Using BCSSE Data

It is more important than ever for institutions to create the conditions that foster student success. Toward this end, many institutions seek to better understand their incoming first-year students. The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) annually collects data about students’ high school experiences and their expectations for the upcoming first college year from tens of thousands of first-time college students prior to their enrollment at a four-year institution in the U.S. and Canada. The most powerful and effective use of BCSSE data is when it is combined with its companion survey, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Institutions that participate in both surveys receive the BCSSE-NSSE Combined Report that provides an in-depth cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis of their first-year students’ experiences.

There are many possible uses of BCSSE data. They can be used to enhance first-year student learning and experiences by aiding the design of pre-college orientation programs, student service initiatives, and other programmatic efforts. BCSSE results, especially when linked with NSSE, can be used to shape initiatives that align the first-year experience of students with recognized effective educational practices.

BCSSE-NSSE results can be used in many ways, including:

- Academic advising
- Accreditation and self-studies
- Assessment and improvement
- Curricular reform
- Faculty development
- First-year program evaluation
- Recruitment
- Retention

Maximizing the Use of BCSSE Data

More specifically, pre-college student engagement and expectations data can be profitably used in these ways:

- Understanding student backgrounds, experiences, and expectations so that institutions can minimize unmet expectations and maximize student engagement, learning, satisfaction, and persistence
- Providing important data for the development of strategic plans for designing effective teaching and learning practices
- Designing and evaluating first-year programs to more effectively align them with student background characteristics and expectations
- Helping faculty better understand who their students are in order to modify curriculum materials and teaching practices
- Informing advisors about students’ prior academic and extracurricular experiences, academic preparation, attitudes, and expectations to best advise the student
- Merging with other data sources to provide a richer understanding of the first-year experience

Saint Xavier University
Institutional Examples of Using BCSSE Data

There are many examples of how institutions use BCSSE data. The examples below illustrate possible uses of BCSSE data.¹

High School Experiences
Exploring BCSSE-NSSE results helped Case Western Reserve University better understand the experiences of incoming students and the effect high school experiences had on student engagement in college. When looking at BCSSE data, the institution found that incoming students were highly involved during high school. The more extra-curricular activities students participated in during high school, the higher they scored on numerous items on the NSSE survey. Specifically, the more involved a student was in high school the more likely they would talk with faculty about career plans, discuss ideas with faculty outside of class, and work with faculty outside of class on activities other than course work during their first year of college. These results provide faculty with helpful information about the student population and could speak to a need for faculty at Case Western to be more intentional in reaching out to students who may not have been very involved during high school.

Institutional Improvement
Norfolk State University (NSU) has effectively used entering student data and engagement results to study gaps between student experiences and expectations and their patterns of engagement at the end of the first year. NSU also integrated BCSSE results into its accreditation quality improvement plan for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. NSU developed a comprehensive approach to assessment with a focus on improving advising, developing a more meaningful partnership between student and academic affairs, and tailoring academic and social support initiatives to advance student persistence and success.

Faculty Development
Knowing who your students are, particularly their expectations and misconceptions about educational activities, is part of good teaching (Bain, 2004). At Southern Connecticut State University, faculty were surprised (and disturbed) by some of the “disconnects” between students’ expectations revealed by BCSSE and their actual first-year experience reported in NSSE. During faculty development events, BCSSE and NSSE results were reported and discussed with faculty to provide more insight into the high school experiences and college expectations of their first-year students. A panel of upper-class students who attended the discussion was asked to comment on some of the findings, resulting in an-depth discussion between students and faculty. Faculty commented that they thought they knew their students, but seeing the data provided them with new insight into students’ experiences and presented provocative challenges for pedagogy.

Outreach Programs
The University of Wisconsin–Green Bay (UWGB) plans to use BCSSE data to support the need for its large and dynamic outreach program for middle and high school students, Phuture Phoenix, www.uwgb.edu/phuturephoenix. The program relies on UWGB peer mentors to develop college awareness and increase educational aspirations in the Green Bay community. In analyzing its BCSSE data, UWGB found that entering first-year students from the Green Bay Public Schools talked less often with school personnel about their college or career plans, were less certain about whether they will graduate from UWGB and about the highest degree they plan to obtain, and were less sure about what their major will be compared with other entering first-year students at UWGB. The mentoring program can target these attitudes and behaviors. Results from these items in future entering classes can help assess the effectiveness of the mentoring program. Program leaders will also use summaries of BCSSE results in the training of student mentors around engagement-related themes, such as, “What does it mean to be a college student?” (with information about time use and important behaviors), and “How is college different from high school?” UWGB also prepares a report on BCSSE results for the campus on student expectations of college compared to their high school experiences and how they perceive college. Results are distributed to chairpersons, deans, and offices directly involved with student registration and resources.

¹ The Southern Connecticut State University and University of Wisconsin–Green Bay examples are excerpted from Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie (2009).
Useful Resources

National Survey of Student Engagement

BCSSE was conceived and designed as a complement to NSSE. Therefore, an important place to look for useful information about using BCSSE data is in publications featuring NSSE use examples, including NSSE’s annual Results reports, Using NSSE Data, and Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education: Lessons from the Field.

BCSSE Webinars

Since 2007, the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research has hosted a series of Webinars focused on the NSSE, BCSSE, and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) projects. Since April 2008, there have been three BCSSE-specific Webinars:

- April 2008 – Introduction to the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement
- September 2008 – Using Your BCSSE-NSSE Data
- March 2009 – Using BCSSE Data: Understanding That Student Expectations Are Important

These Webinars provide an in-depth understanding of the BCSSE project, as well as the uses of BCSSE and BCSSE-NSSE data. Recorded sessions and copies of the PowerPoint presentations are available at: www.nsse.iub.edu/webinars/archives.cfm.

Presentations and Publications

Presentations and publications related to BCSSE may be downloaded from the BCSSE Web site, www.bcsse.iub.edu. Simply visit “Papers & Presentations” for a complete listing.

As noted above in the institutional examples, one of the more recent publications regarding BCSSE and the importance of collecting data regarding pre-college student characteristics was a chapter by Cole, Kennedy, and Ben-Avie (2009) in Using NSSE in Institutional Research. Look for presentations at upcoming conferences such as the Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience and the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), as well as many others.

NSSE Institute

The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice works with institutions and other organizations to collect and disseminate research on promising practices and to assist schools in using data for institutional improvement and student success initiatives. Among the services offered by the Institute are semi-annual Users Workshops, which bring together institutional users from all over the country to learn about and share information regarding effective use of NSSE, BCSSE, and FSSE data. Information regarding past and upcoming workshops as well as other services can be found on the NSSE Institute Web site, www.nsse.iub.edu/institute/index.cfm.

BCSSE Web Site

In addition to the Web sites listed above, the BCSSE Web site offers more information and resources for BCSSE users.

References
