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Some Community-College Students Fall Through the Cracks in Their First Month

By ELYSE ASHBURN

Many new community-college students receive little or no attention from advisers in their first four weeks of class, even though those first weeks are key to helping students succeed.

Those findings, from this year's Community College Survey of Student Engagement, indicate that many students have barely made it through the door before they slip off their college's radar.

"The results are interesting and compelling and completely unsurprising," says Kay M. McClenney, the survey's director and a senior lecturer in the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin. "We know that there are an awful lot of students who are lost very early in the process."

The 2007 survey, which was released this week, for the first time attempted to determine exactly what services students need, but aren't receiving, in the first four weeks of college.

Among the most striking findings, more than a third of students said they had not completed any course-placement tests after a month in college, even though most colleges say they require all students to take such tests.

Some students are exempted from taking placement tests because of their SAT or ACT scores, but at most community colleges, far less than a third of students submit those scores. Rather, the survey indicates that students are slipping by in other ways.

The survey, commonly known as Cessie, also found that more than half of students did not discuss educational goals with an adviser in the first month and that about one-third did not attend orientation.

Those findings stand in contrast to mounting research showing that orientation and advising help students stay in college and do well. The findings also contradict what students say they want.

About 89 percent of students in this year's survey said that academic advising was important to them, and almost two-thirds said it was very important.

The lack of early advising may contribute to students' confusion later on. Last spring almost a quarter of community-college students surveyed weren't sure if they would return to college any time soon.

"When we know there are things students need to be successful, we need to require them," says Ms. McClenney. "When does it become educational malpractice not to?"

Five Years of Data

Cessie started in 2001 and was modeled on the National Survey of Student Engagement, which focuses on four-year institutions.

Two-year colleges use the Cessie survey data, which measure how "engaged" students are in academics and campus activities, to complement more-traditional measures of student success like retention, graduation, and transfer rates.

This year's survey marked five full years of data on student engagement from community colleges. (The survey's first two years were a pilot year and a national field test.) And in those five years, several persistent issues have come to light.

For one, students have consistently rated academic advising as the most important service community colleges can provide. Yet a third of students continue to say that they rarely or never use advising.

That disparity occurs in part because advising services are not easily accessible for many students, especially those attending college part time or at night.

Part-time students have repeatedly fallen behind their full-time peers on key measures of engagement, including use of advising and interaction with professors. That's particularly alarming because about 63 percent of community-college students nationwide attend part time.

On the flip side, Cessie has also consistently shown that students who are academically underprepared are generally more engaged than academically prepared ones. Underprepared students are much more likely to take advantage of student services like tutoring, skills-development labs, and computer labs.

That finding, in part, reflects the fact that underprepared students often have to work harder to succeed. But Ms. McClenney says it also shows that only the most dedicated high-risk students make it to the spring semester, when Cessie is conducted.

Working to Improve

To find out what happens to community-college students who don't make it to the second semester, Ms. McClenney started a new project this fall, the Survey of Entering Student Engagement.

The new survey, known as Sense, was conducted when students were still in their first month of community college. The results from the first entering-student survey are due out this spring.

This year's Cessie used data from a three-year cohort made up of the colleges that participated in the survey in 2005, 2006, and 2007. This year's cohort includes more than 310,000 student from 525 colleges in 48 states, British Columbia, and the Marshall Islands.

The national data were released this week on the project's Web site (<http://www.ccsse.org>), though colleges received their institutional reports in the summer. Those individual results are also posted online, unlike the institutional reports from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which are confidential unless a university chooses to share them.

Inherent in the two-year colleges' openness is a commitment to improve, Ms. McClenney says.

Brookhaven College, in Dallas, for example, has started a workshop for faculty members that focuses exclusively on helping students in the first three weeks of college.

Professors are encouraged to assign short writing assignments, like a job description for the student's workplace. The assignment allows professors to gauge each student's writing ability early on and gives them a sense of the students' outside obligations.

"These colleges are confronting data that isn't what they want to see," says Ms. McClenney. "They're saying, 'Folks, we need to do something about this.'"