Updated NSSE Survey Provides Fresh Look at Student Engagement

Findings released today from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provide a nuanced view of students’ engagement in effective educational practices. Results from the updated survey, representing the most significant change since the project’s launch at the millennium, document aspects of the undergraduate experience that pay dividends in learning, retention, persistence, and completion. According to Paul Lingenfelter, former president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, “Authentic, extensive student engagement is essential for both quality and the scale required for widespread, affordable attainment.”

NSSE’s new measures of student engagement, reported as ten Engagement Indicators, reveal differences between major fields and between online and face-to-face learners. For example, seniors majoring in arts and humanities observed the highest levels of Effective Teaching Practices, while those in engineering observed the lowest levels. The new Learning Strategies indicator, which measures activities such as reviewing class notes and summarizing key information, reveals that these strategies were more frequently used by students who were older, enrolled part-time, or taking all their coursework online, and were associated with higher self-reported college grades.

The report, A Fresh Look at Student Engagement—Annual Results 2013, details results from a 2013 survey of nearly 335,000 first-year and senior students attending 568 U.S. bachelor’s degree-granting colleges and universities that participated in NSSE in spring 2013. It also uses data from two topical modules elected by a subset of 2013 institutions. NSSE’s annual survey provides diagnostic, comparative information about the prevalence of effective educational practices at participating institutions.

“NSSE has helped colleges and universities focus on what matters to student learning for more than a decade, and the updated survey offers valuable new information to enhance these efforts,” said Alexander C. McCormick, NSSE director and associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Indiana University Bloomington.

As higher education debates the merits of distance learning, NSSE results reveal that online students spent more hours per week preparing for class and on assigned reading compared to students taking no courses online. They also reported more total pages of assigned writing, and a larger percentage said their courses were highly challenging. However, students taking all of their courses online were significantly less engaged in collaborative learning.

NSSE results illuminate the relationship between emphasizing higher-order learning in the classroom – sophisticated cognitive tasks rather than rote memorization, aligning with employer concerns for creativity and problem-solving skills – and other indicators of academic challenge such as the amount of assigned reading and writing. Emphasis on higher-order learning was nearly doubled among seniors who indicated a high level of course challenge compared with those whose courses provided low challenge.
In 2013, NSSE and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) asked a subset of students and faculty about their perceptions of end-of-course evaluations. Two-thirds of students believed that end-of-course evaluations substantially (“Very much” or “Quite a bit”) allowed them to give feedback that matters most to them about a course. Lower-ranked faculty – instructors and assistant professors – were more likely than their more senior colleagues to make use of evaluation results to improve their courses and teaching. About one in three first-year students and one in four seniors submitted evaluations to external providers such as ratemyprofessors.com, and about half of all students said they used these sources when selecting courses.

Other noteworthy findings from the 2013 survey include:

- First-year students spent an average of 14 hours per week preparing for class, and seniors averaged one hour more. Of this, six and seven hours per week, respectively, were devoted to assigned reading. Overall, about 55% of first-year students and 61% of seniors felt strongly (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale) that their courses challenged them to do their best work.

- First-year students who participated in at least one high-impact practice (learning community, service-learning, or research with a faculty member) reported greater gains in their knowledge, skills, and personal development, were more satisfied with their entire educational experience, and were more likely to say they would choose the same institution if they were to start over again.

- Participation in high-impact practices also differed by major. Seniors majoring in education, health professions, and social service professions were more likely to take courses that included a service-learning component; and arts and humanities, communications, and engineering majors were more often asked to do a culminating senior experience such as a capstone course or senior project.

- On average, seniors in engineering and biology were most engaged in collaborative learning, while their peers majoring in arts and humanities, social sciences, and social service professions had the lowest levels.

- Only 40% of students identified an academic advisor as their primary source of advice regarding academic plans. About one-third of first-year students and 18% of seniors identified friends or family as their primary source of academic advice, and another 18% of seniors identified faculty members who were not formally assigned as an advisor.

- Both learning with technology and courses that improved students’ understanding and use of technology had a positive association with all four of NSSE’s academic challenge Engagement Indicators.

NSSE’s Annual Results 2013 is sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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A Fresh Look at Student Engagement—Annual Results 2013 can be downloaded from the NSSE Web site (nsse.iub.edu) or ordered for $20.