



# National Survey of Student Engagement

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## Frequently Asked Questions About NSSE

### Introduction

On November 5, 2007, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) will release its *Annual Report 2007*, “Experiences That Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success.” You or your colleagues may receive questions from the media regarding the NSSE project, the contents of this year’s *Annual Report*, or specific results from your campus. This document serves two purposes: 1) the first section will help you answer common media inquiries you might receive about NSSE participation and 2) the second section provides answers to questions you might have for us about how reports are created and future plans for NSSE.

This information is **only being sent to institutions** that participated in the NSSE survey, **not** to representatives of the media.

When talking about the NSSE project and findings, you can justifiably take pride in being involved with a national project that focuses on contributions colleges and universities are making to student learning. Thanks to you and your colleagues we now have national indicators or “benchmarks” of the extent to which undergraduate students engage in practices that are important to their learning. In dealing with the press, we invite you to speak not only for your institution, but also on behalf of nearly 1,200 colleges and universities that are using NSSE.

### Questions That Might Be Asked by the Media

#### 1. Why did you participate in the survey?

Campus leaders have different reasons for participating in NSSE. Some view the NSSE survey as a tool that can confirm their school’s special strengths and distinctive identity. Others see NSSE as a catalyst for institutional improvement. Still others see it as a way to provide useful, meaningful evidence about student learning to external accountability groups such as accreditors. Most participating institutions recognize that the activities NSSE measures — the amount of time students spend preparing for class, the amount of writing they do, their interaction with faculty, and so forth — are associated with many desired outcomes of college. Campus leaders want to participate in a survey that measures things that really matter to student learning and institutional effectiveness.

#### 2. Will your institution be releasing your NSSE results? Can someone (e.g., press, students, faculty, parents, etc.) get school-specific survey results from NSSE?

Each participating institution decides on their own if they will release their NSSE reports; however, NSSE will never release or confirm institutional results without explicit permission from the school. Although NSSE encourages public disclosure of student engagement results in ways that enable thoughtful, responsible institutional comparisons while encouraging and celebrating institutional diversity, there are valid reasons for a school not to share their results publicly.

Some colleges and universities will be understandably cautious about releasing their scores with only one or two years of information available, or if the institution has not thoroughly considered and had an opportunity to act on the results. Premature disclosure could inadvertently divert the focus away from improvement if the data are used in inappropriate or irresponsible ways.

#### 3. What are you most pleased with or disappointed about regarding your own school’s results? Or about the national survey results described in the *Annual Report 2007*?

Institutions will understandably want to focus on different areas. It is very important to interpret your results on the five Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice in the context of your institutional mission. The five benchmarks are: (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student-faculty interaction, (4) enriching educational

#### IMPORTANT

This document suggests some ways to think about your NSSE results and respond to the media and other constituents who may inquire about your participation in the NSSE project.

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experiences, and (5) supportive campus environment. The benchmarks are based on students' responses to clusters of key items from the NSSE survey instrument. They are explained in more detail in the *Annual Report*.

You may want to emphasize distinctive patterns of student experiences at your school. Some institutions are writing-intensive (where students do much more writing than their counterparts at similar institutions) or civic-oriented (where a high percentage of students do community service). You also might consider what constitutes an appropriate level of student involvement in various activities at your school. For some activities, occasional engagement by students may be acceptable, such as talking with a faculty member about career plans. On other items, such as getting prompt feedback, a more frequent level of occurrence ("often") is effective educational practice. You can obtain more detailed information by looking at student responses to individual survey questions in your *Institutional Report* that was sent to your school in August. The *Institutional Report* also includes comparative information for all the survey questions for other schools of your type as well as the national averages.

#### 4. What is your school's exact rank on the benchmarks?

The NSSE project does not rank institutions. Schools receive only their students' scores on the five Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice and aggregated comparative information for similar types of colleges and universities as well as national averages. Institutions also have students' responses to all individual questions in the *Institutional Report* sent to your campus in August.

#### 5. This benchmark report looks different from earlier years. Why the change?

In 2005, the format of the Benchmark Comparisons report was changed from institution-level comparisons to student-level comparisons. Student-level comparisons are essential to understand the engagement profile of not only the typical student on your campus, but also to investigate and better understand the ways in which the engagement of various sub-groups may vary from the average student profile. This can inform efforts to address the special needs of different types of students.

While institutional benchmark scores are still calculated the same way, comparison group scores are now calculated at the student level. For example, your institution's benchmark scores (i.e., the average score for students at your institution) are compared with the average benchmark scores for students in your institutional comparison groups. This student-level comparison is identical to the comparisons NSSE

provides in the institutional reports sent last summer and has the additional benefit of providing statistical comparisons and effect sizes for these comparisons.

The shift to student-level comparisons means the Engagement Index and decile charts (which were based on institution-level data) are no longer included in the report. This further discourages using NSSE data for ranking purposes. In their place, two new reference groups are included: (a) *above-average institutions* with benchmark scores in the top 50% nationally and (b) *high-performing institutions* with benchmark scores in the top 10% nationally. These are labeled "top 50%" and "top 10%" in the report. These comparisons allow institutions to determine if their average student is significantly and meaningfully different from the average student from these strong performing reference groups.

#### 6. What does a benchmark change from year to year mean?

Most year-to-year changes in benchmark scores are usually attributable to subtle changes in the characteristics of an institution's respondents or are simply random fluctuations and should not be used to judge the effectiveness of the institution. The assessment of whether or not benchmark scores are increasing is best done over several years. If specific efforts were taken on a campus in a given year to increase student-faculty interaction, for example, then changes in a benchmark score may be an assessment of the impact of those efforts.

#### 7. How do you explain your school's performance in the areas where students are highly engaged? Will these areas remain a priority?

In some instances, a salient institutional mission may explain certain findings, such as large numbers of students doing community service at denominational colleges or frequent use of information and computing technology at highly wired campuses. In other instances student ability and interests or curricular requirements may explain the results, such as a senior capstone



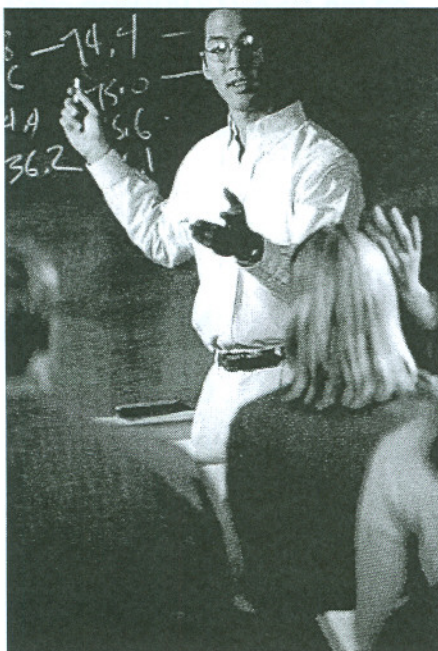
course or an internship. Average class size or students concentrated in certain majors may account for other results, such as the number of different length papers written which can vary widely by discipline. Perhaps the results are associated with strategic planning and improvement initiatives that have been underway for several years. In this case you might consider some variant of the following: "We've been focusing on improving the student experience here for some time and using NSSE is one key step we are taking to achieve that goal. That's one reason we're participating in NSSE. We're going to carefully study the *Annual Report* and our own results and use this information to further enhance the quality of our undergraduate programs."

## 8. How are you going to use your results? Will you release them? What do you intend to do to address the areas where your school scored low?

At most colleges and universities, NSSE results point to one or more areas where there is room for improvement. The *Annual Report* provides examples of how different types of institutions are using the data toward this end. Patterns of student performance measured by NSSE will not likely change without targeted interventions.

Whether it makes sense to release your benchmark scores or individual item responses is up to you. Some public colleges and universities may be expected to do so.

Whatever you decide, please create opportunities to help the public and your colleagues better understand the educational practices and student experiences that can enhance student learning. The NSSE Web site includes some documents



that go into these subjects in more detail. For example, the "Student Engagement Survey Concept Paper" gives some background of the project and the "Conceptual Framework and Psychometric Properties" paper provides a good deal of information about survey design, how it is administered, and the efforts we have

made to ensure its validity and reliability.

You know best the kinds of initiatives that might focus faculty, staff and student efforts on activities that will increase student engagement. One approach is to convene small groups of faculty and staff to carefully review NSSE results to determine what may constitute "reasonable" levels of student engagement, given the local circumstances mentioned earlier, such as institutional mission and student characteristics. For example, is it necessary for 90% of the students to be highly engaged across all five benchmarks? Or is it sufficient that a lower percentage of students are moderately engaged? These questions warrant thorough discussion by groups responsible for the undergraduate program – standing curriculum committees, institutional improvement task forces, academic and student life administrators, student leaders, and so forth. Such discussions can help convert NSSE data into action and institutional improvement.

## 9. When will you administer the NSSE survey again?

About 750 colleges and universities are registered for the spring 2008 survey administration. Visit the NSSE Web site [www.nsse.iub.edu](http://www.nsse.iub.edu) to see if your school is registered. Most institutions administer the NSSE survey every third or fourth year to ensure that their data reflect the experiences of currently enrolled students. Some schools, however, will use the survey more frequently, because of local assessment needs and accreditation cycles.

## Questions for NSSE Project Staff

### 10. How did you select the schools mentioned in the *Annual Report*? Why didn't you mention us? Could you add us?

The *Annual Report* names examples of schools that are using student engagement results and other data in productive ways. Many schools are undertaking positive initiatives based on their results, and NSSE reports a selection of the examples gathered from participating schools so that other participants can benefit from shared experiences. In this regard, NSSE welcomes information about how your institution is using its student engagement data and schools are encouraged to share results with appropriate audiences. Also, when talking with the media, NSSE may mention (again with the institution's permission) colleges and universities that are performing well.

**11. Are you advocating performance-based funding from state legislatures?**

The NSSE project does not typically endorse specific policy recommendations. However, NSSE philosophy is consistent with efforts to discover and increase public awareness of various aspects of institutional effectiveness and collegiate quality. For example, these efforts could include incorporating NSSE data in accountability templates that states and other groups consider to be fair and appropriately focused on educational activities associated with desired outcomes of college.

**12. Where is the research that shows these five areas of educational practice are ones that matter?**

The *Annual Report* mentions some of the research supporting the use of effective educational practices represented by NSSE. Much more supporting information can be found in documents available on the NSSE Web site [www.nsse.iub.edu](http://www.nsse.iub.edu), for example the "Student Engagement Survey Concept Paper" and "Conceptual Framework and Psychometric Properties."

**13. Why don't you control for certain variables (e.g., endowment, average SAT scores)? By failing to do so you stacked the deck against my institution.**

We make only a few statistical adjustments when preparing the national benchmarks because their purpose is to document the current state of student engagement at four-year colleges and universities.

**14. Do the NSSE questions reflect what employers are looking for, or are these measurements of what some scholars think constitutes an "educated person?"**

The survey questions focus on educational processes linked to many of the outcomes considered by informed observers to be essential for a college educated person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Students report the progress they have made since starting college in 16 areas, most of which are general education outcomes. Because students begin college with different amounts of knowledge and at different developmental levels, the results of self-reported gains should be interpreted in an institution-specific context, rather than compared across different sectors or types of institutions. We know that individual colleges and universities use the self-reported gains to identify areas that warrant attention by curriculum committees, general education task forces, and other groups.

**15. Do you plan to take your findings any further by publishing information about best practices from those institutions that performed exceedingly well?**

NSSE is working with an expanding cadre of partners, including the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education, the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, The Teagle Foundation, and The Foundations of Excellence project coordinated by The Policy Center on the First Year of College, among others, to further strengthen institutional accountability for student learning.

The **NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice** helps schools use information about students' experiences to improve academic programs and services. For example, the full report of , Project **DEEP** (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) which explored promising practices at educationally effective institutions is reported in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (2005). We've also prepared more than a dozen four-page briefs that summarize key policies, practices, and cultural properties common to the 20 high-performing schools [www.nsse.iub.edu/institute](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/institute).

**16. Where can I find more information about the initiative to publish NSSE benchmark scores on the USA TODAY Web site?**

Please see our separate FAQ document, "NSSE-USA TODAY Initiative: Frequently Asked Questions," for more information.



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