Center for Community College Student Engagement

NEWS RELEASE

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Media access to an embargoed advance copy of the 2009 *CCSSE* National Report is available at:
www.ccsse.org/publications/national_report_2009/CCSSE09_nationalreport-10-26.pdf

Making Connections: Dimensions of Student Engagement

Colleges Build Connections with Students to Increase Engagement, Success

Colleges that successfully engage students do not merely set up classrooms on a campus somewhere across town and say, "Come here." They meet students where they are—literally, figuratively, and virtually—and help them get to where they need to be. But what does it take for a college to connect with its students across multiple dimensions?

A national report released today highlights key findings from the 2009 cohort of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (known as *CCSSE*). The report, "*Making Connections: Dimensions of Student Engagement,"* offers data about the quality of community college students' educational experiences and describes how institutions across the country are intentionally making connections with students online, in the classroom, on campus, and beyond.

Increasingly, colleges are using technology to reach out to students. Recent data show significant growth in the use of online courses and support services, including online developmental education classes, orientation, and tutoring. The *CCSSE* report offers new primary research on the use of Web 2.0 social networking tools. Yet whatever the mechanism for reaching out to students, connecting requires interaction, a feeling of personal investment, a commitment to listen and to be heard.

Community colleges typically serve an exceptionally diverse student population. The report provides data depicting the competing priorities and challenges in community college students' lives. For example, well over half (60%) attend college part-time, 54% work more than 20 hours per week, and well over a third are first-generation college students. Not surprisingly, 22% are uncertain about their educational plans after the current semester. Still, the report says, "Colleges focused on helping more students succeed acknowledge these challenges, but don't use them as justification for low levels of

student success. Instead, they use the data to understand students' needs, to connect with students where they are in their lives, and to purposefully create relationships that help students stay in college and succeed."

Part-time enrollment is an acknowledged risk factor for low student engagement and dropping out of college. The report suggests that part-time status of faculty also plays a role: "The 67% of community college faculty members who teach part-time typically teach half to two-thirds of all course sections. They play a large role in shaping students' experiences, yet in far too many colleges they are minimally involved with students beyond the hours they are teaching."

Grounded in research about effective educational practice, *CCSSE* assesses the degree of students' engagement in education through questions about the effort students invest in their studies, the ways they interact with faculty and other students, the degree of academic challenge they experience, and the kinds of support they receive from their colleges. The 2009 *CCSSE* Cohort includes more than 400,000 students from 663 institutions in 48 states as well as British Columbia, the Marshall Islands, Nova Scotia, and Ontario.

The 2009 survey included a special focus on students' use of Web 2.0 social networking tools. CCSSE respondents have reported steady increases in use of computers, the Internet, and e-mail each year since 2004. More important, while technology use was once the province of younger students, the age gap has closed to within one percentage point — upwards of 66% of all students now use these technologies to work on assignments.

However, the 2009 CCSSE special-focus items indicate that age gaps remain for some types of technology, notably the newer social networking tools such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

- Traditional-age students—those 18 to 24 years of age, 68% of community college students nationwide—are more likely to use social networking tools multiple times per day "for any purpose." Among respondents, just 5% of traditional-age students versus 22% of nontraditional-age students *never* do so
- Traditional-age students are more likely to use social networking tools to communicate with other students, instructors, or college staff about their college coursework; 27% of traditional-age students versus 49% of nontraditional-age students *never* do so.

The special-focus survey items also indicate that some use of social networking tools improves engagement, but there is a point of diminishing returns. Not surprisingly, using social networking tools to communicate with students, instructors, or college staff *about coursework* correlates with higher levels of engagement; moreover, the more frequently students use these tools for such academic purposes, the more engaged they are. However, higher frequency of using social networking tools for *any purpose* is associated with lower student effort in academic endeavors.

Other key findings indicate that many of the most important connections are formed in the classroom. Making connections elsewhere on campus and beyond the campus requires intentional effort and planning on the part of colleges. The report observes that "the potential for creating on-campus connections is largely untapped" and notes that connections beyond the campus are most likely to happen when colleges incorporate them into mandatory learning activities.

Connections in the Classroom

- About one in five students (22%) *often* or *very often* worked with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments, but more than twice as many (47%) *often* or *very often* worked with other students on projects during class.

- Almost two-thirds of students (64%) report they asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions *often* or *very often*, but only 16% discussed ideas from their classes with instructors outside of class *often* or *very often*.

Connections on Campus

- Approximately one third of students (32%) report that their colleges provide the support they needed to thrive socially. Yet 75% of full-time students and 88% of part-time students report they spent zero hours in a typical seven-day week participating in college-sponsored extracurricular activities.
- While the majority of students (62%) and faculty members (85%) say they believe academic advising and planning is *very important* to students, only 29% of instructors refer students to this service *often* and 19% incorporate the use of academic advising/planning into their selected course *often*.
- Additionally, 41% report that they *never* worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments.

Connections Beyond the Campus

- Half of students (50%) report that they *often* or *very often* discussed ideas from their classes outside of class with other students, family members, co-workers, etc.
- Still, few students are engaged in campus-related projects that take place off-campus. More than three quarters of students (77%) *never* participated in a community-based project.
- Fewer than one in five students (17%) have participated in an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment, but 41% indicate that they have not had, nor do they plan to have, such an experience.

Challenges and Opportunities

While shining a light on innovative approaches at colleges making connections to improve student success, the report also acknowledges that community colleges face a number of challenges as they work to foster connections among students, faculty, and staff. Economic constraints, rapidly changing technology, and issues of scale are among the concerns. To assist colleges, the report offers a guide institutions can use to determine how well they are connecting with their students.

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The report may be downloaded free of charge at www.ccsse.org. CCSSE is a research and service initiative of the Community College Leadership Program in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin.

CONTACTS

Making Connections: Dimensions of Student Engagement

2009 Findings

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