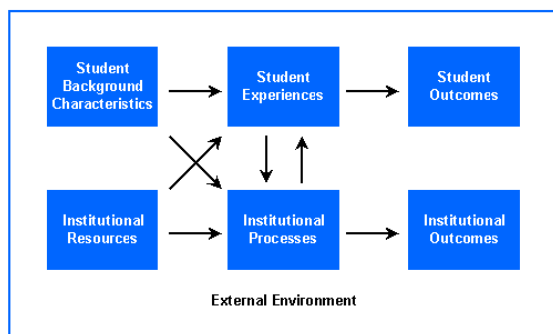


Introduction

The model that provides the theoretical foundation for the research and assessment activities of this office focuses on resources, processes, and outputs in keeping with the supporting literature of Astin, Pace, Pascarella and Terranzini, and others. Often we focus on the outer elements of this model, the resources and output components. This model advocates for an increased emphasis on the process component. It attempts to flesh out what has often been a great leap of faith between inputs and outputs by looking not only at what the relationships are, but why they exist.

The model includes the institution, the external environment, the often overlooked construct of student responsibility, and the interaction among them. In essence, it seeks answers to two very important questions that define assessment. How do college, student, and environmental (external and internal) characteristics, processes or experiences affect student outcomes (learning, development, retention and/or goal attainment)? How do college, student, and environmental (external and internal) characteristics, processes or experiences affect institutional outcomes?



With this theoretical base in mind, during 2003-2004 the Connecticut Community Colleges participated in a national survey of student engagement designed specifically

for two year colleges. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) provides information about effective educational practice in community colleges and assists institutions in using that information to promote improvements in student learning and persistence. CCSSE's goal is to provide colleges with results that can be used to inform decision making and target institutional improvements.

The CCSSE research design acknowledges the effect of student responsibility and process components on academic learning and student development outcomes. Research shows that the more actively engaged students are with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with their subject matter the more likely they are to learn and to achieve their academic goals (Astin, 1991, CCSSE, 2004, Pascarella and Terranzini, 1991, Pace, 1979). Student engagement, or the amount of time and energy that students invest in meaningful educational practices, is the underlying foundation for CCSSE's work.

Participants in the 2004 administration of the survey included 92,301 students from 152 institutions in 30 states. Participating state consortia included Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, and New Mexico. Also participating were 23 small colleges across Texas, 15 Hispanic serving institutions and 17 colleges from the League for Innovation's College and Career Transition Initiative. Among all of the survey respondents across the nation ¹ 60% were female, 39% minority, and 66% full-time.

Rather than publish a full research report of system findings, this office plans to publish

¹ For a detailed explanation of CCSSE's sampling and analysis methodologies, see "Overview of the CCSSE Instrument and Psychometric Properties" on line at <http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/psychometrics.pdf>.

a series of research briefs about what we discover from responses to the CCSSE by Connecticut community college students.

Each one of the first five briefs in this series will focus on one of the five key areas of student engagement as identified and addressed by CCSSE:

1. active and collaborative learning,
2. student effort,
3. academic challenge,
4. student-faculty interaction, and
5. support for learners by colleges and other stakeholders

Before presenting the results for the system, it is important to have a frame of reference for their interpretation and suggested use.

All benchmarks are standardized on the same scale². The mean is set at 50 with a standard deviation of 25 for all students in the sample. Knowing this makes it easier to see whether an institution's performance is relatively better or worse than average and by how much. However, to understand the practical significance of these differences colleges need to consider their own institutional aspirations and priorities.

To help understand more precisely what the differences are, CCSSE suggests using an item level analysis to focus on strengths and weaknesses of survey items comprising each benchmark. This level of detail is not presented as part of this brief.

Colleges may target areas that need improvement both by considering their own institutional aspirations and priorities and by

² To create benchmark scores, the items associated with a factor are first rescaled so that all items are standardized on the same scale (0-1). Each benchmark score was computed by averaging the scores on survey items that comprise the factor. To compensate for disproportionately large numbers of full-time students in the sample, all means used in the creation of benchmarks are weighted by full-time and part-time status. Benchmark scores are standardized so that the weighted mean across all students is 50 and the standard deviation across all participating students is 25. Institutions' benchmark scores are computed by taking the weighted average of their students' standardized scores.

comparing their benchmark scores with **groups** of similar colleges. A college may also identify colleges that are high performers on a given benchmark and initiate communication to explore educational practices that may be contributing to enhanced effectiveness.

Colleges differ significantly from one another on many variables including size, location, resources, enrollment patterns, and student characteristics. CCSSE does not support the use of this data for the purposes of rank ordering colleges or comparing individual institutions with one another.

Any and all benchmark scores can be used as variables in subsequent analyses using the CCSSE student record data for your college in conjunction with institutional data, to understand the factors that really matter in student success.

Benchmarks presented in these briefs show the score for a college, the score for our system and the score for all 2004 CCSSE participating institutions. Later this fall the CCSSE web site will include a "search-the-data" section where colleges may compare themselves to similarly sized institutions or to participating colleges within a particular state or accrediting region.

Academic Challenge

CCSSE reminds us that "Challenging intellectual and creative work is essential to student learning and collegiate quality. Ten survey items address the nature and amount of assigned work, the complexity of cognitive tasks presented to students, and the standards faculty members use to evaluate students". (CCSSE, 2004)

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

4p. Worked harder than you though you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations.

During the current school year, how much has your coursework at this college emphasized the following mental activities?

5b. Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory

5c. Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences in new ways.

5d Making judgments about the value or soundness of information, arguments, or methods

5e. Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or new situations

5f. Using information you have read or heard to perform a new skill

During the current school year, about how much reading and writing have you done at this college?

6a. Number of assigned textbooks, manual, books, or book-length packs of course readings

6c. Number of written papers or reports of any length

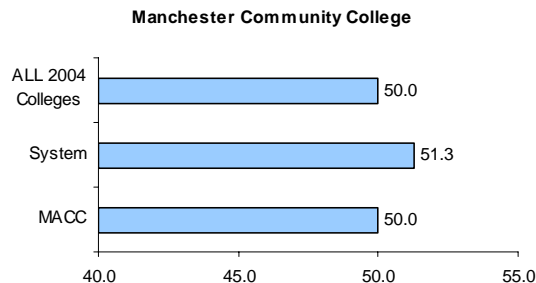
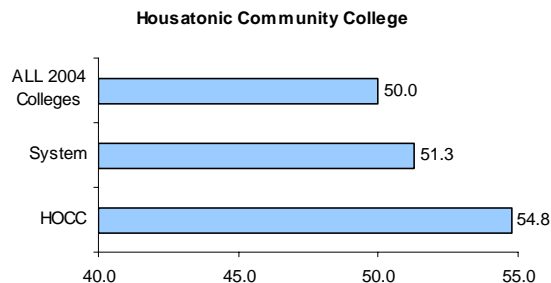
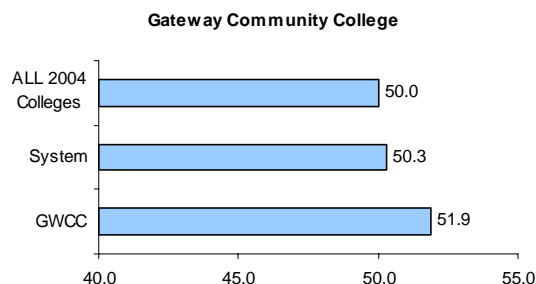
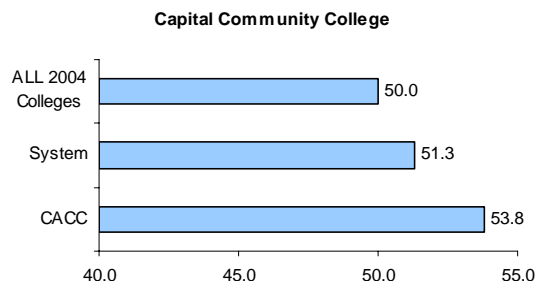
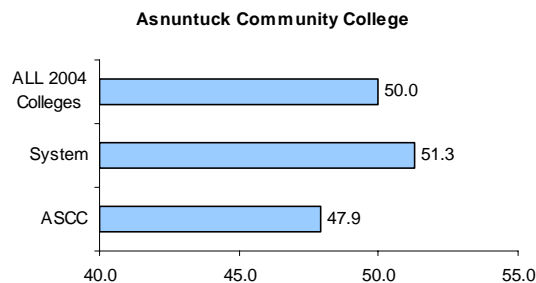
7. Mark the box that best represents the extent to which your examinations during the current school year have challenged you to do your best work at this college.

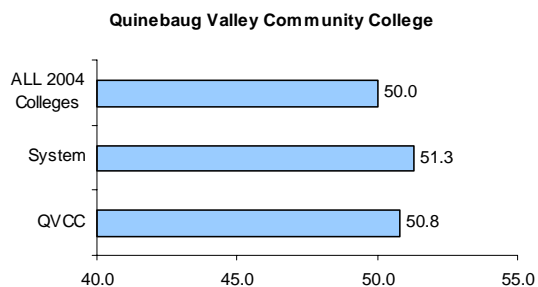
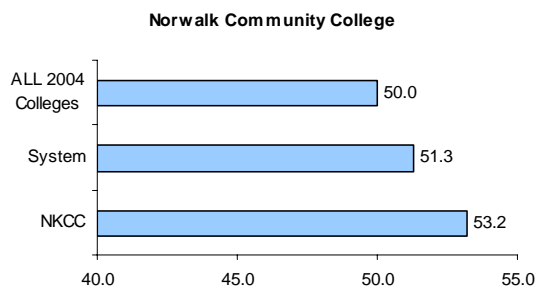
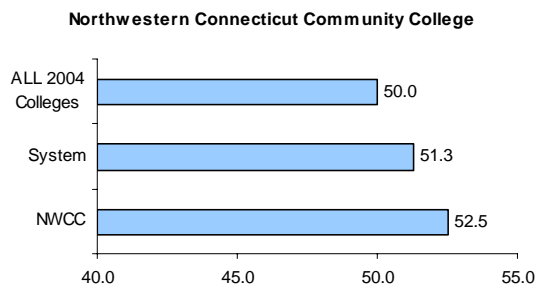
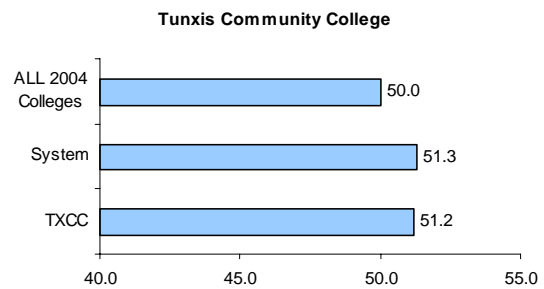
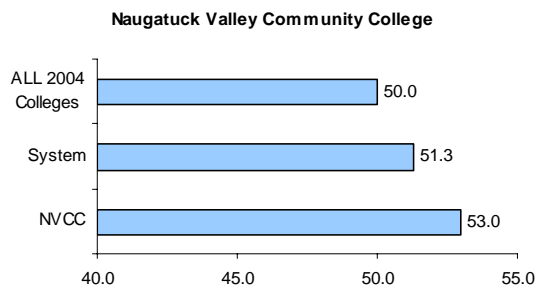
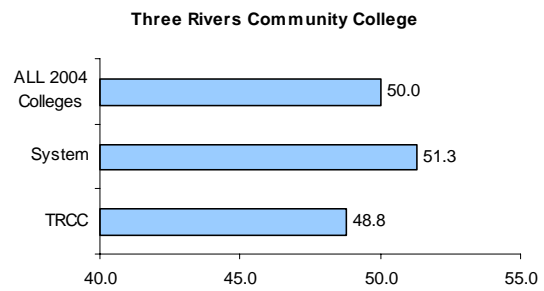
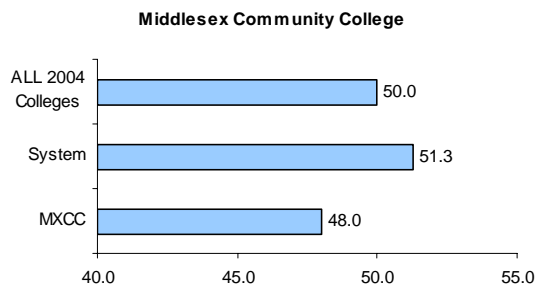
How much does this college emphasize the following?

9a. Encouraging you to spend significant amounts of time studying.

As compared to all participating colleges in the 2004 CCSSE administration, the system is just above the average with three of the twelve colleges approaching the mean and nine at or above the mean. Colleges are more similar on this scale than they are different. Individual college results follow.

If we are to use these results for improvement then the task at hand is to ask and answer the following questions: "What should our target be for the future?" and "How are we going to get there?"





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Thank you to the staff at CCSSE who provided much of the background material for this brief.

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