



FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS:

What Students Expect, What Actually Happens and How to Help Them Succeed

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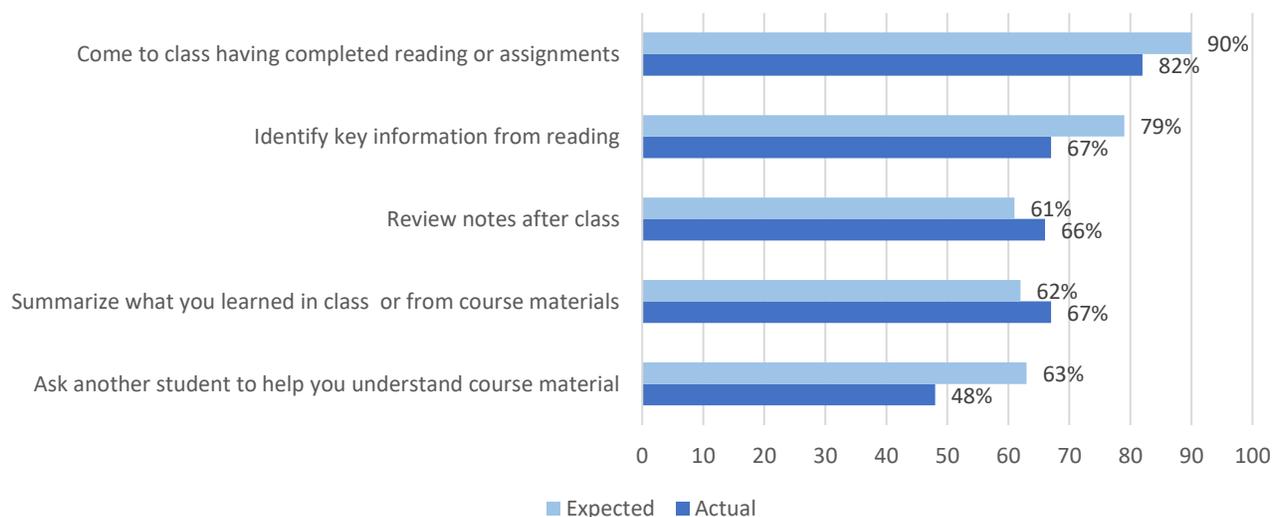
Every two years, first-year students (FYS) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) complete the *Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE)* just prior to the Fall semester; this survey gauges key high school experiences and expectations for college. In the following spring semester, these same students complete the *National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE)* to measure what actually happened compared to expectations. Here are some important metrics from BCSSE 2018 and NSSE 2019 that can help students succeed as they start in their first year at CCSU.

Striving for Academic Success as a First-Year Student

Experiencing academic success is at the forefront of having a positive college experience. There are a few key areas where first-year students can focus to help ensure their success at CCSU: coming to class prepared, identifying key information from reading assignments, reviewing notes after class, summarizing what is learned in class or from course material, and asking another student for help.

Most first-year students are very eager to get to college and have high expectations for what they intend to accomplish. However, their expectations and reality are often different. According to results from the BCSSE and NSSE surveys, student respondents expected to do more at college than they actually did when it came to preparing for class, identifying key information and asking another student for help. They did better than they expected at reviewing notes after class and summarizing what they learned.

Graph 1. Preparing for Class and Learning Course Material



Preparing for Class

When in high school, 91% of students often or very often came to class having completed readings or assignments; 90% expected they would do the same when they arrived on campus. Yet, once on our CCSU campus, only 82% came to class prepared often or very often – which means 18% did not. This tracks evenly with our NSSE comparison institutions, but 4% behind our Connecticut State University (CSU) sister institutions.

**82% often or very often came to class having completed reading or assignments;
18% did sometimes or never.**

Coming to class prepared is essential at the college level. Prepared students are better equipped to ask questions and engage in classroom discussions, ultimately leading to greater retention of information. Consequently, they have a better chance of doing well on papers, projects, and exams. Students who are not prepared often fall behind, making it more difficult to learn the material and do well on assignments and exams. Ultimately, this causes greater stress which, in turn, further exacerbates the situation.

Learning Course Material

Completing reading assignments and being able to identify key information is also important for academic success. Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents expected to spend at least half of their class preparation time on reading at college. This indicates that many students are aware of the importance of reading course materials. More than reading, a better indicator of success is being able to identify key information from the text. While in high school, 79% were able to often or very often identify key information from reading assignments, while 70% expected they would be able to do so at college. In reality, only two-thirds of NSSE respondents were actually able to do so, leaving one-third only able to do this sometimes or never.

**33% sometimes or never identified key information in reading assignments,
reviewed their notes, nor summarized what they learned.**

CCSU trends six to 10 percent behind its comparable schools on this metric. This disparity highlights the need to provide CCSU first-year students with tools to advance their ability to identify key information from reading assignments. Improving this metric can lead to enhanced academic performance.

Table 1. Identifying Key Information from Reading Assignments

	CCSU	CSUs	NSSE Comparison Institutions
Often/Very Often	66%	76%	72%
Sometimes/Never	34%	24%	28%

Another area where students can build their skill set is by reviewing notes after class and being able to summarize what they learned in class or through course materials. While 66% and 67% are doing this often and very often, respectively, a third of our students are not. While CCSU mostly tracks ahead of our CSU sister institutions and NSSE comparison institutions, improving on this metric can generate positive results for a great number of our first-year students.

Why is this a worthwhile investment? There is a preponderance of research confirming that students who review their notes are better able to recall lecture information and perform better on exams than those that do not review their class notes.¹ As well, a student who is able to summarize what they learned by being able to develop themes, understand principles and integrate concepts, demonstrates a higher retention rate² than those that only learning the information through listening³.

Course material retention is also enhanced by seeking out other students for help. Numerous studies have confirmed that collaborative learning improves retention of content knowledge. Students gain deeper knowledge by talking with one another and collaborating on learning activities.⁴ While 57% of first-year students expected they would often or very often seek out other students for help understanding course materials, only 48% actually did. CCSU results on this metric fall three to eight percentage points behind all of our comparative schools.

**48% often or very often asked other student for help.
52% asked only sometimes or never.**

Interestingly, when respondents were asked more specifically who they would turn to for help in their schoolwork, 73% said they would reach out to their friends and other students while 62% said they would reach out faculty. This indicates that first-year students do want to engage in collaborative learning with their peers yet are not always able to put that into action. Creating opportunities for our students to engage in collaborative learning can further support their academic success.

How First-Year Students Spend their Time

A common rule of thumb indicates that, for every one-hour of class time, a student should plan to spend 2 to 3 hours studying and preparing for class.⁵ This translates into 24 to 36 hours for 12 hours of class time. Of the BCSSE survey respondents, only 20% expected they would spend 21 or more hours preparing for class, and in reality, 14% actually did. In high school, only 3% of students spent that much time preparing for class, a highly significant difference from college expectations.

If looking at the data for 16 or more hours, the percentage of CCSU students jumps to 27%. However, NSSE comparison institutions have 39% of survey respondents logging that much time in class preparation, a 12% increase compared to CCSU. The most popular response for first-year CCSU students was 6 to 10 hours preparing for class, a notable decrease from the recommended amount.

Not surprisingly, mastering course material in college demands much more time than first-year CCSU students expect or actually engage in. Attending to this is essential for academic success.

Table 2. Number of Hours Preparing for Class by First Year Students (FYS)

High School: Time spent preparing for class while in high school
FYS Expectations: Time first-year students expect to spend preparing for class
FYS Actual: Time first-year students actually spent preparing for class
Comparison Institutions: Time first-year students in NSSE comparison institutions spent preparing for class

Time Spent Per Week	High School	FYS Expectations	FYS Actual	Comparison Institutions
1-5 Hours	50%	6%	11%	13%
6-10 Hours	28%	22%	32%	24%
11-25 Hours	11%	29%	29%	23%
16-20 Hours	5%	24%	13%	20%
21+ Hours	3%	20%	14%	19%

Relaxing and socializing is also an important component of achieving academic success. In fact, studies have shown that not taking time to relax and socialize results in decreased academic performance and can lead to health issues like anxiety or depression.⁶ For our CCSU first-year students, 47% of BCSSE survey respondents expected to spend 11 hours or more relaxing and socializing each week. As it turns out, 59% of NSSE survey respondents engaged in this activity for 11 hours or more every week. This represents a 13% increase compared to other CSU universities, and 5% more than NSSE comparison institutions. While it is important to take time to relax and socialize, achieving a balance with academic pursuits is necessary for success.

59% of respondents spent 11 hours or more each week relaxing and socializing, representing a 13% increase compared to other CSU universities.

How students spend their time relaxing and socializing is also important. Collaborating with other students to gain a greater understanding of course material⁷ and doing things like exercising and meditating⁸ can contribute to academic success. Conveying how best to relax and socialize can aid students in improving their health and wellbeing, time management, and academic achievements.

Participating in extracurricular activities on campus is an easy way for students to socialize and make friends. Not only does this help facilitate collaborative learning, it also offers students the opportunity to build their resume. While in high school, 85% of BCSSE student respondents participated in extracurricular activities; looking eagerly towards college life, 90% of respondents expected to do so when they arrived on campus. However, what actually happened on campus was

very different from their expectations. Only 64% of NSSE survey respondents participated in extracurricular activities.

Table 3. Number of Hours Engaged in Extracurricular Activities by First-Year Students (FYS)

Time Spent Per Week	FYS Expectations	FYS Actual
0 Hours	10%	36%
1-5 Hours	30%	29%
6-10 Hours	30%	18%
11 or more Hours	29%	17%

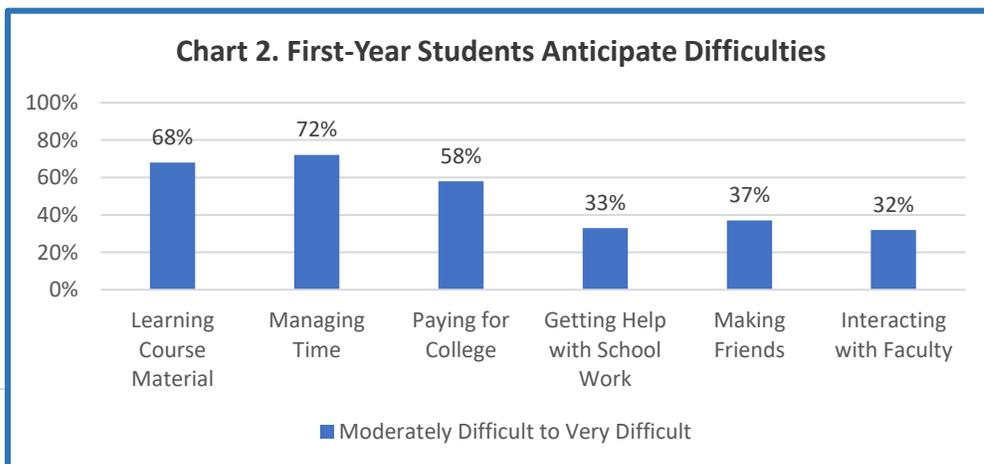
It may also be attributed to the fact that 37% of respondents reported they were employed on or off campus, averaging 10 hours per week of paid work.

Difficulties Anticipated by First-Year Students

It is well known that college life is very different from high school. In anticipation of pursuing academic success, getting involved in campus activities, and possibly securing a job, first-year students are concerned that certain things will be difficult in their first year on campus. Having strategies and resources in place to address these concerns will make their transition easier and can lead to improved retention.

Time management was the greatest concern for almost three-quarters of the BCSE survey respondents. As well, 68% expected that learning course material would be moderately difficult to very difficult for them. Promoting learning support services and facilitating collaborative learning when students first arrive on campus can reduce these anticipated difficulties early in their college tenure.

Helping students negotiate how to pay for college, make new friends, and interact with faculty can also help to reduce stress, foster greater engagement on campus, and improve retention.



Conclusion

Not surprisingly, first-year students are enthusiastic about starting college, anticipating making a substantial commitment to their academic career. However, transitioning from high school to college life can be more difficult than first-year students anticipate. Once CCSU first-year students are on campus, what they expected to do does not always align with what actually happens in their first semester. Attending to these disparities can foster a better, more engaged experience for them, thereby generating a higher degree of satisfaction and retention.

To ensure first-year CCSU students have a successful experience, the university can focus on helping students to:

- Better prepare for class
- Identify key information in reading assignments
- Engage more intentionally in collaborative learning
- Increase participation in extracurricular activities
- Better manage relaxation and socialization

Summer orientation is a great time to engage students in these critical areas. Helping them to understand the importance of these valuable skills prior to their arrival on campus can prompt them to be more engaged and attentive once on campus in the fall.

Survey Respondent Profile

Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) 2018:

- 680 First-year students took the survey
- 99% were full-time students
- 61% chose CCSU as their first choice
- 81% had chosen their major
- 72% expected most of their grades would be B+ or better

National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) 2019:

- 203 First-year students took the survey
- 99% were full-time students
- 18% would rate their Excellent
- 81% indicated they would return to CCSU
- 27% said if they had to choose again, they would still choose CCSU

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