Veterans in College Perceive Lower Levels of Campus Support and Interact Less with Faculty than Nonveterans, Survey Finds.

A national survey released today finds that student veterans attending four-year colleges and universities in the United States generally perceive lower levels of campus support than nonveterans, and they also interact less often with faculty members. These differences were more systematic among seniors than first-year students. Despite spending more time working and caring for dependents, veterans spent as much time studying as their nonveteran peers. Compared to nonveterans, first-year students who were combat veterans spent twice as many hours per week working, and six times as many hours on dependent care. About one in five combat veterans in college reported having a disability, twice that of nonveterans. These findings notwithstanding, overall levels of satisfaction with the college experience were generally comparable between veterans and nonveterans.

“Our findings suggest that colleges and universities need to make special efforts to identify and address the needs of their student veterans,” says Alexander C. McCormick, NSSE director and associate professor of education at Indiana University. “They make up a small share of the undergraduate population, but it is an important group that is likely to grow under the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, or the ‘new G.I. Bill.’”

The report from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Major Differences: Examining Student Engagement by Field of Study—Annual Results 2010, details results from a 2010 survey of 362,000 first-year students and seniors attending 564 U.S. colleges and universities. The report looks at how patterns of involvement in educationally purposeful activities vary according to students’ major field of study. It provides detailed examinations of engagement patterns in four of the largest majors: general biology, business administration, English, and psychology.

A key finding from this analysis is that the nature of the educational experience—not just the amount of reading and writing, but involvement in a range of educationally purposeful activities and specific high-impact educational practices such as service-learning, research with faculty, and internships or field placements—varies considerably by major. “This provides further evidence,” said McCormick, “that thinking of educational quality as a uniform institutional attribute ignores the varied nature of the undergraduate experience within our colleges and universities. The academic major is one important source of this variation.”

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NSSE’s annual survey results provide diagnostic, comparative information about effective educational practices at participating colleges and universities. The results can be used to inform improvement efforts. “NSSE gathers valuable evidence about what students are doing with the resources for learning that their school provides,” according to Stanley Ikenberry, President Emeritus and Regent Professor at the University of Illinois and co-director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Other noteworthy findings from the 2010 survey and its companion surveys, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), include:

- Beginning students who were in the bottom half on self-described preparation for college and in the top half on anticipated academic difficulty rated the importance of academic support services lower than their better prepared and more confident peers. In other words, the very students most likely to need academic support are the ones who see it as less important. “This argues for not just better outreach, but more efforts at early detection and intervention in cases of potential academic difficulty” said BCSSE project manager James S. Cole.

- Senior biology majors said their courses emphasized memorization more than other majors, and they made fewer class presentations. They also spent more time each week preparing for class than other majors.

- About two in five seniors majoring in business administration and accounting had internship or field experiences, compared to about half of other majors.

- Senior English majors were more engaged in integrative learning—such as incorporating diverse perspectives in assignments and combining information from multiple sources—than seniors in other fields.

- Relative to other majors, seniors in psychology were more engaged in reflective learning (for example, examining the strengths and weaknesses of one’s own beliefs or trying to view an issue from another’s perspective).

- About four out of five biology faculty said it is important or very important for undergraduates to do research with a faculty member. The relatively high rate of research participation among senior biology majors (40%, twice the overall average) reflects this faculty priority.

- Learning with other students—for example, participating in study groups, working on group projects, and exchanging feedback with other students—was positively related to other forms of student engagement, and greater involvement in peer learning was also related to higher levels of reflective learning.

NSSE’s Annual Results 2010 report is sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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Major Differences: Examining Student Engagement by Field of Study—Annual Results 2010, can be downloaded from the NSSE Web site (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.