

The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE, pronounced “bessie”), a companion survey to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), was launched in 2007. Since then, more than one million first-year entering students, as well as thousands of transfer and older students at 560 institutions across the United States and Canada, have participated.

BCSSE collects data from entering first-year, transfer, and older students. For entering first-year students, BCSSE collects data about their high school academic and co-curricular experiences, as well as their expectations for participating in educationally purposeful activities during their first college year. For transfer and older students, BCSSE collects information about prior educational experiences, important entering characteristics, as well as their expectations for participating in educationally purposeful activities during the upcoming college year.

BCSSE administration usually takes place prior to the start of fall classes and is designed to be paired with a NSSE administration in the spring to provide an in-depth understanding of first-year student engagement. There is also an optional winter administration for students entering after the December break. Faculty, advisors, administrators, researchers, and others can use BCSSE data independently or in combination with NSSE data for program development, institutional assessment and improvement, and related purposes.

In fall 2021, 107 U.S. institutions and 1 from Canada participated in BCSSE. Of those, 52 (48%) also administered NSSE in spring 2022, allowing comparisons of incoming students’ prior experiences and expectations with their actual experiences during the first year.

Survey Administration and Respondents

BCSSE is administered locally by campus officials who facilitate the online administration or distribute the paper survey. In 2021, 100 institutions (93%) used the online survey and 6 (6%) used the paper survey, while 2 (1%) used both online and paper. More than 70,000 entering first-year, 17,000 transfer, and 1,600 older students completed BCSSE in the summer or early fall. The winter administration included 853 entering first-year students, 1,915 transfer students, and 122 older students.

Table 1

Profile of BCSSE 2021 U.S. Institutions and All Bachelor’s-Granting U.S. Institutions

Institution Characteristics	BCSSE 2021 (%)	U.S. (%)
Carnegie Basic Classification		
Doctoral Universities (Very high research activity)	4	8
Doctoral Universities (High research activity)	10	8
Doctoral/Professional Universities	8	9
Master’s Colleges and Universities (Larger programs)	31	22
Master’s Colleges and Universities (Medium programs)	9	12
Master’s Colleges and Universities (Smaller programs)	4	8
Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences Focus	14	15
Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields	15	18
Control		
Public	52	35
Private	48	65
Undergraduate Enrollment		
Fewer than 1,000	14	22
1,000–2,499	30	32
2,500–4,999	7	17
5,000–9,999	21	15
10,000–19,999	15	8
20,000 or more	13	7

Notes: Percentages are unweighted and based on U.S. postsecondary institutions that award baccalaureate degrees and belong to one of the eight Carnegie classifications in the table. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. U.S. percentages are based on the 2020 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics data. For information on the Basic Carnegie Classification, see carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu.

Wondering how to use your BCSSE data?

See *Using Your BCSSE Data* for illustrative recent examples:

bcsse.indiana.edu

BCSSE Participating Institutions

Many different types of U.S. institutions participated in BCSSE. Among them, 44% were classified as master’s colleges and universities, 29% as baccalaureate colleges, and 22% as doctorate-granting universities. BCSSE institutions generally reflect the diversity of U.S. bachelor’s-granting institutions with respect to Carnegie Classification, public or private control, and undergraduate enrollment (Table 1).

BCSSE U.S. Respondents

BCSSE is locally administered, so sampling schemes and data collection methods vary across participating institutions. Most institutions sample their entire incoming first-year population and collect data from 50% to nearly 100% of their students. BCSSE 2021 respondents are profiled in Table 2.

Table 2
Profile of BCSSE 2021 Respondents: Demographic Characteristics (entering first-year students)

	Percentage of Respondents
Gender Identity	
Man	40
Woman	57
Another gender identity	1
I prefer not to respond	1
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska native	<1
Asian	8
Black or African American	7
Hispanic or Latino	14
Middle Eastern or North African	1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	<1
White	57
Multiracial	11
Other	<1
International Student	3
High School Graduation Year	
2019	1
2020	4
2021	95
First-Generation Student (No parent holds a bachelor’s degree)	38
Financial Aid Recipient (Received any scholarship, grant, or student loan)	91
Notes: Includes respondents from U.S. and Canadian institutions. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.	

Most BCSSE respondents graduated from a public high school, with approximately two-thirds reporting grades of A– or higher in high school (Table 3). In addition, about 32% of respondents were attending an institution with two or more friends. More than two-thirds of all respondents were attending their first-choice institution.



Pitzer College

Table 3
Profile of BCSSE 2021 Respondents: Other Characteristics

	Percentage of Respondents
High School Type	
Public	85
Private, religiously affiliated	9
Private, not religiously affiliated	3
Home school	1
Other	1
High School Grades (Typical)	
A/A+	51
A-	16
B+	15
B	13
B-	3
C+ or lower	2
Number of friends attending same institution	
None	47
1	20
2	14
3 or more	18
Choice of institution	
First	70
Second	23
Third or lower	7

Notes: Includes respondents from U.S. and Canadian institutions. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.