One of the most interesting, useful and mysterious ratings of U.S. colleges is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In the last five years, nearly 900,000 undergraduates at about 1,000 different colleges and universities have provided to the Indiana University-based organization the kind of data completely missing from the best-known college guides and lists.

NSSE (pronounced Nessie) asks freshmen and seniors if they have ever discussed ideas from their readings with professors outside of class, if they have received prompt feedback from their instructors, if they have had serious conversations with students different than they are, if they have done an independent study, and scores of other questions that illuminate which schools are providing the best environment for learning.

Unfortunately, most of the colleges that participate in this survey keep their results a secret. They have their reasons. Colleges compete for students, and the NSSE data could be used to show that writing instruction at Beerblast State University is not as good as it is at the Egghead Institute on the other side of town. The staff of U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges have wisely begun to print the results of some NSSE questions from the few colleges willing to give them out. Many colleges do not want that much public scrutiny of their students' learning experiences, particularly if the news is not good.

And yet what is the purpose of college but to learn? And why should colleges be allowed to keep this information to themselves?

NSSE officials had to promise colleges that they could keep their data secret and use it only for their own internal assessments in exchange for being allowed to survey their students. It is the kind of bargain that social scientists often have to make.

But now NSSE has a new sibling, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, CCSSE (pronounced Sessie), which has broken out of the polite little world of academic anonymity and begun to publish the results from all the colleges it surveys. Go to their Web site, www.ccsse.org, click on Survey Results at the top, and then click on College Profiles. There you see a list of all 257 colleges (click on State List if you want them organized by state) that participated in the 2005 CCSSE survey of 133,281 community college students. With a few more clicks you can see how each one measured
up on a national yardstick of factors such as academic challenge or student-faculty interaction.

Kay McClenney, who directs CCSSE from the campus of the University of Texas-Austin, said that unlike the vast majority of four-year school leaders, the community college officials on her advisory board said that since theirs were public institutions, they felt obligated to reveal to the public what CCSSE had discovered about the quality of learning on their campuses.

I sense an additional, more practical motive for their endorsement of a system that requires all participants to agree to have their results published. The two-year community colleges educate 46 percent of all U.S. undergraduates and do wonderful work providing inexpensive higher education to students whose needs are not met by the four-year colleges. But they remain the Rodney Dangerfields of the college world, never getting much respect, and are thus willing to reveal themselves in exchange for some attention.

I asked McClenney if CCSSE's insistence on publishing all results kept participation low when it started to do the surveys in 2002. "It may have been the first year," she said, "but nobody has died yet." The fact that the initial CCSSE participants suffered no serious harm has led more to sign up, she said.

Those of you interested in checking out the results from your local community colleges should stop reading and go explore the Web site. The summary results page for each school has a bar chart that shows where the school scored on five factors -- active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction and support for learners. When you click on the bar of the factor that interests you, you get a detailed breakdown of the questions asked and the average response from that school.

For instance, Scottsdale Community College in Scottsdale, Ariz., had a benchmark score of 46.5 on active and collaborative learning, on a scale where the average is 50. When I clicked on that bar, I learned that 917 students had been asked how often that school year they had asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, also a question on the NSSE survey. The choices were 1 point for never, 2 for sometimes, 3 for often and 4 for very often. The Scottsdale student responses averaged out to 2.88, the highest mean score on any of the seven questions. The lowest was 1.24, the average response of students asked if they had participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course.

The CCSSE list includes results back to when the survey began. On that class participation question for instance, students at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield, Ill., had an average score of 2.75 in 2002, and inched up to 2.83 in 2005. The school on the list closest to where I am sitting, Northern Virginia Community College in Annandale, Va., had an average score of 2.81 on that question in 2005.

As the CCSSE list grows longer, and researchers have more time to analyze the results, I expect we will learn much about what works and what doesn't in community colleges.
One intriguing preliminary finding in CCSSE's own analysis of the data is that students who are the first in their families to go to college, are academically underprepared or have other factors that might hurt them in college are more engaged in their college experience that better prepared students. Despite, or maybe because of, their disadvantages, they are less likely to come to class unprepared and they interact more frequently with instructors outside the classroom, the survey found.

Wouldn't it be nice to have such a rich source of data on four-year colleges and use it to make good decisions on which school was best for you? I will not be holding my breath waiting for Harvard and Stanford to let their students participate in such a venture, but CCSSE is a sign of progress. Someday our most famous colleges may even be following in the footsteps of our least famous, and letting us know how well their students are being taught inside their ancient, expensively restored buildings.