

#  NSSE 2020 Overview

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “nessie”) collects information from first-year and senior students about the characteristics and quality of their undergraduate experience. Since the inception of the survey, more than 1,600 bachelor’s-granting colleges and universities in the United States and Canada have used it to measure the extent to which students engage in effective educational practices that are empirically linked with learning, personal development, and other desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, and graduation.

NSSE data are used by faculty, administrators, researchers, and others for institutional improvement, public reporting, and related purposes. Launched in 2000 with the support of a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, NSSE has been fully sustained through institutional participation fees since 2002. This document provides an overview of NSSE 2020, including administration details, response rates, participating institutions, and respondent characteristics.

## A Pandemic Strikes

The coronavirus pandemic had a profound impact on almost all colleges and universities across North America. Despite the tumult it caused, the vast majority of schools’ participating in NSSE 2020 successfully collected data to improve undergraduate education. An in-depth analysis of NSSE data revealed survey response behavior and results to be relatively unaffected. Ultimately, only nineteen institutions needed to withdraw and four more eventually decided to exclude post-disruption survey respondents from their reports. Visit our website to learn more about how the NSSE 2020 administration unfolded, actions taken by NSSE to minimize the pandemic’s impact, and the various analyses completed to ensure data quality.

## nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/about-nsse/covid.html

## Survey Data and Methodology

Approximately 1.8 million first-year and senior students from 601 institutions (531 in the US, 65 in Canada, and 5 in other countries) were invited to participate in NSSE 2020. Of this population, 484,242 students responded to the survey. First-year and senior students were about equally represented among the respondent population.

NSSE’s sampling methodology calls for either a census of all first-year and senior students or a random selection of an equal number of students from each group, with sample size based on total undergraduate enrollment. Census administration is available only via email recruitment, in which students get a survey invitation and up to four reminders by email. In 2020, all but two participating institutions opted for this method rather than the regular mail option, in which sampled students get up to three messages by post and up to two email reminders.

Unless noted otherwise, the results presented below are from 584 institutions—521 in the US and 63 in Canada—that participated in NSSE 2020. Due to nonstandard details of their participation, 17 institutions are not represented. In these summary tables, as in each *Institutional Report 2020,* only data for census-administered and randomly sampled students are included. NSSE 2020 U.S. respondents profiled here include 343,045 first-year (47%) and senior (53%) respondents.

## U.S. Participating Institutions

NSSE 2020 participating institutions and students reflect the diversity of bachelor’s-granting colleges and universities in the US with respect to institution type, public or private control, size, region, and locale (Table 1). A searchable list of participating institutions is on the NSSE website: **go.iu.edu/NSSE-participants**

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Ashland University

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| Table 1Profile of NSSE 2020 U.S. Institutions and Respondents and Bachelor’s-Granting U.S. Institutions and Their Students |
|   | **Institutions (%)**  | **Students (%)** |
| **Institution Characteristics** | **NSSE** | **U.S.** | **NSSE** | **U.S.** |
| **Carnegie Basic Classification** |  |  |  |  |
| Doctoral Universities (Very high research activity) | 8 | 8 | 25 | 30 |
| Doctoral Universities (High research activity) | 9 | 8 | 14 | 16 |
| Doctoral/Professional Universities | 9 | 9 | 10 | 10 |
| Master's Colleges and Universities (Larger programs) | 25 | 21 | 29 | 26 |
| Master's Colleges and Universities (Medium programs) | 12 | 12 | 7 | 6 |
| Master's Colleges and Universities (Smaller programs) | 8 | 8 | 4 | 3 |
| Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences Focus | 17 | 15 | 7 | 4 |
| Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields | 13 | 19 | 4 | 5 |
| **Control** |  |  |  |  |
| Public  | 48 | 36 | 68 | 67 |
| Private  | 52 | 64 | 32 | 33 |
| **Undergraduate Enrollment** |  |  |  |  |
| Fewer than 1,000 | 13 | 22 | 2 | 2 |
| 1,000–2,499  | 31 | 31 | 12 | 9 |
| 2,500–4,999 | 20 | 17 | 13 | 11 |
| 5,000–9,999 | 19 | 15 | 21 | 19 |
| 10,000–19,999 | 8 | 8 | 15 | 22 |
| 20,000 or more | 9 | 7 | 37 | 37 |
| **Region** |  |  |  |  |
| New England | 10 | 8 | 8 | 6 |
| Mid East | 17 | 18 | 12 | 16 |
| Great Lakes | 15 | 15 | 14 | 14 |
| Plains | 10 | 10 | 8 | 7 |
| Southeast | 29 | 25 | 26 | 24 |
| Southwest | 7 | 8 | 11 | 12 |
| Rocky Mountains | 3 | 3 | 7 | 6 |
| Far West | 8 | 10 | 14 | 13 |
| Outlying Areas | 1 | 2 | <1 | 1 |
| **Locale** |  |  |  |  |
| City | 45 | 46 | 57 | 61 |
| Suburban | 23 | 26 | 25 | 24 |
| Town | 27 | 22 | 16 | 14 |
| Rural | 5 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Notes: Percentages are unweighted and based on U.S. postsecondary institutions that award baccalaureate degrees and belong to one of the eight Carnegie classifications in the table. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. U.S. percentages are based on the 2018 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics data. For information on the Carnegie Foundation’s 2018 Basic Classification, see [**carnegieclassifications.iu.edu**](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/) |

## Institutional Response Rates

The average response rate for U.S. NSSE 2020 institutions was 30%, up two percentage points from last year. The highest response rate among U.S. institutions was 79%, and about three out of five achieved a response rate of 25% or higher. Higher average response rates were observed for smaller institutions and across all undergraduate enrollment tiers relative to last year’s administration (Table 2).

Fifty-nine-percent of institutions chose to offer a survey incentive to increase response rates. On average, these institutions had a 33% institutional response rate, seven percentage points higher than those who did not offer an incentive. Institutions also had the option to use their learning management system or student portal to recruit students. In 2020, 114 U.S. institutions chose this option, and the average share of respondents who accessed the survey this way was 23%.

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| Table 2NSSE 2019 and 2020 Response Rates (%) by Undergraduate Enrollment Tier |
|  | **2019** | **2020** |
| 2,500 or fewer | 33 | 36 |
| 2,501 to 4,999 | 25 | 28 |
| 5,000 to 9,999 | 24 | 25 |
| 10,000 or more | 21 | 23 |
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## Survey Customization

Participating institutions may append up to two additional question sets in the form of NSSE Topical Modules or consortium questions (for institutions sharing a common interest and participating as a NSSE consortium) (Table 3). Of the nine modules available in 2020, the most widely adopted was Academic Advising, followed by First-Year Experiences and Senior Transitions (Table 4).

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| Table 3Summary of NSSE 2020 Participation in Additional Questions Sets |
| **Selection of Additional Question Sets** | **Number of Institutions** | **Percentage of Institutions** |
| None | 64 | 11 |
| One module only | 142 | 24 |
| Two modules | 220 | 37 |
| Consortium items only | 13 | 2 |
| Consortium items plus one module | 162 | 27 |
| Notes: Includes U.S., Canadian, other international institutions, and institutions with nonstandard population files or administrations. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. |
| Table 4NSSE 2020 Participation in Topical Modules |
| **Topical Module** | **Number of Institutions** | **Percentage of Institutions** |
| Academic Advising | 223 | 37 |
| First-Year Experiences and Senior Transitions | 169 | 28 |
| Inclusiveness and Engagement with Cultural Diversity | 131 | 22 |
| Development of Transferable Skills | 61 | 10 |
| Civic Engagement | 51 | 8 |
| Experiences with Writing | 33 | 5 |
| Experiences with Information Literacy | 29 | 5 |
| Global Learning | 28 | 5 |
| Learning with Technology | 19 | 3 |
| Notes: Includes U.S., Canadian, other international institutions, and institutions with nonstandard population files or administrations. Percentages sum to more than 100 because many institutions selected two modules. |

## U.S. Respondent Profile

Table 5 displays selected demographic and enrollment characteristics of NSSE 2020 U.S. respondents alongside all U.S. bachelor’s degree-seeking students for comparison. NSSE reports use weights as appropriate to correct for disproportionate survey response related to institution-reported sex and enrollment status at each institution. Table 6 provides additional details about U.S. respondents.

## Canadian Respondent Profile

Canadian respondents profiled here include 134,288 students (59% first-year, 41% senior) from 63 institutions from ten provinces, including 24 institutions in Ontario; 12 in Quebec; and under 10 from each of the remaining eight provinces. Female students and full-time students accounted for about 65% and 89% of Canadian respondents, respectively. The average response rate for Canadian NSSE 2020 institutions was 37%, with the highest response rate being 74%. Over 90% achieved a response rate of 25% or higher.

About 16% of Canadian respondents were at least 24 years old. The majority of students providing ethnocultural information identified as Caucasian or White (49%), while 10% were multiracial, 10% Chinese, 10% South Asian, 5% Black, and less than 4% from each of nine other categories.

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| Table 5Characteristics of NSSE 2020 U.S. Respondents and Undergraduate Population at All U.S. Bachelor’s Degree-Granting Institutions |
| **Student Characteristics** | **NSSE Respondents (%)** | **U.S. Bachelor's-Granting Population (%)** |
| **Sex** |
| Male | 34 | 44 |
| Female | 66 | 56 |
| **Race/Ethnicity** |
| African American/Black | 10 | 12 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | <1 | 1 |
| Asian | 7 | 7 |
| Native Hawaiian/other Pac. Isl. | <1 | <1 |
| Caucasian/White | 57 | 55 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 16 | 17 |
| Multiracial/multiethnic | 4 | 4 |
| Foreign/nonresident  | 4 | 5 |
| **Enrollment Status** |
| Full-time | 90 | 84 |
| Not full-time | 10 | 16 |
| Note: Percentages are unweighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Institution-reported, using categories provided in IPEDS. NSSE percentages do not include students with “another” or “unknown” sex (0.3% of all respondents) or unknown race/ethnicity (11% of all respondents). The NSSE 2020 sampling frame consists of first-year and senior undergraduates. Data were provided by participating institutions.U.S. percentages are based on data from the 2018 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics and Enrollment data. Includes all class years. |

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| Table 6Additional Characteristics of NSSE 2020 U.S. Respondents |
| **Student Characteristics** | **%** |
| At least 24 years old | 22 |
| First-generation (no parent has a bachelor’s degree) | 44 |
| Transfer | 30 |
| Expects to complete a master’s degree or higher  | 57 |
| Living on campus (includes campus and Greek housing) | 39 |
| Taking all classes online | 15 |
| Note: Percentages are unweighted.  |

## Meet the NSSE Team

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Suggested citation: National Survey of Student Engagement. (2020). *NSSE 2020 overview*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

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