus findings — Multiple pages of survey data presented at the individual item level may be daunting. Where does one start when there are over 150 items addressing a variety of topics? The benchmark scores provide a manageable starting point for reviewing and understanding your *CCSSE* data.

For example, suppose that you have a college mission statement that expresses a commitment to faculty involvement with students. But, you note that the college's student-faculty interaction benchmark score is lower than those for the comparison group and for the 2009 *CCSSE* Cohort. Therefore, you decide that this is the area you want to target for improvement. To help you understand more precisely what the differences are, *CCSSE* suggests that you drill down to the item level, look at the percentage of students responding in each category, and compare the responses to those in your comparison groups. This will allow you to identify the specific items that are problem areas, and then target these areas, creating appropriate initiatives to build student-faculty interaction.

Understanding the big picture — *CCSSE* reports data for important breakout groups for each benchmark, enabling college leaders to review how their colleges are performing overall, by part- and full-time attendance status, and by credit hours earned. This view provides the big picture of student engagement and involvement.

Talking points — Benchmark scores are designed to help colleges investigate student engagement in key areas that—according to research—contribute to effective educational practice (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Colleges can use these scores to prompt dialogue about effective teaching and learning. Scores likewise can be used to focus attention on programs and policies that may be in need of improvement–and on those worthy of celebration.

Institutional comparisons — Until recently, community and technical colleges have had little opportunity to make valid and appropriate cross-institutional comparisons, particularly with regard to important dimensions of teaching and learning. Many national surveys do not employ strict sampling

protocols, thus making comparisons less meaningful and potentially inappropriate. *CCSSE* employs a strict sampling protocol which allows for appropriate cross-institutional comparisons. *CCSSE* controls the sample selection, thereby ensuring that all class sections have equal chances of being selected. What this means is that no college has the opportunity to skew the results by sampling only highly engaging classes, and therefore, every college is on the same playing field.

Colleges can target areas that need improvement both by considering their own institutional aspirations and priorities and by comparing their benchmark scores with groups of similar colleges. After identifying other colleges that are high performers on a particular benchmark, a college can initiate communication to explore the educational practices that may be contributing to enhanced effectiveness at benchmark institutions.

Subsequent analyses — Any or all of the benchmark scores can be used as variables in subsequent analyses using the *CCSSE* student record data for your college, which was provided with your Institutional Report. The benchmark scores can also be used in conjunction with traditional institutional data, such as grades and demographic data, to understand the factors that really matter in student success.

POLICY STATEMENT ON RESPONSIBLE USES OF *CCSSE* DATA

In accessing the *CCSSE* database and using the *CCSSE* data search tools, the user agrees to the following *CCSSE* policy positions regarding responsible and appropriate uses of the survey data:

★ *CCSSE* supports uses of survey data for benchmarking effective educational practices, for targeting and monitoring progress in quality improvement, and for public reporting in ways that serve to increase understanding of collegiate quality and to support institutional efforts to improve undergraduate student learning and retention. *CCSSE* especially supports public reporting of student engagement results in ways that enable thoughtful, responsible institutional comparisons while encouraging and celebrating institutional diversity.

★ *CCSSE* does not support the use of student

engagement survey results for the purpose of ranking community and technical colleges. Such uses would obscure complex dimensions of institutional performance and student behavior.

★ Because of differences in institutional focus, student characteristics, and resources, comparisons of survey results from two single institutions serve little constructive purpose and may in fact be wholly inappropriate. *CCSSE*'s data search tools therefore provide group comparisons, using aggregated data from at least three institutions.

★ Appropriate interpretation of survey data will take into account the institutional context (mission, size, urbanicity, program mix, and so on) as well as the characteristics of a particular institution's student population–for example, the proportions of full- vs. part-time students, traditional college-age vs. non-traditional-age students, students who are academically under-prepared as they enter the institution, and students with various educational goals.