Survey of Entering Student Engagement

University of Montana-Helena College of Technology

2010 Key Findings

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Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice with Entering Students

SENSE Benchmarks

★ **Early Connections.** When students describe their early college experiences, they typically reflect on occasions when they felt discouraged or thought about dropping out. Their reasons for persisting almost always include one common element: a strong, early connection to someone at the college.

★ **High Expectations and Aspirations.** Nearly all students arrive at their community colleges intending to succeed and believing that they have the motivation to do so. When entering students perceive clear, high expectations from college staff and faculty, they are more likely to understand what it takes to be successful and adopt behaviors that lead to achievement. Students then often rise to meet expectations, making it more likely that they will attain their goals. Often, students' aspirations also climb, and they seek more advanced credentials than they originally envisioned.

★ **Clear Academic Plan and Pathway.** When a student, with knowledgeable assistance, creates a road map— one that shows where he or she is headed, what academic path to follow, and how long it will take to reach the end goal—that student has a critical tool for staying on track. Students are more likely to persist if they not only are advised about what courses to take, but also are helped to set academic goals and to create a plan for achieving them.
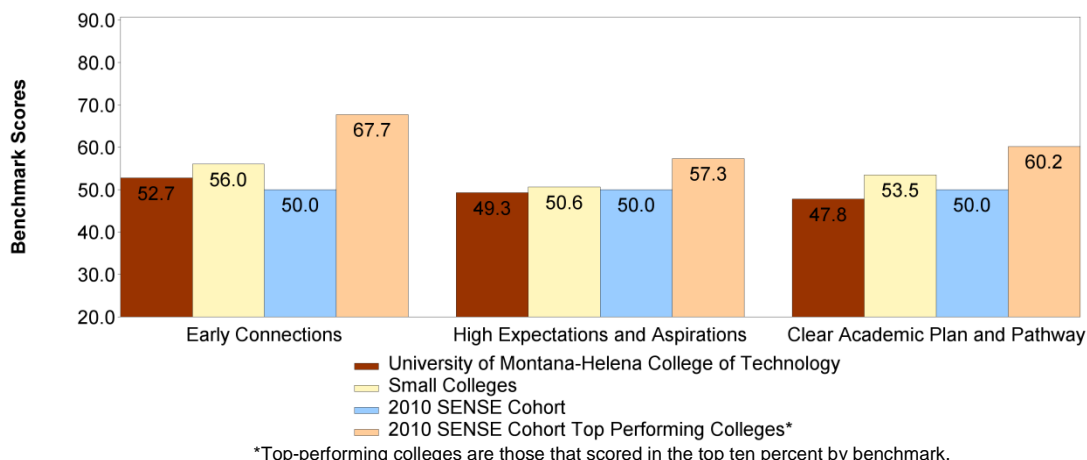
The Survey of Entering Student Engagement *(SENSE)* benchmarks are groups of conceptually related survey items that address key areas of entering student engagement. The six benchmarks denote areas that educational research has shown to be important to entering students' college experiences and educational outcomes, and thus they provide colleges with a useful starting point for looking at institutional results.

Ideally, colleges engage entering students in all six benchmark areas, beginning with a student's first contact with the institution and continuing through completion of the first three weeks of the initial academic term. This time is decisive because current research indicates that helping students succeed through the first academic term can dramatically improve subsequent success, including completing courses and earning certificates and degrees.

While many student behaviors and institutional practices measured by the benchmarks can and should continue throughout students' college careers, the *SENSE* items and the resulting data focus on this critical entering student timeframe.

SENSE benchmark scores are computed by averaging the scores on survey items composing the benchmarks. Benchmark scores are standardized to have a mean of 50 and standard deviation of 25 across all respondents.

Figure 1a

Bar chart – Benchmark Scores by category:

- **Early Connections:** University of Montana-Helena College of Technology 52.7; Small Colleges 56.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort 50.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges 67.7
- **High Expectations and Aspirations:** University of Montana-Helena College of Technology 49.3; Small Colleges 50.6; 2010 SENSE Cohort 50.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges 57.3
- **Clear Academic Plan and Pathway:** University of Montana-Helena College of Technology 47.8; Small Colleges 53.5; 2010 SENSE Cohort 50.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges 60.2

Legend:
- University of Montana-Helena College of Technology
- Small Colleges
- 2010 SENSE Cohort
- 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges*

*Top-performing colleges are those that scored in the top ten percent by benchmark.

Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice with Entering Students

The standardized benchmark scores allow colleges to gauge and monitor their performance in areas of entering student engagement. In addition, participating colleges have the opportunity to make appropriate and useful comparisons between their performance and that of groups of other colleges.

Performing as well as the national average or a peer-group average may be a reasonable initial aspiration, but it is important to recognize that these averages are sometimes unacceptably low. Aspiring to match and then exceed high-performance targets is the stronger strategy.

Community colleges can differ dramatically on such factors as size, location, resources, enrollment patterns, and student characteristics. It is important to take these differences into account when interpreting benchmark scores—especially when making institutional comparisons. Furthermore, the Center for Community College Student Engagement has adopted a policy, "Responsible Uses of *CCSSE* and *SENSE* Data," available at www.cccse.org.

SENSE will use a three-year cohort of participating colleges in all core survey analyses beginning with the *SENSE* 2011 administration. The current cohort is referred to as the 2010 *SENSE* Cohort (only containing responses from the *SENSE* 2009 and 2010 administrations).
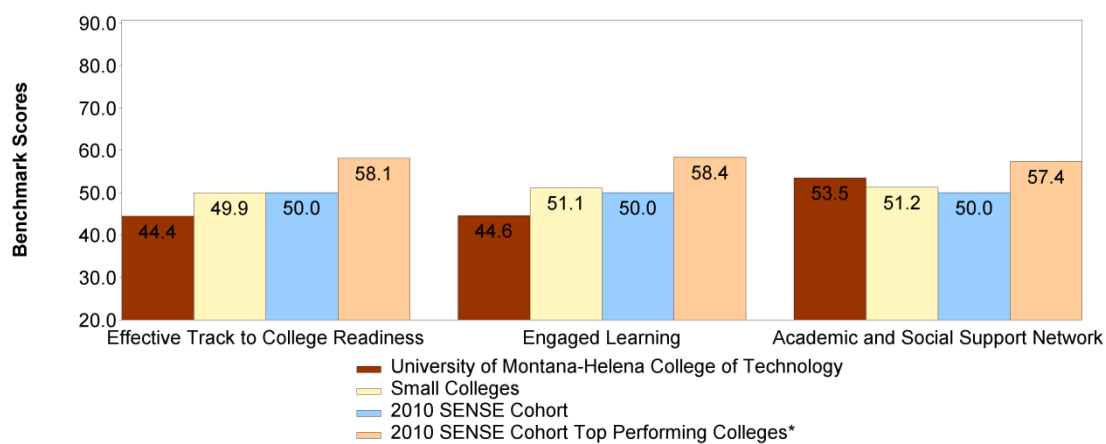
SENSE Benchmarks

Continued from Page 2

★ **Effective Track to College Readiness.** Nationally, more than six in 10 entering community college students are underprepared for college-level work. Thus, significant improvements in student success will hinge upon effective assessment, placement of students into appropriate courses, and implementation of effective strategies to ensure that students build academic skills and receive needed support.

★ **Engaged Learning.** Instructional approaches that foster engaged learning are critical for student success. Because most community college students attend college part-time, and most also must find ways to balance their studies with work and family responsibilities, the most effective learning experiences will be those the college intentionally designs.

★ **Academic and Social Support Network.** Students benefit from having a personal network that enables them to obtain information about college services, along with the academic and social support critical to student success. Because entering students often don't know what they don't know, colleges must purposefully create those networks.

For further information about *SENSE* benchmarks, please visit www.cccse.org.

Figure 1b

Benchmark Scores

- Effective Track to College Readiness: University of Montana-Helena College of Technology 44.4; Small Colleges 49.9; 2010 SENSE Cohort 50.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges 58.1
- Engaged Learning: University of Montana-Helena College of Technology 44.6; Small Colleges 51.1; 2010 SENSE Cohort 50.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges 58.4
- Academic and Social Support Network: University of Montana-Helena College of Technology 53.5; Small Colleges 51.2; 2010 SENSE Cohort 50.0; 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges 57.4

■ University of Montana-Helena College of Technology
□ Small Colleges
■ 2010 SENSE Cohort
■ 2010 SENSE Cohort Top Performing Colleges*

*Top-performing colleges are those that scored in the top ten percent by benchmark.

Aspects of Highest Student Engagement

Benchmark scores provide a manageable starting point for reviewing and understanding *SENSE* data. One way to dig more deeply into the benchmark scores is to analyze those items that contribute to the overall benchmark score. This section features the five items across all benchmarks (excluding those for which means are not calculated) on which the college scored highest and the five items on which the college scored lowest in comparison to the 2010 *SENSE* Cohort.

Figure 2
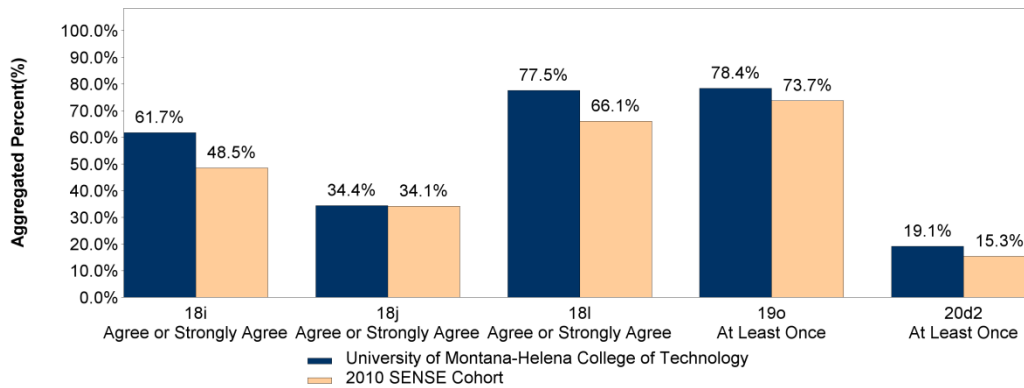
Table 1

Benchmark	Item Number	Item
Early Connections	18i	The college provided me with adequate information about financial assistance
Early Connections	18j	A college staff member helped me determine whether I qualified for financial assistance
Academic and Social Support Network	18l	All instructors clearly explained academic and student support services available at this college
Engaged Learning	19o	Frequency: Received prompt written or oral feedback from instructors on your performance during the first three weeks of your first SEMESTER/QUARTER
Engaged Learning	20d2	Frequency: Used Face-to-face tutoring

Figure 2 displays the aggregated frequencies for the items on which the college performed most favorably compared with 2010 *SENSE* Cohort. For instance, 61.7% of your students, compared with 48.5% of other students in the cohort, responded 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' on item 18i.

Notes

For items 18, 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' responses are combined.

For items 19 (except 19c, 19d, 19f, 19s), 'Once', 'Two or three times', and 'Four or more times' responses are combined.

For items 20, 'Once', 'Two or three times', and 'Four or more times' responses are combined.

Aspects of Lowest Student Engagement

The items in Tables 1 and 2 reflect the largest differences in mean scores between the institution and the 2010 *SENSE* Cohort. While examining these data, keep in mind that the selected items may not be those that are most closely aligned with the college's goals; thus, it is important to review the full Institutional Report on the *SENSE* online reporting system.
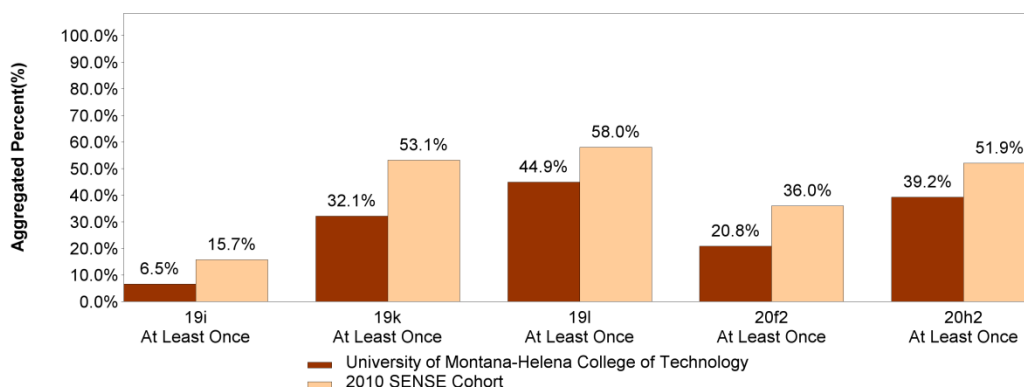
Figure 3

Table 2

Benchmark	Item Number	Item
Engaged Learning	19i	Frequency: Participated in a required study group outside of class during the first three weeks of your first SEMESTER/QUARTER
Engaged Learning	19k	Frequency: Used an electronic tool to communicate with another student about coursework during the first three weeks of your first SEMESTER/QUARTER
Engaged Learning	19l	Frequency: Used an electronic tool to communicate with an instructor about coursework during the first three weeks of your first SEMESTER/QUARTER
Engaged Learning	20f2	Frequency: Used Writing, math, or other skill lab
Engaged Learning	20h2	Frequency: Used computer lab

Figure 3 displays the aggregated frequencies for the items on which the college performed least favorably compared with 2010 *SENSE* Cohort. For instance, 6.5% of your students, compared with 15.7% of other students in the cohort, responded 'Once', 'Two or three times', or 'Four or more times' on item 19i.

Notes

For items 19 (except 19c, 19d, 19f, 19s), 'Once', 'Two or three times', and 'Four or more times' responses are combined.

For items 20, 'Once', 'Two or three times', and 'Four or more times' responses are combined.

2010 *SENSE* Special-Focus Items

SENSE Special-Focus Modules allow participating colleges and researchers to delve more deeply into areas of student experience and institutional performance that are related to student success. Frequencies for five selected items from the Academic Advising and Planning module are displayed below. For colleges that did not administer a Special-Focus Module, example data are provided.

To access complete Special-Focus Module frequency reports, please visit the *SENSE* online reporting system at www.cccse.org.

Figure 4: A college staff member clearly explained how my placement test scores were used to determine if I was ready for college-level courses or needed to take courses to help me become college ready.
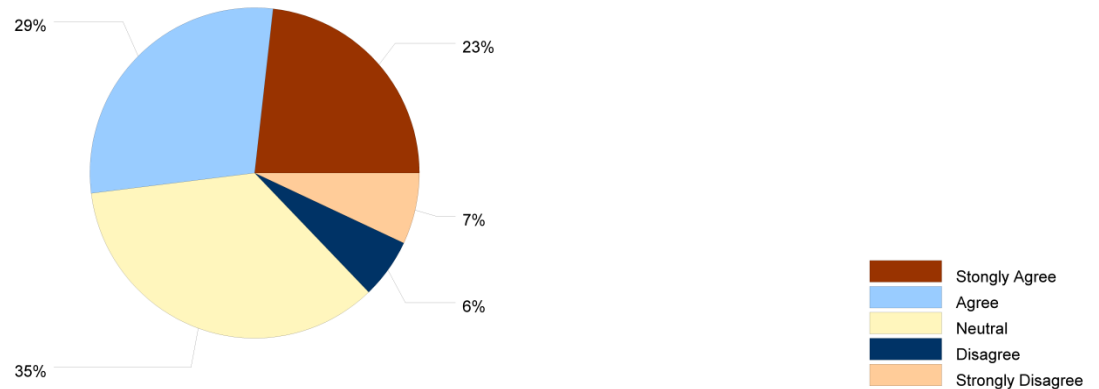

- 23% — Stongly Agree
- 29% — Agree
- 35% — Neutral
- 6% — Disagree
- 7% — Strongly Disagree

Figure 5: A college staff member helped me to design a course sequence that showed how long it would take to attain my educational goals.

- 21% — Stongly Agree
- 28% — Agree
- 35% — Neutral
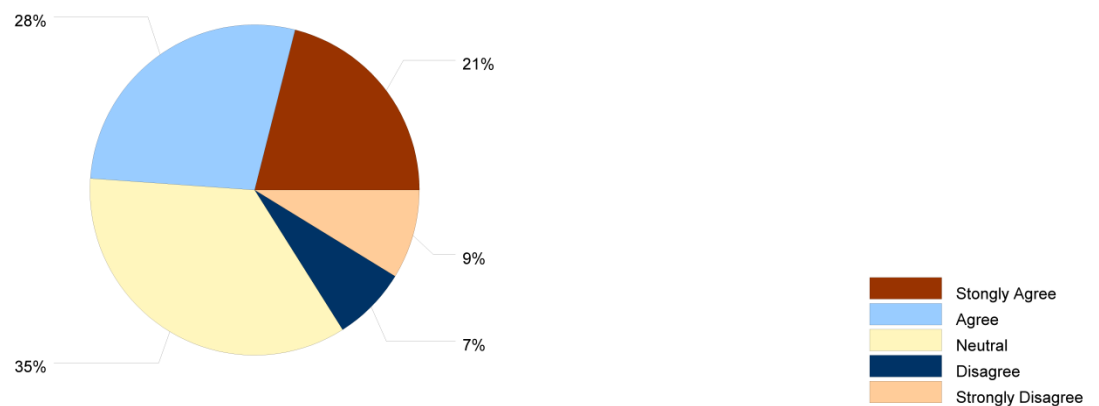- 7% — Disagree
- 9% — Strongly Disagree

Figure 6: A college staff member clearly explained core courses and other requirements for completing a certificate/degree, or for transferring to another college/university.
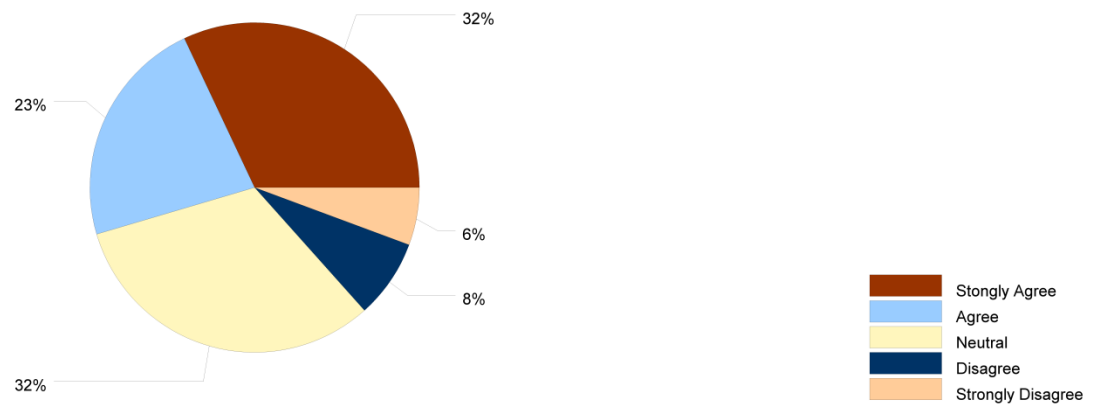

32%
23%
6%
8%
32%

- Stongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Figure 7: A college staff member clearly explained to me where to find help if I were considering dropping out of or withdrawing from college.

25%
17%
7%
10%
42%

- Stongly Agree
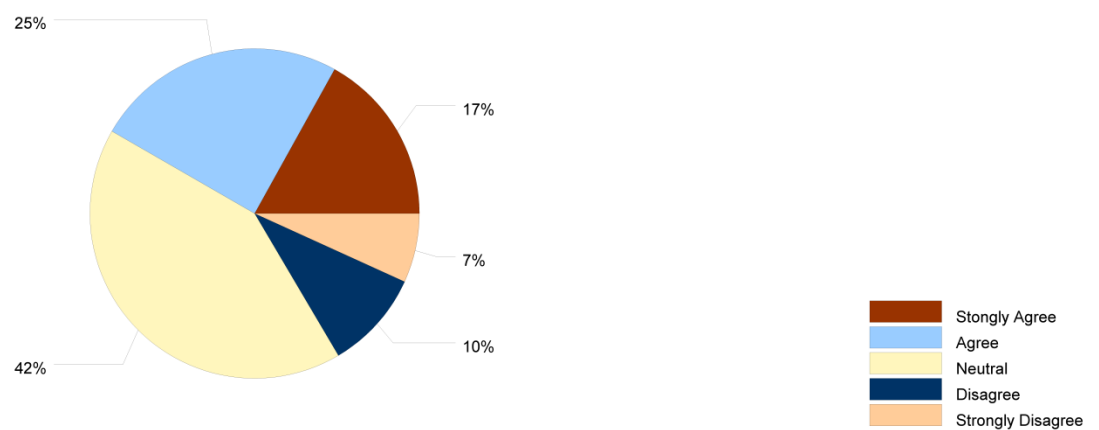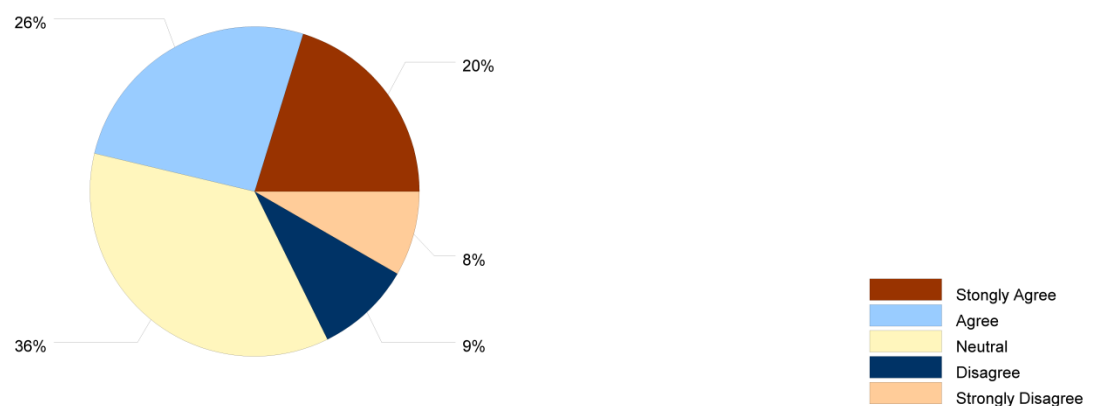- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Figure 8: A college staff member helped me to understand approximately how many hours outside of class (per week) I need to spend preparing and studying for each course I am taking.

26%
20%
8%
9%
36%

- Stongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Assessment and Placement: Are There Gaps?

Most community colleges have assessment and placement polices that are intended to help all students "start right." Yet, often these policies, even when they are ostensibly mandatory, might not be implemented in ways that ensure success for all students. The disaggregated data below illustrate the student experience with assessment and placement at your college. Nationally, more than 60% of community college students are enrolled part-time. Thus, while looking at these data, it is important to consider the institution's enrollment patterns. Are your entering students starting right?
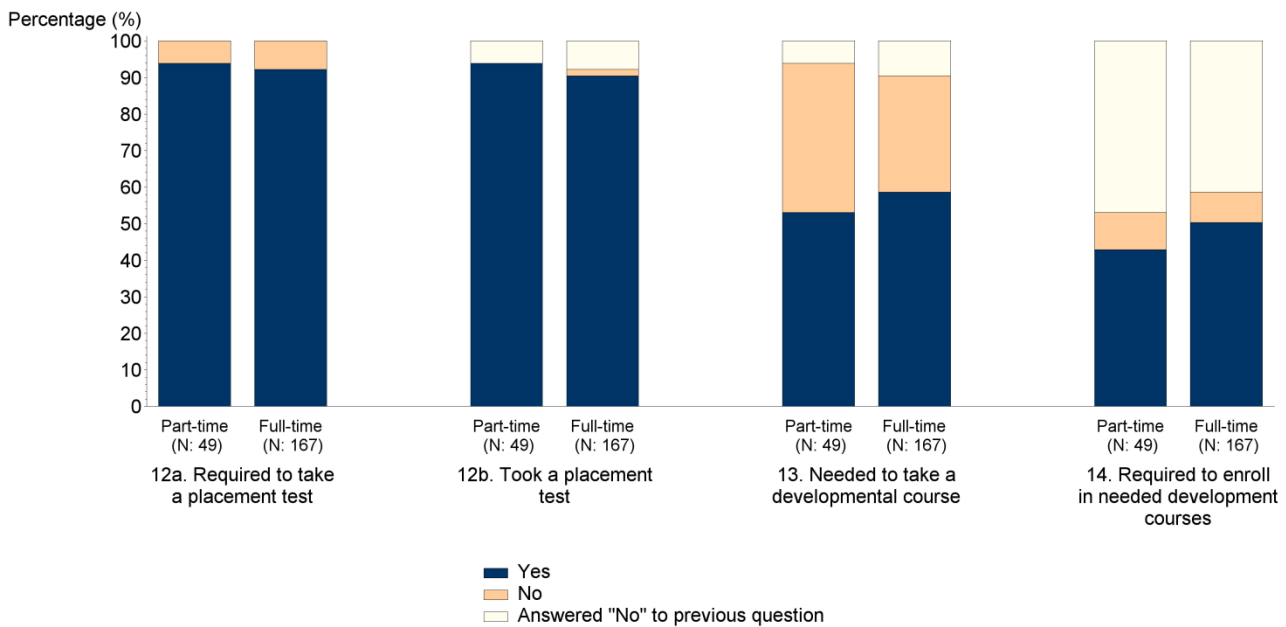
Figure 9

Table 3

Response	12a. Required to take a placement test		12b. Took a placement test		13. Needed to take a developmental course		14. Required to enroll in needed development courses	
	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time
Yes	93.9%	92.2%	93.9%	90.4%	53.1%	58.7%	42.9%	50.3%
No	6.1%	7.8%	0	1.8%	40.8%	31.7%	10.2%	8.4%
Answered "No" to previous question	N/A	N/A	6.1%	7.8%	6.1%	9.6%	46.9%	41.3%