Understanding First-Year Students

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 first college year from tens of thousands of first-time college and university students prior to their enrollment at four-year institutions in the US and Canada.

An effective use of BCSSE data is in combination with data from its companion survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Institutions participating in both surveys receive the **BCSSE–NSSE Combined Report**, which provides an in-depth, cross-sectional analysis of their first-year students’ experiences.

Enhancing the First-Year Experience

There are many ways to use BCSSE data. They can be used to enhance the first-year student experience by informing the design of precollege orientation programs, student service initiatives, and other programmatic efforts. BCSSE results, especially when linked with NSSE results, can be used to shape initiatives that align the first-year experience with recognized effective educational practices.

BCSSE–NSSE results can inform the following:

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

More specifically, data on students’ precollege engagement and expectations can be 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

- Informing advisors about students’ prior academic and co-curricular experiences, attitudes, and expectations
- Providing valuable data for the development of strategic plans for implementing effective teaching and learning practices
- Designing and evaluating first-year programs to more effectively align them with student background characteristics, dispositions, and expectations
- Helping faculty know their students better and informing the design of curriculum materials and teaching practices with that knowledge
- Merging with other data sources to provide a richer understanding of the first-year experience
How Institutions Use BCSSE Data

First-Year Advising and Institutional Reporting

Auburn University has administered BCSSE to all incoming freshmen since 2008 and recently launched an online advising tool, based on the BCSSE Advising Report template, that utilizes BCSSE data and institutional data. With this tool, an adviser can review students’ responses to BCSSE as well as their fall semester grade point average and determine the probability of their one-year retention based on these responses. An adviser can also manipulate student responses to see how different attitudes and plans can affect students’ odds of success. Auburn has also been active in using BCSSE data for institutional reporting, persistence studies, and other assessment activities.

Missouri State University has put the BCSSE Advising Reports to good use, as they have become integral to their orientation program, Student Orientation, Advisement, and Registration (SOAR). Missouri State advisors also used BCSSE items to develop useful questions (“Conversation Catalysts”) to guide the academic advisors.

Did You Know . . . ?
45% of first-year students studied five hours or less per week in during their last year of high school

Retention

The staff at Montana State University’s Allen Yarnell Center for Student Success use the BCSSE Advising Reports to determine who is at risk for early departure. Coupling this use of BCSSE data with their own ChampChange program, Montana State has been successful in reaching their retention targets. Information about how they use BCSSE data in combination with their ChampChange program was presented at the 2015 Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience in Dallas.

Faculty Development and Student Persistence

Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) uses BCSSE data in reports used for faculty development and persistence studies. Individual student BCSSE reports are sent to faculty members who teach in the university’s First-Year Experience “Inquiry” course prior to the start of the academic year. By reading the BCSSE reports, faculty members are able to modify the curriculum of their sections based on the students’ academic background, expectations, and preparedness for postsecondary education. The university also uses BCSSE results in its longitudinal cohort studies of student persistence and academic success. One key predictor, for example, is the BCSSE item that asks students whether they expect to graduate from the institution.

The university’s Student Success Taskforce was established last year to find ways to strengthen retention and graduation rates, to provide more strategic and proactive student advising, and to remove any obstacles that students may face as they move toward completing their degrees. Student profiles that incorporated BCSSE data informed the work of this taskforce. SCSU’s other uses of BCSSE data include a report to the board of trustees and a self-study report.

Additional details regarding uses of BCSSE data are available here:
bcse.indiana.edu/UsingBCSSEData.cfm

Useful Resources

National Survey of Student Engagement

BCSSE was conceived and designed as a complement to NSSE. Therefore, publications featuring uses of NSSE data are also valuable resources for effective uses of BCSSE results. These resources include Using NSSE Data (in this Institutional Report binder), NSSE’s Annual Results, and the Lessons from the Field series.
nsse.indiana.edu/html/annual_results.cfm
nsse.indiana.edu/links/lessons_home

NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice

NSSE Institute associates are available to provide direct assistance to individual institutions or university, state, and multi-campus systems.
nsse.indiana.edu/institute

User Workshops—NSSE staff members and institutional representatives are available for customized training and topical workshops on aspects of educational practice and assessment to assist institutional teams in the development of action plans incorporating NSSE results.

Consulting—To address accreditation or other campus goals, NSSE staff members can help develop improvement initiatives.
Presentations and Conferences—NSSE staff members are available to participate on panels or in research presentations at professional meetings and conferences.

Workshops and Retreats—NSSE staff can present information at faculty and staff workshops and retreats.

The NSSE User Workshop at Bucknell University (April, 2015) featured two BCSSE-focused sessions: Primer on NSSE, FSSE, and BCSSE and Using BCSSE and NSSE to Help Retention Efforts. Materials from all workshop sessions are available here: nsse.indiana.edu/html/workshops.cfm

Did You Know . . . ?
47% of first-year students completed at least one college or university course while in high school

BCSSE Webinars
NSSE offers a series of free, live webinars for faculty, administrators, institutional researchers, and student affairs professionals who want to better understand and use their NSSE, BCSSE, and FSSE (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement) data. Recordings of many of these webinars are archived on the NSSE website and available for convenient viewing.

nsse.indiana.edu/webinars/archives.cfm

Eight BCSSE-specific webinars develop in-depth understanding of the BCSSE project and provide guidelines and examples for using BCSSE and BCSSE–NSSE data:

- Using BCSSE and NSSE to Help Retention Efforts (April, 2015)
- An Overview of BCSSE 2013 (April, 2013)
- Using BCSSE and NSSE Data to Investigate First-Year Student Financial Stress and Engagement (June 2012)
- Engagement Readiness of First-Year Students (April 2011)
- Using BCSSE–NSSE Data to Assess the Effects of Learning Communities on First-Year Experiences (November 2010)
- Using BCSSE Data for Faculty Development: Do Faculty Really Know Their Students? (March 2010)
- Using BCSSE Data: Understanding That Student Expectations Are Important (March 2009)

Publications and Presentations
Publications and presentations related to BCSSE may be downloaded from the BCSSE website, in the Publications and Presentations section.
bcsse.indiana.edu/publications_presentations.cfm

Two issues of New Directions for Institutional Research include chapters regarding BCSSE and the importance of collecting precollege student data: Using NSSE in Institutional Research, by Cole, Kennedy, and Ben-Avie (2009); and Longitudinal Assessment for Institutional Improvement, by Cole and Korkmaz (2010).

Look for BCSSE presentations and papers at upcoming conferences including the Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience and the Association for Institutional Research.

BCSSE Website
In addition to the websites listed above, the BCSSE website offers a range of information and resources for BCSSE users. Information includes cost of participation, administration tips, survey content, linking BCSSE–NSSE data, and much more.
bcsse.indiana.edu

References