NSSE national survey of student engagement

Lessons from the Field -- Dispatch #6

Lessons from the Field is a growing repository of practical ideas for NSSE institutions' evidence-based assessment and improvement initiatives. Read more than 120 data use stories in volumes 1-5 on NSSE's website at *go.iu.edu/nsselff*.

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University of Delaware Builds Strategy Around NSSE

The University of Delaware (Newark, DE)

For two decades, the University of Delaware has administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) on a three-year cycle, with the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness playing a central role in managing the survey and disseminating its results. While NSSE reports are not publicly accessible and remain behind a secure institutional firewall, they are actively used across campus to inform decision-making, support departmental reviews, and guide conversations about the student experience.

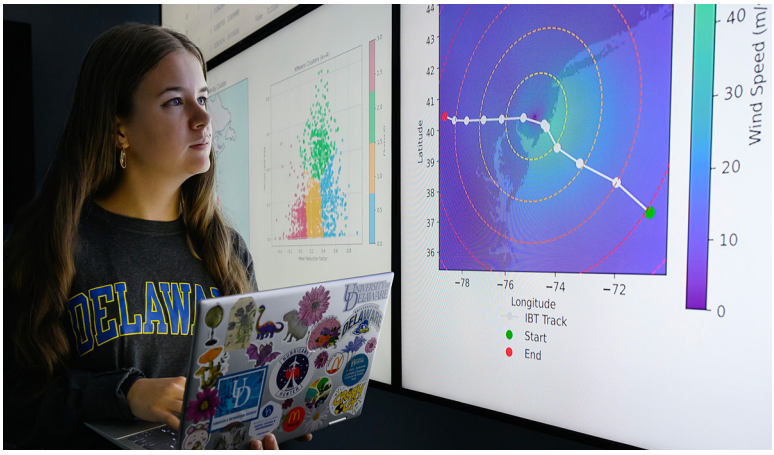
One of the most significant evolutions in Delaware's NSSE practice has come through the work of Sophie Tullier, Director of Student Life Assessment, Data Analytics & Research. Sophie has aligned all student life surveys, including NSSE, on a shared timeline, ensuring that each department undergoing a six-year program review has access to two cycles of NSSE data. Using the CAS (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education) standards as a foundation, she has developed focused reports on key themes such as belonging and career readiness for units like Disability Support Services and Student Services for Athletes. These reports help departments demonstrate how they meet national standards and provide comparative data they wouldn't otherwise have, especially when their own internal program/department surveys only reach students who use their services, whereas NSSE reaches broader student audiences.

Sophie describes her approach as "centralizing measurement, not assessment." Rather than asking every unit to design its own surveys, she encourages them to interpret existing NSSE data to inform their work. This reduces survey fatigue, respects students' time and labor, and leverages NSSE's robust, validated question bank. The university also uses NSSE data to foster broader conversations. After administering the American College Health Association (ACHA) Well-being Survey, Sophie plans to host town halls focused on topics like food insecurity and hazing, using NSSE data to triangulate insights and deepen discussions. These events are designed not just to share data, but to spark meaningful dialogue about student experience and institutional response.

Benchmarking is another key benefit of NSSE at Delaware. By comparing its results to peer institutions, the university can validate its strengths in areas like undergraduate research and community engagement, while identifying opportunities for growth. NSSE data also supports accreditation efforts, providing evidence of how Delaware designs and delivers the student experience in alignment with Middle States Commission on Higher Education standards. As Heather Kelly, Senior Director of Institutional Research & Data Science, explains, "Benchmarking is extremely valuable to ensure the experience UD offers is as good, if not better, than our comparator institutions."

Transparency remains a challenge, particularly when it comes to communicating how NSSE data leads to action. While some efforts have been made to include examples of data-informed changes in survey invitations, tracking the full impact of NSSE across units is complex. Still, there are clear examples of NSSE informing institutional decisions, such as evaluating the impact of the new Center for Intercultural Engagement, which opened between survey cycles and showed promising shifts in student perceptions of campus climate.

Ultimately, the University of Delaware's approach to NSSE demonstrates how a long-standing survey can be leveraged not just for reporting, but for strategic alignment, departmental support, and institutional learning. By integrating NSSE into the fabric of student life assessment, Delaware offers a compelling model for other institutions seeking to make the most of their engagement data.



Unlocking NSSE's Open-Ended Data with AI at the University at Buffalo

University at Buffalo (Buffalo, NY)

At the University at Buffalo (UB), the Institutional Research team has been exploring the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze students' responses from NSSE open-ended comment data. Melinda Whitford, Research Analyst, and Kubra Say, former Graduate Assistant, at UB lead much of this work. In the early stages, they began experimenting with AI tools like ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, initially comparing hand-coded themes with those generated by AI. After finding that AI did a decent job at qualitative analysis, they developed a greater trust in the technology and found that it opened the door to broader applications.

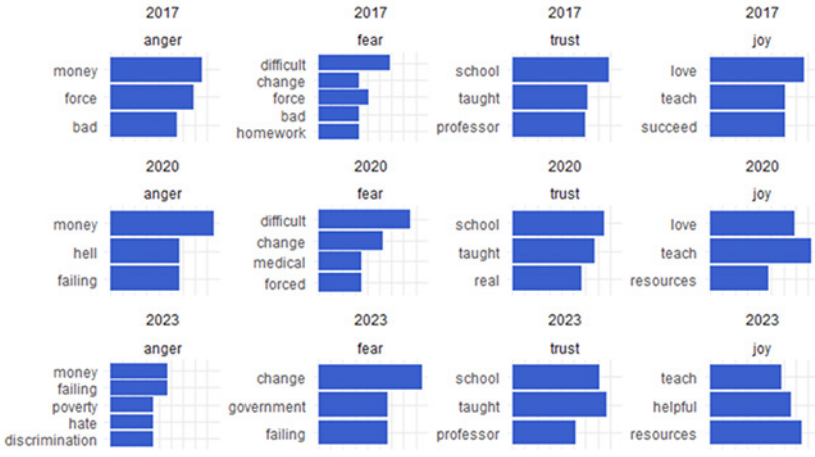
One of the first lessons they learned was the importance of prompt engineering, which is the process of developing useful prompts for the AI tool. Dr. Whitford started AI analysis with general questions, such as asking for the top ten positive themes, and then refined her prompts based on the responses. Using prompts like that for sentiment analysis, she was able to discover which emotions were most expressed in the open-ended comment data (see Figure 1). The iterative process allowed her to dig deeper into the data, comparing themes across colleges, student demographics, and survey years. She found that the same emotional keywords were consistently associated across time. For example, "money" was frequently linked to anger and "helpfulness" to joy (see Figure 2). She interpreted this as a sign of institutional consistency in student experience.

Dr. Say used a mix of tools, including R for text mining and sentiment analysis, and Copilot for more accessible, prompt-based exploration. While R provides detailed metrics, Copilot and ChatGPT offer flexibility and ease of use, especially for those less familiar with coding. Dr. Whitford noted that Copilot can even generate R code if needed, bridging the gap between technical and non-technical users. In fact, she noted that even qualitative analysis can have quantitative elements to it. She shared, "Sentiment analysis, text mining—we think of doing that for qualitative, but it's really quantitative analysis. So that just kind of makes everybody feel better, because we're quantifying something using these descriptors."

Dr. Whitford also noted that with AI's many benefits also come some challenges such as ensuring data privacy, especially when responses might include names, and recognizing that different AI platforms may yield different results. To address this concern, her and Dr. Say have transitioned to using secure, institutionally managed versions of ChatGPT and Copilot that do not share data externally, helping to safeguard student confidentiality. They advised starting with clear research questions and using AI to support rather than replace human interpretation. They also emphasized the value of incorporating student descriptors into the analysis to enable more nuanced comparisons. For example, descriptors like students' year in school or demographic information allow the research team to move beyond general themes and explore how different groups of students experienced campus life.

Beyond their own institution, Dr. Whitford and Dr. Say have shared Tableau templates and analysis strategies with other SUNY campuses through the Association for Institutional Research and Planning Officers (AIRPO), an affiliate organization of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR). Their team's work has helped other institutions with limited resources begin their own qualitative analysis journeys. Dr. Whitford sees AI as a way to honor student voices, ensuring that open-ended responses are not left unread in network folders but instead used to inform decision-making and improve student experiences.

Looking ahead, Dr. Whitford hopes to use AI analysis to examine student responses from previous topical modules and apply similar methods to future NSSE cycles. This would enable point-to-point comparisons and support longitudinal analysis of student experiences. She's also interested in filtering responses by high-impact practices, using AI to explore how students describe these experiences in their own words. For her, she says "this is trying to be respectful of the fact that students have taken the time to submit a response to an open-ended question. We should read that response, and take it seriously, and do something with it." In other words, the goal is not just to analyze data but to make it actionable and to help others do the same.



The Power of Promotion and collaboration: Northern Michigan University's Approaches to Increase NSSE Response Rates

Northern Michigan University (Marquette, MI)

Northern Michigan University (NMU), a four-year public university in Marquette, Michigan, with more than 6,500 undergraduate students, has participated in nine administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). During the 2023 survey, NMU recorded response rates of 24 percent for first-year students and 30 percent for seniors. In 2025, those rates rose to 42 percent and 41 percent, respectively, thanks to innovative promotional efforts led by Ryan Poupore, the institutional researcher who oversees NSSE within NMU's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE).

Poupore set a personal goal to improve response rates in every survey cycle. "I just try to do the best I can, and I usually try to beat what I've done previously," Poupore stated. "If we had 25 percent in the previous cycle, I'll try to get at least over that."

Traditionally, like many institutions, NMU promoted NSSE primarily through email. For the 2025 cycle, however, the IE office decided to try some different approaches. "Every cycle I try to think of a different outreach method," Poupore expressed. "I always like to try something different just to see if it makes a difference."

One of these new approaches the office tried out included setting up informational tables across campus during the NSSE survey window to provide students with survey details, raise awareness, and answer any questions they had.

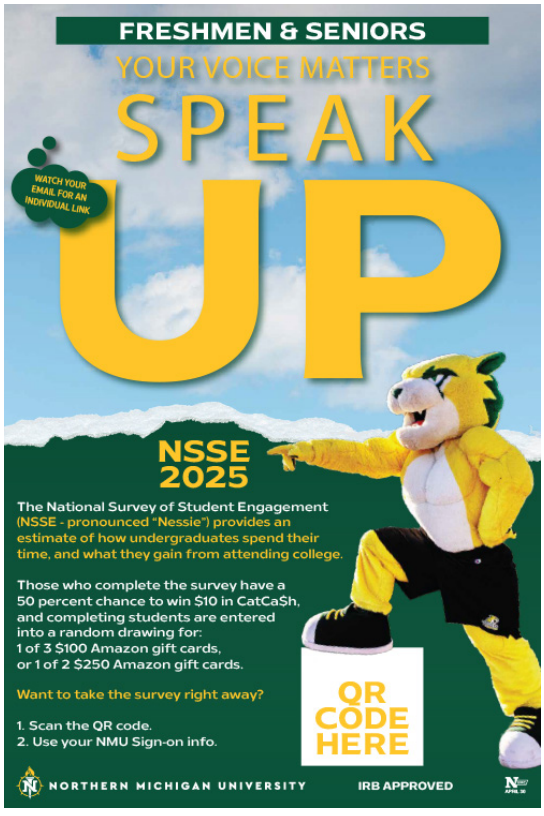
The IE office also partnered with the IT department at NMU to build a secure and accessible system to make participation easier. With the new joint system, students could scan QR codes placed around campus that linked directly to a page where they logged in with their university credentials and were automatically routed to their personalized NSSE survey link. Poupore emphasized that this system helped engage students who might not have participated otherwise.

"We wanted to provide students the opportunity if they're walking around on campus, and they look at one of our digital bulletin boards, or if they're looking at one of the posting sites that has a NSSE poster that we designed," Poupore noted. "At that moment, they have a little bit of time, maybe they're in between classes or maybe they're done with classes for the day, and they have 10 to 15 minutes to take the survey, and that's the chance, you know, that's the opportunity right there."

Speaking of the posters Poupore referenced, they were another collaborative effort between the IE office and NMU's student activities department. The student activities department allowed the IE office to display large-format posters at major posting sites outside the campus theater and several athletics buildings. In addition to the posters, the student activities department also helped the IE office inform various student groups that NSSE was approaching and promoted it on The Hub, NMU's student activities website.

Beyond the collaborations with IT and student activities, the IE office also expanded its outreach and promotion by partnering with other departments across campus. For instance, Poupore reached out to the department heads across NMU to ask that instructors dedicate a few minutes of class time for students to complete NSSE. He also teamed up with academic advising to distribute informational postcards about NSSE during advising sessions. Residence life was another valuable partner. The IE office encouraged resident advisors and resident directors to mention NSSE during floor meetings to help spread the word.

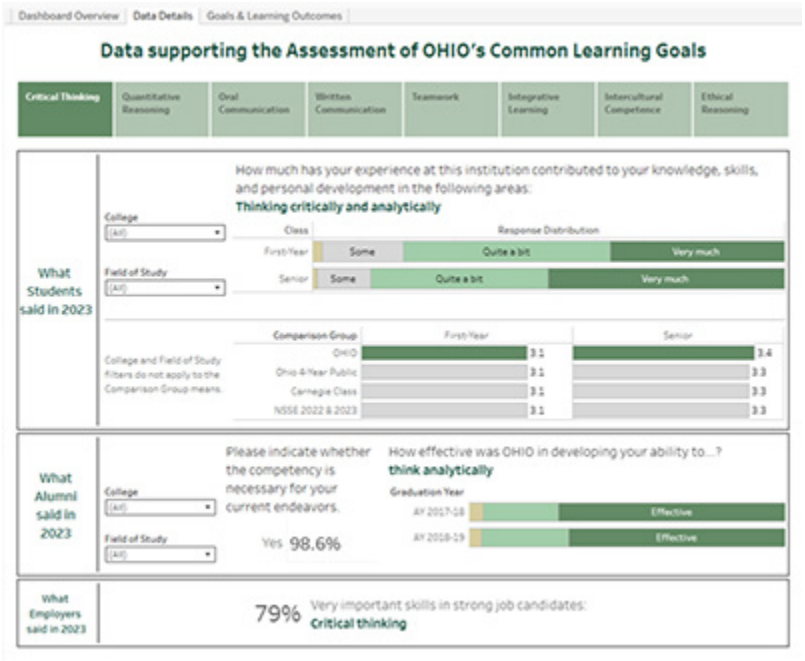
Together, NMU's promotional strategies and campuswide collaborations created multiple opportunities for students to engage with the survey, which was key to their increased NSSE response rates.



Lessons from the Field

NSSE's *Lessons from the Field -- Dispatch #6* is a supplement to NSSE's multi-volume series *Lessons from the Field*. For more institution examples, see Volumes 1-4 and Dispatches 1-6 by scanning the QR code below or by visiting our website at *go.iu.edu/nsselff.*

Scan the QR code (right) with your phone's camera to visit our *Lessons from the Field* institution examples page!



Dashboards, Response Rates, and Data Sharing at Ohio University

Ohio University (Athens, OH)

Ohio University has been a long-time participant in the National Survey of Student Engagement, and in recent years, the institution has taken significant steps to make its data more transparent, accessible, and actionable. After noticing that NSSE data was not being widely used across campus, staff in Institutional Effectiveness & Analytics began reimagining how results were shared. Suzette Burlingame, Associate Director for Assessment Systems & Analytics, built on an existing Tableau dashboard framework their office had previously used, adding new features and updating content to reflect more recent survey items, such as sense of belonging. These dashboards were designed with a variety of users in mind, incorporating feedback from Student Affairs, academic units, and other stakeholders to ensure the data was not only available but also easy to interpret and apply.

Rather than presenting raw tables or complex datasets, the dashboards now include interactive tabs tailored to specific themes like experiential learning and sense of belonging. Filters for student groups such as Pell recipients and first-generation students were added, and terminology was adapted to match campus language. For example, "High-Impact Practices" was renamed "Experiential Learning" to better resonate with students and staff. The dashboards also include explanatory notes and info bubbles to help users understand what they're seeing. This user-centered approach has made it easier for practitioners to find relevant data and use it to inform decisions. One notable example is the university's decision to make tutoring services free after identifying low scores in academic support. Joni Wadley, Senior Director of Institutional Effectiveness, shared that "Previously, students had to pay for tutoring, and that became a free service. When we reassessed in 2023 using NSSE, our scores went up for that." That's just one example of how data directly informed a campus-wide change.

Ohio University chose to make its dashboards publicly accessible, believing that transparency supports institutional improvement. While the dashboards do not display raw data files, users can download visual summaries and explore trends interactively. This openness has encouraged departments to use the data for strategic planning and program development. In addition to the NSSE-specific dashboard, the team at OHIO has also created several integrated dashboards that combine data from multiple sources, including alumni and employer surveys. These dashboards present a holistic view of topics like critical thinking, showing what students, alumni, and employers say, all on one page (see Figure 1). Acronyms and survey names were removed from the interface to simplify navigation, with source details available in footnotes, making it easier for a variety of user types to understand.

The university also achieved a nearly 30% response rate in its 2023 NSSE administration, a notable accomplishment given recent national trends. This success was attributed to several strategies, including embedding the survey link directly into the learning management system, promoting the survey through digital signage across campus, and refining their approach to incentives. For example, in the past, OHIO offered students the chance to win a laptop. However, Joni explained, "When I was calling the students who won, particularly with a $1500 laptop, they were like, 'I already have a laptop, could I get something else?'" They also found that $25 gift cards were less effective, noting that several students would win a gift card but then never stop by the office to receive it. For future administrations, the team plans to shift toward offering more $100 gift cards, based on research suggesting that this amount is more motivating for students than smaller prizes. These efforts reflect a thoughtful and adaptive approach to student engagement.

Looking ahead, Ohio University plans to continue refining its dashboards and outreach strategies. The team is focused on combining data sources into dashboards that meet specific campus needs, simplifying language for casual users, and maintaining full access to detailed NSSE data for those who want to dig deeper. By prioritizing accessibility, collaboration, and continuous improvement, Ohio University offers a compelling model for institutions seeking to make the most of their NSSE data.