The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) is an annual nation-wide survey conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) in Austin, Texas. It aims at exploring institutional practices and new students’ experiences in the earliest weeks of college. The survey data helps colleges better understand students’ early college experience, and assists in identifying early obstacles to student progress and improving college practices in ways that can increase student success in the first year of college.

The survey is comprised of six Benchmarks of Effective Practice with Entering Students. These benchmarks are sets of conceptually related survey questions grouped together to serve as yardsticks to measure performance on various domains of early student engagement:

I. Early Connections
II. High Expectations and Aspirations
III. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway
IV. Effective Track to College Readiness
V. Engaged Learning
VI. Academic and Social Support Network

This document consists of six sections, one for each benchmark. Each section starts with a brief description of the benchmark, followed by a list of items constituting the benchmark, and ending with NOVA’s performance on the benchmark in comparison with other extra-large colleges and all participating colleges (referred to as ‘National Average’) in 2009 and 2010. To make the data comparable, SENSE uses standardized benchmark scores as opposed to raw scores. The national average for the benchmarks is always 50.0. Therefore, a benchmark score greater than 50.0 is indicative of performance better than the national average for that particular benchmark and a score less than 50.0 is indicative of below average performance.
Benchmark 1. Early Connections

Oftentimes, students’ personal experiences at college, such as feeling accepted by the college, the fellow students and the faculty, and developing strong connections with the people around them positively influence students’ decisions about persisting in the college. The benchmark Early Connections taps into this aspect of student life in the first few weeks of college.

The following five items constitute this benchmark:

(Students responded to the following four items using a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)

1. The very first time I came to this college I felt welcome.
2. The college provided me with adequate information about financial assistance (scholarship, grants, loans, etc.)
3. A college staff member helped me determine whether I qualified for financial assistance.
4. At least one college staff member (other than an instructor) learned my name.

(Students responded to the next item on a dichotomous yes or no scale.)

5. A specific person was assigned to me so I could see him/her each time I needed information or assistance.

As seen in Figure 1, in 2010, NOVA scored lower than both the national average and the average for extra-large colleges on this benchmark. NOVA’s score decreased by 0.7 points from 2009 to 2010.

Figure 1. Early Connections: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average
Benchmark 2. High Expectations and Aspirations

Students’ aspirations and the goals they set for themselves, their perceived faculty expectations, and the amount of effort they put into their studies are all important determinants of their academic success. The benchmark High Expectations and Aspirations addresses these aspects of student engagement.

The following seven items constitute this benchmark:

(Student responded to the following items using a five-point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)

1. The instructors at this college want me to succeed.
2. I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college.
3. I am prepared academically to succeed in college.

(Student responded to the following items on a four-point scale: Never, Once, Two or Three times, Four or more times)

During the first three weeks of your first semester or quarter at this college, how often did you:

4. Turn in an assignment late.
5. Not turn in an assignment.
6. Come to class without completing readings or assignments.
7. Skip class.

Figure 2 shows that, in 2010, NOVA’s score is lower than the national average and the average for other extra-large colleges. NOVA’s score decreased by 1.9 points from 2009 to 2010.

**Figure 2. High Expectations and Aspirations: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average**
Benchmark 3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway

In addition to the motivation and aspirations students may have, in order to be successful, students need guidance with defining their goals, choosing the appropriate options in terms of courses and programs to pursue, visualizing their career path, and planning steps to follow to make the goals achievable. The following survey items measure the amount of assistance students are getting in this domain.

The following five items constitute this benchmark:

(Students responded to the following five items using a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)

1. I was able to meet with an academic advisor at times convenient for me.
2. An advisor helped me to identify the courses I needed to take during my first semester/quarter.
3. An advisor helped me to select a course of study, program, or major.
4. An advisor helped me to set academic goals and to create a plan for achieving them.
5. 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.

As seen in Figure 3, in 2010, NOVA scored below the national average and the average for extra-large colleges. From 2009 to 2010, NOVA’s score increased by 1 point.

Figure 3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average
Benchmark 4. Effective Track to College Readiness

A large proportion of students entering community colleges are underprepared for college-level courses. Testing students and placing them in appropriate remedial courses (when necessary) not only equips them with the skills required for college education, but also increases their likelihood of success at college. The following items address students’ experiences in relation with this initiative at the college.

The following six items constitute this benchmark:

(Students responded to the following items on a dichotomous yes or no scale.)

1. Before I could register for classes I was required to take a placement test to assess my skills in reading, writing, and/or math.
2. I took a placement test.
3. This college required me to enroll in classes indicated by my placement test scores during my first semester/quarter.

(Students responded to the following items using a five-point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)

4. I learned to improve my study skills (listening, note taking, highlighting readings, working with others, etc.).
5. I learned to understand my academic strengths and weaknesses.
6. I learned skills and strategies to improve my test-taking ability.

As seen in Figure 4, in 2010, NOVA scored lower than the national average and the average for extra-large colleges on this benchmark. From 2009 to 2010, NOVA’s score decreased by 3 points.

Figure 4. Effective Track to College Readiness: NOVA vs. Extra-Large College and National Average
Benchmark 5. Engaged Learning

The community college student population is mainly composed of commuter and part-time students. These students spend relatively less time on campus than students at 4-year universities and have additional job and family related responsibilities, which in turn translates into fewer opportunities to engage in the process of learning. Thus, an organized effort on the part of the college to encourage certain aspects of engagement is necessary. For example, encouraging student-student and student-faculty interaction within and outside the classroom and developing ways to motivate students to spend more time and effort on their studies can prove effective in enhancing student learning and persistence. The benchmark Engaged Learning taps into related student behaviors.

The following sixteen items constitute this benchmark:

During the first three weeks of your first semester or quarter at this college, how often did you:

(Students responded to these items on a four-point scale: Never, Once, Two or Three times, Four or more times.)

1. Ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions.
2. Prepare at least two drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in.
3. Participate in supplemental instruction (extra class sessions with an instructor, tutor, or experienced student).
4. Work with other students on a project or assignment during class.
5. Work with classmates outside of class on class projects or assignments.
6. Participate in a required study group outside of class.
7. Participate in a student-initiated (not required) study group outside of class.
8. Use an electronic tool (e-mail, text messaging, Facebook, MySpace, class website, etc.) to communicate with another student about coursework.
9. Use an electronic tool (e-mail, text messaging, Facebook, MySpace, class website, etc.) to communicate with an instructor about coursework.
10. Discuss an assignment or grade with an instructor.
11. Ask for help from an instructor regarding questions or problems related to a class.
12. Receive prompt written or oral feedback from instructors on your performance.
13. Discuss ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class.
14. Use face-to-face tutoring.
15. Use writing, math, or other skill lab.
16. Use computer lab.

Figure 5 shows that, in 2010, NOVA scored lower than the national average and the average for extra-large colleges on the benchmark Engaged Learning. NOVA’s score decreased by 1.3 points from 2009 to 2010.
Students entering college are faced with a lot of unknowns, ranging from information about college policies/procedures to specific course-related matters such as grading method and syllabi. Oftentimes, these unknowns include things that students are not aware that they don’t know. Thus, it is important that the college makes a conscious effort to assure communication of the required information to the students. Encouraging students to develop academic and social networks is one effective way to enhance this information exchange. The following benchmark items explore how well the information exchange and student networking process are functioning at the college.

The following seven items constitute this benchmark:

(Students responded to the following items using a five-point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.)

1. All instructors clearly explained academic and student support services available at this college.
2. All instructors clearly explained course grading policies.
3. All instructors clearly explained course syllabi (syllabuses).
4. I knew how to get in touch with my instructors outside of class.
5. At least one other student whom I didn’t previously know learned my name.
6. At least one instructor learned my name.
7. I learned the name of at least one other student in most of my classes.

Figure 6 shows that, similar to the pattern observed in all the previous benchmarks, NOVA scored lower than both the national average and the average for extra-large colleges in 2010. From 2009 to 2010, NOVA’s score remained the same.
Figure 6. Academic and Social Support Network: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average

Summary of the Results

- From 2009 to 2010, NOVA’s scores decreased by between 0.7 and 3 points for four benchmarks: Early Connections, High Expectations and Aspirations, Effective Track to College Readiness, and Engaged Learning. NOVA’s scores increased by 1 point for the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway. NOVA’s score remained the same for the benchmark Academic and Social Support Network.
- When compared to colleges nation-wide, NOVA’s performance on all the benchmarks was below average.
- Benchmark scores of NOVA were also lower in comparison with the scores of extra-large colleges for each benchmark.
- The difference between the NOVA scores and extra-large colleges was most evident for the benchmarks: Early Connections and Clear Academic Plan and Pathway.
  - NOVA scored 38.6 on Early Connections whereas the other extra-large colleges and national average scored 46.5 and 50.0 respectively.
  - On the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway, NOVA scored 39.9, which was considerably lower than the score of other extra-large colleges (46.2) and national average (50.0).
- As indicated by the data for the benchmark Early Connections, NOVA can extend its efforts to improve students’ early college experiences by fostering student connections with faculty and staff, and make students feel more welcome at the College.
- Also, given the results for the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway, there is scope for improvement with regard to academic advising for entering students.