



# National Survey of Student Engagement

## NSSE-USA TODAY Initiative: Frequently Asked Questions

### Introduction

NSSE and *USA TODAY* are working together to further educate the public about the link between student engagement and a high quality undergraduate experience. Institutions that participated in NSSE at least once since 2005 were invited to authorize NSSE to provide their most recent NSSE benchmark scores for posting on a new *USA TODAY* college education Web site. The five NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practice for first-year and senior students are:

- level of academic challenge
- active and collaborative learning
- student-faculty interaction
- enriching educational experiences
- supportive campus environments.

One goal of this initiative is to provide prospective students, parents, counselors, and others with information about aspects of collegiate quality not available through most accessible venues. For example, college rankings are based primarily on measures of resources and reputation that research studies indicate are not related to desired student learning and personal development outcomes. Another goal of this initiative is to feature different types of colleges and universities that involve students at high levels in effective educational practices; many such institutions are providing unusually rich learning opportunities for their students but may not be widely known for their strong performance.

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### 1. Which institutions are included?

All baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities in the US that administered NSSE in 2005, 2006 or 2007 were invited to authorize the release of their benchmark scores to *USA TODAY* for the purposes outlined above. More than 250 schools agreed to participate.

#### 2. Will institutions be ranked?

No. The project is intended to respond to calls for greater institutional transparency and to underscore the idea that educational quality is more complex than typically reported elsewhere, such as in rankings. The focus will be on informing people with an interest in

collegiate quality about the indicators of educational effectiveness represented by NSSE benchmarks and survey items, as well as distinctive patterns of engaging educational activities offered by different types of institutions around the country.

#### 3. Will institutions be compared? Will my peer comparison group institutions be revealed?

NSSE scores for individual institutions are displayed alongside national averages for their institutional type represented by Carnegie Classification because *USA TODAY* believes it is important to provide its readers with a frame of reference to interpret the NSSE benchmark scores. There are no side-by-side comparisons of individual schools or summary tables listing multiple institution scores or comparisons to peer groups selected by the institution.

NSSE and *USA TODAY* recognize that institutional benchmark scores do not reflect everything there is to know about the depth, breadth, and nuances of student engagement at any college or university. For this reason, institutions were invited to provide a link from the *USA TODAY* Web site to a page on the institution's Web site that contextualizes their NSSE scores or describes its distinctive programs and practices.

Of course, people who visit the *USA TODAY* Web site will be able to compare individual institutions. This is one of the purposes of the growing movement toward institutional transparency endorsed by groups such as NASULGC, AACSCU, AAU, and NAICU. NSSE is committed to educating the public about the appropriate and inappropriate uses of NSSE and other data as described at [www.nsse.iub.edu/html/Public\\_Disclosure\\_Engagement\\_Data.cfm](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/html/Public_Disclosure_Engagement_Data.cfm).

#### 4. What are the benchmark scores for each Carnegie Classification?

Averages for each Carnegie Classification are based on the NSSE 2007 cohort, regardless of whether a school's scores are from 2005, 2006, or 2007. This provides the most consistent point of comparison for readers reviewing scores. Average Carnegie Classification scores across administration years are stable enough over time for the comparisons to be valid. NSSE 2007 benchmark

scores for each institutional type can be seen at [www.nsse.iub.edu/html/USAT\\_faq\\_what\\_are\\_benchmark\\_scores\\_table.cfm](http://www.nsse.iub.edu/html/USAT_faq_what_are_benchmark_scores_table.cfm).

## 5. What other kinds of information are included?

In addition to posting NSSE benchmark scores on the *USA TODAY* Web site, *USA TODAY* print and Web articles may feature schools that are strong performers in various categories of NSSE data, such as the number of students who participate in “high impact” activities including study abroad, internships, research with faculty members, service learning and so on. Other schools may be featured because of their demonstrated capacity to engage students in “deep learning” activities, educating large numbers of underprepared students, or fostering a high level of faculty-student interaction.

## 6. What content should institutions publish on their Web site to provide additional information about NSSE scores?

NSSE has provided suggestions for schools about what content they might consider presenting on their Web page. At the same time, each school is in the best position to determine what is most important for prospective students and others to know. Some schools may choose to point to more specific NSSE results, such as student responses to individual survey items that reflect the institutional mission and educational priorities. Other institutions may focus more on programmatic efforts that illustrate student engagement opportunities on their campus. We hope by developing this information each institution will learn more about the results and how they can best be communicated to interested parties, on and off the campus.

## 7. What year was used for each institution's benchmark scores? Could institutions select the year they want to use?

The most recent year of NSSE data for each institution was used. This ensured that all participating institutions were on a level playing field, a cornerstone NSSE operating principle since its inception. Benchmark scores were created consistently in 2005, 2006, and 2007, and institution scores tend to be stable over time.

## 9. Why would an institution want to participate if they did not score well on the benchmarks?

The NSSE-*USA TODAY* initiative is fundamentally about familiarizing the public with what matters to educational quality and encouraging prospective students, parents, policy makers, institutional leaders, and others to focus more on these issues. Institutions vary widely in their educational programs; some score high in certain areas and low in others. Very, very few

schools score high on all NSSE indicators. Schools participating in this initiative are able to declare and demonstrate their commitment to improving and being accountable for undergraduate education. Also, the *USA TODAY* Web site includes a link to the school's Web site; this allows an institution to place its scores in context and call attention to strong performing programs and other distinctive aspects of its learning environment and students' educational experiences.

## 10. If an institution did not release its benchmark scores for this project, does this mean the school did not score well?

Schools with both higher and lower scores chose not to participate for varied reasons. Some only have one year of data, which they have not had time to contextualize with other sources of information, while others are waiting to reassess student engagement after implementing new educational programs.

## 11. Can a school authorize its data to be published on the *USA TODAY* Web site after the Nov. 5 release?

After the initial release of benchmark scores, NSSE and *USA TODAY* will evaluate the response to this initiative and decide how it might develop. It may be possible to post additional school data after Nov. 5. Please contact Todd Chamberlain at [toachamb@indiana.edu](mailto:toachamb@indiana.edu) for more information.

## 12. Will this initiative continue in future years?

This is a trial effort that may continue in future years after NSSE and *USA TODAY* have evaluated its effectiveness. If it is extended, new institutions will be allowed to participate, and current participating institutions can decide if they want to continue.



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Center for Postsecondary Research  
Indiana University Bloomington  
School of Education  
1900 East Tenth Street  
Eigenmann Hall, Suite 419  
Bloomington, IN 47406-7512

Phone: 812-856-5824  
Fax: 812-856-5150  
E-mail: [nsse@indiana.edu](mailto:nsse@indiana.edu)

[www.nsse.iub.edu](http://www.nsse.iub.edu)