

Viewpoint

National Survey of
Student Engagement

November 2003

Converting Data into Action

Expanding the Boundaries of Institutional Improvement

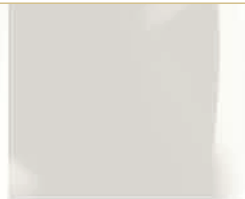
In four short years, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has become a leading tool for assessing the quality of the undergraduate experience.

The number of schools using NSSE has grown every year, from 276 schools in 2000 to 437 schools in 2003. However, NSSE's goal is not merely to increase its size and scope. Rather, NSSE's impact is best measured by people, on and off campus, thinking and talking about quality in terms of educational effectiveness—what students and institutions do as contrasted with what rankings emphasize, which is student test scores and an institution's resources and reputation.

Measuring what people think and how they talk about collegiate quality is admittedly difficult. There are indications, though, that NSSE is moving the conversation in the right direction, as the popular media increasingly work student engagement into stories about student learning. Moreover, NSSE data are the topic of discussion on scores of campuses at faculty and governing board retreats, teaching and learning workshops, and many other campus initiatives. Dozens of institutions are also

*"NSSE was launched with ambitious aims—among them to be widely used by institutions to improve undergraduate education and to help reshape public perceptions of collegiate quality. NSSE has done all this and more. No other measure has become so authoritative and so informative so quickly."
—Peter T. Ewell, Vice President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems*

using student engagement results for strategic planning and accreditation self-studies. NSSE is expanding the boundaries of institutional improvement by providing a new way for schools to convert data into action.



Selected Results

Raising the student engagement bar requires both understanding the extent to which students participate in educationally effective activities and how colleges and universities are encouraging students to take part in these activities. For example:

- Using information technology is strongly associated with academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction.
- Students who more frequently use information technology also report greater gains in knowledge, skills, and personal growth.
- Student athletes are generally as engaged in effective educational practices as their non-athlete counterparts, with Division III athletes reporting the highest levels of academic challenge and interactions with faculty.
- Student experiences vary greatly by major field of study with some students consistently engaging more in effective educational practices than others. For example, students in professional majors such as Health Sciences report higher levels of engagement on all five NSSE benchmarks.
- Women that attend women's colleges are generally more engaged than their counterparts at other schools, and also report gaining more in self-understanding, general education, and the ability to analyze quantitative problems.
- Women, seniors, and students attending baccalaureate liberal arts colleges tend to engage more frequently in integrative learning activities, the types of experiences that lead to deep learning.

Promising Findings

- 41% of all students earn mostly A grades, and only 3% of students report C or lower average grades.
- 87% of all seniors frequently (“often” or “very often”) integrate ideas or information from various sources into papers or projects.
- 80% of seniors said their classes placed a good deal of emphasis on applying theories or concepts to practical problems.
- 74% of all students reported the quality of advising as “good” or “excellent.”
- 87% of all student rated their college experience as “good” or “excellent.”

Disappointing Findings

- 77% of all students who study 10 or fewer hours per week report grades of B or better (33% As, 44% Bs).
- 87% of all students report that their peers at least “sometimes” copy and paste information from the Web or Internet for reports/papers without citing the source.
- Men are disproportionately under-engaged, particularly in the areas of academic challenge and enriching educational experiences.
- 45% of first-year students “never” discuss ideas from their classes or readings with a faculty member outside the classroom.
- 35% of all seniors only “occasionally” get prompt feedback from faculty members.
- Business and Engineering majors are well below their counterparts in other fields in terms of prompt feedback from faculty and the frequency with which they engage in integrative activities.
- Compared with when they were first-year students, fewer seniors work harder than they thought they could to meet an instructor’s standards.

Percentage of Seniors who Participated in Various Educationally Enriching Activities

	Doc-Ext	Doc-Int	Master's	Bac-LA	Bac-Gen	Total
Practicum, internship, field experience	72%	72%	72%	74%	71%	72%
Community service/volunteer work	66%	60%	64%	77%	67%	66%
Research with faculty member	29%	26%	23%	39%	24%	27%
Learning community	25%	25%	27%	25%	28%	27%
Foreign language	44%	35%	35%	65%	36%	41%
Study abroad	18%	14%	14%	35%	15%	18%
Independent study/self-designed	24%	26%	26%	43%	30%	29%
Culminating senior experience	49%	58%	55%	73%	66%	60%

National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice



NSSE results fall into five key clusters of activities that research studies show are linked to desired outcomes in college.

Level of Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, during and after college.

Student-Faculty Interactions

Students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life long learning.

Enriching Educational Experiences

Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment academic programs. Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and others. Technology facilitates collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge.

Supportive Campus Environment

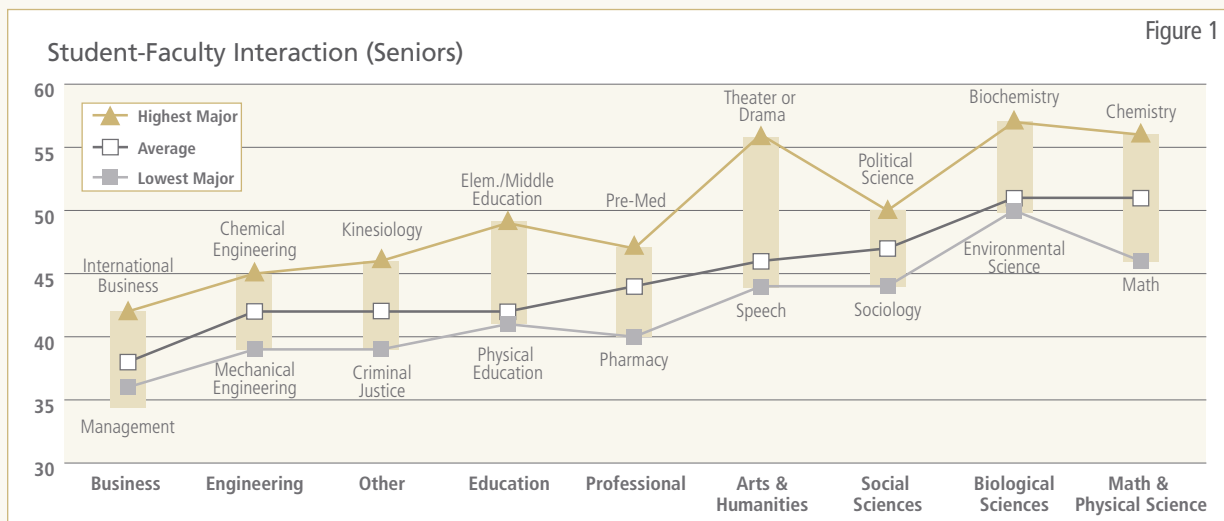
Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

A detailed listing of the survey items that contribute to the National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice can be found on NSSE's Web site at www.iub.edu/~nsse.

Variation in Student Engagement Within Institutions

The variance in student engagement is much greater within individual institutions than between institutions. For example, student experiences vary significantly by major field of study, with some students consistently engaging more in effective educational practices than others. A great deal of variation also exists within similar clusters of majors.

Figure 1 displays average student-faculty benchmark scores for seniors by major, as well as the highest and lowest scores by major group. Substantial improvement in the overall quality of undergraduate education can be realized by focusing on the performance of our least-engaged students.





A Catalyst for Improvement and Accountability

One of NSSE's most important ongoing activities is to discover and share the different ways student engagement results are being used at the state, system, and institutional levels.

Ways to Use NSSE

- To **benchmark** performance against peer institutions
- To compare **first-year** and **senior** student experiences
- To expand and complement institutional approaches to **assessment**
- To contribute to **performance indicators** requested by governing boards and oversight agencies
- To focus conversations related to **general education** and **curricular reform**
- To emphasize effective educational practices in **self-studies**, **accreditation**, and **accountability** efforts
- To guide and monitor **institutional improvement**
- To inform **faculty development** initiatives
- To analyze and evaluate **retention** efforts
- To provide evidence for **research** and **grant** proposals
- To contribute to the national effort to improve undergraduate quality

Source: NSSE 2003 Institutional User Report Card

The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice

The NSSE Institute was established to help maximize the use of student engagement information by working directly with colleges and universities in a number of ways:

Campus Audits:

Conducting comprehensive diagnostic reviews to identify institutional strengths and weaknesses and possible improvement initiatives

Consultations:

Assisting with the development, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives focused on enhancing student success and other institutional priorities

Workshops:

Developing practical, data-driven approaches to institutional improvement, including:

- Creating an institution-wide culture of evidence
- Enhancing campus diversity initiatives
- Promoting academic affairs-student affairs collaborations
- Developing action plans for minority-serving institutions
- Promoting educationally effective student-faculty interaction
- Identifying practices that can enhance persistence and educational attainment
- Incorporating student engagement and related information in assessment and accreditation

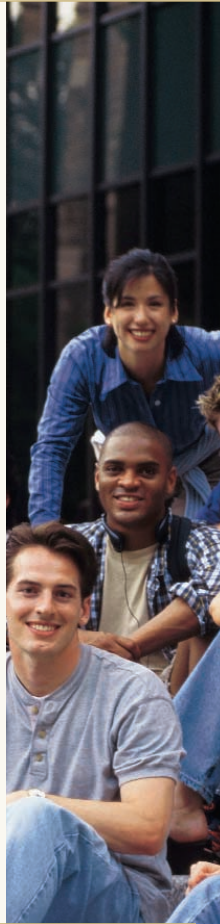
"NSSE is one of the most powerful tools available to stimulate and guide intellectually powerful and credible conversations to focus us on what needs to be changed and how." —*John N. Gardner, Executive Director, Policy Center on the First Year of College*

Looking Ahead

NSSE's priority in the coming years is to continue to administer and report the results of its annual undergraduate survey in ways that contribute to institutional improvement and greater public understanding of dimensions of collegiate quality. Toward these ends, we are pleased to be working with other initiatives that have complementary purposes. These include:

- The Foundations of Excellence project coordinated by The Policy Center on the First Year of College, which is working with two dozen schools from the Council of Independent Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) committed to improving the first-year experience.
- The AASCU American Democracy Project sponsored in part by *The New York Times*.

- A version of NSSE suitable to use in Canadian colleges and universities.
- An accreditation toolkit to increase the utility of student engagement information for purposes of program review and accreditation.
- A High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE—pronounced “hessie”) for use in secondary schools to allow a first-ever look at the performance of students from high school through college and to monitor the engagement levels of students as they move through various levels of the educational system. (www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/hssse_invitation.htm)
- A Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) that is co-sponsored by the American Association of Law Schools and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (www.iub.edu/~nsse/lssse/).



“Without persuasive evidence of the patterns of student engagement, administrators and faculty remain blind to important aspects of the undergraduate experience.”—*Lee S. Shulman, President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*

- Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) and Project BEAMS (Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students) are collaborative efforts with the American Association for Higher Education to learn more about effective educational practices and help develop cultures of evidence in minority-serving institutions.
- Spanish and other language translations of the survey to make student engagement data available to an expanding number of institutions within the U.S. and abroad.

By converting data into action and expanding efforts to learn more about student engagement and effective educational practice, NSSE continues to help higher education become better by strengthening institutional accountability for learning.



Quick Facts

Survey

The *College Student Report* is available in paper and Web versions and takes about 15 minutes to complete.

Objectives

Provide data to colleges and universities to use for improving undergraduate education, inform state accountability and accreditation efforts, and facilitate national and sector benchmarking efforts, among others.

Partners

Established with a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Current grants and contracts from Lumina Foundation for Education, the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, and the American Association for Higher Education. Cosponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning.

Participating Colleges and Universities

More than 430,000 students at 730 different four-year colleges and universities thus far. More than 460 schools are registered for the spring 2004 program.

Consortium & State or University Systems

Numerous peer groups (urban institutions, women's colleges, research institutions, Christian colleges, engineering and technical schools, etc.) and state and university systems (e.g., California State University, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Wisconsin) have formed to ask additional mission-specific questions and share aggregated data.

Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

- Level of Academic Challenge
- Active and Collaborative Learning
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Enriching Educational Experiences
- Supportive Campus Environment

Data Sources

Randomly selected first-year and senior students from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities. Supplemented by other sources such as institutional records, results from other surveys, and data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Administration

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, in cooperation with the Indiana University Center for Survey Research and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).

Validity & Reliability

The NSSE survey was designed by experts and extensively tested to ensure validity and reliability and to minimize non-response bias and mode of administration effects.

Response Rates

Average response rate for paper and web versions is about 43%, with a range of 15% to 89%.

Audiences

College and university administrators, faculty members, students, governing boards; external authorities such as accreditors and government agencies; prospective students and their families; college advisors, institutional researchers, and higher education scholars.

Participation Agreement

Participating institutions agree that NSSE will use the data in the aggregate for national and sector reporting purposes and other undergraduate improvement initiatives, institutions can use their own data for institutional purposes, and that results specific to each institution and identified as such will not be made public except by mutual agreement.

Cost

Institutions pay a minimum participation fee ranging from \$3,000 to \$7,500, determined by undergraduate enrollment.

New Initiatives

NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice is collaborating with the American Association for Higher Education on two major initiatives: Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) and Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students (BEAMS).

Special Services

Faculty survey, NSSE workshops, faculty and staff retreats, consulting, peer comparisons, norms data, and special analysis.

National Survey of Student Engagement

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