# The Heart of Student Success

## Teaching, Learning, and College Completion

College completion is on the agenda — from the White House to the statehouse to the family house. Improving college completion is essential, but increased degree and certificate completion, in and of itself, is not a sufficient measure of improvement. Genuine progress depends on making sure that degree completion is a proxy for real learning — for developing thinking and reasoning abilities, content knowledge, and the high-level skills needed for 21st century jobs and citizenship.

## A Shared Commitment to Increasing College Completion

In spring 2010, the Center for Community College Student Engagement joined five other national community college organizations in signing the Community College Completion Commitment — a pledge to promote and support the goal that U.S. community colleges will produce 50% more students with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020, while also increasing access and quality. Visit www.cccse.org for details about the pledge.

**CCCSE**
Center for Community College
Student Engagement

## The Unquestionable Importance of College Completion

Educational attainment and college completion matter — for the prospects of individual students and for the future viability of both the U.S. economy and the American democracy.

The higher a person's educational attainment, the more likely he or she is to be gainfully employed, pay taxes, volunteer, participate in the democratic process, and be capable of taking care of the health and educational needs of his or her children. Conversely, higher levels of education make it less likely for individuals to be publicly dependent.[1]

Today's collective focus on college completion is a shift in U.S. higher education, and particularly in community colleges, from the historical emphasis on providing access to postsecondary education opportunities. A legitimate point of pride is that almost three-quarters of American young people enter some kind of postsecondary training or education within two years of graduating from high school.[2]

However, for far too many community college students, the open door also has been a revolving door:

- Only 28% of first-time, full-time, associate degree-seeking community college students graduate with a certificate or an associate degree within three years.[3]

- Fewer than half (45%) of students who enter community college with the goal of earning a degree or certificate have met their goal six years later.[4]

- Slightly more than half (52%) of first-time, full-time college students in public community colleges return for their second year.[5]

In addition, America is losing ground in educational attainment, not only by comparison with other countries but also, unfortunately, when comparing successive generations of its citizens.

- The United States, long ranked first worldwide, now ranks 10th in the percentage of young adults who hold a college degree.[6]

- If current trends hold, the current generation of college-age Americans will be less educated than their parents, for the first time in U.S. history.[7]

- American employers are reporting shortages of workers with the skills needed to fill jobs, and there is the growing risk that more and more of those opportunities will be exported to other countries.

## Connecting Improved Learning to College Completion

College completion alone won't address all of these challenges. In fact, it is easy to imagine scenarios in which more degrees are awarded but less learning occurs. That outcome must be rejected as unacceptable. The push for more degrees will produce the desired results for individuals and the society only if *college completion* reflects the learning required for family-supporting jobs, effective citizenship, and further studies.

Teaching quality is an essential link between improved college completion and improved learning. Just as access to college is an empty promise without effective practices that promote student success, improved college completion will have real meaning only with serious and sustained attention to the quality of what goes on between teachers and students. Effective teaching and meaningful learning: They are the heart of student success.

## Strategies to Promote Learning That Matters

*The Heart of Student Success* describes four key strategies to promote the strengthened classroom experiences that ultimately are requisite to both increased levels of college completion and deeper levels of learning. In this report, the term *classroom experiences* refers to any activity that takes place as part of a regularly scheduled course.

The key strategies are:

- Strengthen classroom engagement
- Integrate student support into learning experiences
- Expand professional development focused on engaging students
- Focus institutional policies on creating the conditions for learning

The Center uses data from its three surveys — the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE),* the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE),* and the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (*CCFSSE)* — to explore the challenges associated with college completion and how these strategies address them.

*CCSSE* data reported here include only respondents who indicate that they do not currently hold a college degree. *SENSE* data reported here include only entering students who indicate that they do not currently hold a college degree. Entering students are those who indicate that this is their first time at their college.

## Strengthen Classroom Engagement

Moving the needle on student outcomes at community colleges substantially depends on what happens in the classroom. Colleges must make the most of the time students spend with their instructors. To do so, they should raise expectations; promote active, engaged learning; emphasize deep learning; build and encourage relationships; and ensure that students know where they stand.

### Raise expectations

In school, work, and play — in life generally — people perform better when they are expected to do so. To help students reach their potential, colleges must demand high performance. Instructors should set high standards and communicate them clearly, deliberately, and consistently.

Unfortunately, there are many people who believe that some students cannot or will not succeed. But when instructors believe this about their students, the potential for damage is most severe. Addressing these issues requires courageous conversations, but discussing, and if necessary shifting, faculty attitudes has great power in closing student achievement gaps.

*SENSE* and *CCSSE* data indicate that instructors typically explain expectations for students in their classes. However, there are indications that in some instances, expectations for students may not be as high as they need to be. For example, while nearly three-quarters (73%) of *CCSSE* respondents say their college encourages them to spend significant amounts of time studying *quite a bit* or *very much*, a smaller percentage of faculty survey respondents (66%) indicate that their college encourages this behavior *quite a bit* or *very much*.

*"All my [high school] teachers told me, 'Your teachers in college, they wouldn't care whether you showed up, they wouldn't care if you turned in your assignments, they wouldn't care if you failed.' But at the community college, all my teachers are really showing that they are interested in us succeeding. I didn't expect that."*

— STUDENT

### Expectations: Student and Faculty Perceptions

**The college's role in encouraging studying**

Percentage of students saying their college encourages them to spend significant amounts of time studying *quite a bit* or *very much*
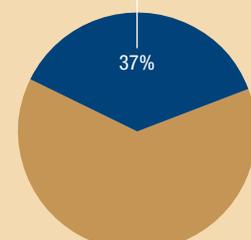


73%
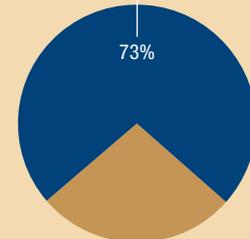
*Source: 2010 CCSSE Cohort data.*

Percentage of faculty members saying their college encourages students to spend significant amounts of time studying *quite a bit* or *very much*



66%
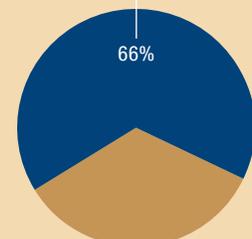
*Source: 2010 CCFSSE Cohort data.*

**Time spent studying**

Percentage of full-time students who report spending *five or fewer hours per week* preparing for class



37%

*Source: 2010 CCSSE Cohort data.*

## Promote active, engaged learning

Students learn and retain more information — and persist and succeed at higher levels — when they are actively involved in learning rather than passively receiving information. Student focus group participants say active instructional approaches that encourage engaged learning, such as small-group work and student-led activities, make them more enthusiastic about their classes and more likely to attend and participate.

Data from Center surveys indicate that there are opportunities to heighten the level of collaborative learning that happens both in and outside the classroom.

- Nearly one-quarter (22%) of *SENSE* respondents and 12% of *CCSSE* respondents report that they *never* worked with other students on projects during class.

- More than two-thirds (68%) of *SENSE* respondents and 40% of *CCSSE* respondents report that they *never* worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments.

In addition, students and faculty report similar views of the amount of collaborative learning in the classroom. Their responses differ, however, regarding the extent to which students work together on projects or assignments outside the classroom.

## Emphasize deep learning

Deep learning refers to broadly applicable thinking, reasoning, and judgment skills — abilities that allow individuals to apply information, develop a coherent world view, and interact in more meaningful ways. Deep learning — learning associated with higher-order cognitive tasks — is typically contrasted with rote memorization. Memorization may help students pass an exam, but it doesn't necessarily expand students' understanding of the world around them, help them make connections across disciplines, or promote the application of knowledge and skills in new situations.

*CCSSE*'s 2010 special-focus items, along with several items from the core survey, explore a variety of experiences that promote deep learning.

## Build and encourage relationships

Personal connections are an important factor in student success. Most students struggle at one time or another. Focus group participants report that relationships with other students, faculty, and staff members strengthened their resolve to return to class the next day, the next month, and the next year.
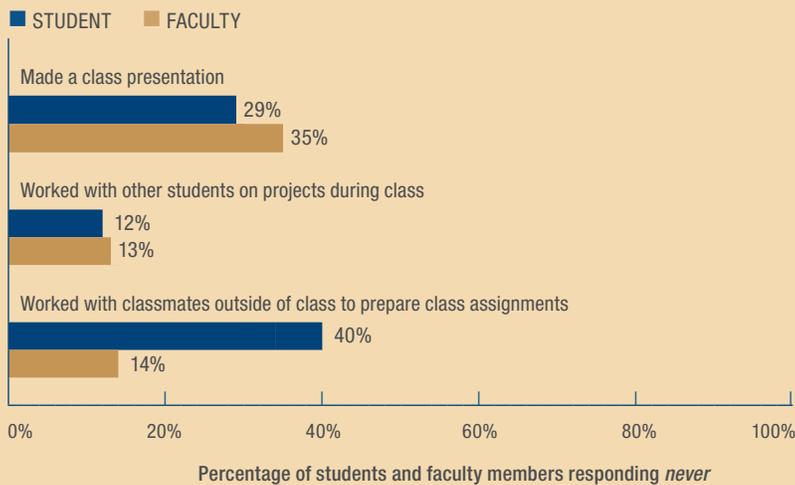
Survey results reveal both areas in which colleges are doing well and areas for improvement in creating multiple, intentional connections with students, beginning with the first point of contact with the college.

- Nearly nine in 10 *SENSE* respondents (86%) *agree* or *strongly agree* that at least one instructor learned their names; 81% *agree* or *strongly agree* that at least one

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### Engaged Learning: Student and Faculty Perceptions

**Students:** In your experiences at this college during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following activities?
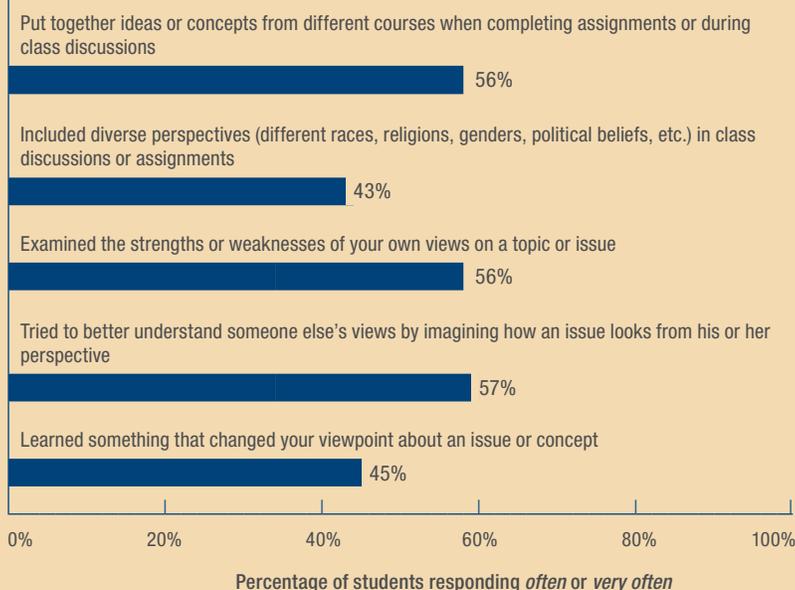
**Faculty:** How often do students in your selected course section do the following activities?

■ STUDENT   ■ FACULTY



Made a class presentation
- Student: 29%
- Faculty: 35%

Worked with other students on projects during class
- Student: 12%
- Faculty: 13%

Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- Student: 40%
- Faculty: 14%

**Percentage of students and faculty members responding *never***

*Sources: CCSSE 2010 Cohort data and CCFSSE 2010 Cohort data.*

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### *CCSSE* 2010 Special-Focus Items: Deep Learning

In your experience at this college during the current school year, about how often have you:



Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions — 56%

Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or assignments — 43%

Examined the strengths or weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue — 56%

Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective — 57%

Learned something that changed your viewpoint about an issue or concept — 45%

**Percentage of students responding *often* or *very often***

*Source: 2010 CCSSE data.*

other student learned their names; and 44% *agree* or *strongly agree* that at least one staff member (other than an instructor) learned their names.

- Nearly nine in 10 *SENSE* respondents (88%) *agree* or *strongly agree* that they knew how to get in touch with their instructors outside of class.

However, there are survey results that clearly indicate opportunities for colleges to increase their intentionality in seeking to build meaningful connections with students:

- More than two-thirds (68%) of *SENSE* respondents and 47% of *CCSSE* respondents report that they *never* discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class.

## Ensure that students know where they stand

Feedback on academic performance greatly affects student retention. Feedback identifies areas of strength and weakness, so students have a greater likelihood of improving and ultimately succeeding. In addition, regular and appropriate assessment and prompt feedback help students progress from surface learning to deep learning.

- 27% of *SENSE* respondents and 8% of *CCSSE* respondents report that they *never* received prompt written or oral feedback from instructors on their performance. By contrast, fewer than 1% of *CCFSSE* respondents say their students *never* received prompt written or oral feedback on their performance.

- 35% of *SENSE* respondents and 9% of *CCSSE* respondents report that they *never* discussed grades or assignments with an instructor.

## Integrate Student Support into Learning Experiences

Students are most likely to succeed when expectations are high and they receive the support they need to rise to those expectations. Community colleges offer a wide variety of support services, but students cannot use services if they are unaware of them. In addition, students don't take advantage of services when they don't know how to access them, find them to be inconvenient, or feel stigmatized by using them.
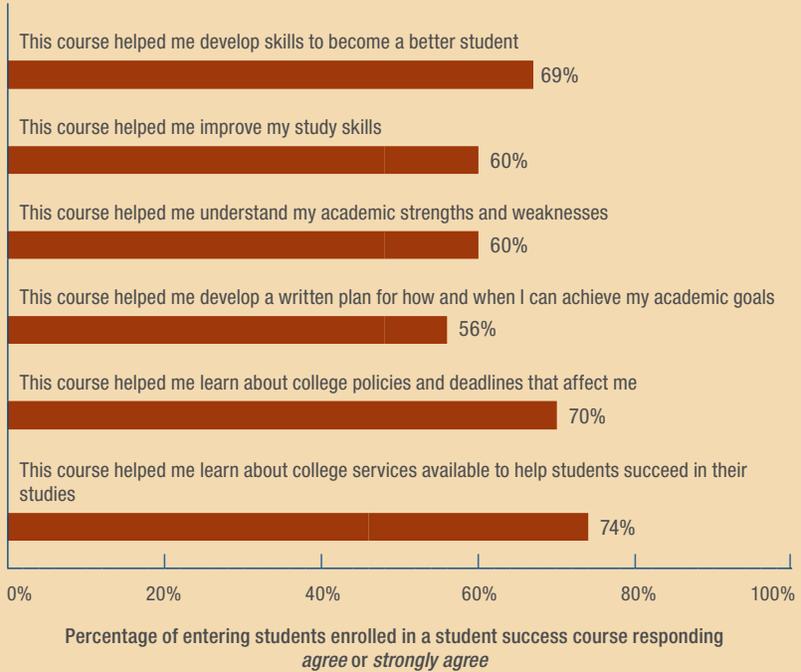
Among *CCSSE* respondents 34% report *rarely* or *never* using academic advising/planning services. In addition, 37% report *rarely* or *never* using skill labs.

*SENSE* data show that while students are aware of some services, they too rarely take advantage of them. A cause for more concern is that *SENSE* data also indicate that many entering students do not even know that critical support services exist.

Intentionally integrating student support into coursework circumvents many of the

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### *SENSE:* The Value of Student Success Courses

Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:

This course helped me develop skills to become a better student
**69%**

This course helped me improve my study skills
**60%**

This course helped me understand my academic strengths and weaknesses
**60%**

This course helped me develop a written plan for how and when I can achieve my academic goals
**56%**

This course helped me learn about college policies and deadlines that affect me
**70%**

This course helped me learn about college services available to help students succeed in their studies
**74%**

0%    20%    40%    60%    80%    100%

Percentage of entering students enrolled in a student success course responding *agree* or *strongly agree*

*Source: 2009 SENSE Student Success Course Special-Focus Module respondents who indicated enrollment in a student success course (3,846 responses).*

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### *CCFSSE:* Faculty's Use of Student Services in Classes

How much do you incorporate the use the following services in your selected course section?

| | Rarely/Never |
|---|---|
| Academic advising/planning | 36% |
| Career counseling | 43% |
| Peer or other tutoring | 27% |
| Skill labs (writing, math, etc.) | 33% |

*Source: 2010 CCFSSE Cohort data.*

### *CCSSE:* Students' Use and Value of Student Services

How important are the following services?

| | Very | Not at all |
|---|---|---|
| Academic advising/planning | 64% | 8% |
| Career counseling | 51% | 19% |
| Peer or other tutoring | 40% | 27% |
| Skill labs (writing, math, etc.) | 45% | 22% |

How often do you use the following services?

| | Rarely/Never |
|---|---|
| Academic advising/planning | 34% |
| Career counseling | 51% |
| Peer or other tutoring | 47% |
| Skill labs (writing, math, etc.) | 37% |

*Source: 2010 CCSSE Cohort data.*

barriers that keep students from using services. Examples of this approach include requiring freshman seminars or student success courses; making participation in supplemental instruction, tutoring, or skill labs mandatory; incorporating counseling and advising and academic planning into learning communities or first-year experiences; and including career counseling as part of technical and professional programs.

Wrapping student support into coursework makes the support services inescapable, eliminates obstacles of time and place, and takes advantage of the time when colleges have the best access to their students.

Moreover, integrating support services creates a new type of shared experience for the students, thereby nurturing their relationships and their ability to support one another. Students need not feel singled out or stigmatized by being referred for help because support becomes simply a feature of being a student at their college.

## Expand Professional Development Focused on Engaging Students

Research abounds about what works in teaching and learning. Instructors, however, must be given the opportunities necessary to learn more about effective teaching strategies and to apply those strategies in their day-to-day work.

Bringing effective strategies to scale to promote learning, persistence, and college completion for larger numbers of students is a complex endeavor. It requires venues and facilitation for faculty collaboration, as well as administrative support through reallocation of scarce resources. *Any effective strategy for dramatically increasing college completion must include a substantial commitment to professional development for individual faculty members and for college teams.*

*CCFSSE* data indicate that close to one-third (31%) of instructors report spending at least 50% of class time lecturing. Only 27% spend at least 20% of class time on small-group activities. Professional development can help more faculty members become skilled and comfortable using more engaging teaching strategies.

This professional development work is critical to teaching effectiveness, particularly when faculty are asked to implement new and promising practices to enhance student success. Moreover, professional development activities cannot be limited to full-time employees. Given that about two-thirds of community college faculty members teach part-time, opportunities to expand instructors' skills and collaborative faculty efforts must be extended to include all faculty.

## Focus Institutional Policies on Creating the Conditions for Learning

Institutional policies focused on student success are most effective when colleges mandate student participation in activities that are shown to increase persistence and improve student outcomes. For example, colleges can require students to participate in orientation or to meet with an advisor before registering for classes or to enroll in a student success course in their first academic term. Institutional policies also can help faculty members be consistent in their requirements of students. For example, an institution-wide policy can require student participation in study groups, and faculty can help enforce that policy by making it a requirement for their courses.

Survey data indicate mixed results on issues related to institutional policy:

- Only 58% of *SENSE* respondents participated in a college orientation program (on campus or online) or as part of a course during their first semester.

- 16% of *SENSE* respondents report adding or dropping classes within the first three weeks of college, including 7% who did so without discussing their decision with a staff member or instructor.

- 4% of *SENSE* respondents registered for courses after classes began.
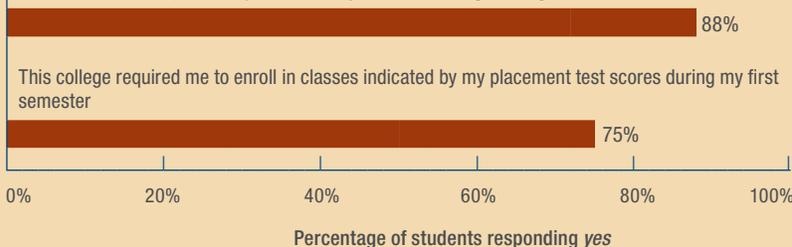
### How Faculty Members Use Class Time

Percentage of faculty reporting that they *never* engage in these activities

| | |
|---|---|
| Lecture | 2% |
| Teacher-led discussion | 4% |
| Teacher-student shared responsibility | 25% |
| Small group activities | 21% |
| Student presentations | 40% |
| In-class writing | 50% |
| Experiential work | 66% |
| Hands-on practice | 27% |

*Source: 2010 CCFSSE Cohort data.*

### *SENSE* Respondents' Enrollment in Courses Based on Placement Scores

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
**88%**

This college required me to enroll in classes indicated by my placement test scores during my first semester
**75%**

0%    20%    40%    60%    80%    100%

**Percentage of students responding *yes***

*Source: 2009 SENSE data.*

## Teaching and Learning Matters

It is time for community colleges to start imagining what is possible. It is time to challenge the notion that some students will not succeed. It is time to relinquish our resistance to *require*. It is time to raise not just our students' aspirations but to raise our own. Perhaps most of all, it is time to assert that access to college is just not enough. Student success matters. College completion matters. And teaching and learning — the heart of student success — matter.

What will it take to change the view of what is possible at community colleges — and then to convert possibility into reality? Colleges should:

■ **Reconceptualize the classroom.** Colleges can improve student success by integrating critical student support services — academic advising and planning, tutoring, career planning, and the like — into the experience traditionally called a course.

■ **Build a culture of evidence.** Good education is driven by passion, but it must be firmly rooted in evidence. Since its inception, the Center has encouraged colleges to build a culture of evidence — one in which administrators, faculty, and staff use data to set goals, monitor progress, and improve practice.

■ **Conduct courageous conversations.** Colleges must be willing to have honest dialogue that addresses the stickiest, most sensitive issues. They must create environments in which faculty, staff, and students feel safe airing their observations, their ideas, and even their fears because they are confident they will be met with a thoughtful, constructive response.

■ **Maintain standards while affirming that all students can learn.** It is not acceptable to lower standards so more students pass courses and earn credentials. At the same time, faculty and staff at community colleges must convey the conviction that all students can learn. Language matters — and the difference between describing students in terms of strengths rather than deficits is palpable.

■ **Look for leadership across the campus.** Everyone must play a leadership role in advancing the college completion agenda, particularly faculty members, who can have the most direct effect on student success.

■ **Revise academic policies.** How many papers should students write? How many books should they read? Is a grade of D considered a successful outcome? Is class attendance important enough to require it? Faculty can set the standard so it is consistent across the college — and rigorous enough to promote high expectations, real learning, and increased success.

■ **Engage unions.** Involved early and often, unions can be powerful leaders for promoting a student success agenda, particularly with clarification of commonly sought outcomes, discussion of stakeholder roles and issues, and continuing attention to communication and transparency.

■ **Provide strategically targeted professional development for all faculty.** All instructors, both full- and part-time, must have the training they need to fully engage their students and to implement effective practice at scale.

■ **Design institutional policies that foster student success.** Policy should make it clear that student success is everyone's job.

### End Notes

[1] The College Board. (2010). *Education Pays 2010*. Available at: http://trends.collegeboard.org/files/Education_Pays_2010.pdf

[2] Available at: www.completecollege.org/completion_shortfall/

[3] Available at: www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?submeasure=24&year=2008&level=nation&mode=graph&state=0

[4] Available at: www.achievingthedream.org/Portal/Modules/936b3989-b5a5-4cf9-ac87-93495e5eea3b.asset?

[5] Available at: www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?submeasure=229&year=2008&level=nation&mode=graph&state=0

[6] Available at: www.oecd.org/document/62/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_43586328_1_1_1_1,00.html#4

[7] Available at: www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=data&state=0&submeasure=240

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