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. The survey was opened for national administration for the first time in Fall 2009 and NOVA was among the various community colleges that participated in the survey. The survey focuses on assessing student engagement in the early weeks of college life and was administered to NOVA students during the fourth and fifth weeks of the Fall 2009 semester.

The survey data are used by the colleges to identify the early obstacles to student progress and appropriately modify the college practices to help the students make a smooth transition into college life and effectively engage in the process of learning. The survey questions elicit information about student’s early college experiences such as, experiences related to testing and placement, enrollment in courses (developmental, learning communities, etc.), availability and usage of college resources, interaction with the other students and faculty, time and effort they spend on curricular activities, etc.

Based on the survey, CCCSE has identified 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. The six benchmarks are:

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 contains six sections, one for each benchmark. Each section starts with a brief description of the benchmark, followed by the list of items constituting the benchmark, and NOVA’s performance on the benchmark in comparison with other extra-large colleges and all the participating colleges taken together (referred to as ‘National Average’). In order to make the comparisons and interpretation of data easy, SENSE uses standardized benchmark scores as opposed to raw scores. The scores are standardized such that the national average (average of all the participating colleges) is always 50.0. Thus, 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 their 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 (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, NOVA scored lower than both the national average and the average for extra-large colleges on this benchmark.

**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:

(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.)

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 NOVA’s performance on this benchmark is close to the performance of other extra-large colleges, but it is clearly lower than the national average.

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 in order to make the goal 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 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.

As seen in Figure 3, NOVA scored remarkably below the national average and the average for the extra-large colleges.

Figure 3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average

![Bar chart showing NOVA, Extra-Large Colleges, and National Average scores for Clear Academic Plan and Pathway]
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 student 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 (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, NOVA scored higher than the national average on this benchmark. However, the score is lower in comparison with the average for the extra-large colleges.

Figure 4. Effective Track to College Readiness: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges 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 NOVA scored lower than the national average and the average for the extra-large colleges on the benchmark Engaged Learning.

Figure 5. Engaged Learning: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average

Benchmark 6. Academic and Social Support Network

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 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 most of the previous benchmarks, NOVA scored lower than the national average and the average for the extra-large colleges.

**Figure 6. Academic and Social Support Network: NOVA vs. Extra-Large Colleges and National Average**

![Bar chart showing NOVA, Extra-Large Colleges, and National Average scores](chart.png)

**Summary of the Results**

- When compared to colleges nation-wide, NOVA’s performance on all the benchmarks was below average, except on the benchmark Effective Track to College Readiness on which NOVA scored slightly above the national average (50.8 vs. 50.0).
- 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 the scores of the comparison groups was most evident for the benchmarks: Early Connections, and Clear Academic Plan and Pathway.
- NOVA scored 39.3 on Early Connections whereas the other extra-large colleges and colleges nation-wide (national average) scored 45.4 and 50.0 respectively.
- On the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway, NOVA scored 38.9, which was considerably lower than the score of other extra-large colleges (45.6) and the national average (50.0).
- As indicated by the data, 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.
- There is also scope for improvement with regard to academic advising for the entering students.