Introduction

Interest in putting NSSE data to use is building across all sectors and types of institutions. Indeed, the most frequently asked question of NSSE staff these days is, “How are schools using their results?” As the number of NSSE schools grows, we are beginning to better understand how, why, and with whom schools are using NSSE data and results.

The ideas we offer come from a number of sources, including the annual NSSE Report Card we use to collect feedback from participating schools, telephone interviews with NSSE users, conference presentations by NSSE users, NSSE user group meetings, and campus visits.

NSSE’s Core Activities

To set a context for how NSSE data are being used, we thought it would be helpful to first review NSSE’s core activities. We conceptualize them in the form of a triangle. The different sized vertices on the triangle represent the relative emphasis NSSE gives to the respective activity.

The vertex at the top of the triangle represents activities that focus on institutional improvement efforts. Colleges and universities use the information from their NSSE institutional report and other sources to determine what they are doing well and to identify areas where improvement is desirable. As we explain later, linking NSSE results to other institutional information about the student experience may generate additional insights.

A second set of activities (lower left vertex) is targeted toward documenting and reporting effective educational practices and then translating and sharing this information with institutions and groups working to improve undergraduate education. One of NSSE’s new initiatives, the NSSE Institute (featured in Appendix A) will build upon, document, and expand our knowledge about using effective educational practices to promote student learning and improve institutional effectiveness.

The third vertex of the triangle represents NSSE’s commitment to public advocacy, including steering the discourse about collegiate quality away from institutional resources and reputation toward effective educational practices. As more colleges and universities use NSSE, its influence and contribution to discussions about institutional effectiveness expand.

These three sets of activities are not mutually exclusive, certainly. Indeed, synergy across these activities is necessary for NSSE to accomplish its mission.
### Why Schools Use NSSE

- To participate in a national effort to improve undergraduate quality
- To use a research-based, psychometrically sound tool
- To compare performance against peer institutions
- To compare first-year and senior student experiences, using both cross-sectional or longitudinal approaches
- To add a new, much needed dimension to the institutional assessment strategy
- To link information about student engagement and the teaching and learning environment
- To incorporate student engagement results in self-studies, accreditation, and accountability
- To guide and monitor institutional improvement

Source: Interviews with NSSE Participants

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### Multiple Uses of NSSE

Because NSSE focuses on student behavior and effective educational practices, colleges and universities have found many different, productive ways to use survey results:

| - Assessment and improvement       | - General education reform |
| - Benchmarking                     | - Alumni outreach         |
| - Accountability                   | - Grant writing           |
| - Institutional research           | - Institutional advancement|
| - Accreditation                    | - Self-studies            |
| - Retention                        | - State system performance reviews |

Later we describe how selected institutions are using their results. For most uses, a communication strategy is needed in order to get people to attend to and take interest in the findings.

### Communicating Results Internally

Institutions often use several approaches to share their results. It’s usually most effective to use a combination of dissemination activities.

#### Selected Audiences

The first approach is to target audiences that may have expressed an interest in, or that should be aware of, one or more aspects of the results.

- Syracuse University uses written reports and presentations to share NSSE results with the Chancellor’s Cabinet, senior staff reporting to the vice-presidents of undergraduate education and student affairs, and its academic coordinating committee.

- Illinois State University conducts focus groups with students to appraise them of the results and solicit advice regarding what the institution can do to more fully engage students.

#### Campus Wide

To distribute NSSE results broadly, many schools post summaries of important findings, and invite colleagues to review the full report online or by request through the appropriate office.

- The executive vice-president of Concordia University Wisconsin regularly sends an email entitled “On the Horizon” to all students, faculty, and staff which periodically includes selected NSSE results.

- Table tents highlighting specific NSSE results were placed in the faculty and staff dining room at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology as a means to create discussion about student engagement.

Another way to share results is to post them to internal or public web sites. You can see some examples, such as North Carolina State University, by linking to participating institutions’ home pages from the NSSE website (www.iub.edu/~nsse).
Communicating Results Externally

Accreditors are the most common external audience for NSSE results. About a third of NSSE schools tell us that they are using their results, or expect to refer to them, in self-studies and accreditation reports. Examples can be found on page 8.

Governing boards and state oversight agencies also see value in student engagement data. Thomas C. Longin, Vice President, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, believes that “NSSE is a major step forward in the ongoing quest for effective ways to assess learning outcomes, academic quality and institutional effectiveness, and we’ve recommended it to our members.”

A number of colleges and universities provide information via news releases and special feature articles for student, local, and regional newspapers. Some of these are included on the NSSE web site at www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/news.shtml.

- Antioch College, Elon University, and Samford University have shared NSSE results with alumni and parents through newsletters and presentations. Miami University and Brigham Young University are using NSSE data to develop descriptions of contemporary campus life for alumni publications.

More than two fifths of the schools responding to the NSSE 2001 Report Card had not yet shared results with external audiences. Some of these schools see NSSE as primarily an institutional improvement tool. Others are in the process of triangulating the results with other institutional data before deciding on appropriate action.

“NSSE is an invaluable tool for us in responding to the revised WASC accreditation guidelines and reconceptualizing the objectives for our entire educational program – curricular and cocurricular programs, pedagogy, and the campus culture...”

-Pamela Jolicoeur, Provost, California Lutheran University

PARTICIPATING STATE AND UNIVERSITY CONSORTIA

<table>
<thead>
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Communicating NSSE Results

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</tr>
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<td>No Disclosure</td>
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Source: NSSE 2001 Report Card
Public Disclosure of Student Engagement Results

The National Survey of Student Engagement provides valid, reliable and usable information about the quality of undergraduate education at national, sector, and institutional levels. To this end, hundreds of colleges and universities are using the NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practice to take stock of their performance. Prospective students, parents, the media, and others have also expressed interest in institution-level results. So far, at least one quarter of NSSE schools have made some or all of their NSSE results available to the public (e.g., website, alumni magazine, press release).

NSSE’s Position on the Public Disclosure of Student Engagement Data

1. NSSE encourages public disclosure of student engagement results in ways that serve to increase understanding of collegiate quality and that support institutional improvement efforts.

   Disclosing institutional results from the NSSE survey provides an opportunity to help educate the public about the value of student engagement as a new metric for defining and examining collegiate quality. NSSE especially supports public reporting of student engagement results in ways that enable thoughtful, responsible institutional comparisons while encouraging and celebrating institutional diversity.

2. Whether a participating institution makes public its student engagement results is up to the institution.

   Consistent with the NSSE participation agreement, NSSE does not make institutional scores available to third parties. Institutions may do so if they wish as stated in the NSSE Participation Agreement. While organizations and individuals are entitled to request NSSE results from participating schools, NSSE is neutral as to whether institutions supply their results. In the near term, some colleges and universities will be understandably cautious about releasing their scores with only one or two years of information available, or if the institution has not thoroughly vetted and had an opportunity to take action on the results. Premature disclosure could inadvertently divert the focus away from improvement.

3. NSSE does not support the use of student engagement results for the purpose of rankings.

   The NSSE National Advisory Board and NSSE co-sponsors -- The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning -- believe that reducing student engagement to a single indicator obscures complex dimensions of student behavior and institutional performance. For this and other reasons, rankings are inherently flawed as a tool for accountability and improvement, whatever the information on which they are based. Such comparisons become even more problematic in the case of schools that differ in terms of mission and resources and percentages of students who are enrolled full- or part-time, who are transfers, or who major in various fields.
**Institutional Improvement**

NSSE data serve a diagnostic function by identifying institutional strengths and weaknesses in terms of effective educational practices. Comparisons with peer institutions and the national averages help reveal aspects of institutional and student performance not readily available from other sources.

**Benchmarking**

There are two basic approaches to benchmarking that NSSE schools are using. One or both may be appropriate, depending on your institution’s situation.

**Normative Approach**

The normative approach compares your students’ responses to those of students at other colleges and universities. If enough students have participated, this can also be done at the department or major field level — a particularly effective way of stimulating faculty interest in the findings.

- One state university uses NSSE results to set benchmarks consistent with their strategic plan. The information was an eye-opener particularly as it related to the first-year experience. NSSE was a stimulus for discussion and reaffirmed the commitment of the faculty to providing an excellent educational experience for all of its students. The fact that NSSE items and subscales can be compared against a variety of national benchmarks makes the information very valuable. This “best in class” approach helps identify areas for improvement.

**Criterion Approach**

A second approach to benchmarking is criterion referenced, whereby you compare your school’s performance against a predetermined value or level that you and your colleagues deem appropriate for your students, given your institutional mission, size, curricular offerings, funding, and so forth.

- After reviewing NSSE findings at one state university in the South, faculty members in various units established what they considered to be reasonable thresholds for the amount of time students should be spend preparing for class. Some groups stipulated that a minimum of two hours studying for every hour of class meeting should be the standard while other units established somewhat higher or lower thresholds. NSSE data for students majoring in the different units were then interpreted according to whether these criterion levels were met.

- Southwest Texas State uses a discipline-specific, criterion-referenced approach when looking at levels of engagement across departments. Faculty members asked themselves, “What should be the level of collaborative learning activities in the College of Liberal Arts?” Do we want 50%, 60% or 70% of our seniors to report “often” or “very often” that they work with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments?

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"The ability to monitor progress within UMBC as well as benchmark against our peers gives versatility to NSSE data. NSSE is one of my leads as I talk about curricular reform at UMBC."

-Arthur Johnson, Provost, University of Maryland Baltimore County

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**NSSE TIP #2**

**Special Peer Comparisons**

To assist in benchmarking efforts, NSSE allows schools to select other participating schools for a special peer comparison report with a minimum of six schools in the aggregated request. Schools can also ask for peer comparisons with institutions from a different Carnegie category.

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 time required to complete the project.
In this section we’ve grouped examples of how colleges and universities are using NSSE data into the following categories: student-faculty interaction, general education, first-year experience, enrollment management and recruitment, technology, accreditation, advising, faculty and staff development, and planning and accountability.

**Student-Faculty Interaction**

A frequently expressed concern is about the level of student interaction with faculty members. For instance, some small liberal arts colleges were surprised to find that students did not report as much contact with faculty as institutional leaders expected.

- In response to first-year student reports about the frequency of interaction with faculty members, Marymount Manhattan College plans to have more full-time faculty and fewer adjunct instructors teach first-year courses.

- The University of Montana has made $3,000 grants available to departments to stimulate projects that increase student engagement; the first $2,000 is awarded to implement a project, and the remainder once an assessment is completed of its impact.

- Based on its NSSE results, the University of Richmond is implementing several strategies to enhance student relationships with faculty, particularly in the first year of study, including involving more students in research projects. In addition, the University intends to expand opportunities for students to serve on institutional committees and to increase faculty interaction with students through the advising process.

- Columbia College, a women’s college, is using NSSE results to leverage several innovations. Although NSSE results highlighted many areas where the school achieved at high levels, they also pointed to some areas for improvement. As a result, the college has begun to implement a series of initiatives including:

  1) A four-year general education plan that incorporates signature course work in the freshman year, learning communities in the sophomore year, mentoring and/or service learning in the junior year, and capstone experiences in each major in the senior year.

  2) An Office of Community Service to support and encourage service learning; and

  3) An Office of Leadership and Globalization to support and encourage student study abroad and faculty development of study abroad programs.

- To push improvement efforts down to the department or major field level the University of Missouri-Columbia analyzes its results at the major field level when possible. As mentioned earlier, larger samples are often needed to yield an ample number of respondents from various majors to be confident in the reliability of the results. As a result, more colleges and universities are adding students to their samples.
NSSE results related to student-faculty interaction are also disquieting for many research intensive universities.

- The President of Georgia Tech created a $250,000 seed grant fund as an incentive to stimulate more student-faculty interaction on research.

- At the University of Missouri – Columbia the provost and undergraduate deans are using NSSE data in the development of new strategies aimed at increasing student engagement. One such approach they are implementing is to pair each entering student with a faculty mentor. Faculty mentors are encouraged to initiate contact with students to arrange meeting times and discuss the importance to student success of engaging in a variety of activities, inside and outside the classroom.

General Education

- Aurora University discussed the role of computing in its general education requirements and the need for a more formalized curriculum. NSSE results helped stimulate movement on both issues.

- Eastern University (formerly Eastern College) formed a task force that focused on core competencies such as writing, math, oral communication, and computer skills. To address some of the issues related to writing, the task force recommended definition of certain courses as writing intensive and provision of opportunity for students to rewrite papers after receiving feedback from faculty.

- NSSE results at a university in the South showed that students’ writing experiences were not matching faculty expectations. As a result, more emphasis is being given to in class writing assignments throughout the curriculum, particularly in first-year courses.

- Prior to its participation in NSSE, Drake University eliminated its oral communication requirement. NSSE results indicated that students did not give as many presentations as expected or develop speaking skills at the desired level. Drake is now attempting to inject more opportunities for oral communication experiences into the curriculum, with a particular eye on using the first-year seminar program for this purpose.

First-Year Experience

- St. Vincent College and Seminary used evidence from NSSE to support the case for instituting a first-year experience program. Subsequent administrations of the NSSE survey will be used to evaluate whether the first-year program is having the desired effects.

- NSSE results combined with other data led to creation of Chatham College’s first-year experience program, with a focus on both new and improved methods targeted toward first-year students.

- North Carolina State University is using its NSSE results during new student orientation to emphasize key activities and behaviors that lead to student success.

- One small college reallocated resources to provide release time for faculty involvement in orientation and the first-year program. In addition, the campus retention team used NSSE data as evidence of the need for additional staff.

“NSSE is a great way to stimulate reflection and debate about what we do more and less well, and why. For us it's proving an exciting and enlivening tool for self-reflection and self-improvement.”

-Michael McPherson, President
Macalester College
Enrollment Management and Recruiting

NSSE data are also being used to provide more accurate and realistic descriptions of campus life to prospective students and parents. This information can help them formulate more specific questions to ask college officials about the student experience. To this end some schools are:

- Presenting empirically-derived portraits of the typical student in viewbooks, recruitment literature, brochures, and gatherings of prospective students to accurately convey expectations for college life.

- Linking first-year student NSSE data with sophomore fall enrollment records to discover student engagement factors that predict persistence, with an eye toward developing an early warning system to identify students at risk of premature departure. For an illustration of this, see the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay website (www.uwgb.edu/iresearch/NSSERetentionResearch_files/v3_document.htm).

- Focusing on the challenge of retaining commuter students, the UNC Charlotte retention team is looking at strategies that will help first-year commuter students feel more connected to campus.

Technology

- The University of Utah found a couple areas in which NSSE results were not what they had anticipated. One of these was in the area of technology use. Information from NSSE is being utilized during staff training and is shared with information technology staff to assist in planning.

- For the past three years, Framingham State College has focused on teaching faculty how to integrate technology into their courses. This strategy has the dual intent of exposing students to technology use while increasing communication between students and faculty. Although not a result of NSSE data, future NSSE participation will be helpful for assessing changes resulting from this initiative.

Accreditation

As mentioned earlier, about a third of NSSE schools plan to use student engagement data in accreditation, both for regional and discipline-specific reviews (teacher education, social work, music, nursing, business, etc.).

- Keuka College reported NSSE results in the assessment and educational programs chapters of their accreditation self-study. Particular attention is given to student views of academic issues and student outcomes such as writing and critical thinking.

- As part of SACS reaccreditation, Radford University is pilot testing new criteria featuring student engagement. The institution developed a quality enhancement plan to improve student learning and NSSE results are integral to guiding and monitoring the impact of this new initiative.

Advising

NSSE data show that student satisfaction with the quality of their advising is a strong predictor of interaction with faculty, overall satisfaction with college, and perceptions that the campus environment is supportive.

The Rhode Island School of Design is considering some changes in the advising system based on its NSSE results as well as a student proposal that an ombudsperson assist with advising.
**Faculty and Staff Development**

NSSE results may be appropriate for faculty and staff development workshops and retreats, such as those sponsored by the local chapter of The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). Presenting student engagement data is one way to initiate discussions about a variety of teaching and learning issues.

To encourage faculty members to reflect on and use the data, a growing number of schools are adapting the NSSE survey, with NSSE’s permission, for use with faculty members to help differentiate faculty expectations from student perceptions. Southwest Texas State University pioneered this approach. More recent variations are being used at Alverno College, University of Akron, and other institutions, such as Winthrop University:

- Prior to the start of classes each fall, Winthrop University holds an academic retreat for its faculty leaders and administrators. Last fall, the Office of Assessment and Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs selected NSSE items to give to participants who were then asked to provide two responses. First, they were to indicate how they thought their students WOULD respond. Next, faculty members were asked to give their ideal response - how did they think their students SHOULD respond? The actual responses from Winthrop's 2001 NSSE report were then shared with the faculty participants, highlighting similarities and differences between students' responses and perceptions of faculty. Later in the fall, a discrepancy analysis was conducted to help focus the campus on self-improvement, especially in areas where student scores were lower than faculty expectations.

**Planning and Accountability**

NSSE results are used along with other surveys and existing institutional data for strategic planning (e.g., St. Bonaventure University, University of Maine at Presque Island).

- The University of Wisconsin-Stout adopted selected metrics from NSSE as part of its strategic plan and set goals for these metrics. NSSE results provided meaningful comparative data and helped document the effectiveness of certain institutional practices in its successful application for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

Some states are incorporating NSSE data as indicators of institutional effectiveness, such as the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education’s “Key Indicators of Progress Project” and the University of Wisconsin System Accountability Report.

- Adams State and Longwood University are using their NSSE results to meet state performance indicator requirements related to persistence and graduation rates, general education, student learning, and civic engagement.

- Cal Poly is committed to continue to participate in NSSE on alternate years for use in the development and improvement of institutional outcomes assessment and for use in the biennial CSU accountability process. For this purpose, Cal Poly joined 12 other CSU campuses in a consortium to specifically address some common system-wide questions. Analysis of the NSSE 2002 survey will be consolidated with those already begun for the previous year and will be presented as part of an institutional accountability report to CSU and its Board of Trustees in October 2002.

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**NSSE Tip #5**

**Faculty Development Activity**

One activity that helps increase faculty and staff interest in using NSSE results is to ask groups to identify the college activities, listed on page 1 of the survey, that would lead to the greatest gains in student learning and development.

Results of this activity can then be tallied and used to narrow in on three or four activities. Faculty and staff members can then brainstorm ways that the institution can increase the frequency of student engagement in these locally identified high priority activities.
Coordinated Uses of NSSE Results

In the first three years, more than 250 colleges and universities participated in 30 self-selected consortia. The consortia represent very different types of institutions -- women’s colleges, urban universities, members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, engineering colleges, and research universities. Institutions participating in consortia or state systems typically shared results with a central office, though some communicated directly with other members of the group. Schools in two consortia exchanged student-level records after removing individual student identification information. One group was composed of four public universities in Ohio, the other of 15 Doctoral Extensive Universities.

- Southwest Texas State University has hosted statewide conferences for about 25 public and private universities in Texas to share how NSSE results are being used to facilitate improvement in student learning.

NSSE results can be linked with information from academic transcripts, retention studies, focus groups, and results from other surveys to develop a rich, comprehensive picture of the undergraduate experience.

- Drake University uses its NSSE results to better understand the contributions of student and academic affairs to the undergraduate experience by weaving together information from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and NSSE. The resulting information provides a common frame of reference for collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs.

How Often to Use NSSE?

On average, a school’s NSSE results do not change dramatically from one year to the next. Knowing this, NSSE recommends that an institution use the survey every 3-4 years. That said, some colleges and universities have specific reasons for using NSSE more frequently, even annually. For example, some schools want data every year for longitudinal tracking purposes or to monitor the impact of specific improvement initiatives. Others time their NSSE participation with the accreditation cycle. Still others are using NSSE to obtain information they can use in funding proposals. Ideally, NSSE should be used in combination with other assessment tools to capture the richest, fullest picture of the college student experience.
Overcoming Potential Obstacles to Using NSSE Data Effectively

Converting assessment information into action is a challenge for all colleges and universities. Below we provide ways to address some of the more common obstacles.

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<th>Obstacle</th>
<th>Approach</th>
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<tr>
<td>Small number of respondents</td>
<td>Check to see how representative the sample is compared to the respective populations. Review sampling error. Try over-sampling to increase number of respondents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions about validity and reliability</td>
<td>NSSE has conducted a number of studies to document the validity of the instrument, including stability analyses, test-retest, focus groups, and non-responder bias checks. The FAQ section of the NSSE psychometrics report [<a href="http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/confra.shtml">http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/confra.shtml</a>] provides more information about this important set of issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate comparison group</td>
<td>Contact NSSE for another peer comparison or special analyses to capture a better fit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited capacity to analyze and report results</td>
<td>The reports that NSSE sends institutions can be quickly packaged and sent to faculty and staff with little work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Average” results across the board</td>
<td>Try using a different comparison group or consider a criterion-based approach to determine to what degree student performance is inconsistent with institutional expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of faculty awareness of, or interest in, learning about and using student engagement results</td>
<td>Consult with NSSE staff about using a variant of the survey designed for faculty members at a retreat or Scholarship of Teaching and Learning workshop. Also make available a summary of the literature on the value of effective educational practices.</td>
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Final Word

Collecting and documenting how NSSE colleges and universities are using their results is an ongoing process. We’d very much like to hear about how you are using your NSSE data. Please send us specific examples of internal reports or brochures highlighting NSSE data, usage strategies, and special activities. This way we can be more helpful to other colleges and universities and assist in our continuing efforts to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience for all students.