Q. What is Wofford’s Experience with the survey of student engagement?

A. The responses provided by Wofford students on NSSE show a remarkably high level of engagement that has been maintained since our students first took the survey in 2001. As the accompanying graphics show, we not only have scored well above the national average in all five of the principal indicators of student engagement, but also at or very near the top 10 percent of the NSSE campuses. In addition, the information management staff annually compares Wofford to a selected list of peer liberal arts colleges, finding that we are there with the very best of them.

Q. What does performance in student engagement mean in telling the Wofford story?

A. Our consistently high performance on NSSE is a powerful affirmation of our claim to offer a “world-class” undergraduate educational experience. A high level of student engagement and student learning also is a prime factor in the superior return on an investment in a Wofford education.

Measuring Student Engagement — Learn what your student will actually get


The authors of this landmark study set out to identify colleges and universities that perform exceptionally well in two areas — graduation rates and student engagement, as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The latter concept is based on a simple conviction: “What today’s students do in college matters most. The time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development.”

Twenty campuses with outstanding records in engaged student learning were selected for Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice). A team of educators did a thorough examination of each of the selected colleges that included a two-day campus visit. “Student Success in College” is the report of the findings of Project DEEP. Here are some benchmarks that this study cited in its discussion of Wofford.

- All first-year students have a “novel experience” before arriving on the campus. They write an essay relating their lives to that of a major character. The novelist visits the campus to interact with the college community, and the essays are subsequently published along with photos of the student authors in a glossy booklet.
- At Wofford, peer tutoring involves students teaching other students in a given subject area. This mentoring takes place in the writing lab, in seminars and community events, and in informal group discussion outside class hours in specially designed gathering places.
- Miss Rita runs the Acorn Café, a small coffee shop in the Roger Milliken Science Center. She seems to know everyone on campus — by name! She has a personal greeting for almost everyone — encouraging some, cajoling others, and freely dispensing her own flavor of advice about students’ academic performance and social life.
Q. How do colleges measure their performance in engaged learning?

A. In the late 1990s, the National Survey of Student Engagement emerged from discussions among educators who were interested in improving undergraduate education. To mention three of their concerns:

1. The need to discover and share across campus lines the “best practices” in undergraduate education.

2. Graduation rates of 50 percent or below on many campuses reflected the growing and alarming ineffectiveness of a “cafeteria curriculum” as well as teaching and quizzes in a cavernous lecture hall. (About 80 percent of Wofford first-year students earn degrees in four to six years.)

3. Finding a better way to compare or “rate” institutions than the methods employed by U.S. News & World Report and the commercial college guides, which compare statistics on entering students and reputation scores. These guides do not attempt to measure what happens once a student enrolls.

More than 1,400 U.S. colleges and universities have participated in at least one administration of NSSE, and the survey has been in use since 2000. NSSE is attracting much interest in national media, particularly USA Today, The Atlantic and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Q. How does the survey of student engagement work at Wofford and other participating colleges?

A. Questions are very carefully crafted to produce data related to five “Indicators of Effective Educational Practice”:

1. Level of Academic Challenge
2. Active and Collaborative Learning
3. Student-Faculty Interaction
4. Enriching Educational Experiences
5. Supportive Campus Environment

Much of the questionnaire consists of a series of statements, asking students if the described activity happens very often, often, sometimes or never. For example, “Did you work with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments?” “Have you frequently memorized facts, ideas or methods from your courses and readings so you could repeat them in pretty much the same form?” “How much reading and writing was required?” “How often do students discuss ideas in class?” “Are faculty accessible and supportive?” “How often do students make classroom presentations?” “Did you attend an art exhibit, play, dance, music, theater or other performance?”

The annual NSSE survey is transmitted from Indiana University to a random sample of seniors and first-year students on a participating campus, and several methods are used to ensure a high level of participation. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending a particular college.