

Innovative Use of NSSE Data in Student Affairs



Over 1,000 four-year colleges and universities have participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Colleges and universities have used their NSSE data to assess the quality of student engagement, create action plans for improvement, set goals, and develop performance measures to evaluate progress. Student affairs departments at these institutions have used NSSE data to create programs that support a climate of success on their campuses. Through collaborative ventures with academic affairs, they have initiated assessment and improvement efforts, particularly around first-year experience initiatives.

Assessment Examples:

Fort Hays State University. The *2005 Comprehensive Assessment Report and Strategic Plan* prepared by the University Assessment Committee at Fort Hays reports on the current state of university-wide assessment including college and departmental level initiatives using NSSE data. It also builds a strategic plan for university-wide assessment to guide decision making and resource allocation. This document is available on the Fort Hays Web site at: www.fhsu.edu/aqip/reports_documents/ascplan.pdf

Lees-McRae College. NSSE data were key pieces guiding the institution towards a focused and coherent plan with the simple yet powerful aim of enhancing student learning. NSSE data were used to develop professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, particularly with regard to teaching. The NSSE data were used in general education revision and QEP for the SACS reaffirmation of accreditation. The revised General Education core curriculum is more structured, focuses on gaining basic skills in math, writing, reading and computing at the beginning before moving on to discipline-specific courses, and also uses a common cohort approach throughout the curriculum to further enhance learning.

Sweet Briar College. Sweet Briar folded messages about their high level of student engagement into admissions materials. Data were useful as an external assessment tool in communicating about programs to the Board of Directors. The profile of the academic component of the college has been elevated in their eyes as a result. During a major strategic planning initiative, NSSE data helped identify those things that "didn't need fixing." SBC was able to identify important strengths upon which to build. Resulting in a new team approach to advising, unified student portfolios of curricular and co-curricular accomplishments, increased study-abroad opportunities, and expanded internship options. Each was shaped by what was learned from NSSE. Several departments reconfigured their senior exercises in response to initial data suggesting a perceived decrease in rigor during the senior year. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has been successfully addressed.

Student Affairs Examples:

Augsburg College. As a Lutheran college, Augsburg College was interested in comparing their students' responses to NSSE questions on the development of spirituality on campus to those of students at peer colleges. NSSE data are also used to evaluate Day Student Orientation, Campus Ministry, and overall student satisfaction. Augsburg also uses NSSE as source of information to evaluate their orientation program and first-year experience. NSSE data along with student and parent evaluations, professional conferences, faculty and staff input, and the College Institutional Research Project (CIRP) are utilized to make decisions about curricular and co-curricular programming for first-year students.

St. Mary's College of Maryland. In a 2004-2005 report of the Multicultural Advisory Committee, which studied diversity issues on the St. Mary's campus, one of the committee's long term recommendations was to explore use of NSSE data to review work-school-life balances among specific groups of students. In terms of academic preparedness, the Committee wanted to gather this information to help students that may be spending time on tasks that are detrimental to their studies.

University of Texas at Tyler. UT Tyler initiated a four year plan in fall '04 to improve the "UT Tyler Tradition," a program aimed at fostering rigorous intellectual growth and academic development in all disciplines. NSSE results are used to assess current levels of overall lower division student satisfaction as well as to measure the progress of the program. In an effort to become a "destination campus", a university that students choose first over other universities, UT Tyler has made improving the overall quality of student life a high priority objective. NSSE student satisfaction scores will be used to measure the success of this goal. UT Tyler plans to redevelop the student center, expand food services, increase options for student housing, expand freshman learning communities,

develop a full program of community service opportunities, expand intramural sports, create and foster institutional traditions around matriculation and graduation, and plan and allow a Greek system to grow.

University of Wisconsin – Platteville. The University of Wisconsin at Platteville has developed a strategic plan to reach six goals by the year 2008. Goal 4 uses NSSE data to create an institutional climate that fosters learning through a respect for racial and ethnic diversity. The first initiative is a collaborative effort to foster a respectful campus climate. NSSE data collected from UWP students (majority and minority) will help to assess their needs regarding racial and ethnic diversity. A second initiative will explore opportunities to provide programs on inter-group relations, conflict resolution and community action for students. UWP will enlist the Diversity Advocates Peer Education team as a campus resource to promote collaborative programming when planning a racial or ethnic diversity event.

University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. In the spring of 2005, the Student Success Advisory Committee at UWSP requested a "map of student success activities" on campus. Committee interviews with student affairs staff and academic department chairs were organized around the five benchmark items from the NSSE survey. This was done to learn what types of specific activities departments and units do that might improve NSSE responses and to gauge awareness of NSSE items by campus faculty and staff.

Washington State University. Based on their NSSE results, Washington State University administrators realized that students felt the campus was above average on being supportive, but was not meeting expectations on collaborative learning areas, faculty-student interactions, and educational challenges and experiences. The institution already supported a successful living-learning community, but this program was limited to a small number of students. This past fall the Freshman Focus learning communities were created which provides all incoming freshmen the opportunity to engage in this extensive living-learning community system.

5 Tips for Using NSSE Effectively

NSSE Tip #1 – NSSE on the Web

Many colleges and universities have disclosed some or all of their results on the web. Publishing NSSE results on the web in an appropriate way is not only a way to highlight institutional strengths, but can also demonstrate your school's commitment to quality improvement. Likewise, this information can be utilized by other schools for institutional comparisons.

NSSE Tip #2 – Peer Comparisons

To assist in benchmarking efforts, NSSE allows schools to select other participating institutions for peer comparison reports with a minimum of six schools in the aggregated request. Starting with the 2005 administration, in addition to the standard comparison groups, schools not already participating as part of a consortium or state system were given the opportunity to select an additional group of peer institutions within the 2005 survey cohort at no charge. NSSE also conducts specialized analyses on an as-needed basis to assist schools in answering specific questions (e.g. how do our women engineering students compare with other women engineering students from across the country?). The fees for special analyses are based upon the time required to complete the project. Please contact your NSSE representative for more details.

NSSE Tip #3 – Use NSSE Multimedia Resources to Increase Awareness and Buy-in

A professionally produced video as well as a PowerPoint template into which you can insert institution-specific results is included with the institutional reports as a tool for introducing the student engagement construct and how NSSE measures it. Schools can use these materials as part of workshop sessions or presentations to student government, staff, or trustees to give an overview of what NSSE entails.

NSSE Tip #4 – Link NSSE Data with Other Sources

NSSE results can and should be linked to other data on campus to determine whether improvement efforts are having the desired effect. Some schools want multiple years of data before taking action. Other institutions corroborate NSSE results with existing evidence and are confident in moving ahead to address areas of concern.

NSSE Tip #5 – Improve Campus Confidence in Your Results

Faculty members and administrative staff often raise questions about the validity and reliability of student self-supported data. In response to skeptics who question whether their results really capture students' educational experiences, some schools have administered local instruments with items similar to those in NSSE to validate their NSSE results to the campus community. The use of additional instruments may help build a stronger sense of the validity of findings.