



May 4, 2018

To: Matt Campbell, Chair, Washington State Student Services Commission (WSSSC)
Tod Treat, Chair, Instruction Commission (IC)
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From: Research and Planning Commission (RPC)

RE: CCSSE and SENSE Feedback

Matt, Joe, and Kristi,

In early February 2018, RPC was approached to provide feedback regarding a WSSSC idea to contract with the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin in order to administer the CCSSE and SENSE surveys at all colleges in the state system. RPC has had a very spirited and engaged discussion about this topic, and this memo summarizes the dialogue that has occurred.

First, it is unclear to RPC what issue WSSSC and the State Board are attempting to address and that they believe CCSSE and SENSE data will address/answer. RPC recognizes that the experiences with CCSSE and SENSE have been uneven in the system. Some colleges in the system have previously participated but have stopped; while some colleges regularly use the CCSSE and/or SENSE results within their individual institutions. In addition, some colleges in the system have never participated in administering either of the survey instruments and do not have plans to do so. Note for reference that only about [7 to 9 colleges](#) in the system administer CCSSE each year and only about [2 colleges](#) in the system administer SENSE each year. Not counting this year (2018), the CCSSE has been administered 116 times and the SENSE has been administered 21 times by community and technical colleges in Washington since 2001.

This document is not meant to discourage individual institutions that find value in the results from administering the instruments. Rather, because both the CCSSE and SENSE are expensive and extremely labor-intensive instruments to administer, and because each institution has different needs and priorities regarding the assessments, RPC would like to have a better idea about how and by whom the information gathered from a system-wide administration will be used. RPC has identified several questions and items for WSSSC and the State Board to consider before a decision regarding a system-wide administration is made.

Cost Savings:

- If WSSSC and the State Board are considering a system-wide administration of CCSSE and/or SENSE in order to save costs, then a system-wide administration would provide a discounted price of about 15%-20% for all of the colleges. This is not a new offer, however, as CCSSE has been offering [a 15% system-wide administration discounts](#) for a number of years and a 20% discount if a college administers both survey instruments in the same year.
- Since not all colleges in the state have previously participated in CCSSE and SENSE and since some have not planned to do so, a system-wide administration might actually impose large costs (in terms of both direct fees and on-site time and labor) upon institutions that they had not previously incurred. Would a system-wide agreement with CCSSE require or force all colleges to participate? What would happen if some colleges refused to administer the survey? What if some institutions do not have the resources to participate in the survey administrations?
- A system-wide administration of the CCSSE has been estimated (by the University of Texas) to [cost \\$221,000](#), and an additional \$186,000 would be charged for a system-wide administration of the SENSE. This is a total cost of approximately \$406,000. Currently, on average, the system spends about \$55,000 to \$72,000 per year on CCSSE administration fees, which are shared among the 7 to 9 colleges that choose to administer the CCSSE. The system also spends about \$15,000 per year on SENSE administration fees. So, a system-wide cost would be 5 to 6 times the cost that the system currently spends. Where would the additional \$319,000 to \$336,000 in funding come from in order to cover the administration fees? Could this money be better used elsewhere in the system?
- Before launching into a system-wide new administration of the CCSSE (and/or SENSE), RPC encourages WSSSC and the State Board to review the 116 sets of CCSSE data (that contain more than 75,000 total student responses) and the 21 sets of SENSE data that already exist in the state to see if the information that WSSSC and the State Board hopes to obtain is already available.
- The CCSSE is generally meant as a planning tool, and so is geared towards repeat administrations at each institution, where the first attempt provides a baseline and where periodic follow-ups allow campus leadership to consider whether any policy or instructional changes have had an impact on their students. If the system decided to administer the CCSSE and/or SENSE, to increase the value of the information, at least one additional administration should be done per institution, which would also greatly increase the costs for all colleges in the system.

Actionable Intelligence:

- The primary benefit of CCSSE and SENSE information is for national benchmarking, which could be useful and informative for individual colleges within the system. For years, colleges in

the state have shared their CCSSE benchmark scores, and all of this information has been maintained [in this shared document](#). But for all of the years that this information has been maintained, it is unclear how the system (or colleges within the system) have used the information. In fact, some colleges are using CCSSE information as key performance indicators (KPIs) to inform decision-making at their institution. That said, CCSSE benchmarks are not generated/do not exist for the system as a whole.

- Some colleges have remarked that their leadership finds CCSSE's high-level off-the-shelf overview reports and item-by-item summaries to be useful for accreditation purposes, and CCSSE has even made "[Accreditation Guides](#)" available, which map some of the survey questions back to accreditation standards. However, it should be noted that while previous iterations of the Accreditation Guides mapped specific CCSSE questions to specific NWCCU criteria, the latest guides do not provide this level of detail. Many additional questions remain about the value of these brief reports weighed against the time and money involved in collecting the data.
- Beyond high level reports, and even though colleges in the state have previously administered the CCSSE 116 times and the SENSE 21 times, it is unclear how that data has otherwise been used. Some RPC members have voiced that their colleges have collected the data, but do not regularly use the information, if at all. Some RPC members have voiced concerns that the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin might be benefiting more than individual colleges are, in terms of actionable information. RPC encourages WSSSC and the State Board to investigate whether and how colleges that have previously administered CCSSE (and/or SENSE) have actually used the data to inform decision-making.
- A few years ago (starting in 2011) the SBCTC paid for [15 extra CCSSE questions](#) that about a dozen colleges used during their administrations. RPC is unsure how that [summarized data](#) was used, if at all, even though it was paid for and collected.

Informational Validity:

- Some colleges have not found the CCSSE results to be very useful because there are not enough details about its methodology. For example, if a college's national 'benchmark score' goes up or down between administrations, is it because the college is doing better or worse, or is it because the comparison group is doing better or worse? There is no way to determine this. So the national benchmark comparisons are of very little value.
- The validity of some discrete survey items are also questioned by some RPC members because they seem overly broad. For example, how would a student answer, "Used email to communicate with an instructor" if the class uses the LMS (Canvas) rather than email? How would a student interpret a question about "community-based projects?"
- Some RPC members have voiced concern with the CCSSE regarding the potential disconnect between the intuitive appeal of its discrete items to lay audiences (e.g., faculty or

administrators who are not survey experts), the actual validity of the subscales, and the actual relevance of the benchmarks for decision-making.

- Some college currently pay an additional fee in order to administer 15 extra custom survey questions that are of interest to their specific college. This is not an option for a system-wide administration of the instruments, so individual colleges would lose the ability to ask their specific questions.

Administration Logistics:

- Colleges that have successfully administered the CCSSE and/or SENSE have had strong executive support; resources for survey administration; and a strong cadre of volunteers to help with the administrations and after-administration survey processing. How will resources such as these be obtained for a system-wide administration?
- Due to the state operating on a quarter system and CCSSE originally being designed for semesters, colleges in Washington have either a 4-week window (the last four weeks in winter quarter) or a 2-week window (the fourth and fifth weeks of spring quarter) in which to administer the survey. These logistics make it extremely complicated for a thoughtful survey administration, particularly since the class sections in which the survey is administered cannot be determined until after the 10th/census day of the quarter.
- Like many nationally-normed institutional surveys, the CCSSE is primarily conducted in-class because that is the best way to collect large samples of student-responses. They are typically conducted on paper because not all classrooms are equipped with computers, and occasionally because of a perceived digital divide that persists among some non-traditional community college students. As such, it is important to point out that the most effective administration of the CCSSE does require giving up dozens of hours of instructional time for most samples.
- When conducted in-class, the surveys are typically administered to a random sample of class sections, and not all students are included in that random sample. Often the random sample contains students who are asked to complete the survey multiple times during the same year. Many students in the system attend multiple colleges at the same time, or move between classes where they are asked to complete the survey (which is also highly inefficient and onerous on both students and faculty in terms of lost instructional time).
 - If, during a system-wide administration of the CCSSE, some students were selected to complete the survey at different colleges, how would these students respond? Would they complete the survey more than once, based upon their experiences at each college? If so, how would they respond to question #3 on the survey, which asks if the student has taken the survey in another class section during the same term -- knowing that a "yes" response to this indicates to CCSSE to not count this student's responses again?

- There is otherwise a broad disconnect between concepts of random and representative sampling of *classes* and presumptions about collecting responses from a random and representative sample of *students*. CCSSE generally selects classes for each institution using methodology that does not account for the unique nature of community and technical college courses (e.g., cohort movement, lecture/lab combos), nor the unique needs of faculty being asked to give up class time for the survey (which is revisited below). Also, the colleges maintain little control over their own sampling needs unless they were to attempt to work around CCSSE's sampling requirements. This practice is not encouraged ... by RPC or by CCSSE.
- The survey administrations also place a great onus on individual faculty, and often the survey administrations disproportionately affect some faculty over others. These facts are a major obstacle to administering the surveys. For example, when the random sample of class sections is determined, it often contains class sections in which some faculty members are asked to give up more than one of their class sections; while other faculty member are not asked to participate at all. This has become an issue with individual faculty members, faculty senates, and even faculty unions at some colleges. In addition, some colleges have stopped the administration of all paper surveys due to the instruction time and staff time they consume. Some colleges have experienced faculty grievances and had impacts on collective bargaining agreements due to faculty objections to the survey. (At those colleges, faculty members and/or faculty senates have fervently supported the paperless survey initiatives, which has its own set of pros and cons.) While some of the faculty at some of the colleges recognize, despite the required inconveniences, the importance of completing the surveys as part of their college's institutional effectiveness process, these realizations are not held by all faculty or colleges in the system, and so can be quite inequitable in many ways.
- There are alternatives to on-paper, in-class survey administrations. These typically use a self-selected sample and are administered anonymously via an online survey for which the hyperlink is emailed or posted to Canvas. One advantage to online surveys is that they do not discriminate against online only students, as paper surveys do. Online surveys can also reach the entire student body at a college, as opposed to a small subset. So, even if a college has a smaller participation rate, the college may in fact end up with more students participating. While such on-line methods are more convenient, however, they have pitfalls in terms of collecting large and representative samples of responses. In-class methods benefit from socially-normative cues to complete the survey (meaning that a broader segment of students will choose to complete the survey rather than opt-out because they observe other class-members doing so, and because they are already in-class anyway). Self-selected online methods, on the other hand, rely on students to opt-in to the survey, and so typically appeal to a narrower subset of students who are more predisposed to respond, for example because they have more extreme positive or negative points of view, or are more attracted to a particular incentive because they have a greater need for it (e.g., a small token gift card, which incidentally also adds to the cost of administration).

Special Populations:

- The CCSSE excludes students who are exclusively taking online classes. CCSSE has begun to address this by launching another survey for exclusively online students, Survey of Online Student Engagement (SOSE). Administration of this online-only student survey, though, requires another administration fee be paid.
- Some colleges' primary issue with the CCSSE and SENSE are that the instruments exclude students under the age of 18 (of which Running Start students are the majority). For reference, 46% of one college's new students during fall 2017 were Running Start students, and 23% of all students in state-support classes were Running Start students. Therefore, the surveys would eliminate nearly half of this college's new students and almost a quarter of all its students in state-funded classes, which comprise the majority of the CCSSE-selected random class sections. Does this affect the validity of the results for that college?
- Some college have remarked that the wording used on the survey instruments is difficult for non-native English speakers to understand (i.e., "working for pay"). Therefore, inequities that exist among students who are asked to complete the survey may be further exacerbated by the survey administration.
- Some RPC members have indicated that the nature of the CCSSE and SENSE questions are less useful for technical colleges. The instrument focuses on academic skills, but not the hands-on training that is emphasized in technical programs.

Timing and Common Business Practices:

- The SENSE and CCSSE ask students about specific business practices at colleges, but Washington's colleges do not necessarily share common business practices. The value of any system-wide SENSE and CCSSE results would be increased if a system-side administration took place once all colleges are operating under ctcLink, since ctcLink will require common business practices throughout the state system.
- In the next 3-5 years, all colleges in the system will be transitioning to ctcLink. Those transitions will require a great deal of time to crosswalk previously developed data reports and information systems to the new fields and data formats in ctcLink. If WSSSC and the State Board are depending on RPC members to lead the CCSSE and SENSE efforts at each college, then RPC is concerned that the system will not have the capacity for multiple administrations (let alone a single/one administration) when so many other, previously scheduled initiatives related to ctcLink have been scheduled and must be completed.
- If the decision is made for a system-wide administration, then RPC recommends that the first administration takes place no sooner than two years after that decision is made so colleges who currently or who have recently administered either of the surveys will have an off year before administering the instrument(s) again.

Environmental Factors:

- A system-wide administration of CCSSE and/or SENSE would generate hundreds of pounds of printed materials, which would be mailed to and from each institution. While the majority of the paper could be recycled after scanning into a data system (similar to a Scantron), the impacts on environmentally friendly and sustainable practices would be significant.
 - CCSSE response rates for colleges in the state have been in the 60%-70% range. The remaining surveys, the sheets with the extra questions, the program code sheets, and the survey administrator script are all items that need to be recycled and not sent back to the University of Texas-Austin. At one college, this was a stack of paper approximately 3 feet tall; whereas the stack of paper surveys mailed back to Texas for processing was just over 1 foot tall.

Alternative Survey and Benchmarking Options:

- In addition to CCSSE and SENSE, there are a number of student surveys on the market (e.g., [CCSEQ](#), [SSI](#)) and a number of community college benchmark projects (e.g., [NCCBP](#), [Cost and Productivity Project](#), [Voluntary Framework for Accountability](#)) that may be more suited to the needs and questions for which the WSSSC and State Board are trying to address, and which might provide greater flexibility and actionable information to each individual institution within the system. RPC encourages them WSSSC and the State Board to carefully examine each of these options to determine which (if any) of them meet these needs and address the questions for which answers are being sought.
- RPC does not preclude the idea that a system-wide survey instrument could provide some benefit to Washington's community and technical college system, provided the survey uses transparent methods for peer comparison. RPC does not believe, however, that any current third-party survey or vendor provides this information, and this includes the CCSSE and SENSE. RPC has expertise to lend to the development of a state-based survey that can specifically address needs of the Washington State community and technical college system.
 - For example a system-developed survey could include questions for "point in time reporting" so that students only receive a handful of questions (say 5-7 at a time) that are relevant to the place they are in their education pathway (such as getting on a path; staying on a path; and completing a path). In this way a different set of questions could be triggered when a student registers each quarter (via ctcLink), and the questions the student is asked to complete are dependent upon the type of student they are and the number of credits that they have earned along their pathway. Over the lifetime of the student in the system, the student would complete the entire set of survey questions. This method would allow colleges to better assist students where they are in their pathways and would allow the state to only ask questions that are relevant of its students.

Final Thoughts:

Based upon the points described above, earlier in this document, a system-wide administration of CCSSE and/or SENSE requires a lot of thought, support, communication, and planning. The starting point for this work should be a clear understanding of the questions or problems that WSSSC and the State Board hope to address and why CCSSE and SENSE are the most appropriate tools to address them.

Although there are numerous challenges with CCSSE, it is a national survey that provides comparable data, and the survey is based on higher educational research. As a result, the survey is fairly well-respected, and the results can provide a great starting point for meaningful conversations about creating active learning environments for our students. When resourced well and administered well, the results can be a valuable resource for individual colleges ... but perhaps not the entire system.

RPC believes that individual colleges should continue to decide whether or not to participate in the CCSSE and/or SENSE and to determine the best methods of administration for their unique populations. Therefore, RPC does not support a mandated statewide or system-wide administration.

In closing, as always, members of RPC are willing to assist with and/or present relevant information to WSSSC and the State Board regarding the points that have been made above.