



National Survey of Student Engagement

A Guide to Understanding Your Institutional Report

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Whether this is the first time your school has used NSSE (“new user”) or you have done NSSE before (“repeat NSSE user”), we have prepared this guide to help you understand and appreciate the wealth of information included in your NSSE 2005 Institutional Report and how to use it productively. We hope you find this document useful and sincerely appreciate any comments or suggestions on how we could improve it in the future.

Becoming Familiar with What’s Included

There are a number of approaches to becoming familiar with your NSSE 2005 Institutional Report. For example, repeat users might go directly to their mean comparisons and frequency reports to look for interesting trends while others might go directly to their institutional data included in the last tab of the binder. If you are a new user, you might consider using the 10-step approach outlined below to get better acquainted with your report.

1) Table of Contents

Glancing through the Table of Contents will give you a bird’s eye view of what the institutional report contains. Some of this information will be immediately useful and usable, while other information may become more relevant later as you discover ways to maximize the use of NSSE data on your campus.

2) Respondent characteristics report

Before reviewing your results, it is important to get a sense of how representative your respondents are in relation to the respective first-year and senior populations. NSSE provides a number of demographic statistics (e.g. gender, race, enrollment status) to make this process easy. Keep in mind the total number of respondents, response rate, and sampling error when assessing data quality and usability. More information about checking respondent representativeness is in the second section of this guide.

3) Mean comparisons and frequency reports

The mean comparisons and frequency reports provide detailed information on how your students responded to the survey and how these responses compare to students at other types of institutions. At first glance, you might want to look for patterns of positive or negative responses (e.g. look for items that are statistically significant, or look for items where a large percentage of students responded “never”). If you are a new user, think about how these data compare and related to other information you have about the student experience and campus climate. Repeat users may want to look for trends or changes from findings from previous years.

4) FSSE reports (if applicable)

A growing number of colleges and universities are complementing their NSSE results by encouraging their faculty members to participate in the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). FSSE measures faculty perceptions of student engagement along with what faculty emphasize in terms of teaching practices. The results can help stimulate and guide discussions related to teaching, learning, and improving the quality of the undergraduate experience. Especially provocative are the gaps between FSSE and NSSE results which frequently highlight areas or activities that may warrant attention.

5) NSSE Overview

Every year, NSSE provides a basic overview of selected national results and trends. To provide a context to understanding your school’s results, we include information on the numbers and breakdown of participating colleges and universities, a profile of respondents, information on response rates, and some selected aggregate results.

6) Using NSSE Data

Over 1,000 different colleges and universities have used NSSE in the last six years. We regularly collect information from our institutional contacts on the multiple ways that institutions are using their NSSE data for institutional improvement and accountability. This section highlights a number of recent examples of putting NSSE data to use on campus. More can be found in NSSE’s annual reports and on our web site at www.nsse.iub.edu.

7) Accreditation Toolkit

Many colleges and universities incorporate NSSE data and results into their accreditation and self-study efforts. To support this use, NSSE created an accreditation toolkit that maps your regional accrediting standards and criteria to specific NSSE survey items. This document outlines considerations and possibilities for using NSSE results as accreditation support.

8) NSSE Institute

The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice is NSSE’s research, outreach, and service arm. Institute associates conduct research designed to enhance student learning and institutional success and consult with colleges and universities, consortia, systems, and states about how to maximize the use of NSSE results. In addition, the Institute sponsors regional workshops to provide a forum for participants to exchange ideas on NSSE usage.



9) Institutional Data CD

One of the most powerful ways NSSE data can be used is by linking it to other data sources on campus, including transcripts, persistence rates, other survey results, and achievement tests. The CD in the back of the binder includes all your student responses and a number of other documents, such as electronic versions of your reports, a PowerPoint template, and a survey codebook, among others. We recommend making a backup copy of the CD and distributing the electronic documents to interested people and units on your campus.

10) Develop a Plan for Using and Reporting Your Results

Once you have had a chance to glance through your institutional report, we recommend creating a usage and dissemination plan to initiate conversation on campus. Schools that use student engagement results productively develop a campaign approach to reporting and using the data. You might consider ways to share the results with relevant groups on and off campus to increase interest and understanding on the part of faculty and staff members at the school and department levels.

A growing number of colleges and universities are making results available (e.g. press release on selected results, posting results on web sites, and making copies of actual reports available for download) to prospective students, parents, the media, and other individuals interested in learning more about how students are experiencing college. NSSE encourages public disclosure of student engagement results in ways that serve to increase understanding of collegiate quality and that support institutional improvement efforts. Disclosing institutional results from the NSSE survey provides an opportunity to help educate the public about the value of student engagement as a new metric for defining and examining collegiate quality. NSSE especially supports public reporting of student engagement results in ways that enable thoughtful, responsible institutional comparisons while encouraging and celebrating institutional diversity. Whether a participating institution makes public their student engagement results is up to the institution. However, in general, publicly reporting NSSE results “later than sooner” provides a greater opportunity to understand and interpret results in their proper context. Premature disclosure could inadvertently divert the focus away from improvement if the data are used inappropriately or irresponsibly. It is also important to remember that NSSE does not support the use of publicly disclosing student engagement results for the purpose of rankings.

To help facilitate public reporting, we suggest using the standard protocol for posting and communicating NSSE results on the Web that is described in the last section of this guide.



Understanding and Interpreting Your NSSE Results

As just mentioned, it's wise to first become familiar with the nature of the data and the "story lines" of your school's performance before publicly reporting NSSE results. Here are some other things to consider.

Check the Representativeness of Your Respondents

Compare your student respondents' demographic characteristics, summarized in the Frequency Distributions and Respondent Characteristics Reports, with your institutional data files for first-year and senior students. Women and White students are somewhat over-represented among NSSE 2005 respondents. Check to see if this is also true in your case and whether your respondents differ in any other ways from the institutional profile of your first-year and senior students. The determination of student year in school ("first-year" or "senior") is based on information from the electronic file that your school provided last fall. The Frequency Distribution section also contains student-reported class information from the survey, which in a few cases may differ from the institution's classification.

Another way to gauge respondent representation is through sampling error, an estimate of the margin by which the "true" score for your institution on a given item could differ from the reported score due to random sampling. For example, if 60% reply "very often" to a particular item and the sampling error is +/- 5% there is a 95% chance that the population value is between 55% and 65%. Keep in mind that sampling error is based on the population of interest. If you want to estimate the sampling error for first-year male students, it must be calculated using the first-year male student population size. Increasing the number of respondents relative to the total population reduces sampling error. For this reason some schools increase their sample size using NSSE oversampling.

Look Carefully at Items with Large Effect Sizes

In the Means Comparison Report an asterisk (*) indicates your students' responses differ at a statistically significant level from students at schools in your respective comparison group(s) or at all NSSE 2005 institutions. More asterisks reported for a particular item indicate a smaller probability that the difference noted is due to chance. Even so, the actual magnitude of some item score differences may seem trivial, even though they are highly reliable and statistically significant. For this reason, we also report the Cohen's *d* effect size for comparisons that are statistically significant. The effect size represents the magnitude of the difference in the student or institutional behavior represented by the item. When the effect size is large, or a pattern of moderate effect sizes exists, it is likely that the quality of the student experience is appreciably different and, therefore, may be of practical as well as statistical significance in the respective area of student engagement.

Large effect sizes are uncommon in most areas of non-experimental social science research, including the NSSE project. If your results show medium or large effects, there may be some practices or conditions that warrant immediate attention, especially if other information corroborates the NSSE data. Here are some general guidelines for determining the relative importance of a Cohen's *d* effect size:

- .20 is a small effect
- .50 is a medium effect
- .80 is a large effect



Look for Patterns in Student Responses

In addition to noting items with medium to large effect sizes, look for patterns in your students' responses. For example, are your students consistently above or below the mean of your comparison group in certain areas of engagement? Are the differences explainable; that is, perhaps a function of your school's mission, the nature of the undergraduate program, or certain students' characteristics?

Do not rely exclusively on significance tests to identify areas that warrant attention. A consistent pattern of scoring above the mean, even though all items may not reach statistical significance, may indicate your institution is doing the right things in terms of good educational practice. At the same time, some institutions have very high expectations for student engagement and may fall short of their own aspirations even though comparisons with other institutions are favorable.

Remember Institutional Report Results are Not Weighted

The results in the Means Comparison Report are not weighted. That is, no adjustments were made to correct for potential bias in students' responses to approximate the populations of first-year and senior students at your school and other colleges and universities in your comparison groups. Later this fall, when we prepare the five National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice, we will use appropriate weighting techniques, similar to those employed in previous years, to make adjustments. That said, the unweighted and weighted results for most NSSE items tend to be very similar at the institution, comparison group, and national levels. Some possible exceptions may be the reading, writing, and time on task questions (e.g., study hours, caring for dependents) at schools that have substantial proportions of part-time students, as they take fewer classes per term and cannot be expected to read and write as much as full-time students. Keep this in mind when reviewing the results.

Note If Your School Belongs to a Consortium

If your school belongs to a consortium that used additional questions, the responses to these additional questions are included in the Means Comparison Report (if non-categorical) and Frequency Distribution sections. These data are also in the institutional data file. When presenting the results of categorical questions to colleagues and others, please use the information in the Frequency Distribution section.

Take into Account Possible Mode-of-Administration Effects

A mode-of-administration effect slightly favors schools where a high percentage of students completed the NSSE survey via the Web. However, the differences that favor the Web mode have very small effect sizes. This phenomenon has also been noted by others using the Web for survey research and is discussed in more detail in the Additional Information tab of the institutional report binder. We cannot be certain whether this pattern of responses is a function of the mode of administration itself (e.g., something about responding via the Web induces students to slightly inflate their responses), a function of certain institutional features (e.g. technology investment), or whether students who complete the survey via the Web are different in some ways including engaging more frequently in good educational practices. Evidence of the last of these is that the Web effect is most prominent on the three technology-related items ("used e-mail to communicate with an instructor," "used an electronic medium to discuss or complete an assignment," and self-reported gain in



“using computing and information technology”). We monitor this issue on an annual basis and will alert you if our analyses lead us to modify our conclusion that the Web mode has little practical impact on student responses to NSSE.

Review Responses to Experimental Questions (if applicable)

In an effort to test potential survey items for future administrations, a small set of experimental questions related to enrollment patterns and student motivation were added to the NSSE online survey. These questions were attached to the end of the survey and only students responding to the online version received these extra questions.

For schools that chose to participate, responses to the experimental questions are included in the institutional data file. However, due to their experimental nature and the fact that only students completing the online survey received them, these questions are not included in the Frequency Distribution and Means Comparison Reports. Rather, frequencies and means by Carnegie type and at the national level are provided in a separate report titled “NSSE 2005 Experimental Items” that will help inform institutional comparisons.

When reviewing your institution’s experimental item results, please pay attention to the number of respondents. If the number is small compared with your overall respondent group, interpret your results with extreme caution.

Remember That Oversampled Students Are Not Included in Comparisons

NSSE’s minimum sample sizes are determined by undergraduate enrollment (i.e., less than 4,000 students = 450; 4,000 to 15,000 students = 700; greater than 15,000 students = 1,000). It is possible to add students to the minimum sample size by oversampling in one of two ways: (1) all Web-only and Web+ schools are oversampled using an algorithm based on undergraduate enrollment; and (2) some institutions request oversampling, which requires an additional fee. An increasing number of schools are using the oversampling option to add students to their sample, reduce sampling error, and insure an adequate number of respondents to analyze the information by school or department, major field of study, race and ethnicity, and other variables.

NSSE’s policy is to use only respondents from the institution’s standard random sample when developing the National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice as well as sector and national norms for the means and frequency report. Consortia data are also compiled with only the standard random sample of participating institutions in each group. This protects against the possibility that colleges and universities with oversamples might unduly influence the results. However, if your school requested a NSSE oversample, the responses of all your students (standard sample and NSSE random and targeted oversample) are included in your institution's means and frequency reports and data file. Excluding schools in the BEAMS project, students who were locally oversampled will appear only in an institution’s data file and not in their reports.



Posting Your Results on the Web

Every year, a growing number of colleges and universities report their results on institutional web sites. In order to promote and facilitate such public reporting, we encourage schools to use a standard web protocol for posting NSSE information on campus web sites.

If at all possible, we ask that you post your NSSE information using the following address:

www.[insert the appropriate name or letters of your institution].edu/nsse

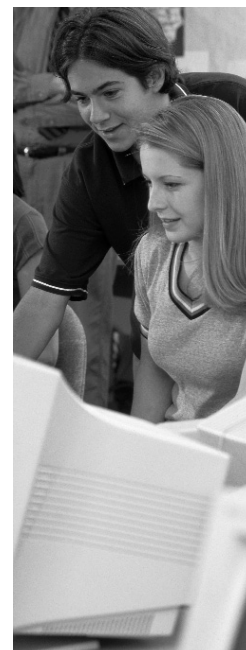
For example, Indiana University Bloomington would post its NSSE results at www.iub.edu/nsse. Earlham College would post its results at www.earlham.edu/nsse, and so on.

For most colleges and universities, rather than creating a separate NSSE page, it will likely be easier to ask your information technology department to establish a simple re-direct for this new NSSE web protocol address that links to your existing institutional research office web site or wherever you post your NSSE results.

Thus, if another institutional researcher types in the recommended NSSE protocol web URL for a respective institution, it would automatically take them to the web page where NSSE results are found on campus (i.e. institutional research office, assessment office, etc.).

If this is unclear or if you have questions please contact NSSE at 812.856.5824.

Thanks for your help in making student engagement results more widely accessible!



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