Exploring Different Dimensions of Student Engagement

Since 2000, almost 900,000 undergraduates at about 1,000 different colleges and universities have completed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). From the beginning, NSSE focused on two goals. First, we wanted to be an authoritative source of valid, reliable information about the quality of undergraduate education, measuring student behaviors and institutional factors that matter to student learning and success in college. Second, we wanted institutions to actually use their student engagement results to improve the student experience and educational effectiveness.

Reflecting on the past seven years, Russ Edgerton, president emeritus of the American Association for Higher Education, declared that NSSE has become a major source of intellectual leadership about issues of college quality. Equally important, faculty and staff are using student engagement data to determine whether students find their academic work to be challenging and how often they interact with faculty and diverse peers inside and outside the classroom. Schools also learn about student use of information technology, their experiences with cultural and intellectual diversity, and their perceptions of the institution’s academic and social environments.

“NSSE has changed the national conversation about quality in undergraduate education, providing a rich model for institutional change and improvement.”
—Joni Finney, Vice President, National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education
Is Your Institution Organized to Promote Student Success?

To improve educational effectiveness, a school must take stock of its performance and act on what it learns. To assist with this important task, researchers from the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice studied 20 high-performing colleges and universities. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005) features a wide array of examples and offers suggestions for how colleges and universities can create and sustain effective educational practices. The findings are instructive for faculty and staff development activities, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs.

Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: *The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success* (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005) provides a template for institutions to use with *Student Success in College* to assess the extent to which their policies, practices, and learning environments are educationally effective. Because presidents, academic affairs and student affairs administrators, faculty members, and governing board members don’t have as much time as they would like to read lengthy reports, we’ve prepared more than a dozen four-page briefs that summarize key policies, practices, and cultural properties common to the 20 high-performing schools.

These publications can be ordered directly from the NSSE Institute Web site (nsse.iub.edu/institute).

Facilitating Institutional Improvement

Most campuses have one or more initiatives underway that can be strengthened by more frequently using the effective educational practices represented on NSSE. Among these targets of opportunity are general education reforms, service learning and community service activities, accreditation and other self-studies, and internationalization and diversity efforts, to name a few.

To help institutions use student engagement results and other information to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness, NSSE Institute associates have:

- Worked with academic and student affairs staff of a state university to further develop strategic planning goals related to student engagement and educational effectiveness.
- Organized a day-long series of working sessions with administrators and faculty at a Canadian research-intensive university to examine how student engagement data can be used to enhance student learning and respond to province accountability expectations.
- Introduced conditions for student success identified in Project DEEP to faculty and student affairs staff at a historically Black liberal arts college to inform the institution’s efforts to enhance student engagement.
- Met with the General Education Task Force at an urban doctoral extensive university to tease out areas where the institution’s student engagement results suggested attention was needed.

“Kuh and his colleagues have turned a probing spotlight on the ‘how’ of pervasive educational change. *Student Success in College* should become a basic text for everyone concerned with the quality of undergraduate learning…” —Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities

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<th>Table 1: How Faculty Shape Student Engagement and Outcomes</th>
<th>Average Student Score</th>
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<td><strong>Average Faculty Score</strong></td>
<td>Active and Collaborative Learning</td>
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<td>Using active/collaborative practices</td>
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<td>Emphasizing diversity experiences</td>
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<td>Emphasizing higher order thinking</td>
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+ indicates that student scores tend to be higher on campuses where faculty scores are high.
Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement

The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) is a companion survey to NSSE and measures entering first-year students’ academic and extracurricular involvement in high school and the importance they place on related educationally purposeful activities during college. Used in tandem, BCSSE and NSSE results help institutions better understand factors that influence student engagement after matriculation. This information can be used to design pre-college orientation and socialization experiences with an eye toward enhancing student engagement and learning during college.

Here are a few highlights based on responses from about 6,000 entering students who completed BCSSE in fall 2004 and NSSE in spring 2005:

- Three-fifths of entering students expect to spend more than 15 hours per week preparing for class, but only two-fifths studied that much during their first year of college.
- Although 93% of entering students expected to participate in cocurricular activities, almost one-third did not do so during their first college year.
- Eighteen percent of first-year students frequently came to class unprepared; only 8% did so during their senior year of high school.

Faculty and Student Perceptions of Student Engagement

The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) measures faculty priorities, preferred pedagogical approaches, and expectations for student engagement in effective educational practices. About 19,000 faculty members from 109 schools participated in 2005. Taken together, FSSE and NSSE findings indicate that when faculty more frequently use and emphasize effective educational practices, students tend to be more engaged (Table 1).

National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

NSSE results fall into five key clusters of activities that research studies show are linked to desired outcomes in college.

Level of Academic Challenge
Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.

Active and Collaborative Learning
Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, during, and after college.

Student-Faculty Interaction
Students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, lifelong learning.

Enriching Educational Experiences
Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment academic programs. Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and others. Technology facilitates collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge.

Supportive Campus Environment
Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

“NSSE provides a rich data set about the collegiate experience that is invaluable for every campus and organization hoping to deepen and enrich student learning in and out of the classroom.”
—Elizabeth L. Hollander, Executive Director, Campus Compact
Selected Results

- The single best predictor of satisfaction with college is the degree to which students perceive the college environment to be supportive of their academic and social needs.
- The most common reason for taking courses concurrently at another institution was to complete degree requirements sooner (Figure 1).
- Students who frequently engage in spirituality-enhancing practices also participate more in a broad cross-section of collegiate activities.
- Effective educational practices measured by NSSE are independent of institutional selectivity.
- Schools that have a lower student-faculty ratio, more full-time faculty, and more classes with fewer than 20 students generally score higher on all five NSSE benchmarks.

Promising Findings

- High-profile student-athletes generally are as engaged in effective educational practices as are other students.
- At institutions where faculty members use effective educational practices more frequently in their classes, students are more engaged overall and gain more from college (Table 1).
- Graduates of institutions where students interact more with faculty and see the campus environment as more supportive are also more likely to contribute to the annual fund.
- A majority of students (54% first-year students, 63% seniors) often discusses ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class; more than 9 of 10 do this at least sometimes.
- One-fifth of all seniors have worked on a research project with a faculty member, and almost one-third of seniors at Baccalaureate Liberal Arts institutions did so.

Disappointing Findings

- African American and Asian American students are the least satisfied with their college experiences.
- By their own admission, three of ten first-year students do just enough academic work to get by.
- Less than one-fifth of first-year students expect to spend more than 25 hours per week studying, which approximates the amount of time faculty say is needed to do well in college.
- Transfer students participate in fewer educationally enriching activities.
- Less than half of seniors say their institution places quite a bit of emphasis on encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.
- Between 40% and 50% of first-year students never used career planning, financial advising, or academic tutoring services.

“NSSE data inform planning and decision-making, provide a comprehensive snapshot of the quality of the undergraduate experience, and encourage institutions to adopt best models and practices.”
—James A. Anderson, Vice President for Student Success, University of New York at Albany
Survey
Supported by institutional participation fees. The survey itself, The College Student Report, takes about 15 minutes to complete. The survey is available in paper and Web versions.

Objectives
Provide data to colleges and universities to use for improving undergraduate education, inform state accountability and accreditation efforts, and facilitate national and sector benchmarking efforts, among others.

Partners
Sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Established with a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Current support for research and development projects is from Lumina Foundation for Education, the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, Teagle Foundation, and National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.

Participating Colleges & Universities
More than 844,000 students at 972 different four-year colleges and universities thus far, with participating institutions mirroring the diversity of four-year institutions nationally (Figure 2).

Administration
Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research in cooperation with the Indiana University Center for Survey Research.

Validity & Reliability
Designed by experts and extensively tested to ensure validity and reliability and to minimize nonresponse bias and mode effects. For more information visit the NSSE Web site at nsse.iub.edu.

Response Rates
Average institutional response rate about 40%. In 2005, the average Web-only school response rate (42%) surpassed that of paper schools (35%).

Audiences
College and university administrators, faculty members, advisors, student life staff, students, governing boards, institutional researchers, higher education scholars, accreditors, government agencies, prospective students and their families, high school counselors.

Participation Agreement
Participating colleges and universities agree that NSSE will use the data in the aggregate for national and sector reporting purposes and other undergraduate improvement initiatives. Colleges and universities can use their own data for institutional purposes. Results specific to each college or university and identified as such will not be made public except by mutual agreement.

Consortium & State or University Systems
Different groups of institutions (e.g., urban institutions, women’s colleges, research institutions, denominational colleges, engineering, independent colleges, and technical schools) and state and university systems (e.g., California State University, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Wisconsin) ask additional mission-specific questions and may share aggregated data.

Data Sources
Randomly selected first-year and senior students from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities. Supplemented by other information such as institutional records, results from other surveys, and data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Cost
Institutions pay a minimum participation fee ranging from $1,800 to $7,800 determined by undergraduate enrollment.

Current Initiatives
The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice is partnering with the Institute for Higher Education Policy and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education on the Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students (BEAMS) project. Other ongoing collaborative work is with The Policy Center on the First Year of College “Foundations of Excellence” project, the Wabash College National Study of Colleges and Universities, and AAC&U’s “Bringing Theory to Practice” project.

Other Programs & Services
Beginning College Survey, Faculty Survey, Law School Survey, NSSE workshops, faculty and staff retreats, consulting, peer comparisons, norms data, and special analyses.

Figure 2: NSSE 2000-2005 Participating Colleges and Universities
International Perspectives and Projects

Canada is leading the way in incorporating student engagement as an educational accountability measure beyond the U.S. borders. NSSE was adapted for Canada and also translated into French. G-10 universities participated in a consortium in 2004, followed by a Canadian consortium in 2005 and an Ontario consortium in 2006.

NSSE was translated into Albanian and Macedonian for South Eastern European University and Tetovo, Macedonia. Also, the core survey has been used at the American University in Rome, as well as part of educational initiatives in Australia, Kazakhstan, Japan, and England. Future collaborations are planned in Ireland, Lebanon, Russia, and Spain. As globalization brings institutions of higher education around the world together, NSSE is pleased to collaborate with its international colleagues in efforts to improve student learning and institutional performance.

Looking Ahead

NSSE remains committed to providing high-quality information that institutions can use to improve the undergraduate experience. We will continue to seek opportunities to work with like-minded partners – consortia, states, professional associations, accreditors, and public and private sector entities. Our highest priority is to maintain and, if possible, improve the range and level of services we provide to institutional users. As always, we welcome suggestions toward this end.

In addition we intend to:

- Develop an interactive Web portal allowing NSSE users to manipulate the national database in selected, appropriate ways.
- Develop templates that institutions can use to integrate multiple sources of information about the student experience.
- Test experimental items in order to create modules of questions institutions can use to customize the Web version of the core survey for their students.

In the meantime, we are grateful for the opportunity to work with so many dedicated, forward-thinking people around the country who are committed to improving the quality of the undergraduate experience.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) annually collects information directly from more than 150,000 undergraduate students at hundreds of colleges and universities that is used to improve student learning and collegiate success.