



# Talking SENSE

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## First Entering Student Success Institute Hailed as Break-Through Opportunity for Colleges

**Team-only event focuses on integrating data to develop action plan for improving entering student experiences and outcomes**

*In spring 2008 teams composed of chief executive officers, academic and student services leaders, faculty, and institutional researchers from 21 colleges gathered for the first annual Entering Student Success Institute (ESSI) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Teams' preparation for this intensive 2 ½-day meeting started, however, weeks before the group convened. ESSI colleges were required to submit in advance a Basic Data Review, an Entering Student Inventory, and to begin working on the Entering Student Action Plan— a planning document that each team completed, with the input and assistance of an assigned resident faculty, by the end of the Institute.*

*For most teams, the focused interaction with SENSE data initiated important conversations about the nature of their own entering students' experiences and helped participants pose critical questions about connections between student needs and institutional practice. While the completed ESSI Entering Student Action plans reflect a variety of strategies and initiatives among ESSI college's top institutional priorities, most of the priorities can be grouped into broad areas of emphasis that highlight the common concerns and insights shared by participants. This issue of TALKING SENSE provides an overview of common themes and issues addressed in the colleges' Entering Student Success Action plans.*

*As a participating SENSE Field Test college, we invite you to register for this year's event – April 26-28, 2009 – in Santa Fe, NM. No more than 30 colleges will be allowed to participate. Only a few spots remain!*

*Yours in Pursuit of Starting Right!*

*Angela Oriano-Darnall*

Angela Oriano-Darnall  
Assistant Director, SENSE

## Inquiry and Investigation

SENSE's conceptual framework assumes that entering students should be understood as a distinct cohort. As ESSI institutions worked to interpret and understand their SENSE data, new perspectives emerged regarding how policy and practice impact student success on individual campuses. Action plan priorities questioned what colleges know about their entering students as a cohort and what other kinds of data are needed to understand how policies, practices, and people impact the initial experiences of entering students.

- **Policy audit:** Policy established from an institutional point of view may inadvertently create obstacles for entering students (i.e. late registration). Several colleges plan to review policies that impact how entering students are advised, placed, and registered.
- **Walk-through practice review:** Improving entering students' front door experiences requires taking a closer look at student flow through the existing configuration of institutional practices including examination of key contact points for new students such as admissions, financial aid, placement, advising, and registration.
- **Program/initiative review:** Developmental education courses are offered at virtually all community college campuses, and orientation programs, tutoring, and student success courses are becoming increasingly common. Heightened awareness of the entering student perspective is motivating many ESSI institutions to take a closer look at how their current programs are meeting students' needs in the early weeks of enrollment.

## Communication

Several action plans underscored the critical importance of shared vision and institutional commitment to improving student success. Administrators, faculty, and staff all play important roles in helping entering students become returning students. However, faculty involvement in entering student initiatives is seen by many as particularly critical to successful outcomes. Several approaches emerged regarding how SENSE data may be used as a tool for broadening awareness of entering students and for increasing campus-wide support for their success.

- **Mini SENSE institutes:** Several colleges proposed replicating the ESSI workshop model for interpreting and using *SENSE* data for personnel on their own campuses to raise awareness of entering student issues.
- **Staff development:** Action priorities noted in several plans focused on providing faculty and staff with opportunities to develop new tools, skills, and perspectives for supporting entering students.
- **Tracking relationships:** Understanding how students form relationships on campuses and how those relationships impact early experiences is a key factor in increasing student engagement. To enhance engagement, colleges are looking at ways to define and model how students on their campuses form relationships with college personnel and with each other.

## Integration

As the kaleidoscope of student experiences shifted into a new and sharper focus at ESSI, many college teams expressed concerns about integrating entering student perspectives and practice into their busy, resource-strapped campus cultures. The notion of “initiative fatigue” resonated for many colleges in which commitment to improving student success has brought in multiple initiatives aimed at assisting particular groups or programs. That resonance underscores the challenge of achieving a coherent, well-integrated approach to student success that incorporates a clear understanding of entering student experiences. Several colleges listed efforts to clarify, prioritize and integrate entering student success initiatives.

- **Student success model:** Among the most common action priorities listed by colleges was developing a comprehensive model that defines student success goals and aligns relationships between programs, processes, and initiatives intended to support that success.
- **Task forces:** Another common priority is establishing a broadly representative committee or task force charged with evaluating data on entering students, raising visibility of entering student issues across the college, and leading efforts to align services with entering student needs.

## Initiation

Many institutions placed a high priority on implementing new success initiatives for entering students or revising existing practices to support higher levels of engagement.

- **Orientation:** Most colleges reported offering some kind of orientation for new students. Several ESSI

colleges plan to redefine orientation goals, structures, and participation requirements with increased attention to the entering student experience. One college plans to employ student mentors and teaching assistants in orientations.

- **Early alert systems:** Though colleges often have excellent support services, getting new students to those services in the earliest weeks of enrollment is critical. Colleges are looking at ways to structure early alert systems to allow faculty and/or staff to make effective and timely interventions with students who need them.
- **Learning communities:** The literature increasingly points to learning communities as effective tools for increasing student engagement and success. Several ESSI colleges are looking at linking classes for entering students through connecting course content and scheduling.
- **Student success courses:** Many colleges already offer student success courses, and others are considering adopting a success course initiative. Action plans reflect intent to review and revise success course factors such as number and status of credit hours earned by participants, whether the course should be mandatory and for whom, selection and training for course instructors, and improving how students perceive the legitimacy of the course.

ESSI feedback demonstrates that while colleges are struggling with many of the same challenges at the same time they are recognizing that the quality of the entering student experience is critical for students’ long-term success. The substantial pre-institute work completed by college teams and the significant presence of senior administrators at the Institute testify to the strong commitment by these colleges to use *SENSE* data to improve student success on their campuses. *SENSE* applauds the hard work of the ESSI teams and their commitment to improving the entering student experience at their colleges.

## Registration for ESSI 2009

To hear what last year’s attendees have to say about ESSI, or to register your college, please visit our website at [www.enteringstudent.org](http://www.enteringstudent.org). You may also contact Angela Oriano-Darnall directly at (512) 475-6526 or by email at [oriano-darnall@ccsse.org](mailto:oriano-darnall@ccsse.org).

We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to further your institutions’ entering student success agenda.