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Exclusive Focus on Average Scores Misses the Mark when Comparing Colleges and Universities, Survey Finds.

Findings from a national survey released this week show that the quality of undergraduate education varies far more within colleges and universities than between them. As a result, rankings can be highly misleading predictors of educational quality. Analyses of key “Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice” reveal that in almost every case, more than 90 percent of the variation in undergraduate education quality occurs *within* institutions, not between them. A related conclusion is that even institutions with high benchmark scores have an appreciable share of students whose undergraduate experience is average at best.

The 2008 report from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is based on information from nearly 380,000 randomly selected first-year and senior students at 722 four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. The report, *Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within*, provides an overview of survey findings and points to accomplishments as well as areas where improvement is needed.

“College-wide averages contain meaningful information and they can inform improvement initiatives, but limiting attention to them amounts to analyzing the tip of the iceberg,” says Alexander C. McCormick, NSSE director and associate professor of education at Indiana University. “We need to look at the rest of the iceberg. Even institutions with high average scores should identify and address their ‘pockets of disengagement.’ In addition, prospective students and their parents need to understand that a high ranking is no guarantee of high quality throughout the undergraduate experience.”

The survey—now entering its tenth year—annually provides comparative standards for assessing effective educational practices in higher education. 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.

“At a time when US standards for higher education are being evaluated in a competitive global context, NSSE data provide real insights into the qualities of the campus learning environment,” says Molly Corbett Broad, President of the American Council on Education.

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Other key findings from the 2008 survey are:

- Students taking most of their classes online report more deep approaches to learning in their classes, relative to classroom-based learners. Furthermore, a larger share of online learners reported very often participating in intellectually challenging course activities.
- Seniors who entered as transfers lag behind their peers on several measures of engagement. They talked less frequently with faculty about their future plans, were less likely than their peers to work with their classmates on assignments outside of class, and fewer participated in co-curricular activities. On the other hand, they more frequently prepared multiple drafts of assignments.
- About one in five first-year students and seniors reported that they frequently came to class without completing readings or assignments.
- First-year students wrote on average 92 pages and seniors wrote 146 pages during the academic year. Seniors majoring in the social sciences and arts and humanities wrote considerably more than those studying the physical and biological sciences.
- When courses provided extensive, intellectually challenging writing activities, students engaged in more deep learning activities such as analysis, synthesis, and integration of ideas from various sources, and they grappled more with course ideas both in and out of the classroom. These students also reported greater personal, social, practical, and academic learning and development.

McCormick says the findings for online learners are intriguing. “Critics of distance education assume that face-to-face classes have inherent advantages as learning environments. But these results indicate that those who teach classes online may be making special efforts to engage their students. It may also be the case that online classes appeal to students who are more academically motivated and self-directed.”

Regarding students who come to class unprepared, Thomas F. Nelson Laird, Assistant Professor and Project Manager for the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), notes that “it coincides with results from FSSE and NSSE indicating that students spend about half as much time preparing for class as faculty expect. With ongoing concerns about grade inflation, these findings suggest that we in the higher education community need to examine whether we are truly holding students accountable for their side of the educational equation.”

The NSSE 2008 report is sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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The NSSE 2008 Report, *Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within*, can be downloaded from the NSSE Web site (www.nsse.iub.edu) or it can be ordered for \$20 from the National Survey of Student Engagement, Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 1900 E. 10th Street, Suite 419, Bloomington IN 47406-7512.

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