This research brief presents performance of five of the NOVA campuses\(^1\) on the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) administered in Fall 2009. Based on the survey items, SENSE has identified six benchmarks that can be used as yardsticks for evaluating the effectiveness of the educational practices concerning entering students at the college. The benchmarks are composed of groups of conceptually related items on the survey, and the benchmark scores are composite scores of these items. The benchmark scores are standardized such that the national average for each benchmark is 50. Thus, a score less than 50 is indicative of below average performance and a score greater than 50 is indicative of performance better than the national average (average of all the participating colleges taken together). 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

Overall, the results indicate that benchmark scores of the college and the individual campuses are, in general, lower than the national average, with an exception for the fourth benchmark – Effective Track to College Preparedness – for which most of the NOVA campuses scored above the national average. In addition, the Alexandria and Loudoun campuses scored higher than the national average on the benchmarks, High Expectations and Aspirations, and Engaged Learning, respectively. Also, the Loudoun campus stood out in this analysis by being the one to score either the highest or the lowest on the different benchmarks. Specifically, Loudoun's score was the highest or close to the highest on the benchmarks Early Connection, Clear Academic Plan and Pathway, Engaged Learning, and Academic and Social Support Network. However, it scored the lowest on the benchmarks High Expectations and Aspirations, and Effective Track to College Preparedness.

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\(^1\) The Medical Education Campus was not included in the survey as the courses offered at this campus did not meet the course selection criteria used for SENSE sampling.
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 the 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.

Figure 1 displays performance of the NOVA campuses on the benchmark Early Connections. As can be seen, the Loudoun campus scored the highest (46.4) on this benchmark and Manassas the lowest (33.8).
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.

As seen in Figure 2, among the various campuses, the Alexandria campus scored the highest score of 51.2, a score that was also higher than the national average for this benchmark. Loudoun, on the other hand, scored the lowest at 43.3.

Figure 2. High Expectations and Aspirations: Comparison of NOVA Campuses
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, on the benchmark Clear Academic Plan and Pathway, the Loudoun campus scored the highest (44.2) and Manassas the lowest (35.6). Benchmark scores of all other campuses ranged between 37 and 39.

Figure 3. Clear Academic Plan and Pathway: Comparison of NOVA Campuses
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, all the campuses scored more than the national average (50.0) on this benchmark, except the Loudoun campus, which scored the lowest score of 49.1.

Figure 4. Effective Track to College Preparedness: Comparison of NOVA Campuses
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 displays scores of the NOVA campuses on the benchmark Engaged Learning. As can be seen, the Loudoun campus scored 52.3 on this benchmark, a score higher than the national average (50.0) and also higher than the scores of all other campuses. Woodbridge, on the other hand, scored the lowest (46.0) on this benchmark.

**Figure 5. Engaged Learning: Comparison of NOVA Campuses**

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**Benchmark 6. Academic and Social Support Network**

Students entering college are faced with 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 displays performance of NOVA campuses on the benchmark Academic and Social Support Network. As displayed in the figure, the Annandale campus scored the highest (48.2) on this benchmark, with Loudoun next in order with a score of 47.9. In contrast, Alexandria scored the lowest (43.0) in comparison with all the other campuses; Woodbridge performed only slightly better than Alexandria by attaining a score of 43.4 on this benchmark.

**Figure 6. Academic and Social Support Network: Comparison of NOVA Campuses**