**SENSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice**

To assist colleges in their efforts to reach for excellence, the Center for Community College Student Engagement reports national benchmarks of effective practice with entering students in community colleges. Research shows that the more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter—the more likely they are to learn and to achieve their academic goals.

**SENSE** benchmarks are groups of conceptually related survey items that focus on institutional practices and student behaviors that promote student engagement early in the college experience—and that are positively related to student learning and persistence. Benchmarks are used to compare each institution’s performance to that of similar institutions and with the **SENSE** Cohort. Each individual benchmark score is computed by averaging the scores on survey items that make up that benchmark. Benchmark scores are standardized so that the mean (the average of all participating students) always is 50 and the standard deviation is 25. The six benchmarks of effective educational practice with entering students in community colleges are: early connections, high expectations and aspirations, clear academic plan and pathway, effective track to college readiness, engaged learning, and academic and social support network.

### Early Connections
When students describe their early college experiences, they typically reflect on occasions when they felt discouraged or thought about dropping out. Their reasons for persisting almost always include one common element: a strong, early connection to someone at the college.

- 18a Agreement: The very first time I came to this college I felt welcome
- 18i Agreement: The college provided me with adequate information about financial assistance (scholarships, grants, loans, etc.)
- 18j Agreement: A college staff member helped me determine whether I qualified for financial assistance
- 18p Agreement: At least one college staff member (other than an instructor) learned my name
- 23 Was a specific person assigned to you so you could see him/her each time you needed information or assistance?

### High Expectations and Aspirations
Nearly all students arrive at their community colleges intending to succeed and believing that they have the motivation to do so. When entering students perceive clear, high expectations from college staff and faculty, they are more likely to understand what it takes to be successful and adopt behaviors that lead to achievement. Students then often rise to meet expectations, making it more likely that they will attain their goals. Often, students’ aspirations also climb, and they seek more advanced credentials than they originally envisioned.

- 18b Agreement: The instructors at this college want me to succeed
- 18t Agreement: I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college
- 18u Agreement: I am prepared academically to succeed in college
- 19c Frequency: Turn in an assignment late
- 19d Frequency: Not turn in an assignment
- 19f Frequency: Come to class without completing readings or assignments
- 19s Frequency: Skip class
Clear Academic Plan and Pathway

When a student, with knowledgeable assistance, creates a road map — one that shows where he or she is headed, what academic path to follow, and how long it will take to reach the end goal— that student has a critical tool for staying on track. Students are more likely to persist if they not only are advised about what courses to take, but also are helped to set academic goals and to create a plan for achieving them.

18d Agreement: I was able to meet with an academic advisor at times convenient for me
18e Agreement: An advisor helped me to select a course of study, program, or major
18f Agreement: An advisor helped me to set academic goals and to create a plan for achieving them
18g Agreement: An advisor helped me to identify the courses I needed to take during my first semester/quarter
18h Agreement: A college staff member talked with me about my commitments outside of school (work, children, dependents, etc.) to help me figure out how many courses to take

Effective Track to College Readiness

Nationally, more than six in 10 entering community college students are underprepared for college-level work. Thus, significant improvements in student success will hinge upon effective assessment, placement of students into appropriate courses, and implementation of effective strategies to ensure that students build academic skills and receive needed support.

12a Before I could register for classes I was required to take a placement test (COMPASS, ASSET ACCUPLACER, SAT, ACT, etc.) to assess my skills in reading, writing, and/or math
12b I took a placement test (COMPASS, ASSET ACCUPLACER, SAT, ACT, etc.)
14 This college required me to enroll in classes indicated by my placement test scores during my first semester/quarter
21a Agreement: Within a class or through another experience at this college, I learned to improve my study skills (listening, note taking, highlighting readings, working with others, etc.)
21b Agreement: Within a class or through another experience at this college, I learned to understand my academic strengths and weaknesses
21c Agreement: Within a class or through another experience at this college, I learned skills and strategies to improve my test-taking ability

Engaged Learning

Instructional approaches that foster engaged learning are critical for student success. Because most community college students attend college part-time, and most also must find ways to balance their studies with work and family responsibilities, the most effective learning experiences will be those the college intentionally designs.

19a Frequency: Ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions
19b Frequency: Prepare at least two drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in
19e Frequency: Participate in supplemental instruction (extra class sessions with an instructor, tutor, or experienced student)
19g Frequency: Work with other students on a project or assignment during class
19h Frequency: Work with classmates outside of class on class projects or assignments
19i Frequency: Participate in a required study group outside of class
19j Frequency: Participate in a student-initiated (not required) study group outside of class
19k Frequency: Use an electronic tool (e-mail, text messaging, Facebook, MySpace, class Web site, etc.) to communicate with another student about coursework
19l Frequency: Use an electronic tool (e-mail, text messaging, Facebook, MySpace, class Web site, etc.) to communicate with an instructor about coursework
19m Frequency: Discuss an assignment or grade with an instructor
19n Frequency: Ask for help from an instructor regarding questions or problems related to a class
Academic and Social Support Network

Students benefit from having a personal network that enables them to obtain information about college services, along with the academic and social support critical to student success. Because entering students often don’t know what they don’t know, colleges must purposefully create those networks.

18l Agreement: All instructors clearly explained academic and student support services available at this college
18m Agreement: All instructors clearly explained course grading policies
18n Agreement: All instructors clearly explained course syllabi (syllabuses)
18o Agreement: I knew how to get in touch with my instructors outside of class
18q Agreement: At least one other student whom I didn’t previously know learned my name
18r Agreement: At least one instructor learned my name
18s Agreement: I learned the name of at least one other student in most of my classes
SENSE 2014 Benchmarks for Effective Practice

- **Early Connections**
  - UCBA 2009: 52.4
  - UCBA 2012: 51.3
  - UCBA 2014: 56.8

- **High Expectations and Aspirations**
  - UCBA 2009: 51.7
  - UCBA 2012: 48
  - UCBA 2014: 50.2

- **Clear Academic Plan and Pathway**
  - UCBA 2009: 49.6
  - UCBA 2012: 49.6
  - UCBA 2014: 50.5

- **Effective Track to College Readiness**
  - UCBA 2009: 54.3
  - UCBA 2012: 54.3
  - UCBA 2014: 50.3

- **Engaged Learning**
  - UCBA 2009: 51.1
  - UCBA 2012: 51.1
  - UCBA 2014: 64.4

- **Academic and Social Support Network**
  - UCBA 2009: 50.1
  - UCBA 2012: 50.1
  - UCBA 2014: 56.7

Legend:
- UCBA 2009
- UCBA 2012
- UCBA 2014
- Medium Colleges
- 2014 SENSE Cohort