NOVA participated in the national administration of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) in Fall 2010. This research brief presents NOVA’s performance on this survey for entering students by student age group. Given that community colleges attract students from a wide age range, in contrast with a typical four-year college, it is useful to look at the performance of traditional age students (18 to 24 years old) in comparison with non-traditional age students (older than 24 years) to explore the differences between the two groups.

The tables below present scores for the two age groups on the following six SENSE benchmarks:

1. Early Connections
2. High Expectations and Aspirations
3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway
4. Effective Track to College Readiness
5. Engaged Learning
6. Academic and Social Support Network

These benchmarks are considered yardsticks for measuring good educational practices in relation to early student engagement. A benchmark score is a composite measure of student performance on various conceptually-related survey items that constitute each benchmark.

Generally, benchmark scores are standardized such that the aggregate national average (average of all the participating colleges) is always 50. Thus, a benchmark score greater than 50 is indicative of performance better than the national average for that particular benchmark and a score less than 50 is indicative of below average performance.

However, it should be noted that the national benchmark scores may deviate slightly from 50 when the data is disaggregated, for example, by student demographic characteristics such as age group, as examined herein. Therefore, when making comparisons in the present context, the exact benchmark scores are mentioned for each group. In the following sections of this document, each benchmark is considered separately and the items constituting the benchmarks are listed within the related section.
Benchmark 1. Early Connections

The following five items constitute the benchmark Early Connections. (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 (scholarships, 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 following 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, traditional age students at NOVA scored higher on Early Connections than the non-traditional age students. Further, both age groups at NOVA scored lower than their counterparts at other extra-large colleges and colleges nationwide (as indicated by the national average).

Figure 1. Early Connections: Comparison of Traditional Age and Non-Traditional Age Students
Benchmark 2. High Expectations and Aspirations

The following seven items constitute the benchmark High Expectations and Aspirations. (Students 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.

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

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 the traditional age students in general scored lower on this benchmark than the non-traditional age students. Of the three populations, non-traditional age students at NOVA stood out with the highest score, indicating that they have higher motivation and aspirations to succeed and expend more effort on curricular activities in comparison with the other students under consideration.

**Figure 2. High Expectations and Aspirations: Comparison of Traditional Age and Non-Traditional Age Students**

![Bar chart showing benchmark scores for Traditional Age Students and Non-Traditional Age Students at NOVA, Extra-Large Colleges, and National Average. NOVA scores are 43.7, 47.0, and 48.0 for Traditional Age Students and 58.3, 55.7, and 57.2 for Non-Traditional Age Students.](chart.png)
Benchmark 3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway

The following five items constitute the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway. (Students responded to these 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.

Figure 3 shows that non-traditional age students at NOVA scored slightly higher than the traditional age students on the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway. The scores of both the groups, however, were lower than their counterparts in extra-large colleges and the national average.

Figure 3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway: Comparison of Traditional Age and Non-Traditional Age Students
Benchmark 4. Effective Track to College Readiness

The following six items constitute the benchmark Effective Track to College Readiness. (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 (COMPASS, ASSET ACCUPLACER, SAT, ACT, etc.) to assess my skills in reading, writing, and/or math.
2. I took a placement test (COMPASS, ASSET ACCUPLACER, SAT, ACT, etc.).
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. 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.).
5. Within a class or through another experience at this college, I learned to understand my academic strengths and weaknesses.
6. Within a class or through another experience at this college, I learned skills and strategies to improve my test-taking ability.

As seen in Figure 4, in comparison with corresponding age groups at extra-large colleges and colleges nationwide, traditional age NOVA students scored lower on this benchmark. However, in comparison with non-traditional age NOVA students, they scored more closely with the comparison groups, while the non-traditional age NOVA students scored significantly lower than all other groups.

Figure 4. Effective Track to College Readiness: Comparison of Traditional Age and Non-Traditional Age Students
Benchmark 5. Engaged Learning

The following sixteen items constitute the benchmark Engaged Learning.

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.

As seen in Figure 5 (next page), both traditional age and non-traditional age NOVA students scored lower than extra-large colleges and the national average on this benchmark. In comparison to non-traditional age students at NOVA, traditional age NOVA students scored higher.
 Benchmark 6. Academic and Social Support Network

The following seven items constitute the benchmark Academic and Social Support Network. (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 (next page) shows that both age groups at NOVA scored lower than the extra-large colleges and the national average on the benchmark Academic and Social Support Network. Extra-large colleges in turn scored lower than the national average on this benchmark. At NOVA, non-traditional students scored lower than traditional age students.
Summary of Results

- At NOVA, traditional age students scored higher than the non-traditional age students on four of the six benchmarks – Early Connections, Effective Track to College Readiness, Engaged Learning, and Academic and Social Support Network.

- Non-traditional age students scored higher than the traditional age students on the benchmarks High Expectations and Aspirations, and Clear Academic Plan and Pathway.

- On the benchmark High Expectations and Aspirations, non-traditional age NOVA students scored higher than their counterparts in other extra-large colleges and the national average.

- The scores of both the traditional age and the non-traditional age students at NOVA were lower than their counterparts in the extra-large colleges and the corresponding national averages for the benchmarks Early Connections, Clear Academic Plan and Pathway, Effective Track to College Readiness, Engaged Learning, and Academic and Social Support Network.