



# Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement

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## BCSSE 2008 Overview

The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) was launched in 2007 as a companion survey to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In its first two years, close to 140,000 entering first-year students at 197 institutions across the United States and Canada have participated in BCSSE. Now in its third year, BCSSE continues to collect data about entering college students' high school academic and co-curricular experiences, as well as their expectations for participating in educationally purposeful activities during the first college year. BCSSE administration usually takes place prior to the start of fall classes and is designed to be paired with a NSSE administration at the end of the first year, providing an in-depth understanding of first-year student engagement.

In fall 2008, 119 U.S. and Canadian institutions participated in BCSSE. Of those, 91 (76%) also administered NSSE in 2009, allowing comparisons of incoming student experiences and expectations with their actual experiences at the end of the first year. BCSSE data can be used independently or in combination with NSSE data by faculty, academic advisors, administrators, researchers, and others for program development, institutional improvement, accountability, and related purposes.

### Administration and Respondents

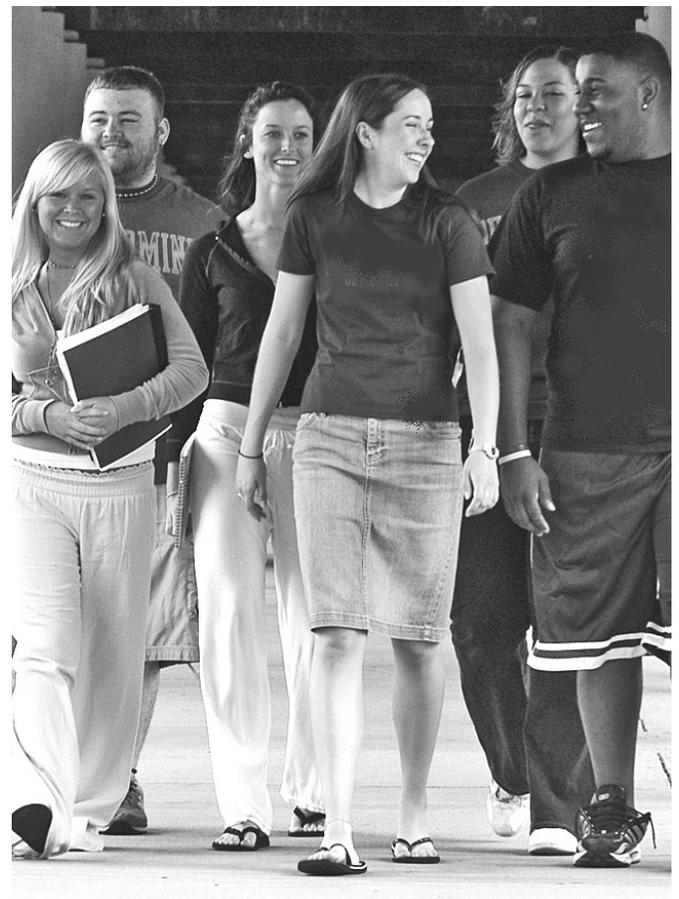
BCSSE is administered locally by campus officials who distribute the paper survey or send invitations and reminders for online administration. In 2008, 72 institutions (61%) utilized paper administration, 45 institutions (38%) chose the Web-based survey, and 2 institutions (1%) used mixed modes. More than 100,000 incoming students from 38 states and one Canadian province were invited to participate in the 2008 BCSSE administration. In total 70,443 U.S. and Canadian students completed the survey.

### BCSSE 2008 Institutions

Many different types of U.S. institutions and one Canadian institution participated in BCSSE 2008. Almost half (43%)

of the U.S. institutions were classified as master's level, with 40% baccalaureate, and 17% doctoral (Table 1).

In general, the characteristics of BCSSE 2008 institutions reflected the national distribution of baccalaureate-granting institutions with respect to Carnegie Classification, control, and undergraduate enrollment size. BCSSE institutions very closely matched the distribution of U.S. institutions nationally according to their Carnegie classifications, yet public colleges and universities were slightly overrepresented while private institutions were slightly underrepresented. Medium-sized colleges and universities with enrollment sizes between 5,000-9,999 undergraduates were slightly overrepresented in this sample, while small schools with fewer than 1,000 students were slightly underrepresented.



Bellarmine University

**Table 1****Profile of U.S. BCSSE 2008 Institutions Compared to All U.S. Baccalaureate-Granting Colleges and Universities<sup>a</sup>**

	<b>BCSSE 2008</b>	<b>US<sup>b</sup></b>
<b>Carnegie Classification - Basic 2005<sup>c</sup></b>		
Doctoral (RU/VH, RU/H, DRU)	17%	18%
Master's (Master's L, Master's M, Master's S)	43%	42%
Baccalaureate (Bac/A&S, Bac/Diverse)	40%	41%
<b>Control</b>		
Public	42%	35%
Private	58%	65%
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment</b>		
Fewer than 1,000	15%	19%
1,000 - 2,499	34%	33%
2,500 - 4,999	17%	18%
5,000 - 9,999	19%	15%
10,000 - 19,999	10%	10%
20,000 or more	4%	5%
<hr/>		
RU/VH	Research Universities (very high research activity)	
RU/H	Research Universities (high research activity)	
DRU	Doctoral/Research Universities	
Master's L	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	
Master's M	Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)	
Master's S	Master's Colleges and Universities (smaller programs)	
Bac/A&S	Baccalaureate Colleges-Arts & Sciences	
Bac/Diverse	Baccalaureate Colleges-Diverse Fields	

- a. Percentages are based on U.S. postsecondary institutions that award baccalaureate degrees and belong to one of the eight Carnegie classes in the table. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
- b. U.S. percentages are based on the data from the 2008 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics file.
- c. For information on the 2005 Carnegie Classifications see: [www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications).

## Profile of U.S. Respondents to BCSSE

Given that BCSSE is a locally administered survey, sampling schemes and data collection methods vary across institutions. However, most institutions sampled the entire first-year population and collected data from 50% to 70% of their students. Thus, BCSSE 2008 respondents are likely a good estimate of the overall first-year student class for the participating institutions (Table 2).

## Gender

Overall, there is very little gender difference in the BCSSE 2008 sample compared to the national representation of women in their first year of college. Women made up more than half (58%) of the U.S. BCSSE respondents, closely matching the percentage of first-time, first-year women at baccalaureate-granting institutions nationally (U. S. Department of Education, 2008<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:08)

**Table 2****Profile of BCSSE 2008 U.S. Respondents**

<b>Gender</b>	
Male	42%
Female	58%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
American Indian/Other Native American	1%
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	5%
Black/African American	12%
White(non-Hispanic)	70%
Mexican/Mexican American	2%
Puerto Rican	1%
Other Hispanic/Latino	3%
Multi-racial	3%
Other	1%
I prefer not to respond	3%
<b>International</b>	4%
<b>High School Graduation Year</b>	
2005 or earlier	2%
2006	1%
2007	3%
2008	92%
<b>First-Generation Students</b>	34%
<b>Financial Aid Recipients<sup>a</sup></b>	80%

a. Financial aid recipients are students who reported receiving any form of scholarships, grants, or student loans.

## Race and Ethnicity

BCSSE data also generally comport with the representation of students in U.S. higher education by race and ethnicity, with a slight overrepresentation of White (non-Hispanic) students. Of BCSSE U.S. respondents, approximately 70% were Caucasian, 12% were Black/African American, 5% Asian American, and 6% Hispanic/Latino.

## First-Generation Status

Approximately 34% of BCSSE respondents indicated that neither of their parents (or legal guardians) graduated from college with at least a bachelor's degree. Given the difficulties that many first-generation students face when entering higher education, it is important that institutions focus resources to assure the success of these students.

## High School Graduation Year

BCSSE U.S. respondents are, for the most part, traditional-age college students. Approximately 92% graduated from high school in 2008, 3% graduated in 2007, and 3% graduated in 2006 or earlier.

## Financial Aid

Not surprisingly, about 80% of all respondents indicated they received some form of financial aid (loans or grants). More specifically, 18% of students indicated that they received a federal Pell Grant, compared to approximately 26% nationally (Baum, 2008<sup>2</sup>).

## BCSSE Application: Studying the Impact of Learning Communities

BCSSE-NSSE combined data are useful for a variety of analyses to better understand the students' first-year experiences, and the impact of first-year programs on student engagement. One such important program is a learning community. NSSE defines a learning community as a formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together.

## Learning communities

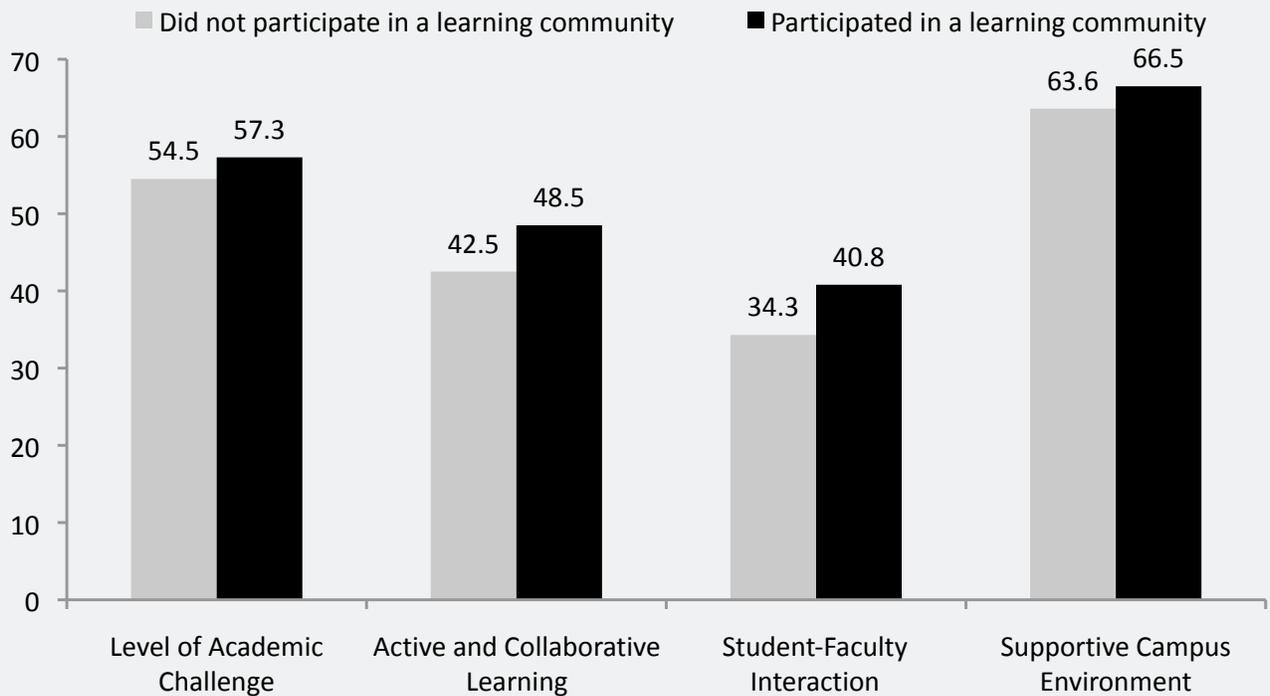
Overall, approximately 19% of all the first-year respondents with matched BCSSE 2008-NSSE 2009 data participated in a learning community. These students were enrolled at a variety of institutions across of the country. About 35% were enrolled at doctoral institutions, 59% at master's level institutions, and approximately 15% at baccalaureate institutions. In addition, respondents who participated in a learning community were more likely to be enrolled at public institutions (56%).

An important question typically asked regarding the impact of learning communities is, "Are students who participate in a learning community more academically engaged?" To answer this question, students must first be categorized as having participated in a learning community or not. It requires that we consider students' prior high school experiences, as they may influence the decision to participate in a learning community as well as first-year academic engagement.

Considering the incoming characteristics of these students, we see that those who participated in a learning community were significantly more academically engaged in high school and reported significantly higher expectations to be engaged in college compared to those who did not participate in a learning community ( $p < .001$ ). Thus, to better understand the impact of learning

<sup>2</sup> Baum, S. (2008, July). *Financial aid: Access for whom?* Paper presented at the Congressional Black Caucus Education Summit, Washington, DC.

**Figure 1**  
**Adjusted<sup>a</sup> Mean NSSE Benchmark Scores for Those Who Participated In a Learning Community and Those Who Did Not**



a. Adjusted mean differences were calculated using MANCOVA with two BCSSE scales as covariates (high school academic engagement and expected academic engagement). Both covariates contributed significantly to the model ( $p < .001$ ).

communities on first-year academic engagement, one should take into account prior engagement experiences and engagement expectations. Doing so will better isolate the specific impact of learning communities on first-year academic engagement.

Using BCSSE 2008-NSSE 2009 matched data, Figure 1 displays the mean differences between those respondents who participated in learning communities and those who did not, after statistically controlling for their high school engagement and their expectations to be engaged in college. Even with these controls in place, respondents who participated in a learning community reported significantly higher levels of engagement as measured by the NSSE benchmarks for Level of Academic Challenge ( $p < .001$ ), Active and Collaborative Learning ( $p < .001$ ), and Student-Faculty Interaction ( $p < .001$ ). These students also reported significantly higher Supportive Campus Environment scores compared to their peers who did not participate in a learning community ( $p < .001$ ).

Based on data from first-year students enrolled at institutions across the United States, these results provide support for the positive impact of learning

communities. However, specific implementation of learning communities vary widely, thus the results on any one campus may differ. Using your BCSSE 2008-NSSE 2009 data, your campus can replicate this analysis and explore the impact of learning communities on first-year student experiences.



**Beginning College Survey  
of Student Engagement**

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