MANY STUDENTS ARE NOT SUFFICIENTLY CHALLENGED TO DO THEIR BEST WORK, AND COURSE CHALLENGE BEARS LITTLE RELATION TO ADMISSION SELECTIVITY, SURVEY FINDS

Findings released today from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) show that substantial shares of students were insufficiently challenged by their courses. Only 54% of first-year and 61% of senior students were highly challenged to do their best work. Older undergraduates, in particular those taking all of their courses online, were more likely to experience high levels of course challenge. Institutional selectivity was unrelated to the extent of course challenge for first-year students and had a modest negative relationship for seniors, suggesting that selectivity neither assures nor is a prerequisite for this important aspect of educational quality. These results bear on the importance of designing course assignments that prompt students to put forth their best effort.

The report, Engagement Insights—Annual Results 2015, details results from more than 315,000 first-year and senior students attending 541 U.S. institutions in spring 2015, or subsets of that group where supplemental survey questions were included. NSSE’s annual survey provides colleges and universities with rich data about the undergraduate experience to help them improve student learning and success.

Results for seniors show that participation in several High-Impact Practices (an internship or field experience, a learning community, research with faculty, a culminating senior-year experience, or service-learning) was positively related to how well their major coursework prepared them for post-graduation plans for employment or further education.

Results also show that financial stress has not abated since 2012, and in some cases has worsened. Compared to 2012, a higher proportion of students frequently chose not to purchase required academic materials due to their cost. According to NSSE Director Alexander C. McCormick, “These findings indicate that college students’ financial stress is not declining as the economy improves and remains a particular concern in historically underserved populations.” McCormick also noted that while financially stressed students were engaged in academic and co-curricular activities on par with their peers, their lower ratings of interactions with others and environmental support are cause for concern.

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Other noteworthy findings from the 2015 NSSE survey and its companion surveys, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), include:

- BCSSE results indicate considerable consistency in study time between high school and the first year of college. Over two thirds (68%) of those who studied more than 15 hours a week in high school studied at least that much during the first year of college. In contrast, only a quarter (25%) of those who studied five or fewer hours per week in high school studied more than 15 hours per week in the first college year.

- A large majority (88%) of faculty at 16 institutions felt safe at their institutions, and 70% substantially agreed that if a crisis happened their institution would handle it well. However, perceptions of preparedness varied considerably from campus to campus. About one in four faculty members (23%) experienced offensive behavior, discrimination, isolation, or harassment at their institutions. (Results from FSSE experimental questions.)

- Additional NSSE findings: 66% of first-year students frequently learned something that changed the way they understand an issue or concept, and 80% of seniors talked about career plans with a faculty member.

The report also features examples from Harvey Mudd College, University of Mount Union, and University of West Florida illustrating how these institutions have used NSSE results to guide improvement efforts. James A. Anderson, Chancellor of Fayetteville State University, explained: “NSSE data inform planning and decision making, provide a comprehensive snapshot of the quality of the undergraduate experience, and encourage institutions to adopt best models and practices.”

Summary statistics for all survey questions, Engagement Indicators, and High-Impact Practices by Carnegie classification, sex, and related-major category are available on the NSSE website: nsse.indiana.edu/links/summary_tables

NSSE’s Annual Results 2015 is sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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Engagement Insights: Survey Findings on the Quality of Undergraduate Education—Annual Results 2015 can be downloaded from the NSSE website (nsse.indiana.edu) or ordered for $20.