

**NSSE**

National Survey of  
Student Engagement

# Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD 2009



National Survey  
of Student Engagement

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# Foreword

## Harnessing the Collective Wisdom of the NSSE User Community

Since 1998, we have learned a great deal more about how students learn in college. The National Survey of Student Engagement, NSSE, as originally conceived, rests on systematic studies of student learning and development linked empirically to student experiences and behaviors compiled over 40 years. In designing a new vision of quality, we wanted to be sure that the practices we called attention to as “engagement” really mattered for student learning. That philosophy has guided NSSE ever since. But as we learn more from cognitive science, the resulting insights confirm the efficacy of the kinds of things NSSE measures. More importantly, they help illuminate *why* these practices and experiences are so powerful and exactly *how* they work. At the same time, they underscore the varied paths that individual students pursue when making meaning of the same subject matter.

Used in combination, NSSE and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) provide a powerful way to engage faculty in serious thinking about curriculum and pedagogy. Similarly, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) allows colleges and universities to undertake sophisticated longitudinal studies that can reveal detailed patterns of development for different kinds of students. Just as important, NSSE data have grounded a

significant and growing literature on college student growth and development that both advances the field’s “basic science” and can readily support improvement.

Institutional users have been an important part of NSSE’s intellectual capital. They have unceasingly made suggestions for improvement, attended lively user group gatherings at higher education meetings across the country, exhibited an uncommon willingness to take part in experiments, and shared their stories of institutional use. Indeed, some of the most important components of the enterprise today—FSSE, for example—arose directly from trying out new ideas at participating campuses. As institutions continue to experiment with ways to use and improve NSSE in the coming years, harnessing this growing body of collective wisdom has become more important than ever. This volume captures the emerging lessons from the field, providing instructive accounts and inspirational examples of how colleges and universities are using NSSE results to enhance undergraduate teaching and learning.

**By Peter T. Ewell, Vice President,  
National Center for Higher Education  
Management Systems (NCHEMS)**

# Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education

## Overview of NSSE

The National Survey of Student Engagement annually surveys first-year and senior students at participating baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities to assess the extent to which they engage in and are exposed to proven educational practices that correspond to desirable learning outcomes. Institutions use the results to develop programs and practices that promote student engagement. The survey is administered in the spring term and is short, reliable, and easy for students to complete. It asks undergraduates about:

- their exposure to and participation in effective educational practices
- their use of time in and out of class
- what they feel they have gained from their educational experience
- the quality of their interactions with faculty and other students
- the extent to which they feel the institution provides a supportive environment

Participating institutions receive a detailed report with customized comparisons to selected institutions, supporting materials and resources, and a student-level data file. To date, approximately 1,400 colleges and universities in the US and Canada have participated in NSSE.

The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice was created to develop user resources and respond to requests for assistance in using student engagement results to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness. Since the NSSE Institute's inception in 2003, staff and associates have completed a major national study of high performing colleges and universities, made dozens of presentations at national and regional meetings, conducted workshops and Webinars for NSSE users, created user resources, including *Accreditation Toolkits* and *Working with NSSE Data: A Facilitator's Guide*, and worked with many campuses to enhance student success.

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD 2009

Assessment is a worthwhile undertaking when meaningful data are generated, evidence-based improvement initiatives are thoroughly considered and discussed, and results are ultimately used to improve educational effectiveness. NSSE results are oriented toward such practical use. Each year, more campuses use their NSSE results in innovative ways to improve the undergraduate experience. In this publication we highlight the approaches different types of institutions have taken to move from data to action.

Because NSSE focuses on student behavior and effective educational practice, colleges and universities have found many instructive ways to use survey results:

- Accountability
- Accreditation self-studies
- Alumni outreach
- Assessment and improvement
- Benchmarking
- Communication with internal and external stakeholders
- Faculty and staff development
- General education reform
- Grant writing
- Institutional advancement
- Institutional research
- Retention
- State system performance reviews

In the spring and summer of 2008, NSSE conducted an in-depth examination of how institutions use their NSSE results. Staff members from the NSSE Institute and doctoral students from NSSE client service teams interviewed more than 40 representatives from participating colleges and universities. The institutions represented a range of size, Carnegie-type, region, locale, and private-public control.

## Featured Institutions

We feature Youngstown State University, Pace University, and Viterbo University as illustrative cases for the successful use of NSSE results. In addition, we provide additional brief accounts from institutional research staff and campus contacts about how they have incorporated NSSE results into their assessment efforts.

### Integrating NSSE Results with Institutional and Other Survey Data

#### YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY (OH)

Youngstown State University (YSU), which celebrated its centennial year in 2008, is a comprehensive public university of 13,500 students who are recruited primarily from the metropolitan area in which it is located. YSU offers over 100 undergraduate majors, thirty masters programs, and doctorates in educational leadership and physical therapy. In 2000, YSU introduced a goal-based general education program that includes writing, oral communication, and critical thinking requirements, as well as a senior capstone course. In 2008 YSU received reaccreditation by the North Central Association of the Higher Learning Commission.

YSU has used NSSE data for assessment and reaccreditation. YSU has triangulated NSSE data from 2004, 2006, and 2007, with institutional and other national survey data and reported these results as part of YSU's participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) project. The VSA, an initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), provides information on the undergraduate experience through the College Portrait. Specific NSSE items fall into broad categories of “group learning experiences, active learning experiences, experiences with diverse groups of people and ideas, student interaction with campus and faculty,

institutional commitment to student learning and success.”

Results on these items are included on a template designed for Ohio's College Portrait/VSA project, [www.ysu.edu/institutional-research/ysuwsa0809.pdf](http://www.ysu.edu/institutional-research/ysuwsa0809.pdf). Faculty and staff reviewed VSA project data along with information about student learning from electronic portfolios, classroom embedded assignments, field tests, and data on faculty and first-year students derived from YSU's participation in Pennsylvania State University's “Parsing the First Year of College” project—a three-year study funded by the Spencer Foundation that included 35 institutions who researched the influences affecting student learning and persistence of new first-year students.

Dr. Sharon Stringer, Director of Assessment and Professor of Psychology at YSU, continues to collaborate with other units on campus to drill down on specific NSSE items that are part of the VSA template. They examine these data in relation to GPA, success, and progress rates, to determine whether there are patterns of performance among sub-populations of students (e.g., nontraditional students, diversity subgroups, transfer students). This process will inform future decisions about the selection of assessment tools such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) that provide direct measures. Stringer is using recommendations from *Assessment matters: The why and how of cracking open and using assessment results* (Ahren, Ryan, and Massa-McKinley, 2008) as a planning guide to deeper analyses of the data and pacing of assessment tests and surveys over the next four years. YSU has also collected internal survey data on general education over the past ten years and plans to examine these data in relation to NSSE and to direct measures of student learning.

Standing alone, NSSE only supplies indirect measures of student learning. The campus community and constituencies recognize that NSSE data are insufficient in themselves to make substantial changes in programs

or policies. For preparation of its self-study for the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), YSU used NSSE results, in-house questionnaires, and data on retention and diversity. Stringer considered all of these data resources to be very valuable in the design of YSU's new 2007-2013 Academic Strategic Plan, which emphasizes teaching, learning, and student engagement. The campus is dedicated to helping students integrate their curricular and co-curricular experiences. Future review of NSSE data will be used to enhance YSU's participation in Campus Compact, a national initiative that promotes community service, civic engagement, and service-learning in higher education. Although YSU joined Campus Compact in 2008, Stringer hopes to use NSSE results and other resources to assess the impact of service-learning experiences on students.

YSU has formed an Assessment Council with 14-16 members. The Council was established through the Provost's Office and includes faculty, staff (including Institutional Research & Policy Analysis, Student Affairs, and representatives from each college), and students. All members of the Council received a copy of the actual NSSE report (including raw data). The report was read by all members and discussed in Council meetings. The General Education Committee also participates in the Assessment Council and considers NSSE results to refine the general education goals. After careful review of the data by the Council, Stringer makes presentations to numerous campus constituents such as the President's Cabinet, Student Life, Student Government Association, academic advisors, and others.

Currently at YSU, the Assessment Council, General Education Committee, and Institutional Research play vital roles in reviewing and interpreting NSSE data. For the future, YSU plans to implement a Council on Teaching and Learning that will include campus-wide representation—including academic affairs, student affairs, and advising staff—to discuss data on student learning.

## Using NSSE Results to Study “Sophomore Slump”

### PACE UNIVERSITY (NY)

Pace University has participated annually in NSSE since 2002. Results have been shared extensively with the Board of Trustees, Presidents' Council, and senior administrative councils. The Provost's office has placed special emphasis on sharing results with faculty and the entire university community. NSSE results have not only been shared, but have been acted on and incorporated into various institutional assessments. Very early on, the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research along with the University Assessment Committee teamed up with the Pforzheimer Center for Faculty Development and the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology to present Faculty Development Days to review NSSE results. The programs prompted discussion among faculty concerning NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice such as Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, and Student-Faculty Interaction. Best practices were also shared.

In addition to sharing NSSE data with the various administrative councils, individual deans and department heads requested presentations on the results for their department faculty and staff. Each year, interest in “how we are doing” grows within the institution. Several NSSE items helped assess Pace's progress in achieving specific goals of its strategic plan in which a special emphasis was placed upon the goal of “student-centeredness.” NSSE items also were easily adapted to the goals and objectives of specific programs and initiatives such as:

- measurement of progress in service-learning
- development of capstone experiences
- participation in study abroad

- reaffirmation of Pace’s commitment to a diverse learning environment
- increase in positive student self-reports in mastering the learning objectives of the 2003 Core Curriculum

Some specific examples follow that further illustrate how NSSE results have been used by Pace for institutional improvement.

### *Improving the Sophomore Experience*

Pace University had long provided coordinated programs for first-year students to promote their success. These efforts seemed effective as evidenced by a stabilized first-year retention rate of 76–77%, beginning with fall 2000 cohort. However, no special initiatives or programs addressed the needs of students in their sophomore year and there was growing concern over a retention rate that after two years dropped off by more than 9%. Motivated by this persistence data and the success of the first-year experience, the “Sophomore Working Group,” comprised of faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals, began to focus on developing a special program or “experience” for sophomores.

In reviewing NSSE 2004 first-year results, the Working Group sought to better understand areas where Pace was doing well and those that needed improvement in students’ relationships with faculty, other students, administrators, and staff. Schreiner and Pattengale’s (2000) *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students: Helping Sophomores Succeed* provided the group with additional insights into the sophomore year. They found that the phenomenon of “sophomore slump” corresponded with a number of NSSE questions, so the Working Group incorporated these items into a short survey which was administered to sophomores to assess the extent to which students might be experiencing this phenomenon.

Findings from student responses to this survey revealed, for example, that relationships with faculty played a critical role in students’ assessment of their educational experiences and achievements, and that specific bureaucratic procedures for registration, financial aid, and payment of fees were a source of frustration for students.

Sophomore focus groups were also conducted to further contextualize NSSE responses to the Pace environment. Focus group findings were consistent with previous focus groups conducted among a larger sample of the general Pace student population, and indicated sources of students’ satisfaction and their key reasons for attending and remaining at Pace.

Specific actions and programs resulted from the findings of the Sophomore Working Group, including the development of comprehensive transition and support programs for sophomores such as the “Pace Plan”, a comprehensive advisement model for both academic and career advisement, and the expansion of faculty mentoring opportunities to increase quality interactions with faculty, and restructuring the registrar, bursar, and financial aid office.



Pace University

**“We rely upon NSSE and FSSE data to encourage the campus community to take responsibility for student learning and engagement.”**

—Margaret W. Cohen, Associate Provost for Professional Development and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Missouri-St. Louis

### *Digging Deeper: Examining Variation Within and Over Time*

In an effort to provide usable results to each school or college, Pace conducted a local NSSE administration in 2005. This provided larger samples for each of its schools and resulted in a more insightful profile of their students’ engagement experience. The Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research used NSSE results to determine whether there were significant differences in the engagement experience of students across schools and colleges.

Pace used NSSE data to carry out additional studies on the experiences of transfer students compared to native students; commuters compared to resident students and first-generation students. In addition, NSSE results have been used by professional schools at Pace in their accreditation efforts with AACSB, ABET, CCNE, and NCATE. Pace also incorporated NSSE results in its Middle States Self-Study in preparation for a spring 2009 reaccreditation visit.

Pace also looked over time at two satisfaction questions on NSSE to identify relationships between engagement practices and membership in one of the two extreme satisfaction groups, “Low Satisfaction” defined by “poor or fair” rating and “definite or probable would not repeat experience” versus “High Satisfaction” defined by “good or excellent” rating and “probable or definite would repeat experience.”

Although results indicated that the trend in most areas was one of improvement, the percentage of unambiguously satisfied students (i.e., those who

found the experience satisfactory and would attend the same institution) hovered steadily between 65 and 70% over a five-year period, compared to Pace’s Carnegie peers who consistently demonstrated higher scores.

In all, 37 engagement activities correlated positively with student satisfaction and perceptions of the Pace experience. The analysis demonstrated that the engagement activity most strongly correlated with student satisfaction was the quality of academic advising. This was followed by “provided the support to help you succeed academically,” “quality of your relationships with faculty members,” “coursework contributed to acquiring a broad general education,” and “quality of your relationships with administrative personnel and offices.”

The University Assessment Committee disseminated the findings of the five-year student satisfaction analysis as widely as possible, beginning with the University’s leadership—all members of the President’s Council which included the Vice President of Student Affairs, and all members of the University’s management team. Results from the five-year study and a report highlighting Pace’s NSSE results were also shared with the Board of Trustees. Faculty members were a prime audience for the satisfaction results since many of the activities identified were within their control. Because faculty members are often faced with reports of what is wrong, the Assessment Committee thought it was especially important for them to see what was “right.”

The Assessment Committee published a newsletter reporting on the five-year study of NSSE results that was sent through the provost's Listserv to all Pace faculty in late March 2007. To follow up, a workshop on the study was presented at the annual Faculty Institute in May.

## **NSSE TIP #1: Posting NSSE Results on the Web**

Many colleges and universities have displayed some or all of their results on the Web. This is an appropriate way to highlight institutional strengths and demonstrate an institution's commitment to quality improvement. Some institutions display all their NSSE reports online, while others post selected results highlighting institutional strengths or news releases emphasizing institutional participation and findings relevant to institutional performance priorities. More institutions are posting their NSSE *Executive Snapshot* and the NSSE *Pocket Guide Report: "What Students are Saying..."*, two short reports that summarize key student engagement findings. Participants in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) that elect to feature NSSE results have the opportunity to post additional information about their performance. See the NSSE Web site for NSSE-VSA updates, [www.nsse.iub.edu/html/vsa.cfm](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/html/vsa.cfm). Examples of institutional Web sites that display NSSE results in support of the assessment, transparency, and accountability initiatives in higher education are featured on the NSSE Web site. These sites are in keeping with NSSE's policy on rankings and guidelines for analyzing and interpreting results.

### ***Results Influence Revision of Freshman Seminar***

The influence of the five-year satisfaction results fed directly into an issue getting a great deal of attention and concern at Pace: a proposed revision in the Freshman Seminar, UNV 101. One of the most important changes proposed was to have full-time faculty from each of the schools and the college teach the UNV 101 course. In the past, professional staff and long-time adjunct faculty taught the seminar along with a handful of full-time faculty. The NSSE student satisfaction results provided additional evidence for the associate provost to convince deans and full-time faculty that the assignment of full-time faculty to UNV 101 would have a significant impact on the first-year experience. As the instructor of the seminar also served as the student's advisor, a second change extended the advisory role of the faculty member from a one-semester to a year-long relationship with the student. First-year students would be assigned to seminar sections based upon their professional school or college selection. As a result, first-year students would come into early contact with a full-time faculty member from their school or college in a meaningful advisory relationship. With the help of NSSE evidence to

strengthen the proposal, fall 2007 UNV101 sections benefitted from the expertise of 57 full-time faculty members.

### ***Results Inform Reorganization of Student Services***

The satisfaction study, which identified that "quality of your relationships with administrative personnel and offices" contributed to student satisfaction, and the sophomore survey results that revealed the need for improvement in student services, particularly the Registrar, Bursar and Financial Aid, made a strong case for the creation of "one-stop services." In 2007, these offices were restructured and renamed the Office of Student Assistance. A new administrator was hired to oversee the operation and a new series of assessments was performed to identify the most pressing problem areas. Pace's president was keen on using engagement results for improvements and made student satisfaction a high priority. He extended Pace's commitment to the improvement of service delivery and has supported formal programs to empower Pace staff to take greater responsibility for resolving student problems. Student engagement data provided Pace University leaders with empirical evidence of areas where action and change was needed.

## Effectively Communicating NSSE Results to Internal and External Stakeholders

### VITERBO UNIVERSITY (WI)

One of Sister Georgia Christensen's first goals after being named Viterbo University's new Director of Institutional Research and Assessment (IRA) in 2000 was to attend workshops and presentations to learn how to use institutional data in assessment and to provide feedback to faculty members about their students. At that time, Viterbo participated in a number of national surveys but used its results mostly for marketing-related activities. As she became more informed, Christensen was convinced that NSSE would reveal more useful information for assessment than the current surveys in use. She presented her findings and suggestions to senior administrators who then decided to participate in the NSSE 2006 and 2007 administrations. Since Viterbo also wanted to gather data on the experiences and expectations of its first-year students, as well as data on how faculty perceived students, the institution administered the BCSSE pilot in 2005, and FSSE in 2007.

### *Sharing NSSE Results*

Sr. Christensen attempts to be consistent in her use of NSSE, FSSE, and BCSSE data. She uses NSSE benchmark data for presentations and has shared results with the Board of Trustees, faculty at an in-service session, and with administrative and staff assemblies. The Board of Trustees places great importance on Viterbo's performance compared with other institutions and has developed a list of peer schools that Christensen uses for benchmarking. Not all schools on the list participate in NSSE but she selects those that do as a "selected peers" column to compare with Viterbo's scores and with the entire NSSE cohort. For faculty presentations, Christensen has focused on survey item results related to active

learning. For administrators and staff, she has presented results on items related to an enriching educational environment and stressed their role in creating that environment. She notes, "It's nice to stand in front of the campus community and say, 'This is your effect on students.'"

In addition to the groups above, Christensen has worked on analyses of survey data with the vice president of Student Development, the Offices of Communications and Marketing, and Admissions and Enrollment Management. The president of Viterbo has been an active supporter of NSSE as a measure of educational quality as opposed to a ranking system. He published an article in the local paper to explain why rankings on test scores and other external factors are not useful for judging the academic quality of an institution. NSSE results are publicly posted by the IRA office on the Viterbo Web site, [www.viterbo.edu/Assessment.aspx](http://www.viterbo.edu/Assessment.aspx).

### *Demonstrating Effective Diversity Initiatives*

Viterbo University, a private university located in La Crosse, Wisconsin, is committed to Catholic Franciscan values and its mission to provide each student with a quality liberal arts education rooted in the values of human dignity and respect for the world. The institution participates in a NSSE consortium of Catholic schools. Christensen is interested in how being in a Catholic school affects students' lives. Participating in a consortium helps Christensen understand what things are "special" about Viterbo—she feels religious affiliation creates special conditions.

Although grounded in a Franciscan tradition, Viterbo defines itself as an ecumenical university where diversity is an important core value. All undergraduates are required to take six hours of coursework chosen from the 81 courses in 19 departments that meet the diversity learning

**NSSE TIP #2:****Linking NSSE Data with Other Sources**

NSSE results can and should be linked to other data sources on campus to determine whether improvement efforts are having the desired effect. Because it is possible to identify individual student respondents, with appropriate approvals NSSE results can be linked with information from academic and financial aid transcripts, retention studies, focus groups, and results from other surveys to develop a rich, comprehensive picture of the undergraduate experience.

Some institutions want multiple years of data before taking action. Other institutions corroborate NSSE results with existing evidence to address areas of concern, such as student use of technology, amount of assigned reading and writing in certain majors, and quality of academic advising.

component. NSSE results have indicated that Viterbo students, in comparison to their selected peers, scored more highly on learning about diverse perspectives as a result of class discussions and written assignments that have intentionally incorporated different racial/ethnic, religious, gender-related, and political perspectives.

Intercultural study and exchange experiences enhance the Viterbo curriculum and foster diversity. With the assistance of a Title VI grant in 2006–2007, Viterbo University started a Latin American Studies Program. The Global Education office promotes study abroad programs to students and assists faculty in finding international opportunities for professional development.

***NSSE Results Influence Pedagogy***

As part of a Title III Program, Viterbo faculty members have increased the use of active learning strategies and technologies to create a learner-centered classroom. Faculty participated in intensive active learning workshops during university in-service and out-service weeks from 2004 to 2008. All had access to a Title III “Coach” who was trained in active learning teaching strategies and who reviewed faculty projects, observed their teaching, and finally evaluated the faculty member’s practice. Faculty submitted progress reports to the Title III Director and Coaches. NSSE results from both 2006 and 2007 reinforce the effectiveness of active learning strategies at Viterbo—students’ responses indicated

they learn more when they are intensely involved in their education, asked to think about what they are learning in different settings, and collaborate with faculty and other students on projects.

***Using NSSE in Higher Learning Commission-North Central Association Accreditation***

Viterbo used survey data throughout its HLC-NCA Comprehensive Self-Study. Two targeted areas where NSSE results established evidence to meet accreditation standards were diversity and active learning strategies (see above). Christensen also used NSSE *Institutional Report* data reports and supporting documents, raw data files, and NSSE’s *HLC-NCA Accreditation Toolkit* as additional resources to support the self-study. Her presentations at the HLC-NCA annual conference in April, 2007, and at the 2007 annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research in the Upper Midwest (AIRUM) on “The Role of the Institutional Researcher in Accreditation,” focused on preparing NSSE data for multiple audiences and using institutional data in the accreditation process. For example, in one PowerPoint slide, Christensen included a chart she had created that displayed Viterbo’s NSSE results mapped to HLC-NCA accreditation standards.

# Institutional Examples by Topic

## Making NSSE Data Part of a Systematic Assessment Approach

### CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY NORTHRIDGE (CA)

California State University Northridge (CSUN) has participated in NSSE four times over the past five years. Data from its NSSE 2007 administration were widely circulated for the first time on campus by the Office of Institutional Research (IR). CSUN had participated in a paper administration in 2006, as part of the BEAMS project. This yielded relatively small numbers of responses, making results less reliable, so they were not widely circulated. The current Director of Institutional Research, Bettina Huber, opted for the Web-only approach in 2007, along with an oversample of first-year (FY) students, with the result that just over 1,900 students completed the NSSE survey. Thanks to these “good numbers,” meaningful subgroup analysis was feasible for the first time.

All departments and colleges at CSUN are expected to provide annual planning reports. To assist with this process, the IR office provided tables broken down by college (see Table 1)

as part of a general overview of the 2007 NSSE findings presented at a spring 2008 session of the Provost’s Professional Development Series. The NSSE senior data, broken down by college, served as a focus for college-specific discussion groups held at the end of the session. Using the rich data from the oversample of FY students, Huber is currently comparing the progress of FY students who participated in University 100 (an introduction to the University) with those who did not take the class. She is also examining differences in engagement

**Table 1 ABSTRACT THINKING SKILLS: NSSE RESULTS BY COLLEGE**

NSSE Items Relating to the Emphasis on Abstract Thinking Skills in Coursework by College Housing Majors of Senior Respondents (Spring 2007 Percentages)								
	Arts, Media, & Commun.	Business & Econ.	Engin. & Comp. Sci.	Health & Human Dev.	Humanities	Science & Math	Social & Behav. Sci.	All Senior Resp.
During the current school year, coursework has substantially emphasized* the following mental activities:								
ANALYZING basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory (e.g., examining case/situation in depth & considering components)	78.6 (103)	89.4 (180)	86.6 (68)	82.4 (125)	85.8 (127)	86.5 (74)	82.0 (122)	84.8 (815)
APPLYING theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations	72.8 (103)	78.5 (181)	80.9 (68)	81.6 (125)	75.6 (127)	79.7 (74)	73.8 (122)	77.3 (816)
MAKING JUDGMENTS about value of information/arguments/methods	65.0 (103)	71.3 (181)	66.2 (68)	76.8 (125)	70.1 (127)	<b>81.1</b> (74)	76.2 (122)	72.5 (816)
SYNTHESIZING and organizing ideas/information/experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships	71.8 (103)	75.6 (180)	70.6 (68)	80.8 (125)	77.2 (127)	79.7 (74)	75.4 (122)	76.1 (815)
MEMORIZING facts, ideas, or methods from courses/readings and repeating them	63.1 (103)	58.0 (181)	47.1 (68)	<b>70.4</b> (125)	50.4 (127)	<b>71.6</b> (74)	60.7 (122)	59.9 (816)
During the current school year, I have often or very often								
put together ideas/concepts from different sources in completing assignments or during class discussion	65.1 (103)	73.4 (184)	65.2 (69)	70.3 (128)	64.1 (128)	69.7 (76)	73.8 (122)	69.4 (830)
examined the strengths & weaknesses of my own views on a topic or issue	52.5 (101)	36.7 (180)	33.3 (63)	<b>66.1</b> (124)	52.0 (127)	53.4 (73)	<b>64.4</b> (118)	51.5 (802)
learned something that changed my view of a topic or concept	66.3 (101)	63.0 (181)	39.1 (64)	<b>79.0</b> (124)	60.3 (126)	69.9 (73)	<b>72.9</b> (118)	65.9 (803)

Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of responses on which the percentages are based.

\*Substantial emphasis includes respondents saying that specific activities have been emphasized “very much” and “quite a bit.”

NOTE: In an effort to highlight areas of strength, numbers are highlighted in the above table whenever the percentage of respondents giving a certain response exceeds the percentage for all senior respondents by 5% or more.

among seniors who entered the university as first-year students or later in their college careers as community college transfer students.

Rather than using the NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice, CSUN's IR staff members have developed their own groupings of survey items to inform different educational processes students experience and to evaluate the effectiveness of certain campus services. For example, student responses regarding academic advising have been helpful in locating individuals' difficulties with advising services within a broader context of fairly widespread satisfaction. Huber has also found the option to select peer comparison groups very useful and looks at the performance of CSUN in relation to other CSU campuses and other large public, primarily nonresidential institutions.

CSUN was among a few dozen colleges in the nation participating in the fall 2007 beta test of the VSA (see p.4) and provides information to the College Portrait, a common Web template that institutions can use to meet the following objectives:

- Demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public
- Measure educational outcomes to identify effective educational practices
- Assemble information that is accessible, understandable, and comparable<sup>1</sup>

CSUN will continue to use NSSE data in future activities such as planned improvements to various university programs and exploring possible differences in the experiences of first-time FY and transfer students. Huber would also like to examine in more detail specific NSSE item clusters, such as those that comprise what she calls "abstract

thinking skills" (judgment, analysis, memorizing) and are included in the Level of Academic Challenge benchmark.

## CLEMSON UNIVERSITY (SC)

Clemson University has administered NSSE consecutively over the past seven years, beginning in 2003. A campus NSSE team was formed to provide faculty and administrative staff with resources and information about how to use NSSE in practice, and how to enhance the campus's administration. Recently, renewed efforts to share NSSE results across campus and have meaningful conversations about putting the results into practice have begun.

Clemson's president, James F. Barker, has set an institutional goal to become one of the top 20 public institutions in the nation by 2011. To reach this goal, increased focus has been placed on intentional data collection to ensure that all assessment instruments utilized are providing useful and actionable data.

In addition to NSSE, Clemson participates in COACHE, a job satisfaction survey created by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at Harvard University that gathers information on tenure-track faculty, and in the VSA.

For the first time in 2007, Clemson chose to customize its NSSE comparison groups. Eleanor Nault, Clemson's Director of Assessment, reports that this option has made the data reports much more useful. She has also found the NSSE benchmarks to be very helpful for institutional level analysis.

In addition to individual campus goals, the South Carolina State Budget and Control Board requires that all higher education institutions apply the Baldrige Criteria® reporting guidelines used to measure organizational performance. The Board used national criteria for educational quality and

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<sup>1</sup> Voluntary System of Accountability Web site. Retrieved on August 11, 2008, from [www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm](http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm).

adapted them to address the Baldrige Criteria. In its accountability report to the State Board, each institution must benchmark its performance against these criteria. Clemson accomplishes this task by integrating NSSE, VSA, and other institutional data.

NSSE results have been presented to the entire Division of Student Affairs, sparking productive



Clemson University

discussions concerning areas where the campus is succeeding in connecting with students, and areas that may require some attention. Stemming from the increase in emphasis on effective assessment measures at Clemson, the new Vice President of Student Affairs, Gail DiSabatino, invited Dr. George Kuh, Director of the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and then Director of NSSE, to campus in the fall 2007. Dr. Kuh suggested that assessment efforts work to identify underengaged students. Clemson's NSSE data has since been aggregated to identify large enough groups of students to successfully pinpoint characteristics of those who may be underengaged. Given the number of years the campus has administered NSSE, their pool of respondents is large enough for this method to be effective.

Presented with NSSE data, Clemson faculty members expressed concern over student reports of too few in-class discussions that address issues of diversity. The campus has since determined that faculty and students may have been interpreting the question differently. However, preserving the classroom as a safe space for conversations on diversity is very important to the University and faculty have been offered opportunities to learn more about teaching methods to engage students in these types of discussions. In addition, workshops on other types of pedagogical strategies have been developed and offered to faculty members.

NSSE data has been tied to other campus decisions at Clemson. Over the past three years, Clemson has initiated Creative Inquiry Projects—undergraduate research activities where faculty members guide small groups of students through a multi-semester project in various disciplines. Projects are designed to help students develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, as well as the abilities to work on teams and express themselves effectively in written and verbal communication.

A campus press release from last year highlighted how the Creative Inquiry program and other initiatives such as internships and cooperative experiences had, according to Clemson's 2007 NSSE results, increased the numbers of students participating in undergraduate research to a level significantly higher than institutions in Clemson's selected peer group.

Looking forward, Clemson plans to use NSSE data to evaluate first-year programs such as living and learning communities. Clemson's response rate to the survey is approaching a level where the numbers of students involved in these communities are a large enough part of the random sample of its student population that more targeted analysis of their responses will be possible.

**“NSSE complements our existing data sources to provide a more complete picture, and has been a catalyst on our campus for rethinking and reimagining the undergraduate learning experience.”**

—Brian D. Pettigrew, Assistant Vice President (Institutional Research & Planning) & Registrar, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

### HASTINGS COLLEGE (NE)

For decades, Hastings College (HC) has been telling potential students that its students are engaged, they learn, and they are satisfied. Faculty and administrators at the institution felt confident in this statement based on personal feedback from students but, until recently, there had been no concrete evidence to support their assertions. In 2006, with HLC-NCA accreditation looming, Hastings decided to adopt a systematic approach to measuring student outcomes to validate these claims. Participation in NSSE was chosen as a key component of this assessment approach.

To encourage survey participation, HC’s President Phil Dudley signed the NSSE e-mail invitation that asked students to respond to the NSSE request to participate. This personalized approach worked well and the school had a 75% participation rate. Such a high response rate bolstered the college’s confidence in its NSSE data since it suggested the results were closely representative of the total student population.

Upon receipt of 2007 NSSE data, Rich Lloyd, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and other HC administrators were pleased to find that the results “confirmed what they already knew.” High benchmark scores and positive growth in almost all areas in both first-year and senior results confirmed that HC students were actively engaged in their education.

According to Lloyd, Hastings had administered surveys in the past but their use was sporadic.

However, HC is now committed to adopting assessment strategies that provide useful data for accreditation and dissemination to external groups. As Lloyd noted “The HLC-NCA language is clear; they expect colleges to prove they are accomplishing their mission.” HLC was on campus in the spring of 2005 and asked Hastings to file a progress report by June of 2007. NSSE, and other assessments, were selected to address key components in the institution’s response.

Hastings also wanted a plan that it could use for internal assessment. As a small campus in rural Nebraska, student scores on diversity-related items on the NSSE survey were not as high as those involved in assessment had hoped, so Hastings drilled down to specific item responses to determine which areas needed improvement. By using NSSE results to target specific diversity needs, Hastings was able to implement new programs to improve these areas and to encourage more interaction among students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. The new programs included publishing an annual campus-wide diversity calendar, establishing the Faculty Diversity Initiative, and increasing study abroad opportunities.

Campus administrators share NSSE results, along with those of other assessment instruments, with all new students in a simple one-page overview. Finally, students’ responses to NSSE survey items are posted on the Hastings Web site and accessed through a prominent link on the home page.

Lloyd says Hastings still has a long way to go in determining how to “tell the story with NSSE.” He believes a systematic approach to assessment and commitment to use of the data will result in significant gains as Hastings College continues to grow and change.

### PEACE COLLEGE (NC)

Peace College is a private, liberal arts college for women located in Raleigh, North Carolina. Faculty-student interaction is central to Peace’s mission and NSSE results serve as a gauge of how well they are doing in fulfilling that mission. Student-reported data on the extent to which they are challenged in their coursework is of major concern to faculty and administrators at Peace and significant focus is placed on the NSSE benchmark, Level of Academic Challenge. Two outcomes of this focus were the addition of a required statistics course to the general education curriculum and continuing conversations regarding pedagogy. Starting in 2008, Peace began comparing student performance from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) along with NSSE to gather more in-depth data on this benchmark.

Having recently completed its eighth administration of NSSE, Peace had made the reporting of NSSE results a part of the campus culture and an expected component of the campus’s regular assessment plan. In addition to use as an assessment tool, Peace’s marketing office has used NSSE results as a public relations resource for the campus. Dr. David B. McLennan, Associate Dean for Institutional Effectiveness and Professor of Communication and Political Science, issues annual reports to the institution’s curriculum committee and presents NSSE data to the faculty several times each year, charging them to review specific aspects of the data. While these groups are presented with detailed information, senior administrators at Peace receive a broad overview of all NSSE results. Even though NSSE

results are widely disseminated across campus, Peace would like to dig deeper into its NSSE data and plans to begin more comparative analyses.

### UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA MERCED (CA)

The University of California (UC) Merced is the first new American research university of the 21st century. NSSE was a part of the UC Merced assessment strategy beginning with its very first student body in the 2005-2006 academic year. In addition to fulfilling accreditation requirements, the administrators at UC Merced saw a need for data to track progress over time as both the students and the campus develop and grow—or formative feedback according to Nancy Ochsner, Director of Institutional Planning & Analysis.

Prior to beginning their positions at UC Merced, key administrators such as Ochsner had worked with NSSE data at other institutions. When they were hired by UC Merced and tasked with opening a new university, these administrators immediately turned to NSSE as a source of credible data to help them monitor student support services and encourage faculty to embrace a holistic view of students’ UC Merced experience. In particular, administrators involved in assessment and planning hope to use NSSE data to help faculty and staff understand the student experience and maintain effective academic and co-curricular connections with students.

UC Merced has not yet received a Carnegie classification. In the future, the institution will be classified as a research university. However, for now, the ability to compare their institution with other institutions participating in NSSE is critical to UC Merced administrators. The customization of the peer comparison groups is particularly important as the institution grows and expands. They want to be able to benchmark UC Merced experiences both with

research universities (mostly much larger) and with selective liberal arts colleges (more similar in size). NSSE allowed the campus to define both groups for comparisons and, as UC Merced develops, they will redefine their comparison groups appropriately.

UC Merced has received data from two past NSSE administrations and is participating again in 2009. Results already reflect the unique UC Merced student experience. For example, during the first academic year of operation, there were no classrooms on the campus and classes were held in the library as facilities were being built and opened for use. Responses to NSSE reflected that experience. NSSE responses also mirrored student responses to other surveys conducted by UC Merced, including the system-mandated University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES).

UC Merced administrators carried out additional analyses to further confirm that NSSE results reflected the student experience on campus. They disaggregated NSSE data using different demographics to understand the experiences of a number of selected groups such as first-generation and transfer students, students of different races or ethnicities, and students in different majors. UC Merced considers these

analyses, made possible by using NSSE raw data, to be essential for an institution with such a diverse student body.

UC Merced has also made use of other NSSE resources, particularly the PowerPoint presentation included with the *Institutional Report* and research papers and presentations available on the NSSE Web site. These materials have helped administrators and staff make sense of the large amount of data returned to NSSE participants, and to share results with other campus audiences. In sorting through the data, Ochsner found it helpful to focus attention on effect sizes since there was so much information to process.

Thus far, UC Merced administrators have shared their NSSE data with senior administration, including the Chancellor's Cabinet and various deans, and students, including the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Advisory Group. "The students at UC Merced get excited about the findings too," Ochsner told NSSE staff. "The goal is to familiarize them with survey data," she continued. Some next steps for Ochsner and other administrators involved in assessment include beginning discussions with faculty on using NSSE data and working on their partnership with the newly formed Center for Research on Teaching Excellence.

## UNIVERSITY OF DENVER (CO)

The University of Denver (DU) has a tradition of administering the NSSE survey and Janette Benson, the Director of the Office of Academic Assessment, hopes to enhance the tradition by looking at new ways to utilize NSSE results. The oldest private university in the Rocky mountain region, DU serves almost 5,000 undergraduate students. Based on



Peace College

previous NSSE benchmarking results, the college has high levels of engagement in comparison with its peers. Benson believes DU's NSSE results have the potential to provide the University with much more than comparative information.

Benson is enthusiastic about including analysis of NSSE results as one component of the institutions' larger academic assessment plan. Drawing on her background as a cognitive developmental psychologist, Benson plans to disaggregate NSSE results. "We should be using NSSE as part of a direct assessment of what the University of Denver is doing on campus for different groups of students," said Benson. As a faculty member and administrator, she is optimistic that she will help DU's faculty continue to find value in using NSSE results to learn more about their students.

Institutional Research and senior administrators were particularly excited about DU's 2008 BCSSE administration. Benson hopes participating in both NSSE and BCSSE will allow the University to collect longitudinal data on incoming students. She believes the institution could benefit greatly by looking at both students with low- and high-engagement scores in NSSE and examine their previous high school experiences and expectations for college.

In the future, Benson plans to examine the types of learning that occur in different educational programs at DU. She will begin by assessing some of the key features of general education unique to DU. Using evidence from the field of cognitive developmental psychology that suggests a higher level of learning goes on in areas where students have the most motivation and expertise, such as their majors, Benson hopes to dig deeper and break down NSSE results by major area of study. She believes the outcomes within the majors might be a better indicator of what students are actually learning.

NSSE comparison reports are a beneficial part of the overall NSSE survey results, according to Benson, and she uses them to benchmark DU's performance against other schools. By making a commitment to incorporate NSSE into the overall institutional assessment plan, Benson and others will be able to use the data for more targeted analysis. She believes this approach will eventually help DU fully understand how to best educate students in accordance with its institutional mission.

## Promoting Student Engagement through Shared Leadership and Collaboration

### UNIVERSITY OF TULSA (OK)

The University of Tulsa (TU) is a private doctoral-degree granting university with an average student enrollment of slightly over 4,100. Of this total, approximately 3,000 are undergraduates. The campus is close to downtown Tulsa, OK, an urban center with a population of 550,000. The University's mission reflects the core values of excellence in scholarship, dedication to free inquiry, integrity of character, and commitment to humanity.

The decision to participate in NSSE was made by the Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs in 2001. Institutional administrators were motivated to learn more about the experiences and expectations of their students and to discover if faculty and staff impressions of students were accurate. TU participated in NSSE in 2001, 2004, and 2007; and in Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) in 2004 and 2007. In addition, the College of Law administered the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) in 2004 and 2007.

“BCSSE and NSSE results have **helped guide** our thinking and planning over the past two years as the campus engaged in a broad-based **strategic planning process.**”

—Marianne D. Kennedy, Professor and Coordinator of Assessment and Planning,  
Southern Connecticut State University

Winona Tanaka, a Clinical Associate Professor from the TU College of Law, is the current Vice Provost and Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs whose responsibilities include heading up administration of NSSE and working with survey results. Over the past five years, she has actively promoted the use of NSSE results for assessment and planning across campus. In addition, after attending a NSSE users workshop, her office has provided funds for two faculty members, the dean of students, and several senior administrators from enrollment services and university assessment to attend additional NSSE workshops. Dr. Alex Wiseman, an Assistant Professor in the School of Education, attended a NSSE workshop and later delivered presentations to the Student Services staff at TU using many of the materials—such as handouts, slides, and exercises—he had gathered in the NSSE sessions.

The culture at TU is to “work together” across division lines. Tanaka has presented NSSE results in the Dean’s Council, at the annual campus-wide meeting of faculty and staff, to Student Services staff, and to internal HLC accreditation committees. Presentations focused on using NSSE results as indirect measures to support selected standards in TU’s self-study, a component of the HLC reaccreditation process. NSSE data was used to affirm a number of assertions in the self-study.

Professor Tanaka uses NSSE benchmark data for broad comparisons. When carrying out analysis of specific areas, she frequently uses disaggregated raw data. For example, TU prides itself on the quality of relationships between students and faculty. Using

student responses from selected NSSE items, the vice-provost was able to present to the Dean’s Council a revealing look at student-faculty interaction on campus.

Although NSSE results were mainly used for reaccreditation purposes, the Admissions and Student Services offices were very interested in student responses that Tanaka had pulled out for the self-study on survey items 7d and 7g, which ask students if they plan to or have: a) worked with a faculty member on a research project, or b) pursued an independent study or a self-designed major. Admissions and Student Affairs plan to use these data along with scores on diversity items in recruiting materials. These offices have created an advisory board of high school counselors from across the country. TU funds the counselors to come to campus for an annual meeting to gather their expertise on meeting the needs of first-year students.



Responsibilities for assessment have moved from the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs to the Director of University Assessment over the past year. University Assessment hopes to collaborate with a faculty member in each college who will serve as a champion for helping their colleagues understand the importance and usefulness of NSSE data for analysis at the college level.

## Empowering Institutional Stakeholders to Convert NSSE Results into Action: Diversity, Student Affairs, Faculty, Communicating Results

### TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY (TX)

Texas A&M University (TAMU) was opened in 1876 as the first public institution of higher learning in the state. Currently TAMU has a student enrollment of 46,000-plus students (8,500 are graduate students). About 25% of first-year students are the first in their family to attend college

NSSE data have been used in a variety of ways at TAMU. Texas law requires public universities to report student satisfaction data to the state. Since 2001, the Texas A&M University system has used NSSE as a tool to report these data. Associate Director of Measurement and Research Services, Mark Troy, sends out NSSE results to all Deans as well as a custom-tailored college-level analysis of the data. Several colleges, such as Agriculture and Liberal Arts, have used NSSE data for their institutional effectiveness reports.

Several task forces at TAMU were established to better measure the institution's progress in serving students. One of these task forces focuses exclusively on writing. In 2005, another task force identified 20 characteristics a TAMU graduate should possess, one of them being writing effectively. However, when

compared to other institutions, the task force found that TAMU students were not performing as well as their selected peers on this characteristic. After targeted analyses of specific NSSE item responses related to communication, TAMU established the University Writing Center, a student calibrated peer-review program, and "W courses"—courses with intensive writing components in many majors. Similar targeted analyses of NSSE items related to student research have been conducted in support of TAMU's initiative to enhance the undergraduate experience through inquiry/research-based education.

To share NSSE results and encourage campus-wide interest in the assessment process, Troy has made presentations on NSSE to the University Assessment Committee, a group that deals with all assessment-related topics for the University and to some of the college assessment committees. Troy has also found the NSSE pocket guide to be a very useful tool for sharing NSSE results. He and his staff pulled out TAMU's results related to the guide questions and compiled a report which was sent across campus to academic advisors and admission officers.

### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, WILMINGTON (NC)

The University of North Carolina, Wilmington (UNCW) enrolls over 10,000 undergraduates who pursue 73 baccalaureate programs and, for over 10 years, has been recognized as one of the top public universities in the South. A recent conversation with university leaders from institutional research, academic affairs assessment, and student affairs assessment revealed how this institution has empowered various stakeholders to use NSSE results to take meaningful action in their respective areas.

For UNCW executive leadership, NSSE provided a snapshot of student engagement at the university as well as a comparison of UNCW students with

**NSSE TIP #3:****Benchmark against meaningful comparison groups**

To assist in benchmarking efforts, NSSE allows institutions to select other participating institutions to form comparison groups with a minimum of six other institutions. Using a Web-based tool, institutions determine the comparison groups included in their institutional reports based on criteria they establish or by selecting from the list of participating colleges and universities. Suggestions for creating meaningful comparison groups can be found in the *Customizing Your NSSE Institutional Report* document at [www.nsse.iub.edu/links/comparison\\_groups](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/links/comparison_groups).

Institutions use peer comparisons (normative perspective) to confirm or challenge assumptions about performance. A criterion-referenced view of student engagement, whereby the institution's results are compared against a predetermined value or level that the institution deems appropriate for students, can provide a more meaningful gauge of performance given institutional mission, size, curricular offerings, funding, and so forth.

self-selected peers. Assistant Vice Chancellor, Lisa Castellino, who coordinated NSSE administration and oversaw the dissemination of findings, discovered that visually representing NSSE results was highly effective for large and varied audiences. Castellino used graphics to cluster UNCW results on the five NSSE benchmarks and to represent its survey scores as compared to peer institutions. She used arrows to indicate whether the institution's mean was above or below their comparison groups and different colors to denote the strength of differences. Her visual presentation of findings along with a summary of areas of strength, progress, and mixed performance helped make the data easily understood by all campus audiences.

The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at UNCW recently made NSSE data available through a secure server. The Office had been challenged to respond to various requests by university assessment experts for specialized analyses of NSSE data. By providing server access to NSSE data, campus assessment professionals were enabled to conduct their own analyses related to specific functional areas. NSSE data has now become a living resource for decision making in the university. Future plans include providing access to multiple years of NSSE data and adding more UNCW-specific information,

such as student residence, academic major, grade point average, and standardized test results.

Additionally, the Division of Student Affairs has used NSSE data as an impetus for improvement in the areas of advising, diversity, and co-curricular activities. In an initiative focused on career planning and advising, the Division found that survey responses from students of color and those majoring in physical sciences and engineering indicated that they were less likely to consult with faculty or advisors about their career plans. The Division recruited more career advisors of color, developed a mentoring program for minority students, and increased staffing to reach out to physical sciences and engineering majors. NSSE results related to diversity also showed variation in the frequency that students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds participated in conversations with diverse peers. These findings prompted the Division to host diversity workshops and conferences, to increase support for select subpopulations, and to create new staff positions for advising multicultural organizations and conducting multicultural programming. Finally, NSSE findings and other feedback led to a UNCWeekends campus initiative to increase co-curricular engagement.

**“We’ve used our NSSE results to support major expansion of the learning communities, faculty development initiatives, and creation of a host of online student support tools.”**

—Rosa L. Jones, Vice President for Student Affairs and Undergraduate Education,  
Florida International University

The Watson School of Education at UNCW has used NSSE data to develop summary reports that compare student engagement results in individual departments with all other students at the university. NSSE data on diversity have also been made available to the Watson School Diversity Committee. These data were used as part of the basis for discussions in the diversity committee that led to the planning and implementation of a diversity showcase. By combining and averaging three years of NSSE results, academic departments with smaller majors had additional respondents which provided more reliable measures. These reports, organized around the five NSSE benchmarks, offered descriptive summaries and item level frequencies for first-year and senior students. While NSSE findings are becoming more integrated in the decision making process, the response rate seems to be an obstacle to overcome for academic units like the Watson School of Education.

## Student Faculty Interaction

### THE COLLEGE AT BROCKPORT, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (NY)

Located in a small town on the historic Erie Canal, The College at Brockport, State University of New York (SUNY Brockport) is located 16 miles west of Rochester, NY, and about 45 miles east of Buffalo. SUNY Brockport was one of the founding institutions in the pilot (2003–2004) of the Foundation of Excellence® in the First College Year process and participated in NSSE for the first time in 2004. Since then, the institution has participated in the survey every year.

After receiving NSSE results for several years, department chairs at Brockport began to express interest in the survey and ask about the responses of their specific students. To better help faculty serve students, Lillian Zhu, Director of Institutional Research and Planning, utilized the group variable columns in the population file to identify the academic majors of students. Then, she created binders for each department which included NSSE mean comparisons and frequency distributions reports from students in that department over the span of four years compared to the entire Brockport sample. In addition, she and her institutional research (IR) team wrote a one-page summary detailing specific results that department chairs should pay special attention to in both highlighting and improving their efforts.

Zhu and her IR team also provided reports to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Honors program, and the Delta College program, an alternative to the traditional General Education program. Delta College offers students an interdisciplinary approach to required courses with a special focus on career preparation. Students work closely with faculty and take up to 10 classes together as a cohort.

Zhu continued working with department chairs and faculty following the distribution of binders. Brockport had also participated in FSSE three times from 2006–2008. Through various presentations to and discussions with school deans, Zhu addressed differences or mismatches present in faculty and student perceptions revealed in comparing FSSE and NSSE results. For example, the amount of time faculty indicated students should be investing in class was very different from

the amount of time students actually reported. These discussions have led to the development of several action plans to improve the undergraduate experience at Brockport.

With the system participation of all SUNY schools in 2008, Zhu looks forward to making use of comparison data to review Brockport's performance with other system institutions.

## UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI (OH)

The University of Cincinnati (UC), a public research university in Cincinnati, Ohio, uses NSSE results to assess ongoing initiatives and establish new ones. In response to student satisfaction and technology use scores, the university established a “One-Stop Service Center” and provided students with 24-hour access to selected computer labs. UC has also used NSSE results to inform curriculum planning as it has expanded learning community offerings. Additionally, NSSE participation and data have been used to fulfill assessment requirements for the Ohio Needs Grant, a

student success grant with funding tied to institutional improvement and new program evaluation.

When asked about the primary use of NSSE data, Caroline Miller, Senior Associate Vice President and Associate Provost for Enrollment Management, replied, “We use it to inform staffing decisions and to determine student satisfaction levels and the quality of services and experiences (academic and social) students have—particularly in regards to diversity matters.” NSSE results are shared on campus with individual colleges and student affairs units, enrollment management, and committees and task forces. These groups use NSSE in conjunction with other data to assess specific areas such as recruitment, retention, student satisfaction, and involvement and participation levels based on race and gender. NSSE results are also regularly included in the President's Report Cards, [www.uc.edu/reportcard](http://www.uc.edu/reportcard), a publicly-available document published for the Board of Trustees intended to show university performance on key indicators.



University of Tulsa

## WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY (OH)

Wittenberg University is a private liberal arts college located in Springfield, Ohio, with an undergraduate enrollment of 1,950 full-time students. The institution promotes student engagement through shared leadership and collaboration. President Mark Erickson created the President's Task Force to study student engagement in the academic and co-curricular environments on campus. Along with the task force, three other committees were formed to focus on the long term institutional goals of education and communication, social context and values, and community standards and compliance.

For the Wittenberg task force, student engagement informed a rubric that targeted efforts on student learning and academic growth. To advance these efforts, the student engagement committee developed action plans based on the *Inventory for Student Engagement and Success (ISES)* (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), a self-guided framework for conducting a comprehensive, systematic, institution-wide analysis; carried out more in-depth analyses of their NSSE data; and followed-up these activities with a climate study. It was hoped that such efforts

would provide evidence to show whether Wittenberg had increased levels of student engagement. The institution also intends to study engagement trends over time, to compare their NSSE results with selected peers, and to consider how other colleges engaged faculty as key partners in the assessment process.

A challenge Wittenberg faced was encouraging faculty investment in the student engagement concept. Leaders of the student engagement committee carefully chose faculty representatives from across the campus who had a strong commitment to students and to service. As they began to understand that student engagement was rooted in academics, the selected faculty members became more invested in the charge of the committee. Faculty then carried out a particularly useful exercise using several prompts from ISES framework to identify functional areas of the institution that helped to strengthen and promote student success. They talked with students, faculty peers, and administrators about these areas to further promote understanding of the concept of student engagement. These discussions were felt to increase commitment to student engagement among faculty, administrators, and students at Wittenberg.

**“NSSE is becoming increasingly helpful in improving student success and building public confidence in the commitment of colleges and universities to improve teaching and learning.”**

—Paul E. Lingenfelter, President, State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO)

## Quick Takes

### INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS (IUPUI)

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), a large public university in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana, has participated in NSSE four times since NSSE's launch in 2000. To make use of NSSE results, IUPUI has mapped NSSE data to campus-wide principles of undergraduate learning for curriculum and co-curricular development (service-learning, research with faculty, and study abroad) and uses the data as performance indicators in those critical areas. NSSE data are also mapped to performance indicators in strategic planning and institutional improvement, specifically for gains on diversity goals, in technology use and participation in service-learning; corroborating data from other in-house instruments (advising); and evaluating first-year programs. To inform staffing decisions, the Office of Information Management and Institutional Research at IUPUI has presented data from NSSE to the Board of Trustees and various units and departments highlighting the positive engagement/educational impact of on-campus employment for students, and has encouraged departments and units to hire more students to fill staff positions.

Several concrete changes at IUPUI have been motivated by NSSE data. Based on participation results related to service-learning in thematic learning communities, stronger linkages between service experiences and learning outcomes have been created and opportunities for participation in service-learning increased. A new program, RISE, or RISE to the Challenge, was implemented to ensure that all students take part in at least one of the following

four high-impact experiences prior to graduation: undergraduate research, study abroad, service-learning, or internship experience.

IUPUI also participated in FSSE in 2006. Based on its results, IUPUI implemented curricular changes focused on diversity; specifically, faculty use of diverse perspectives in the classroom. IUPUI also explored other areas of disconnect between faculty and student responses.

### NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (NMU)

Northern Michigan University (NMU) is a public university with 9,400 undergraduate and graduate students. Northern, located in the Upper Peninsula, is also one of three universities in the state of Michigan to serve a community college role for its region. NMU is noted for its focus on using technology in higher education and is one of the largest notebook computer campuses in the US. Full-time students receive either a ThinkPad or iBook as part of tuition.

The Associate Vice President of Institutional Research at NMU, Paul Duby, chose to participate in NSSE because he felt it is a survey instrument that measures holistic and affective learning processes. NMU places great emphasis on encouraging students to get involved in service-learning. The Superior Edge program, which currently has over 1,500 students enrolled, combines community engagement, diversity awareness, leadership development, and real-world experience. Duby considers NSSE the best instrument to assess the impact of service-learning through more meaningful constructs of processes and outcomes.

## UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON (OH)

The University of Dayton (UD) is one of the nation's 10 largest Catholic universities and Ohio's largest private university, with an enrollment of 6,800 full-time undergraduates and more than 70 academic programs in arts and sciences, business administration, education and allied professions, engineering, and law. UD participated in NSSE in 2004, 2005, and 2007, which will allow the institution to identify student engagement trends over time and support evaluation of responses by subgroups of students who completed the survey both in their first-year and senior years. NSSE results along with other assessment data will help the University draw a more complete picture of its students and programs.

Academic divisions and departments have used NSSE analyses to identify areas of strength and possible areas of concern. Divisional deans received reports of student engagement results in specific colleges as compared to all other students at the institution and for individual departments compared to other students in the division. By drilling down into the data, institutional leaders gained a profile of their students in various majors as well as a comparison to students in other departments and divisions. For example, the institution examined differences in



Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

the level of engagement for first-year students who persisted at the university with that of those who withdrew. The findings were not surprising—students who persisted at the institution spent more time with instructors, felt they got more feedback on assignments, and participated more frequently in classes. These data helped define a basic core of experiences that contributed to students' success.

The School of Engineering at UD used NSSE data to assess their approach to first-year advising. When comparing student ratings of advising on NSSE prior to and after program changes, the school decided to keep the new advising system for now. They will continue to monitor students' ratings on advising.

## WESTMINSTER COLLEGE (UT)

A private, comprehensive liberal arts institution located in Salt Lake City, Utah, Westminster College enrolls approximately 2,000 undergraduates. The college has administered NSSE 7 times, FSSE 4 times, and BCSSE once since 2001, and utilizes combined survey results to better understand student engagement on campus and to effectively plan for the future.

Paul Presson, Associate Provost for Institutional Research and Assessment, finds that comparisons and analyses using what he terms the “linked” data from all three surveys to analyze engagement trends over time is essential to its Westminster's long term planning. He explains, “We take it seriously. We started a new process of what we call ‘effectiveness retreats’ where we bring in senior staff, deans, board members and we spend half a day looking at NSSE,

## **NSSE TIP #4:** Improving Campus Confidence in Results

Faculty members and administrative staff often raise questions about the validity and reliability of student self-reported data. It may be helpful to build a case for the validity of the findings at your institution. In response to skeptics who question whether their results really capture student educational experiences, some institutions have administered local instruments with items similar to those in NSSE to validate their NSSE results to the campus community. The use of additional instruments may help build a stronger sense of the validity of the findings.

NSSE has done a lot to establish the robustness of the survey. Consider reviewing the NSSE Psychometric Properties document when planning a faculty or administrative retreat and plan to have a few copies on hand for those who want more details. The document can be downloaded from the NSSE Web site, [www.nsse.iub.edu/pdf/conceptual\\_framework\\_2003.pdf](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/pdf/conceptual_framework_2003.pdf).

BCSSE, and FSSE and the senior surveys, alumni surveys, career center surveys—I spend basically the whole fall semester looking at those findings.” FSSE results have provided a point of reference to understand students’ engagement at Westminster. Most NSSE and FSSE comparison results have been consistent. However, in some cases NSSE and FSSE results identified mismatches between student and faculty responses.

To provide an example of how Westminster has integrated its survey data, NSSE results indicated that students felt satisfied with their level of contact with faculty for academic advising but did not feel they were getting enough career advising and general emotional support. The college looked at FSSE results to verify that faculty perceived that students felt these types of interactions were important, then implemented a new career advising program and created a learning community requirement for first-year students. Westminster will use BCSSE results to further refine and monitor its understanding of student needs for institutional support.



Wittenberg University

## Conclusion: Valuable Lessons from the Field

NSSE provides information that helps colleges and universities plan strategies and programs to assess and improve the quality of undergraduate education. The institutions featured in this report illustrate valuable maxims and instructive lessons for maximizing the use and impact of NSSE results.

### Generate enthusiasm and commitment to NSSE as a tool for assessment across campus.

Develop a communication strategy before and after survey administration so stakeholders will take interest and support the incorporation of NSSE into institutional improvement efforts.

At Pace University, assessment and institutional research staff members teamed up with the faculty development and teaching and learning centers on campus to create faculty sessions where NSSE results were presented. Deans and department heads also scheduled special presentations with their department faculty. New students at Hastings College receive a one-page assessment overview which includes NSSE results. Results are also posted on the Hastings Web site. Senior administrators and institutional research staff at Viterbo University actively promote NSSE as a measure of educational quality and publically display survey results on the institutional Web site.

### Collaborate and share leadership in promoting student engagement.

Members of the Admissions and Student Affairs staff at the University of Tulsa (TU) include NSSE benchmark scores in their recruiting materials. TU also reviewed NSSE results to better understand the first-year experience and formed an advisory board of high school counselors from across the country to gather expertise in meeting the needs of incoming students.

### Identify sub-populations of interest such as academic departments and/or specific groups of students. Collect results from enough students so the information is usable at the department or unit level or to support specialized accreditation efforts.

Pace University used selected NSSE results for seniors by major in its specialized accreditation efforts for AACSB, ABET, and NCATE. CSU Northridge disaggregated NSSE senior data, broken down by college, on NSSE items related to abstract thinking skills. They also conducted a targeted oversample among first-year students so that they compared experiences between first-year students who participated in a class that introduced them to University with those that did not. SUNY Brockport utilized the group variable columns in the population file to identify the academic majors of students and then created binders for each department that included NSSE mean comparisons and frequency distributions reports from students in that department over the span of four years compared to the entire Brockport sample.

### Identify peer comparison groups (normative perspective) to confirm or challenge assumptions about performance. Consider a criterion-referenced view of student engagement in the context of the institution's mission.

Customization of its peer comparison groups allows UC Merced, a new research university, to compare its students experiences with both research universities (mostly much larger) and with selective liberal arts colleges (more similar in size). This customization will allow UC Merced to redefine its comparison groups appropriately over time.

**Participate in a consortium to further focus comparisons with similar institutions and to custom-tailor questions to the survey.**

Viterbo University has joined a consortium of Catholic institutions to further explore how religious affiliation influences students' lives.

**Use NSSE results to identify potential areas for further research best captured by qualitative studies.**

Quantitative assessments provide a useful, but incomplete picture of the student experience. To gain more detailed information, institutions have used their NSSE results as a jumping off point for developing a protocol for focus groups and student and faculty interviews. Pace University identified several NSSE item results from first-year students that concerned them, and then explored these topics more in-depth via focus groups.



Viterbo University

**Validate findings by linking NSSE data to other data sources. Corroboration of engagement results with other institutional data increases confidence in decision-making.**

Clemson University integrates NSSE, VSA, and other institutional data into a version of Baldrige standards adapted to assess education quality to meet South Carolina state budget performance guidelines. Youngstown State also uses its NSSE results for Ohio's College Portrait/VSA project. Viterbo mapped its results to HLC-NCA standards to support its Comprehensive Self-Study. Student responses on NSSE items related to two targeted areas, diversity and active learning, helped establish evidence for meeting accreditation standards. Comparing BCSSE and NSSE data helps the University of Denver to understand how high school experiences may affect the college success. The University of Tulsa, SUNY Brockport, IUPUI, and Westminster College review the alignment and disconnect of faculty and student expectations and experiences using NSSE and FSSE data in tandem. As a "living resource," NSSE data are available to assessment researchers along with other institutional data, through a secure, dedicated server at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

**Incorporate NSSE data into strategic planning and create a culture of assessment on campus.**

Review of NSSE data is part of regular assessment planning and considered formative feedback at Peace College. NSSE results are also one component of the University of Denver's larger academic assessment plan. At the University of Cincinnati, NSSE results have been used to fulfill requirements for state grants aimed at student success. UC and IUPUI as well have used their survey data to inform campus staffing decisions.

## Translate data into action.

To help students further integrate their curricular and co-curricular experiences, Youngstown State will use NSSE results to assess the impact of their experiences in service-learning and community services activities. When Texas A&M University found that their students did not perform as well as their selected peers on NSSE items related to communication skills, TAMU established a University Writing Center, a student peer review program, and added cross-disciplinary, writing-intensive, “W” courses. To implement its plan to create a greater awareness of diversity on campus, Hastings College implemented a diversity calendar, a faculty diversity initiative, and increased study abroad opportunities. Northern Michigan University found NSSE to be a useful measure of the impact service-learning has on its students.

## Final Word

Collecting and documenting how NSSE colleges and universities use their results is an ongoing process. We want to know how you are using your NSSE data. Please send specific examples of internal reports or brochures highlighting NSSE data, usage strategies, and special activities to us at [nsse@indiana.edu](mailto:nsse@indiana.edu). These examples will form a shared resource for colleges and universities and assist in our continuing efforts to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience for all students.

## NSSE Resources Referenced by Institutions in this Report

Regional and Specialized Accreditation Toolkits  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/links/accred\\_toolkits](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/links/accred_toolkits)

*A Guide to Contextualizing Your NSSE Data: Cognitive Interviews and Focus Groups*  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/links/cognitive\\_interviews](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/links/cognitive_interviews)

*Working with NSSE Data: A Facilitator’s Guide*  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/links/facilitators\\_guide](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/links/facilitators_guide)

*NSSE Multi-Year Data Analysis Guide*  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/links/mydag](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/links/mydag)

NSSE Webinar Series  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/webinars](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/webinars)

*Customizing Your Institutional Report: A Guide to Selecting Your Comparison Groups*  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/links/comparison\\_groups](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/links/comparison_groups)

NSSE Users Workshops  
[www.nsse.iub.edu/workshop\\_presentations](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/workshop_presentations)

NSSE Pocket Guides (English and Spanish versions)  
*A Pocket Guide to Choosing a College: Are You Asking the Right Questions on a College Campus Visit?*

*Una Guía de Bolsillo Para Escoger una Universidad: Cómo hacer las Preguntas correctas en tus visitas universitarias*  
[http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pocket\\_guide\\_intro.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pocket_guide_intro.cfm)

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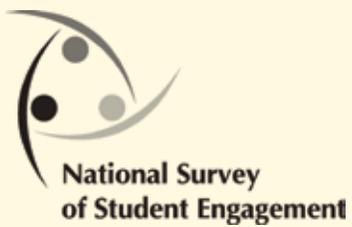
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