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Improving the College Experience: Using Effective Educational Practices

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) annually collects information directly from undergraduate students that colleges and universities can use to improve student learning. NSSE results challenge the view of college quality popularized by national news magazines, which rate colleges largely on the basis of their institutional resources and reputation.

In fact, “a school’s academic reputation as judged by others says very little about the extent that active learning, student-faculty interaction, and a supportive environment characterize a campus,” according to NSSE director **George Kuh** of Indiana University Bloomington.

By focusing on whether colleges are using their resources to help students learn and get the most out of school, NSSE provides campuses with insights into effective teaching and student learning that they can use almost immediately to improve some aspects of their performance. President **Lee Shulman** of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching considers NSSE as “a novel approach for monitoring the ‘vital signs’ of quality in undergraduate education, one that might eventually lead to a comprehensive strategy superior to traditional approaches to accountability.”

“The NSSE survey not only gives us feedback about how well we are doing, it also helps us to diagnose weaknesses and to strategize how we can become the learning university that we want to be.”

—Robert Glidden
President, Ohio University





I've got seven kids and they've all been to college. As a concerned parent, I went to the library to look up information on the quality of the institutions they were considering. The only measure of how "good" the institution was was how hard it was to get in, how many Ph.D.s it had, and how much it cost."

—**Roy Romer**
*Superintendent,
Los Angeles City Schools*

"NSSE is a major step forward in the ongoing quest for effective ways to assess learning outcomes, academic quality and institutional effectiveness."

—**Thomas C. Longin**
*Vice President,
Association of Governing Boards
of Universities and Colleges*

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The NSSE 2001 report, "Improving the College Experience: National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice", summarizes the project's first two years. The national database includes more than 155,000 first-year and senior students at 470 different four-year colleges and universities. The project is funded by **The Pew Charitable Trusts** and sponsored by **The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching** and the **Pew Forum for Undergraduate Learning**.

The results of the survey provide comparative benchmarks for determining how effectively colleges are contributing to learning in five areas: **1) level of academic challenge; 2) active and collaborative learning; 3) student-faculty interaction; 4) enriching educational experiences; and 5) supportive campus environment.**

NSSE refers to the combination of these measurements as "student engagement." The survey measures student engagement by asking students questions about their campus experiences, such as their classroom activities, their interactions with faculty, their interactions with other students, their study habits, and their university's support of their efforts.

"Students and parents should be asking colleges the kinds of questions NSSE asks," said

Russell Edgerton, director of the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning.

"How much do students study and how rigorous are their assignments? How much writing is expected? How often do students interact with their teachers in meaningful ways? Policy-makers and accrediting bodies should be asking these questions, too." ■

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—*Russell Edgerton
Director, Pew Forum on
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The NSSE is proving, in the absence of other good measures of quality assurance, to be extremely popular at smaller teaching-oriented liberal arts based colleges and universities.”

— **Richard Ekman**

*President,
Council of Independent Colleges*

“It’s an important step in the right direction – to look at measures of actual educational experience, rather than inputs.”

— **Kathryn Mohrman**

*President,
Colorado College*

KEY FINDINGS

A

lthough experiences of students at the same school can differ a good deal, NSSE results point to some generalizations:

- Schools of similar sizes and missions vary widely on student engagement, though students at small colleges and liberal arts colleges tend to be more engaged than their counterparts attending larger institutions.

- Many schools are using a variety of programs and practices to influence student engagement, such as first-year seminars, service learning courses, internships, and capstone experiences.

- A gap exists between the amount of time students spend on educational activities and what faculty members and others say is optimum. For example, students spend only about half as much time preparing for class as their teachers recommend is necessary and 22% of all students frequently come to class unprepared.

In addition, the survey found evidence of a broad range of educational practices that show many institutions already have established the foundations that lead to optimum student learning, while others still have a way to go. ■



PROMISING FINDINGS

- Almost all students (98%) at least “occasionally” ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions.
- Most students (90%) worked at least “occasionally” with other students on projects during class.
- Many institutions provide first-year seminars, service learning, research opportunities, capstone experiences, and other activities to increase the frequency of student-faculty interaction.
- Two-thirds of all seniors are involved in community service and volunteer work and 72% participate in internships.
- Half of all first-year students and seniors frequently have serious conversations with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Most students say their academic advising is either “good” (43%) or “excellent” (27%).

DISAPPOINTING FINDINGS

- About one-fifth of both first-year students and seniors say their institution gives little emphasis to studying and spending time on academic work.
- Almost half (45%) of the first-year students surveyed never discussed ideas from their classes or readings with a faculty member outside of class.
- Commuter students and part-time students view their campus environments as less supportive.
- African-American and Asian-American students are less positive about their relationships with other students and with faculty members.

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.

Student Interaction with Faculty Members

Students learn first-hand 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.

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.

Enriching Educational Experiences

Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside classrooms 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.

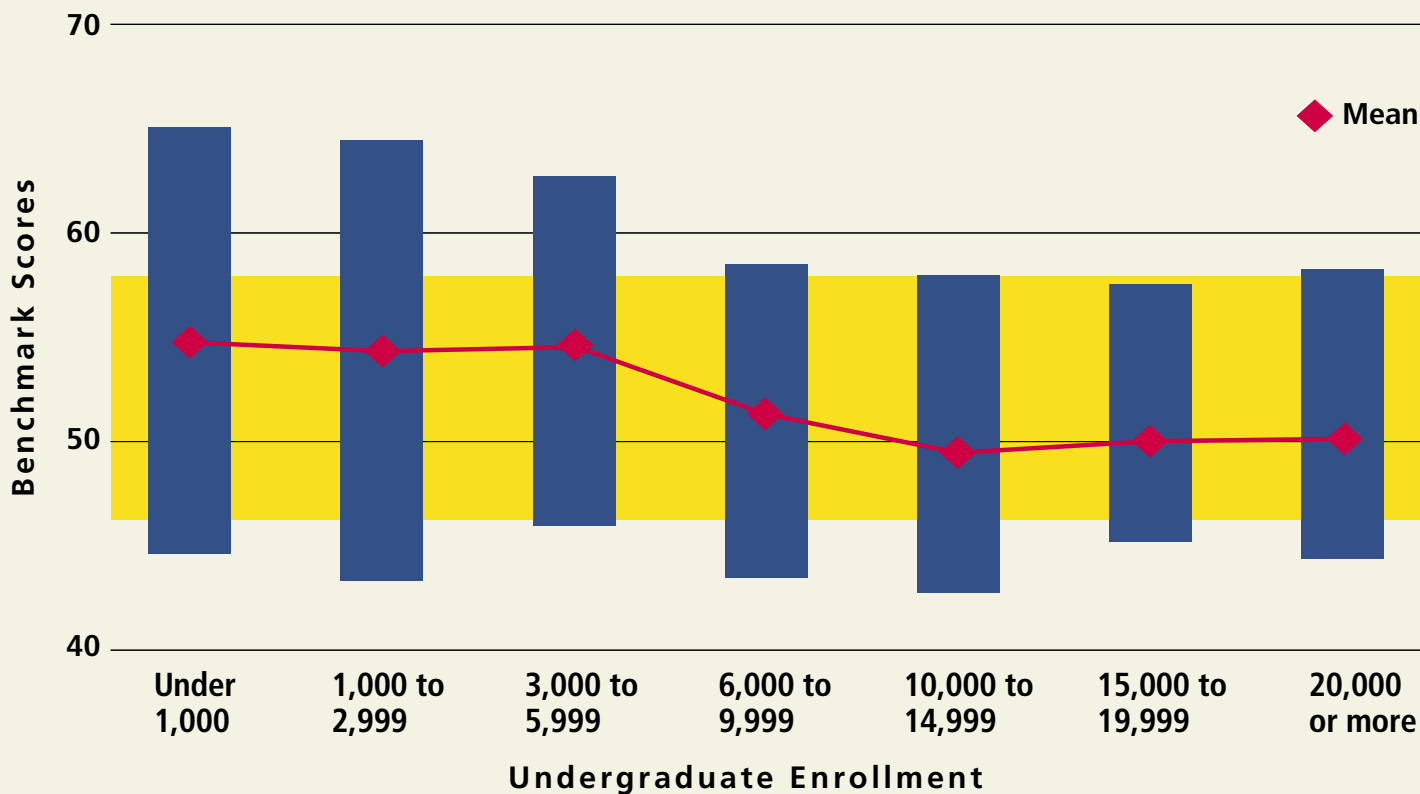
Supportive Campus Environment

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

VARIATION IN ACADEMIC CHALLENGE BENCHMARK SCORES FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS BY INSTITUTIONAL ENROLLMENT SIZE

Though smaller schools generally have higher NSSE benchmark scores, wide differences exist among institutions of comparable enrollment. To illustrate, the blue shaded bars of this figure represent 95% of all institutional scores on the Level of Academic Challenge benchmark. These blue bars (range of scores) shrink somewhat as enrollment size increases indicating that larger schools don't vary as much as do small schools. The yellow shaded background represents the overlap of

scores among all enrollment groups. The overlap is quite large indicating that different size institutions do not differ as much from one another on academic challenge as do institutions of similar size. Thus, it's important to ask for evidence of effective educational practices from the specific schools being considered, and not assume that all small schools necessarily are more challenging than larger schools.





NSSE is a great way to stimulate reflection and debate about what we do more and less well, and why. It's proving an exciting and enlivening tool for self-reflection and self-improvement."

— **Michael McPherson**
*President,
Macalester College*

"NSSE provides us with high quality data that go well beyond opinions and satisfaction surveys to give us useful comparisons to similar universities."

— **John Cahir**
*Vice Provost and Dean for
Undergraduate Education,
Penn State University*

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ARE USING THEIR NSSE RESULTS

In two short years, NSSE has made its mark inside colleges and universities across the country by provoking public discussions about institutional performance. Schools are comparing themselves with peer institutions and the national benchmarks to get a sense of their strengths and weaknesses. In most cases, the results point to things institutions can do something about almost immediately to improve the undergraduate experience. The NSSE 2001 report contains numerous examples of how different types of colleges and universities are using their results.

NSSE director **George Kuh** observed that "it's unusual and refreshing for faculty members, provosts, deans, and student affairs professionals to openly talk about areas they wish to strengthen, sharing what seems to be working and what isn't, and then deciding what actions to take." ■



LOOKING AHEAD

Student engagement is an understandable, meaningful way of thinking and talking about collegiate quality. Faculty members, media personnel and prospective college students and their parents are beginning to thoughtfully incorporate student engagement as a factor in searching for evidence of collegiate quality.

NSSE is not a college rating system, nor does it measure student learning directly. But even when valid measures of learning are available, schools will still need NSSE or something like it to identify areas that need attention to improve.

The NSSE survey is once again oversubscribed with about 350 institutions registered for the 2002 survey. In the future NSSE plans to identify and describe schools that have intentionally changed the way they work with their students to promote higher levels of student engagement. ■

The complete report, "Improving the College Experience: National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice," can be ordered from the NSSE Web site at
www.iub.edu/~nsse.

NSSE FACTS

Project Name	National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE – pronounced “nessie”)
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.
Partners	Supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and cosponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and The Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning.
Data Sources	Randomly selected first-year and senior year students from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities. Supplemented by other data sources such as institutional records, results from other surveys, or data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).
Survey Name	<i>The College Student Report</i>
Administration	Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning in cooperation with the Indiana University Center for Survey Research and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).
Participants	More than 155,000 students at 470 different four-year colleges and universities thus far. About 350 schools are registered for the 2002 program.
Cost	Participating colleges and universities are charged a minimum fee ranging from \$2,500 to \$5,500, depending upon undergraduate enrollment.
Audiences	College and university administrators, faculty members, and governing boards; external authorities such as accreditors, policy makers and government agencies; prospective students and their families; college advisors, institutional researchers, and higher education scholars.

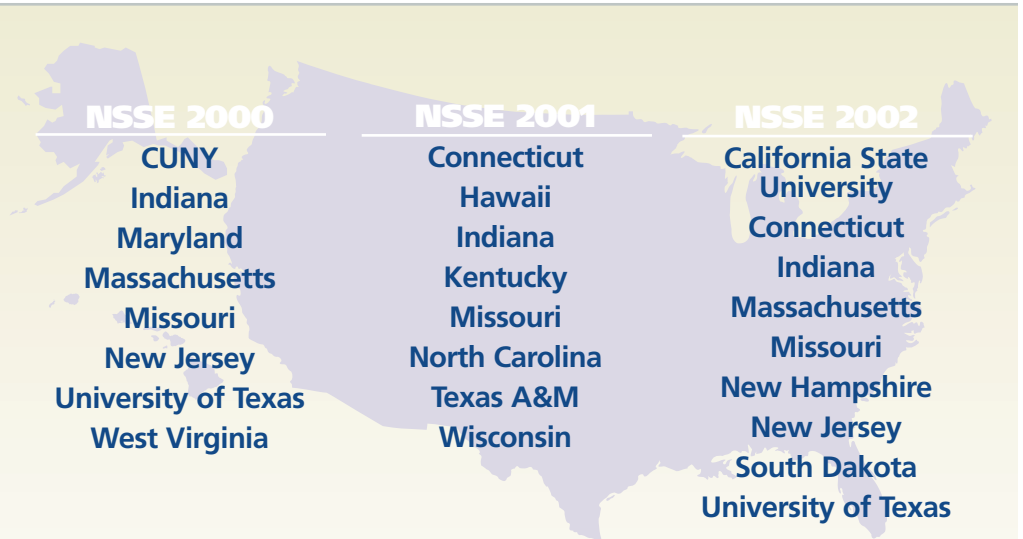
PARTICIPATING STATE AND UNIVERSITY CONSORTIA

NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning

Ashton Aley Hall 102
1913 East Seventh Street
Bloomington, IN 47405-7510

Phone: 812-856-5824
Fax: 812-856-5150
E-mail: nsse@indiana.edu
Web: www.iub.edu/~nsse



National Survey of Student Engagement

The College Student Report