AAHE/NSSE National Roundtable:  
Supporting Institutional Change at Historically Black, Tribal, and Hispanic-Serving Colleges and Universities

Washington, DC  
May 3, 2002

Summary of Discussion

**Attendance:** Sally Andrade, the University of Texas at El Paso; Barbara Cambridge, AAHE (facilitator); Samuel Cargile, Lumina Foundation for Education (observer); Jay Chunn, Morgan State University; Nuria Cuevas, Norfolk State University; D. Jason DeSousa, Savannah State University; Lacey Hawthorne, AAHE (observer); Paul Kreuzer, Lehman College; George Kuh, NSSE (observer); Willis B. McLeod, Fayetteville State University; Jamie Merisotis, The Institute for Higher Education Policy; Frank Sanchez, Adams State College; Peter Smith, California State University, Monterey Bay; Joahanne E. Thomas-Smith; and Rick Williams, American Indian College Fund.

**Context for the roundtable:** Barbara and George outlined the respective work of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and the National Survey of Student Engagement and their joint two-year project on the impact of NSSE data on institutional change and effectiveness, discussing the role of the roundtables, the AAHE Summer Academy, and select site visits in culling such information. Barbara also briefly outlined the work that AAHE and NSSE hope to do in the proposed four-year partnership and discussed the central role historically black, tribal, and Hispanic-serving colleges and universities would play in that project through their administration of NSSE and their participation in the AAHE Summer Academy as part of a NSSE/AAHE consortium.

**Using NSSE Data:** Each participant was asked to discuss ways in which they use or would like to use NSSE data and the possibilities and drawbacks of such uses. General themes that emerged are as follows:

**Current and future uses on NSSE at represented institutions**
- Accreditation
- Assessment
- Confirmation of other institutional findings
- Budgeting—redirecting resources to areas highlighted by the NSSE as needing improvement
- Strategic planning
To amend or affirm an institutional mission—used to affirm or confirm ways benchmarks link to goals of the institution and counteract ways in which goals are not being met
- To development an academic plan
- Enrollment management
- To help an institution develop and monitor its capacity as a learning organization—provides purpose for institutional work and a means of describing that work
- To create a seamless orientation program that brings together student affairs and academic affairs
- To discover ways to increase the chances for success for high-risk students
- To build partnerships across various institutional departments and offices
- To improve instruction
- To help train support staff
- Accountability
- Faculty development
- As an assessment measure that assesses core competencies
- To supplement other campus measures
- To discuss institutional effectiveness with the public
- To determine trends in specific student populations—ie, first-year verses senior students
- To provide scaffolding for current and/or future campus programs or projects
- To help faculty deal with a changing student body by opening their eyes to the issues
- To address issues of retention
- To create new programs to address deficiencies
- To access effectiveness of new and on-going programs
- To improve student life

**Drawbacks of/Concerns with using NSSE data**
- Low response rates
- Doesn’t address or account for characteristics common to historically black, tribal, and Hispanic-service colleges and universities/issues of compatibility
- the media’s use of results to compare different types of institutions with different types of student bodies and missions
- costs related to the actual survey, administering the survey, and securing staff to make changes based upon the results of the survey
- Any kind of assessment tool like this becomes part of a political conversation, with traditional institutions not wanting to cede their own standing by recognizing other higher education players and the ways in which they create rich learning environments for their students
Other Possibilities of using NSSE data

- Faculty need to understand what it means and then discuss how they should use it
- Development of consortia-based models for national dissemination
- Historically black, tribal, and Hispanic-service colleges and universities-specific questions that help better represent and explain results when compared with other types of institutions
- Developing a value-added marketing strategy for NSSE to help institutions understand just how comprehensive this instrument is compared to others they may be using and to help the external community understand what NSSE is measuring and just how different that information is from other seemingly similar instruments
- Need to prepare institutions to look at the NSSE data across offices and departments

Issues specific to Tribal Colleges: Rick Williams discussed the unique Native American college experience that impacts their participation in such initiatives as NSSE. According to Williams, tribal colleges support higher education change for they were specifically created as a change movement to address issues of Native American student engagement. Based on his reading of the NSSE benchmarks, he believes that tribal campuses are strong in 4 of the 5 benchmarks because these benchmarks are central to the mission of tribal colleges. The one benchmark that they are weak in, according to Williams, is the level of academic challenge. That aside, Williams was most concerned that tribal colleges just do not have the resources to both participate in the administration of NSSE and to implement any changes based on the results. The relevance of NSSE does not matter when there are no resources, even to divert, for such initiatives.

Issues specific to Historically Black and Hispanic-Serving Colleges and Universities: The major issue facing the historically black and Hispanic-serving institutions represented was how an instrument such as NSSE could account for their unique institutional characteristics and still deliver information that can help them improve the level of student engagement on their campuses. Most were concerned that the current NSSE results would only be used by the public and the media to further discount the work going on at these institutions when compared to other, very different institutions. The most pressing needs, then, were to find ways of accounting for such differing characteristics and for publicly casting such results in a manner that cannot be easily homogenized by the media.

Others also noted the same resource issues as tribal colleges although not to the same degree. Some participants felt the costs associated with NSSE deterred many historically black and Hispanic-serving colleges and universities. At the same time, they noted that if these institutions truly understood how comprehensive this instrument is compared to the many separate assessments currently being used, they might not have as many resource concerns.