Executive Summary

Research has consistently identified good educational practices that are directly related to retention and other desired student outcomes. Among them, increased contact with faculty and “greater engagement in learning activities in the classroom, especially those that are seen as meaningful and validating” (Tinto, 2012).

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), built upon the extensive and relevant research, asks students about their community college experiences — how they spend their time; what they feel they have gained from their classes; how they assess their relationships and interactions with faculty, counselors, and peers; what kinds of work they are challenged to do; how the college supports their learning; and so on (CCCE, 2014). A nationally recognized and validated tool, CCSSE results help participating colleges identify local strengths and areas for improvement. The companion tool—the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE)—developed in response to demand from the community college field, elicits information from faculty about their perceptions regarding students’ educational experiences, their teaching practices, and the ways they spend their professional time—both in and out of the classroom.

Students and faculty at Citrus College participated in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), respectively, in the spring of 2012. Analyses indicated that Citrus College students were less engaged in several key areas than the overall 2012 nationwide cohort including active and collaborative learning, student effort, and student-faculty interaction. Additionally, faculty survey results highlighted a significant discrepancy between student and faculty perception in areas such as engagement in the classroom and receiving faculty feedback.

Following in-depth discussion of the survey results, the Office of Institutional Research and the Institutional Research and Planning Committee (IRPC) commenced a spring 2013 campus-wide qualitative research project consisting of a series of focus group interviews with Citrus College students. The overarching objective was to better understand students’ thoughts and opinions regarding student engagement and to:

- gain a better understanding of student needs;
- understand student perceptions of reasons for high or low levels of engagement;
- hear suggestions from students on how the college can improve student engagement;
- enhance college-wide awareness of the importance of student engagement; and
- improve student engagement by providing research-based recommendations to the institution.
To assess the five outcomes outlined above, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed consisting of a total of 16 questions. In addition to the five outcome areas, the interview questions included an additional area intended to help the college better understand students’ perceptions of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the institution.

A purposeful sampling methodology was utilized to ensure a diverse sample of students were included in the focus group interviews. A total of 63 students participated in the CCSSE follow-up study with a final sample that mirrored the Citrus College student body.

- 48% of participants were male, 52% were female
- 60% of the sample were 18-21 years old; the overall sample ranged in age from 18-41 years old
- 47% of participants were Latino/Hispanic, 30% were White, 8% were Asian, 5% Black/African-American, 5% Two or More Races, 2% Pacific Islander, and 3% Other
- 30% of the participants were in their first academic year at Citrus College
- 54% of the sample were taking a total of 12 or more units while only 13% were taking 6 units or fewer
- 43% of participants were first-generation college students

Fifty-seven percent of focus group students belonged to one or more of the following groups: DSP&S, EOP&S/CalWORKs, Honors, Student Government/ASCC, Veterans, or International. Additionally, 57% of focus group student participants were eligible for financial aid.

Analysts from the Institutional Research Office coded transcripts from the focus group interviews around salient themes related to the six outcome areas outlined in the study: Active and Collaborative Learning, Student Effort, Student-Faculty Interaction, Academic Challenge, Support for Learners, and Strengths and Weaknesses. Initial codes were grouped into distinctive categories through a second cycle coding process and a codebook for all themes, categories, and subcategories was developed.

Results

Outcome 1: Active and Collaborative Learning

Students acknowledged the benefits of participating in class, indicating that they are better able to synthesize new material when they are actively engaged. They recognize however, that their understanding does not consistently guide behavior. Their comments and discussion highlighted three overarching factors they believe may affect their levels of class participation: faculty characteristics, student characteristics, and course type.

Salient among faculty characteristics identified by focus group participants were the amount of positive encouragement students receive from the instructor, the standards and expectations for engagement set by faculty at the outset the course, and the level of warmth and approachability of the instructor as perceived by the student.

Students indicated that they were less likely to participate when they had not adequately prepared for class and when they were unfamiliar with the topic. Additionally, they believe that some courses—liberal arts and English—are more conducive to discussion
and participation than science and mathematics courses.

**Outcome 2: Student Effort**

Student respondents reported they tailor the amount of effort they put into coursework based on the 1) the level of difficulty of the course, 2) faculty expectations, 3) enthusiasm for the subject matter, and 4) faculty passion. Overall, students asserted they adjust the amount of effort they invest in a course depending on their perception of the difficulty of course content and, that they adjust their level of effort according to the expectations communicated by the course instructor. For example, students indicated that when they believed faculty had low expectations of them, they reduced their level of effort accordingly. Students also indicated that when they were not enthusiastic about the course content and when faculty did not convey a passion for what was being taught, they reduced their level of effort.

Additionally, students indicated that employment and family responsibilities impinge on their ability to commit more time and effort to coursework. When asked about preparing multiple drafts of class assignments, students acknowledged that preparing multiple drafts increases learning and improves performance. However, the majority of students reported preparing a single draft due to impacted schedules, procrastination, and/or no requirement set by the instructor to complete and submit both early and final drafts.

**Outcome 3: Student-Faculty Interaction**

Interview responses made it clear that in terms of student-faculty interaction, students need and expect faculty to provide timely and high-quality, detailed feedback that they are able to utilize for their academic development. Students argued that timely feedback allows them to track their progress and ensure grades are recorded accurately. Overwhelmingly, students asserted a desire to meet one-on-one with faculty who are accessible and encouraging. Additionally, students value Blackboard© as an important feedback tool.

**Outcome 4: Academic Challenge**

Comments related to questions focused on academic challenge clearly indicated that students value and welcome challenging courses and believe completing challenging courses increases their confidence and helps them become more disciplined. While challenging courses are appreciated, students’ perceptions regarding the level of challenge they experience in their courses varied and depended largely on the type of course (e.g., liberal arts, math, science), expectations of faculty, and students’ own learning styles, attitudes, and personal motivation. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that Citrus College courses are not sufficiently challenging.

**Outcome 5: Student Support**

Six areas of student support were most frequently mentioned by focus groups participants: Peer Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, the Writing Café, Book Check, EOP&S and DSP&S. Of those, Peer Tutoring and Supplemental Instruction (SI) garnered the most responses. Although students were aware of many of the services available to them and acknowledged the benefits of using these services, only a few stated regularly utilizing services.

Students discussed factors impacting their usage of support services indicating that time/schedule, self-motivation, and intimi-
dation or embarrassment, especially as it relates to Peer Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction and the Writing Café, hampers participation. Moreover, some respondents voiced concern over the ability of peer tutors to adequately respond to their range of needs and, they believe that selecting their own tutor in the Writing Café would better meet their needs.

The majority of student respondents were aware of financial aid options. Specifically, most students commented on taking advantage of the Board of Governors (BOG) fee waiver, G.I. Bill, Pell Grants and student loans. Few students indicated they were recipients of Citrus College scholarships. While students seemed knowledgeable about general financial aid services, many were not aware of specialized programs and scholarship opportunities.

**Outcome 6: Strengths and Weaknesses of Citrus College**

Overall, students believe the faculty and the campus environment are among the greatest strengths of the college. Respondents indicated that they come to Citrus College because they feel a sense of “unity” and an important connection to other students and the larger academic community.

Weaknesses of Citrus College cited by students included the registration process, limited parking and campus security, expensive and limited food services, and poor maintenance of restroom facilities. Additionally, students expressed frustration with counseling services, indicating that appointments are difficult to schedule and that 30-minute appointments are insufficient. They expressed concern that the information they receive may not always be accurate.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

CCSSE data are intended to help institutions focus on good educational practice and identify areas in which they can improve their programs and services for students. To augment the quantitative results provided by CCSSE and help the college better understand why results in several areas of student engagement fell below that of the 2012 nationwide cohort, the Institutional Research Office and the Institutional Research and Planning Committee conducted student focus group interviews.

The qualitative data were carefully coded and analyzed and literature related to themes articulated by the students was reviewed to formulate brief recommendations.

**Outcome 1:** Faculty may want to consider brainstorming ways to set the standard and norms of class discussion and participation at the outset of each course. Additionally, incorporating class participation as a larger part of students’ overall grade may increase active participation. Allowing students to submit questions anonymously has the potential to reduce students’ feelings of intimidation or embarrassment. Additionally, providing opportunities for students to give constructive feedback may help instructors better understand students’ responses to class climate and pedagogy.

**Outcome 2:** Faculty may want to consider ways to increase the level of challenge in their courses which study results suggest lead to increased student effort. Also, faculty might consider requiring all students to submit an outline, concept paper/project or rough draft prior to turning in final products to ensure quality of work. Lastly, it is recommended that faculty brainstorm ways in which to demonstrate their own passion
for the subject matter through professional development opportunities which, based on study results, is related to students’ interest and commitment to the subject matter.

**Outcome 3:** Providing timely feedback to students through Blackboard© or turnitin.com© will allow students to better track their progress. Faculty are encouraged to increase the level of detail they provide on students papers and tests so students can effectively apply feedback to their academic development.

**Outcome 4:** Faculty may want to consider ways to increase the level of challenge and instructional scaffolding they provide in their courses to promote deeper levels of learning.

**Outcome 5:** Staff in charge of student support services may want to discuss a variety of scheduling options to fit students’ needs. To effectively reduce any negative stigma associated with services such as SI or tutoring, staff may want to reconsider how these services are publicized.

Per students’ recommendations, newsletters, flyers, and a financial aid resource fair are all things that can help ensure students are getting the most up-to-date information regarding financial aid and planning.

**Outcome 6:** Providing continuous information about how registration priority is determined will help alleviate students’ concerns with the registration process. Reminding students that while there is sufficient parking on campus, “prime” locations fill quickly and traffic during peak times may mean arriving early for class is critical to alleviate their parking frustrations.