Using NSSE Data

How Do Institutions Use NSSE Results?

Because NSSE provides rich, reliable information on student learning behavior and effective educational practice, colleges and universities have found many uses for survey results:

- Accountability and transparency
- Accreditation self-studies
- Alumni outreach
- Assessment and improvement
- Benchmarking
- Communications with stakeholders
- Faculty and staff development
- General education reform
- Grant proposals, applications, and progress reports
- Institutional advancement
- Institutional research
- Retention and completion
- State system performance reporting

TOP RESOURCES FOR NSSE DATA USERS

Discovering and sharing how institutions use student engagement results to improve the undergraduate experience is an especially important and ongoing NSSE activity. Products of that activity include helpful, practical resources for NSSE data users:

Lessons from the Field

Our Lessons from the Field series presents dozens of instructive and inspiring narratives from colleges and universities describing the innovative ways they are putting their NSSE results into action.
nsse.indiana.edu/links/lessons_home

Search Tool for Institutional Examples

NSSE’s online database—with more than 500 accounts of how institutions are using their NSSE results—is searchable by keyword, institution name, or Carnegie classification; by data use purpose, such as accreditation or general education assessment; or by improvement focus, for example, retention or advising.
nsse.indiana.edu/html/using_nsse_db.cfm

NSSE Data Use in Brief

The User Resources section of your Institutional Report package features three special briefs highlighting best uses of NSSE data in three key contexts: using Topical Modules, promoting high-impact practices, and investigating the experience of specific student populations.

What Lessons Have We Learned About Using NSSE Data?

Based on the collective experience of NSSE users, we offer the following suggestions for incorporating NSSE data into institutional improvement efforts:

Encourage faculty and staff to adopt a student engagement perspective by explaining its potential for improving teaching and learning.

Report and share results in ways that increase understanding of collegiate quality and promote improvement efforts in all institutional sectors.
How Often Should an Institution Participate in NSSE?

The ideal cycle for NSSE participation is guided by institutions’ intended uses for NSSE data, including:

As part of regular assessment. Institutions that include NSSE in their regular assessment plan establish a cycle of administration that fits that plan, for example, placing NSSE administrations on a three-year cycle.

For formative evaluation. Institutions implementing a change in undergraduate education may plan to administer NSSE before and after the reform to assess the impact of the initiative on student engagement.

Confirm the validity, reliability and other indicators of NSSE data quality by reviewing NSSE’s Psychometric Portfolio.

nsse.indiana.edu/links/psychometric_portfolio

Drill down to your institution’s department- or unit-level data, made accessible through NSSE census administration and detailed in the Major Field Report.

nsse.indiana.edu/html/major_field_report.cfm

Link NSSE results to other information about the student experience and complementary initiatives to extend the insights to campus improvement efforts.

Combine numeric data and statistical comparisons with verbal explanations to facilitate interpretation of results.

Examine results from multiple perspectives including normative comparisons that may confirm or challenge assumptions about performance relative to other institutions.

Build campus teams and institutional consortia on topics of mutual interest to increase the likelihood of success in policy and practice changes.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING NSSE RESULTS

More than a decade of working with NSSE data and interviews with campus project managers support the following recommendations:

1. Form a NSSE committee, team, or task force to provide representation and leadership.
2. Disseminate NSSE results widely throughout the campus to stimulate interest and inspire action.
3. Share NSSE results at the department level for campuswide involvement.
4. Link NSSE data to other data sources to validate findings.
5. Post NSSE results on your institutional website to enhance communication and promote transparency.

For accreditation (one of the most common uses of NSSE data). For institutions conducting three-year self-studies, NSSE is best administered in year one so that, in years two and three, results can be shared and reviewed across campus to identify specific actions for improvement. In a longer accreditation cycle, administering NSSE more than once may be best. For example, in the first year or two of a self-study, NSSE results can help determine where to focus improvement efforts. Three or four years later, after the changes are implemented, another NSSE administration can help measure their impact—allowing ample time for assessment of results and, perhaps, adjustments of priorities in subsequent progress reports.

For benchmarking. A key asset of NSSE participation is your ability to customize up to three comparison groups from prior- and current-year NSSE participants—allowing you to build comparison groups of similar peer, aspirational, or pre-existing groups. NSSE participation may also be linked to membership in or affinity with consortia or state systems.

What Can Institutions Learn from Comparative Data?

NSSE data serve a diagnostic function by identifying institutional strengths and weaknesses with respect to effective educational practices. Comparisons with peer institutions and the full NSSE cohort reveal aspects of performance not readily available from other sources. Also, examining internal variation in student engagement can help in identifying less-engaged groups and determining how to improve their experience.

Benchmarking

Institutions use two basic approaches to benchmarking with NSSE: normative and criterion. One or both may be appropriate, depending on institutional priorities.

Normative Approach

The normative approach compares your students’ responses to those of students at other colleges and universities. If enough students have participated, this can also be done at the school, department, or major field level—a particularly effective way of stimulating faculty interest in the findings.

Criterion Approach

With the criterion approach you compare your institution’s results against a predetermined value that you and your colleagues deem appropriate, given your institutional mission, size, curricular offerings, funding, and other factors.
Who Should See Your NSSE Results?

Institutions share their NSSE results widely (see Table 1). The types of audiences institutions target for sharing fall into three general groups:

**Selected Audiences**

Targeting audiences interested in a specific set of results may spark focused dialogue about implications for policy and practice. For example, customizing reports for the board of trustees and department heads or selecting results on collaborative learning for faculty may generate much interest in the targeted audiences.

**Campuswide Audiences**

Many institutions post summaries of important NSSE results on their websites and invite colleagues to review the full report. Results are also shared through displays in public areas such as student unions or dining halls.

**External Audiences**

Prospective students, parents, the media, researchers, and others express interest in seeing institutionally specific information on student engagement. Many institutions participating in NSSE publish some or all of their results in a variety of media (e.g., websites, alumni magazines, press releases).

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### POSTING YOUR NSSE RESULTS

About 40% of NSSE-participating institutions post NSSE results on their websites. This is an effective way to highlight institutional strengths and demonstrate commitment to quality improvement.

Some institutions display all of their NSSE reports online, while others post selected results highlighting institutional strengths or news releases that emphasize institutional participation and findings relevant to performance priorities. Another option is to post short reports summarizing key student engagement findings. Dozens of exemplary institutional website displays of NSSE results may be viewed on our website. nsse.indiana.edu/html/inst_web_site_display.cfm

Participants in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) that elect to feature NSSE results have the opportunity to post additional information about their performance (see the NSSE website for VSA–NSSE updates). nsse.indiana.edu/html/vsa.cfm

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### Table 1

**Data Sharing with and Use by Internal Institutional Audiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Stakeholders</th>
<th>Results shared with</th>
<th>Results explicitly used by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President/senior administration</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department chairs/deans</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student affairs staff</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising staff</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions staff</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public affairs/news office</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governing board</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus newspaper</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
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**Targeted Committees/Groups**

| Accreditation                      | 61%                 | 43%                         |
| First-year experience              | 53%                 | 31%                         |
| Teaching and learning              | 42%                 | 28%                         |
| General education                  | 53%                 | 31%                         |
| Diversity                          | 36%                 | 18%                         |
| Writing program                    | 27%                 | 14%                         |
| Technology                         | 14%                 | 4%                          |

Note: Data were collected from 220 institutional respondents to the NSSE 2014 Report Card and NSSE 2015 Report Card assessments of the 2014 and 2015 NSSE administrations.
How Are Institutions Using NSSE Data in Improvement Efforts?

Institutions are putting NSSE data to use as designed—informing their improvement efforts with evidence of student engagement in effective educational practices. Receiving NSSE’s Institutional Report, with survey results and supporting documents, sets in motion each institution’s processes to share and interpret data, to identify priorities for action, to formulate and implement plans for improvement—and then to assess the impact of those efforts. Institutions report using data for assessment and improvement in a range of areas including:

- Academic advising
- Accreditation
- Enrollment management and recruiting
- Experiences with diversity
- Experiences with faculty
- Faculty and staff development
- First-year experience
- General education
- High-impact practices
- Planning and accountability
- Reporting by majors and programs
- Service-learning
- Student affairs
- Transfer student experience
- Writing programs

The best resources for learning more about specific institutional uses of NSSE data can be found in our Lessons from the Field series and on our website in our searchable database of institutional examples.

USING NSSE DATA TO ADDRESS CAMPUS ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

NSSE results can spotlight current campus issues and concerns. Many institutions share common challenges, such as lower-than-desired retention or completion rates. All institutions have an interest in improving the learning environment.

While no single approach to such issues is right for every institution, the following questions can help frame your examination of NSSE results and your development of action plans:

- What data confirm known facts?
- What results are surprising?
- What results meet your expectations?
- What results need further investigation?

WHAT IS YOUR NSSE DATA USE STORY?

Our growing collection of stories about how NSSE institutions use their results is a shared resource for colleges and universities, and assists in our continuing efforts to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience. Please contact your NSSE Project Services team to share examples highlighting your institution’s uses of NSSE data, usage strategies, and special activities.

nsse.indiana.edu/html/staff.cfm
## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO USING NSSE DATA EFFECTIVELY

Converting assessment information into action is a challenge for all colleges and universities. Below, we provide ways to address some of the more common obstacles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacle</th>
<th>Approach</th>
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<tr>
<td>Small number of respondents</td>
<td>Look at various demographics of your NSSE respondent file to check its representativeness of your campus population. The average response rate by institution type can help put response patterns in perspective. NSSE research indicates that a sufficient number of respondents is more important than a high response rate for institution-level survey estimates. If possible, combine two years of data to increase numbers. Specific questions about response rate and its relationship to data quality are addressed on the NSSE website. nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/Resp_Rate_FAQ.pdf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions about validity and reliability</td>
<td>NSSE has conducted a number of validity and reliability studies including a study of the interpretation of response rates in college surveys, stability analyses, test-retest, focus groups, and nonrespondent bias checks. NSSE’s Psychometric Portfolio provides information on these issues. nsse.indiana.edu/links/psychometric_portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited capacity to analyze and report results</td>
<td>NSSE reports can be quickly packaged and sent to faculty and staff with little extra analysis. All data files, reports, and supporting documents related to your NSSE Institutional Report are available in electronic format from the Institution Interface, allowing easy print or electronic distribution. The easily shared Online Institutional Report is also available from the Institution Interface. The NSSE Report Builder−Institution Version generates user-customized reports. nsse.indiana.edu</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Average” results across the board</td>
<td>If your results are comparable to those of your selected comparison groups, try using a different comparison group or consider a criterion-referenced approach to determine the degree to which student performance is consistent with institutional expectations. Analyze results by subgroup (e.g., departments or special programs) to reveal variation within your institution. Examine your institution’s results over time (see your Multi-Year Report).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of faculty awareness of or interest in student engagement results</td>
<td>Consider administering the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) to look at student engagement from the faculty perspective. Results may be useful for retreat or workshop discussions. Make available a summary of the literature on student engagement’s value in effective educational practices. fsse.indiana.edu</td>
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