College Students “Swirl”; Benefit from First-Year Seminars

Findings from a national survey released today show that almost half (45%) of all college seniors took at least one course from another postsecondary institution prior to enrolling at their current institution. This “swirl pattern” – taking classes from multiple institutions on the way to the baccalaureate – is a concern because transfer students participate less in activities that enrich their learning, such as doing community service or volunteer work and working with a faculty member on a research project.

A third of seniors took at least one course at another college after enrolling at their current institution. Most of the outside coursework was done at vocational-technical schools or two-year colleges. Among the more popular reasons for taking a course at another school were to complete degree requirements sooner (47%), have a better course schedule (21%), or to take an easier course (17%).

The 2005 report from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is based on information from about 237,000 first-year and senior students at 528 four-year colleges and universities. The NSSE study, titled “Exploring Different Dimensions of Student Engagement,” gives schools an idea of how well students are learning and what they put into and get out of their undergraduate experience.

“Engagement is a critical factor in the educational process because the more time and energy students devote to desired activities, the more likely they are to develop the habits of the mind that are key to success after college,” says George Kuh, the NSSE director and Indiana University Bloomington professor of higher education. “In addition, engagement is positively related to grades and graduation, outcomes that everyone agrees are important.”

Joni Finney, vice president of the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, says “NSSE has changed the national conversation about quality in undergraduate education, providing a rich model for institutional change and improvement.”

The survey findings annually provide comparative standards for determining how effectively colleges are contributing to learning. Five key areas of educational performance are measured: 1) level of academic challenge, 2) active and collaborative learning, 3) student-faculty interaction, 4) enriching educational experiences, and 5) supportive campus environment.

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Other key findings from the 2005 report are:

- At institutions where faculty members use proven teaching practices, such as frequent feedback and class discussions, students are more satisfied and more likely to interact with their teachers and peers.

- The 54% of all first-year students who took a first-year seminar were more likely to use campus services, were more satisfied with college, and gained more in terms of personal and social development.

- High-profile student-athletes – male football and basketball players and female basketball players – generally take part in effective educational practices at the same level as other students.

- Graduates of institutions where students interact more with faculty and have a more supportive campus environment are more likely to make financial contributions to their school.

- African American and Asian American students are the least satisfied with their college experiences.

- Students who worship frequently or engage in other spirituality-enhancing practices such as meditation also participate more in a broad cross-section of collegiate activities.

- Three of ten first-year students reported studying just enough to get by.

- Although over 90% of new students expect they will get involved in co-curricular activities, 36% of first-year students and 43% of seniors do none.

“Student engagement results are invaluable for every campus and organization hoping to deepen and enrich student learning in and out of the classroom,” says Elizabeth Hollander, executive director of Campus Compact. According to James Anderson, vice president of the University at Albany, NSSE data “inform planning and decision making, and encourage institutions to adopt best models and practices.”

Kuh believes, “Institutions can do more to help students succeed in college by clearly marking paths that students should take to get involved in activities that matter to them and their learning.”

The NSSE 2005 Report is sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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The NSSE 2005 Report, “Exploring Different Dimensions of Student Engagement,” may be obtained for $20 from the National Survey of Student Engagement, Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, School of Education, 1900 E. 10th Street, Eigenmann Hall, Suite 419, Bloomington IN 47406-7512. The NSSE Web site: nsse.iub.edu.