



# MAKING CONNECTIONS

*Dimensions of Student Engagement*  
2009 Findings

## Build Connections, Build Success

Most students arrive at college expecting to succeed and believing that they are motivated to do so. Too often, though, there is an evident difference between being motivated and being prepared to succeed. Still, community college students often come to recognize one factor that plays a pivotal role in their success: connections.

Entering students predict they will stay in college and achieve their academic goals because of their own resolve. They expect to succeed because of “my own determination,” or so “my children will have a better life.” But most continuing students indicate that, at some point, they considered dropping out, and their reasons for staying in school are revealing: They almost always include the name of a particular person — an instructor, a staff member, another student — who gave the encouragement, guidance, or support they needed to keep going.

*Personal connections are the unanticipated success factor — a critical variable that improves the odds of persistence. But students' typical patterns of college attendance, including part-time enrollment and juggling classes with work and family commitments, create challenges. Establishing personal connections may not happen easily, much less automatically. This discrepancy raises an important question for colleges and their approach to engaging students: Since strong personal connections are key to keeping more students in college, how can institutions foster stronger and more diverse connections with (and among) students?*

This year, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) focuses on the importance of relationships among students,

faculty, and staff, and with their institutions: how these connections evolve, the value they add, and the importance of devoting greater effort to nurturing them.

In this evaluation of connections, it is important to distinguish between communicating information and connecting. Communicating information is a one-way, self-contained event. The individual for whom the information is intended may or may not receive it, understand it, care about it, or act on it. Connecting is an interactive, iterative series of events that is personal and creates a sense of presence. No one ever asks “so what?” in the wake of a genuine connection.

*“When people come here, they need somebody to talk to ... they need somebody to reach out to them.”*

— Female student



## The Connected College

*Connected colleges* effectively connect with their students and encourage them to build the relationships — with faculty, staff, other students — that are essential to student success. Connected colleges are easily identified by their campus cultures. Their language and actions communicate the belief that *all* students can succeed and demonstrate that everyone on campus is committed to facilitating that success. Moreover, a college’s commitment to building connections is:

- ★ Evident across campus groups, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students.
- ★ Carried through all college policies and procedures, from admission and financial aid services to class scheduling, teaching practices, student support services, and so forth.
- ★ Visible in every contact with a student or potential student, starting with outreach to local high schools and continuing through day-to-day interactions with students in classrooms, on campus, and online.
- ★ Cognizant of and relevant to student needs.
- ★ Apparent in all communications — face-to-face, print, and electronic.

## Is Your College a Connected College?

Colleges can use the guide below to prompt discussions about how well they are connecting with their students. To what extent is your college doing each of these things (e.g., not at all, under discussion, partial implementation, or full implementation)?

Does your college ...

- ★ Design experiences to ensure that all students make personal connections with other students, faculty, and staff during their earliest contacts with the college?
- ★ Create *required* cohort-based experiences, such as learning communities, study groups, first-year seminars, and the like, to intentionally promote interaction among students?
- ★ Assign someone to serve as a primary contact for each new student (e.g., another student, advisor, success coach, mentor, etc.)?
- ★ Systematically inquire about students’ use of various technologies, including course management systems, the Internet, and social networking tools?
- ★ Systematically inquire about faculty and staff members’ use of various technologies, including course management systems, the Internet, and social networking tools?
- ★ Provide professional development for faculty on ways to engage students for academic purposes through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or other social networking technologies? Provide this training to both full-time and part-time faculty?
- ★ Require orientation and training for students on the use of technologies employed by the college, rather than assume that they know how to use them?
- ★ Promote student connections with college services and staff by integrating services into organized courses?

- ★ Ensure that the college’s online courses consistently incorporate engagement strategies that promote student-student and student-faculty interaction?
- ★ Ensure that evening and online students have access to the services they need at times and in locations that fit their schedules?
- ★ Establish and enforce academic policies regarding acceptable/encouraged and unacceptable uses of social networking technologies and electronic devices during class time?
- ★ Ensure that students have access to computers for uses related to their studies (e.g., computer labs, loaned laptops, etc.)?
- ★ Provide free, easily accessible Internet access throughout the campus?
- ★ Provide adequate, user-friendly support for use of broadband and wireless technologies on campus and for online learning?
- ★ Provide comfortable, open spaces for students, faculty, and staff to interact?
- ★ Ensure that all full-time and part-time faculty members have adequate space to meet with students outside of class?
- ★ Build a college-wide culture of connection and caring?

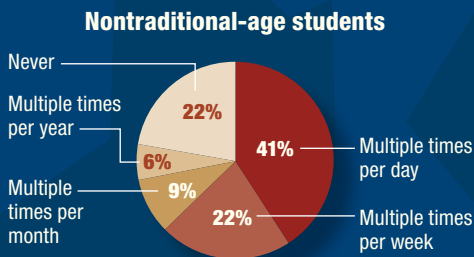
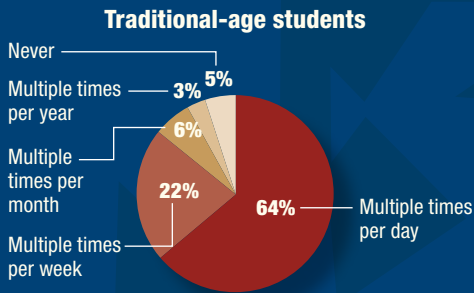
*“I’ve learned that I can’t just say, ‘It’s your credit, it’s your money.’ ... You have to get in there with these students. It’s important to me for them to succeed, not just in this class, but in life.”*

— Faculty member



## Students' Use of Social Networking Tools for Any Purpose

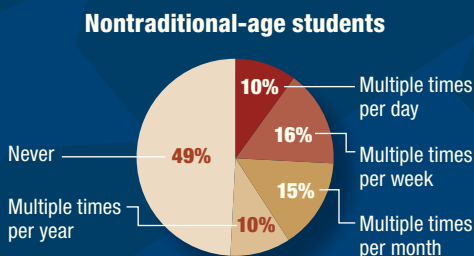
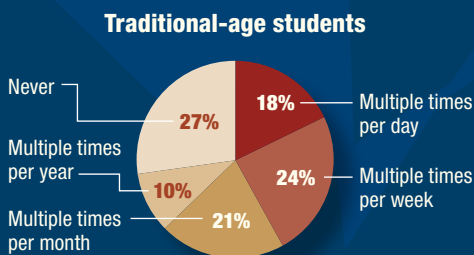
How often do you use social networking tools, such as instant messaging, text messaging, MySpace and/or Facebook, Twitter, etc., for any purpose? (This does not include e-mail.)



Source: 2009 CCSSE data.

## Students' Use of Social Networking Tools To Communicate about Coursework

How often do you use social networking tools, such as instant messaging, text messaging, MySpace and/or Facebook, Twitter, etc., to communicate with other students, instructors, or college staff about coursework at this college? (This does not include e-mail.)



Source: 2009 CCSSE data.

## Cultivating Connections

“The medium is the message.” Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase reminds us that a communication medium fundamentally affects the way people receive messages and construct their perceptions of reality. The medium itself drives changes in behavior.

Community colleges can apply this concept to their efforts to connect with students. The challenge is twofold: (1) using data to understand the status quo — which students need to be better engaged; and (2) finding ways to use each interactive medium — such as individual face-to-face exchanges, classroom experiences, online services, and social media — to create meaningful, lasting connections.

Whatever the mechanism for reaching out to students, the work of connecting is ongoing. It requires an interaction, a feeling of personal investment, a commitment to listen and to respond.

### Connections in Virtual Space

Quantitative data indicate that students increasingly use social media and other virtual tools to interact. At the same time, qualitative data tell us that students value personal connections at their colleges. How should colleges reconcile these two facts? The challenge is to use online and social networking tools to cultivate relationships that help students feel connected and encourage them to persist in their studies.

### Social Networking

Over the last five years, CCSSE respondents have reported steady increases in use of technology — computers, the Internet, and e-mail. More important, while technology used to be the province of only younger students, the age gap is closing.

However, the 2009 CCSSE special-focus survey items indicate that technology-related age gaps remain for some types of technology, notably for use of newer social networking tools. Traditional-age students are more likely to use social networking tools, such as Twitter or Facebook, multiple times per day for any purpose (5% of traditional-age students versus 22% of nontraditional-age students *never* do so), and they are more likely to use social networking tools to communicate with other students, instructors, or college staff about coursework at the college (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 is related to increased engagement. There is, however, a point of diminishing returns.

- ★ Using social networking tools to communicate with others (students, instructors, or college staff) *about coursework* is related to higher CCSSE benchmark scores. The more students use social networking tools for academically purposeful activities, the higher their levels of engagement.
- ★ However, higher frequency of using social networking tools *for any purpose* is related to lower scores on the student effort benchmark.



Connecting in virtual space is a new challenge for many colleges. But social networking tools are just another communications channel, a new set of resources that colleges can add to their toolboxes. Colleges that successfully engage students with these tools understand that sharing information using social media is not necessarily connecting with students. The medium must be suited to the service the college is providing.

For example, in focus groups, students consistently say that colleges should eliminate online orientation, which they criticize as “impersonal,” but they reliably applaud online tutoring. Why? It is difficult for a virtual orientation to create a genuine sense of connection to a college. For example, a virtual tour shows a campus in a way students taking on-campus courses will never use it: Students will never eat in a virtual cafeteria or park in a virtual parking lot.

Online tutoring, however, is simply another mechanism for delivering the same service provided by face-to-face tutoring. It involves a one-on-one connection with a real person, facilitated by technology. Students do the same work (revisions to a paper, for example) that they would do if they were meeting their tutors in person.

Engaging students with social media requires the same intentionality and diligence as engaging them with other tools. The magic happens when colleges find the right match between students’ needs and the mode of response to those needs.

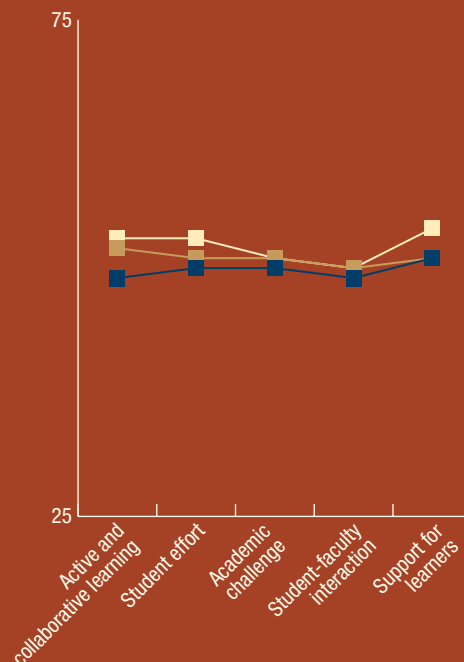
## Connections in the Classroom

CCSSE and CCFSSSE data consistently show that students and faculty have different perceptions of classroom engagement. For example:

- ★ 92% of faculty report that they *often* or *very often* give their students prompt feedback (written or oral) on their performance, as compared with 56% of students who report receiving this feedback *often* or *very often*.
- ★ 70% of faculty indicate that students *often* or *very often* often discuss grades or assignments with them, while 46% of students say they have these conversations *often* or *very often*.
- ★ 29% of faculty say students *often* or *very often* discuss ideas from readings or classes with them outside of class, as compared with 16% of students who report having these discussions *often* or *very often*.

CCSSE data also demonstrate that instructors’ use of classroom time may have an impact on student engagement. Not surprisingly, more time spent on interactive instructional approaches appears to increase student engagement. For example, colleges in which instructors use high percentages of classroom time for lecturing have lower benchmark scores than those in which instructors spend high percentages of classroom time on in-class writing or small group activities.

## Connections in the Classroom: More Engaging and Less Engaging Instructional Strategies



- Lecture. The 30 colleges in the 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort with the highest reported percentages of class time spent lecturing. (On average, faculty at these colleges spent a greater percentage of class time lecturing than did faculty at other colleges in the 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort.)
- Small group. The 30 colleges in the 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort with the highest reported percentages of class time spent on small group activities. (On average, faculty at these colleges spent a greater percentage of class time on small group activities than did faculty at other colleges in the 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort.)
- In-class writing. The 30 colleges in the 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort with the highest reported percentages of in-class writing time. (On average, faculty at these colleges spent a greater percentage of class time on in-class writing than did faculty at other colleges in the 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort.)

Source: 2009 CCSSE and CCFSSSE Cohort data.

## Connections on Campus

Although students are most easily engaged in the classroom, the campus community offers untapped opportunities to help students forge deeper connections through shared experiences.

While about one-third of students (32%) say their colleges provided the support they needed to thrive socially, 75% of full-time students and 87% of part-time students report that they spent *zero* hours in a typical seven-day week participating in college-sponsored extracurricular activities.

CCSSE is administered in the spring semester, long past the point when most students should have experienced an orientation to college. However, only slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of students indicate that they attended a college orientation program. Although 13% report that they plan to attend orientation, 60% say they did not attend an orientation nor do they plan to do so.

Colleges can strengthen student engagement by making outside-the-classroom engagement inescapable. Rather than minimizing expectations for out-of-class commitments from students, colleges can require students to participate in educational experiences that are important to their success.

## Connections Beyond the Campus

A variety of powerful engagement and connection opportunities — such as community service projects, internships, field experiences, and attendance at assigned cultural or political events — are available beyond the campus.

Many community colleges also begin engaging students when they still are in high school to encourage college enrollment and boost college readiness. By making early connections directly with students, as well as with high school teachers, administrators, and parents, colleges can help incoming students prepare for the academic, social, and financial challenges ahead.

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

Connections beyond the campus are most likely to happen when they are mandatory. Colleges can require service projects and other experiential learning opportunities so more students can make the compelling connections that may evolve from these experiences.

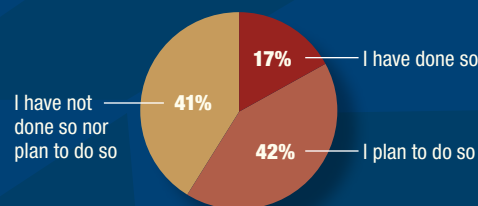


## Connections Beyond the Campus

*In your experience at this college during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?*

	Often or very often	Never
Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course	7%	77%
Discussed ideas from your classes outside of class (with students, family members, co-workers)	50%	12%

*Will you have an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment while attending this college?*



Source: 2009 CCSSE Cohort data.



## Time on Task: Full-Time and Part-Time Faculty with the Same Teaching Loads

How many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing each of the following?

Percentage of CCFSSSE respondents who indicate zero hours.

	Part-time faculty teaching 9–12 hours/week*	Full-time faculty teaching 9–12 hours/week*
Advising students	40%	15%
Working with students on activities other than coursework	82%	50%
Involved in other interactions with students outside the classroom	47%	22%
Coordination and/or administrative activities	71%	23%
Participating on college committees or task forces	78%	8%

\*And not employed elsewhere

Source: 2009 CCFSSSE Cohort data.

## The Connection Gap

The phenomenon of *part-timeness* stands as one of the greatest challenges community colleges face in creating strong connections with students. Close to two-thirds of community college students attend college part-time, and about two-thirds of community college faculty members (67%) teach part-time.\*

It is well documented that part-time students are less engaged than full-time students and that they are at greater risk of leaving college without attaining their educational goals. But the challenge of *part-timeness* isn't just about students. 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.

CCFSSE data show that about four in ten part-time faculty members (42%) spend zero hours in a typical week advising students. Even when they have the same teaching loads, part-time faculty spend less time engaging students outside the classroom. Among part-time faculty teaching between nine and twelve hours per week, 40% never spend time advising students. Among full-time faculty with the same teaching load, only 15% never spend time advising students.

This difference may be attributed, at least in part, to different expectations and support for part-time faculty. Nonetheless, part-time faculty teach a sizable portion of course sections, and many students interact primarily with part-time faculty. If part-time faculty are not engaging students outside the classroom, then large numbers of students — particularly those who attend college part-time — likely have little opportunity to receive essential guidance from faculty members.

The extensive use of part-time faculty is unlikely to change, given the economic realities of community colleges. Moreover, there is ample evidence that part-time faculty bring real value and commitment to their work. To close the connection gap, colleges will need to grapple with ways to offer part-time faculty the same kinds of instructional support and development opportunities that are available to their full-time colleagues.

\*U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF: 04) Report on Faculty and Instructional Staff in Fall 2003*.

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