

Tips for Using the *College Survival and Success Scale* in the College Classroom

By John J. Liptak, Ed.D. and Dave Anderson, MA

While the CSSS is designed as an assessment tool to help individuals identify effective habits and skills needed to succeed in college, it also works well in a classroom environment to increase student awareness and provide the basis for a discussion of the pressures and expectations that come with college life. Taking less than twenty minutes to complete and score, it provides an ideal starting point for establishing a framework of issues to discuss, as well as creating a sense of community and unity of purpose among classmates. It can be used as part of a freshmen orientation curriculum, in college survival skills courses, or as part of a college transition program.

In using the CSSS as a pedagogic tool, it is important to keep these things in mind:

- Like any assessment that asks about personal qualities or experience, some of the information gleaned from the CSSS may be sensitive, and students might not be willing to share their answers to specific questions with large groups. It is recommended that instructors keep discussions voluntary and that individuals not be forced to share answers to specific items.
- Students who take the assessment in a class setting but wish to discuss their results in more depth should be given the name of a counselor or administrator who can help them interpret their results and discuss any potential issues that arise.
- While the attitudes, habits, and skills addressed by the CSSS span the whole spectrum of student concerns, they aren't completely comprehensive. Allow space for students to voice other concerns not specifically addressed by items in the CSSS, and discuss how they contribute to college success, positively or negatively, and what can be done about them.
- Remind students that although the CSSS will identify their strengths and weaknesses, its purpose is to help students learn about themselves and make the personal adjustments necessary to succeed in college.

PRIOR TO CSSS ADMINISTRATION

Prior to administering the CSSS, instructors and administrators should thoroughly read the *Administrator's Guide* for the CSSS. This manual provides information about the theory on which the CSSS was based, as well as information related to the development of the assessment and reliability and validity data. The technical information included

will provide administrators with means and standard deviations of sample populations similar to the students with whom they are working. It is also important that any one administering the assessment complete the CSSS themselves. This will familiarize them with the steps for administration, scoring, and interpretation.

ADMINISTERING THE CSSS

Following are some of the questions that you might have about administering, scoring, and interpreting the CSSS:

When should I administer the CSSS?

If you only have a limited time with the students, you can have them complete the CSSS ahead of time. The problem with this approach is that you will not be able to help students complete the assessment or answer questions related to administration or scoring. If you use this approach, make sure that the students understand how to properly complete the CSSS ahead of time. Another strategy would be to administer the assessment at the start of a class. This method is probably most effective when you have plenty of class time or are using the CSSS throughout the semester. This allows you to be present to answer questions that students may have as they complete, score, and interpret the assessment. Regardless of which way you choose, much of class time should be spent discussing the results, and tying the issues addressed by the assessment to current concerns facing your college or your students specifically.

How should I start administering the CSSS?

Start by introducing the *College Survival and Success Scale*. Information from the *Administrator's Guide* can be used to initiate a discussion about problem areas that college students encounter in college. Stress that the students can easily administer, score, and interpret their CSSS. Then have students look at the front of the assessment and complete the section with questions about demographic information.

Begin the administration of the CSSS by having students read the section titled "The CSSS" on the front cover of the assessment. You should emphasize the notion that the CSSS takes five steps to successfully complete.

What are the five Steps on the CSSS?

Steps are included to guide students through the administration, scoring, and interpretation of the CSSS. These steps include:

STEP 1

Step 1 involves completing the CSSS. Tell students that the CSSS is divided into five color-coded sections, each with twelve statements. Suggest that students read each

statement and decide how much it describes them. Then, they should circle the corresponding number next to the statement.

STEP 2

Step 2 involves scoring the CSSS. Tell students that the items in the scales are grouped so that they may explore how their attitudes are related to potential college success. Tell them to add up their scores they circled for each of the five color-coded sections in Step 1. They should put each total on the line in the Total column at the right of the section.

STEP 3

Step 3 is about profiling their scores. Tell students to copy each scale's total to its corresponding Score column. Then they should chart their scores by placing an **X** along each line on the profile for each of the five scales of the CSSS. Then, tell students to explore their results on the five scales using the score range descriptions in the assessment.

STEP 4

Step 4 of the CSSS provides suggestions for success for each of the five scales. While some of these suggestions are directive statements, many of them are questions that can easily be modified to act as discussion questions, journaling topics, free-writing exercises, or even ideas for individual or group research projects or papers.

STEP 5

In addition to the discussion opportunities afforded by the suggestions in Step 4 of the CSSS, the plan that individuals outline in Step 5 can be expanded into a variety of individual and group projects. One possibility is to use the CSSS as a kind of pre and post test, an introspective self measure of progress. Using Step 5 of the assessment as a model, have students expand on the ways they will be more successful at the start of the semester. At the end of the semester, have them review their success plan and evaluate how well they stuck to it. Retaking the CSSS would be a useful exercise as well, though not a necessary one. The key is to use the information to help students discover their strong areas and those areas they need to improve on.

What are the scales on the CSSS?

The CSSS has the following five scales and descriptions:

Section 1: Commitment to Education

Low scores on this scale indicate that you are not yet a lifelong learner. You may not be aware that education provides you with the skills for success. You may not be aware of the ways education enhances your career and life possibilities. You may also not understand how much education improves your employability and earning potential.

Section 2: Self- and Resource-Management Skills

Low scores on this scale indicate that you are not yet ready to manage your time or money. You may not know about the financial aid that is available to you. You may not have a plan for budgeting and managing your money. You may also have difficulty in managing your time among school, work, and social obligations.

Section 3: Interpersonal and Social Skills

People scoring low on this scale tend not to have the most effective human relations skills. You may have trouble getting to know other students or may not value diversity in college. You may not have good oral or written communication skills, may need assistance in dealing effectively with professors, and may have difficulty in handling conflict with others.

Section 4: Academic Success Skills

People scoring low on this scale tend not to be the most effective students. You may need assistance in building knowledge through reading and studying. You may need help in taking notes, doing research, and preparing for tests. You may also need to learn to write more effectively.

Section 5: Career Planning Skills

People scoring low on this scale tend not to be as career-committed and career-mature as they could be. You may not have thought that much about your own career or career development. You may not have defined a clear career path or started to investigate potential careers. You may also not know much about occupations that match your interests, skills, and personality.

Encourage students taking the assessment not to focus solely on those scales they have low scores in, but also to confirm the strategies they are using to stay successful in all five areas. See the *CSSS Administrator's Guide* for additional information on how to interpret CSSS scores, including an illustrative case and means and standard deviations for a more comprehensive comparison study.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR USE WITH THE CSSS

As mentioned previously, the CSSS provides an ideal starting point for class discussion and introspection. The following sets of discussion questions are gleaned directly from Step 4 of the CSSS. You might start a discussion by addressing the retention and graduation rates at your particular school, and then brainstorming with the students what the causes for drop-out might be.

Commitment to Education

- Why are you here? How do you expect your education will help you? How will it change you personally? How will it change you professionally?
- What do you expect to get out of your college education? What do you expect to put into it?

- What goals, both short and long term, have you set for yourself as a college student? Are those goals realistic? Do you have a plan for reaching them?
- What kinds of technology do all students need to master to be successful in college?
- What is the value of learning and education outside of the financial and professional rewards it might lead to?

Self- and Resource-Management Skills

- What are the hardest or what do you anticipate will be the hardest aspects of college life to adjust to?
- What are things you think college students should do every day? Every week? Every weekend? At least once before they graduate?
- What are the financial difficulties involved in attending college? How do those difficulties interfere with your studies? What can be done to alleviate them?
- What do you consider to be the proper balance between school, work, and social obligations? Which of these is most important to most college students? Which should be? Why?
- To what extent is drug or alcohol use a problem in college? At what point does it go too far? What can be done to help control it?

Interpersonal and Social Skills

- How has the cultural diversity of the college campus changed your thinking or affected your social perceptions?
- What is the hardest part about “fitting in” at college? What strategies can you think of to help others become more socially involved?
- What have you noticed about other college students’ attitudes that you admire? What have you noticed that you don’t like?
- Where do you see conflict or potential conflict on campus? What can be done about this?

Academic Success Skills

- What do you think it takes to get an A in a college course? What about a C? What do you have to do to fail a course?
- What academic skills do you think are most important to have for any college class? What can you do to improve your ability in these areas?
- What are the most effective study methods you’ve developed that you can share with others? What are the least effective?
- Do you procrastinate? Why? What can you do to motivate yourself to work ahead of schedule?
- What common problems do people run into when taking tests? What are the characteristics of test anxiety? What are some effective test-taking strategies to remember for various kinds of exams (multiple choice, short answer, essay, etc.)?

Career Planning Skills

- What is your college major or what majors are you considering? What possible jobs do you think this might lead you to? What appeals to you most about those jobs?
- What did you want to be when you grew up? Why? Now that you're there did you change your mind? If so, why?
- If you had to list your accomplishments so far that an employer would be interested in, what would they be? What do you hope to have added to this list by the time you graduate?
- What additional opportunities—outside of classes—does college offer to increase your chances of getting the job you want after graduation?

These questions are merely suggestions, of course, and lend themselves to multiple variations and different kinds of class activities. As suggested earlier, instructors should adapt the CSSS to meet their own pedagogic needs.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Following are some group activities that can also be used to initiate a discussion after students have completed and scored the CSSS:

- Have group members list the three activities that will help them most to succeed in college. Then devote class time to making and refining a master list of effective strategies.
- Break the class into smaller groups. Ask each smaller group to identify which of the five scales represents the biggest barriers to success in college, and why they think this is.
- Ask group members to think about and then share with the group one positive and one negative thing they learned about themselves from taking the CSSS.
- Divide the class into smaller groups based on their primary skill deficiency. Have the members of the smaller groups brainstorm ways in which they will work to enhance their skills in that area.
- Have students identify their strengths on the five scales. Then have students share information with other group members about how they have been able to succeed in those areas.

These are just some suggestions for how the CSSS might be used in a college classroom setting. For how it can be used more specifically as a counseling or assessment tool, please read the *Administrator's Guide* that comes free with each package or can be downloaded for free at www.jist.com.