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For Immediate Release

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NEWS RELEASE

CCSSE Responds to Community College Rankings

AUSTIN -- In response to the publication this week of an article that purports to rank community colleges, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*) has confirmed two longstanding policies: commitment to public reporting of survey results and opposition to the use of those results in ranking colleges.

The growing debate about college rankings, spurred by the *U.S. News & World Reports'* annual rankings issue, is intensified by *Washington Monthly's* concurrent release of its alternative rankings of 4-year colleges and universities. And, for the first time, the *Washington Monthly* also printed a pair of articles about community colleges, including an accompanying list of what the magazine bills as "the top 30 community colleges" in the country.

The *Washington Monthly* created the rankings in large part through the use of data drawn from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*) Web site and then unequally weighted, using a method not described in the article.

According to Kay McClenney, *CCSSE's* director, "*CCSSE* commends the *Washington Monthly* for recognizing the importance of community colleges to America's future, and we have long sought to prompt a redefinition of what 'quality' means in higher education. While we welcome the description of community college examples of effective educational practice, we are deeply concerned about the inappropriate use of *CCSSE* data to rank colleges. In addition, even if ranking made sense, there would be serious questions about the methodology used."

Says McClenney, "It is clear that the colleges on the magazine's list are demonstrating promising results from their efforts to strengthen student engagement and increase graduation rates; the same is true for many other community and technical colleges around the country. Furthermore, from our work with *CCSSE* colleges, we are confident that few if any of them would attest that their current performance, however good, is as good as it needs to be."

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement was established in 2001 to provide information about effective educational practice in community colleges and to assist institutions and others in using that information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence and attainment. From the beginning, *CCSSE* has been committed to the public reporting of survey results, a practice for which the organization and community colleges participating in the survey have been widely praised. According to survey staff, public reporting is a significant benefit to the colleges because it supports benchmarking of effective educational practice; in addition, by their participation in *CCSSE,* colleges demonstrate their commitment both to transparency with regard to institutional performance and to accountability for improvement of educational quality.

Prominently displayed on the CCSSE Web site and in other publications is this statement:

"CCSSE opposes using its data to rank colleges. Each community college's performance should be considered in terms of its mission, institutional focus, and student characteristics. Because of differences in these areas — and
variations in college resources — comparing survey results between individual institutions serves little constructive purpose and likely will be misleading."

[CCSSE's Policy Statement on Responsible Uses of Survey Data, also displayed on the Web site , is attached.]

The *Washington Monthly* article ends with author Kevin Carey's assertion that the main conclusion community colleges should draw is this: "No more excuses. It's just not very credible to blame subpar performance on funding levels or student demographics" when there are colleges with significant resource constraints and high-risk student populations that are showing these positive results.

CCSSE staff concur; but they point out a significant difference between the constructive practice of benchmarking and the potentially deleterious consequences of focusing on questionable rankings. McClenney concludes, "The quest for quality – and for valid, publicly available data that document it – is the right pursuit. But the rush to rankings is the wrong race."

Learn More: www.ccsse.org
Overall, *CCSSE's* 2007 Cohort survey respondents represent a total credit enrollment of 3,391,101 students across 518 colleges. *CCSSE's* entire college membership represents approximately 49% of the nation's accredited, public associate degree-granting institutions and 53% of the national population of credit students.

The survey Web site (www.ccsse.org) displays key national findings and results for individual colleges. The award-winning Web site is aimed at promoting public understanding of the work of community colleges, supporting institutional improvement, and advancing public discussion about new ways of defining and examining quality in higher education.

CCSSE *is operated by the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin*

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Policy Statement on Responsible Uses of Survey 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. nontraditional-age students, students who are academically underprepared as they enter the institution, and students with various educational goals.

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