

# Using NSSE Data

## Inside

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>NSSE’s Core Activities.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Multiple Uses of NSSE .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Communicating Results Internally .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Communicating Results Externally .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Establishing Standards of Comparison .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Lessons Learned .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Examples .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Coordinated Uses .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>How Often to Use .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Public Disclosure of Student Engagement Results .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Overcoming Obstacles .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Final Word .....</b>	<b>12</b>

## Introduction

Interest in using student engagement data continues to build across all sectors and types of institutions. A common question for NSSE staff these days is, “How are schools using their results?” Now in our fifth year, schools are continuing to report back to us more detailed descriptions of the ways in which they are using NSSE data and results.

The ideas we offer in the following pages come from a number of sources, including the annual NSSE Report Card we use to collect feedback from participating schools, telephone interviews with NSSE users, conference presentations by NSSE users, NSSE user group meetings, and campus visits.

## NSSE’s Core Activities

To set a context for how NSSE data are used, it’s helpful to review NSSE’s core activities. We conceptualize them in the form of a triangle.

The largest segment of the triangle represents activities that focus on institutional improvement efforts. Colleges and universities use the information from their NSSE institutional report and other sources to determine what they are doing well and to identify areas where improvement is desirable.

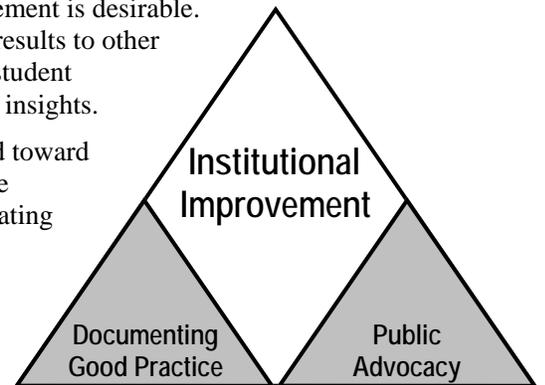
As we explain later, linking NSSE results to other institutional information about the student experience may generate additional insights.

A second set of activities is targeted toward documenting and reporting effective educational practice and then translating and sharing this information with institutions and groups working to improve undergraduate education. The NSSE Institute’s Project DEEP (Developing Effective Educational Practice)

is building on, documenting, and expanding our knowledge about using effective educational practice to promote student learning and improve institutional effectiveness. More information on Project DEEP is under the NSSE Institute tab in the Institutional Report binder.

The third portion of the triangle represents our commitment to steering the discourse about collegiate quality away from institutional resources and reputation toward effective educational practice. As more colleges and universities use NSSE, its influence and contribution to discussions about institutional effectiveness will expand. Our public advocacy commitment is represented by the NSSE pocket guide, *College. What You Need to Know Before You Go*, a pamphlet designed to help prospective college students ask the right questions when they visit a school ([www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/pocket\\_guide\\_intro.htm](http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/pocket_guide_intro.htm)).

These three sets of activities are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, synergy across these activities is necessary for NSSE to accomplish its mission.



### Why Schools Use NSSE

- To participate in a national effort to improve undergraduate quality
- To use a research-based, psychometrically sound tool
- To compare performance against peer institutions
- To compare first-year and senior student experiences, using both cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches
- To add a new, much needed dimension to the institutional assessment strategy
- To link information about student engagement and the teaching and learning environment
- To incorporate student engagement results in self-studies, accreditation, and accountability
- To guide and monitor institutional improvement

Source: Interviews with NSSE Participants



## Multiple Uses of NSSE

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

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

Later we describe how selected institutions are using their results. In most instances, a communication strategy is needed in order to get people to attend to and take interest in the findings.

## Communicating Results Internally

Institutions often use several approaches to share their results. It's usually most effective to use a combination of dissemination activities.

### Selected Audiences

Targeting specific audiences that may have expressed an interest in, or that should be aware of, one or more aspects of the results can facilitate focused dialogue about implications of the findings for policy and practice.

- When preparing NSSE reports and presentations for various campus constituencies, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay assessment services office highlights results that link to ongoing activities of the target audience. Reports indicate areas of relative strengths and weakness and attempt to distill myths about student engagement on campus.
- Using the sample NSSE PowerPoint presentation as a starting point, the College of St. Catherine customized it with institutional data and showed it at three events: its annual teaching and learning faculty conference, a meeting of the enrollment committee, and a student affairs directors meeting. They also created a document showing means comparisons, correlations, and frequency data and shared this across campus.

### Campus Wide

To distribute NSSE results broadly, many schools post summaries of important findings, and invite colleagues to review the full report online or by request through the appropriate office. Another way to share results is to post them to internal or public web sites or create displays in public areas such as student unions or dining halls.

- The institutional research staff at Nazareth College of Rochester created a presentation to share NSSE results with a number of campus groups and posed the question "What surprised you?" These comments were collected into a summary document, highlighting areas of concern identified by multiple groups. This document will be used to initiate further discussion around areas where student and faculty perceptions regarding student engagement do not match.

## Communicating Results Externally

Accreditors are the most common external audience for NSSE results. About one third of NSSE schools tell us that they are using their results, or expect to refer to them, in self-studies and accreditation reports. Examples can be found on page 8 of this document, and more detailed information is located in the Accreditation Toolkit section of the NSSE Institutional Report binder.

Governing boards, state oversight agencies, and university systems also see value in student engagement data. “The NSSE survey has been valuable at the System level for accountability purposes, allowing us to provide national benchmarks along with system data,” said Frank Goldberg, Associate Vice President for Policy Analysis and Research, University of Wisconsin System.

A number of colleges and universities provide information via news releases and special feature articles for student, local, and regional newspapers. Some of these are included on the NSSE web site at [www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/news.shtml](http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/news.shtml). Although some schools choose not to share their data with external audiences and use it solely for institutional improvement, others delay public data sharing until triangulation with other institutional data can provide greater context.

## Establishing Standards of Comparison

NSSE data serve a diagnostic function by identifying institutional strengths and weaknesses in terms of effective educational practices. Comparisons with peer institutions and the national averages help reveal aspects of institutional and student performance not readily available from other sources.

## Benchmarking

There are two basic approaches to benchmarking that NSSE schools are using. One or both may be appropriate, depending on your institution’s situation.

### Normative Approach

The normative approach compares your students’ responses to those of students at other colleges and universities. If enough students have participated, this can also be done at the department or major field level—a particularly effective way of stimulating faculty interest in the findings.

- NSSE scores have been identified as key indicators of the University of Kentucky's goal to "attract and graduate outstanding students." Indicators have been pegged to the Institutional Engagement Index, with the goal to exceed the predicted levels of attainment for all five NSSE benchmarks.
- At the University of Puerto Rico in Humacao, NSSE’s status as an independent research project with a broad representation of institutions facilitated greater faculty acceptance of normative comparisons.

### Criterion Approach

A second approach to benchmarking is criterion-referenced, whereby you compare your school’s performance against a predetermined value or level that you and your colleagues deem appropriate for your students, given your institutional mission, size, curricular offerings, funding, and so forth.

- Cal State University-Chico has developed a First-Year Experience Committee that cuts across all university units and plans to develop benchmarks based on NSSE data to monitor improvement over time.

### How Schools Communicate NSSE Results

<u>INTERNAL USE</u>	<u>%</u>
President	80
Faculty Members	71
Administrative Staff	68
Department Chairs	59
Academic Advisors	51
Governing Board	34
Students	32
Other (web site, fact book, etc.)	20
<u>EXTERNAL USE</u>	<u>%</u>
Accreditation Agencies	31
Web Site	25
Media	13
Prospective Students	13
Alumni	13
Parents	13
State Agencies	11
Other	7
No External Disclosure	35

Source: NSSE 2003 Report Card

*“NSSE results help identify the areas of excellence and determine the areas for improvement, thus informing teaching and learning, planning, and decision-making.”*

**-Alexei Matveev,**  
Associate Director of Institutional  
Assessment and Effectiveness,  
Norfolk State University

## NSSE TIP #1

### NSSE on the Web

Many colleges and universities have disclosed some or all of their results on the Web. Publishing NSSE results on the Web in an appropriate way is not only a way to highlight institutional strengths, but can also demonstrate your school's commitment to quality improvement.

Some NSSE schools display their entire means and frequency reports. Others post selected results highlighting particular strengths or news releases emphasizing institutional participation and the importance of the study.



### Criterion Approach (cont.)

- University of Wisconsin-Stout has set NSSE benchmarks for themselves within the context of their strategic plan. Several strategic indicators were set for each goal in the plan, and NSSE represents one of the indicators the school is tracking to measure success.
- Texas State University-San Marcos uses a discipline-specific, criterion-referenced approach when looking at levels of engagement across departments. Faculty members asked themselves questions such as: What should be the level of collaborative learning activities in the College of Liberal Arts? Do we want 50%, 60% or 70% of our seniors to report that they “often” or “very often” work with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments?

## Lessons Learned About Using NSSE Data

Based on the collective experience of NSSE early adopters, we offer the following suggestions for incorporating NSSE data in institutional change efforts. Details can be found on pages 18-20 of the NSSE 2002 Annual Report.

- 1. Make sure faculty and staff understand and endorse the concept of student engagement.** The value of student engagement results to improving teaching and learning needs to be convincingly explained to those faculty less familiar with assessment in general and the engagement concept in particular.
- 2. Collect results from enough students so the information is usable at the department or unit level.** Surveying more students than called for by NSSE's standard sampling strategy can allow schools to drill down to the department or unit level, which may increase faculty interest in using engagement data.
- 3. Understand what student engagement data represent and use the results wisely.** It takes time, perspective and experience to understand and make the best use of NSSE results.
- 4. Report student engagement results in a responsible way.** NSSE encourages schools to share their results in ways that lead to a better understanding of collegiate quality and promote institutional improvement efforts.
- 5. Don't allow the numbers to speak for themselves.** Every number and comparison reported should be accompanied by an explanation and interpretation of what can and cannot be concluded from the results. Unclear results can provide opportunities for dialogue that can provide greater clarity.
- 6. Examine the results from multiple perspectives.** Use peer comparisons to confirm or challenge assumptions about performance quality, but also consider a criterion-referenced view of student engagement in the context of the school's mission. It's also wise to compare the engagement levels of specific student groups, such as first-year women students or seniors in various majors.
- 7. Link the results to other information about the student experience and complementary initiatives.** The positive impact of student engagement results will be multiplied if the data can be made relevant to groups of faculty and staff working on different reform efforts around the campus.
- 8. Don't go it alone.** Experts argue that the chances of successful innovation improve when campus teams are formed and institutions work together in consortial arrangements on topics of mutual interest. Greater success may be achieved when institutions develop these partnerships at the start of a NSSE administration cycle to make early decisions about strategic use of the data.

## Institutional Improvement Examples

In this section we've grouped examples of how colleges and universities are using NSSE data into the following categories: civic engagement, general education, technology, active and collaborative learning, first-year experience, involving students in interpreting NSSE data, enriching the undergraduate experience, faculty and staff development, enrollment management and recruiting, accreditation, student-faculty interaction, supportive campus environment, and planning and accountability.

### Civic Engagement

- The American Democracy Project, a joint venture of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) and *The New York Times*, seeks to increase undergraduate participation in civic life. NSSE's assessment of student and civic engagement at participating colleges and universities will help gauge the effectiveness of programs designed to foster this involvement.

### General Education

- Based on a review of NSSE data by senior administrators and the Faculty Senate (including its Academic Steering Committee), Cleveland State University identified three areas for improvement: e-mail communication with students, student advising, and writing across the curriculum.
- By measuring students in their first and final years, NSSE has helped Centre College in the difficult assessment of whether general education goals are being achieved. Their NSSE scores affirmed that students have learned to write well, think critically, and express themselves by the time they graduate.
- NSSE items addressing areas such as time on task, academic support, active and collaborative learning, and joint student-faculty research have helped Pace University assess progress toward the first goal of their strategic plan: "Strengthen Pace's Academic Excellence and Reputation."
- One of Plymouth State College's general education goals is for students to develop "an appreciation of the process by which different approaches to scholarship can be brought to bear on the same problem." NSSE items related to problem solving, analyzing, and synthesizing, combined with items regarding writing, speaking, and listening informed the decision to infuse these elements throughout the general education program.
- Occidental College triangulates its general education assessment by rotating NSSE, the College Student Survey, and Higher Education Data Sharing surveys on its campus. A recent review of these data showed Occidental lagging behind peers in the area of scientific literacy, prompting faculty to begin investigating ways to improve this.

### Technology

- Saint Xavier University faculty used NSSE data in their application for a Title III grant to increase retention through student engagement and technology.
- St. John's University in New York has set new targets for integrating technology in the curriculum based on a review of its NSSE results.
- Lower scores on the use of computing and information technology at Saint Louis University prompted initial concern after NSSE 2002. The more detailed experimental items about technology on NSSE 2003 provided greater context that clarified there was not as much reason for concern as originally thought.

*"The questions on NSSE are at the heart of what we need to know about students and our impact on students."*

**-Tammy Crites,**  
Director of Institutional Research,  
West Virginia Wesleyan College

### **NSSE TIP #2**

#### **Special Peer Comparisons**

To assist in benchmarking efforts, NSSE allows schools to select other participating schools for a special peer comparison report with a minimum of six schools in the aggregated request. Schools can also ask for peer comparisons with institutions from a different Carnegie category.

NSSE also conducts specialized analyses on an as-needed basis to assist schools in answering specific questions (e.g. how do our women engineering students compare with other women engineering students from across the country?). The fees for special analyses are based upon time required to complete the project. Please contact your NSSE representative for more details.



### NSSE Tip #3

#### Drilling Down with NSSE

Increasing the institution's sample size may allow you to "drill down" to the school, major, or department level. This gives faculty members confidence that the data represent their students and also reduces sampling error. This can be done by NSSE analysis or through locally administering the survey on campus via classrooms, residence halls, or campus mail.

### Active and Collaborative Learning

Research shows students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and asked to think about what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems prepares students for the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, during and after college.

- At the University of Charleston (West Virginia), increasing faculty awareness of students' perceptions about their engagement has encouraged efforts to support active learning and co-curricular development of team-building, leadership skills, and service-learning opportunities that are beginning to receive academic credit as part of their outcome-based learning environment.
- For nine years, Cal State University-Chico has been emphasizing Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*. Because NSSE is grounded in these principles, they have used it to assess efforts in these areas. Faculty are being encouraged to engage students earlier in the semester and implement the seven principles in their classrooms.

### First-Year Experience

- The Policy Center on the First Year of College has adopted NSSE as one of the assessment measures for its "Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year" study, a project aimed at detailing the nature of high-achieving programs for students entering college at a variety of colleges and universities.
- Brigham Young University-Hawaii initiated a first-year experience program and learning communities with a limited number of freshmen based on a review of NSSE results related to first-year students.
- Roanoke College held open forums to focus on NSSE responses related to level of academic challenge for first-year students. NSSE data provided momentum for addressing the academic experience of first-year students.

### Involving Students in Interpreting NSSE Data

Some schools are making strong efforts to share their NSSE data with undergraduates and interpret the results in ways that are meaningful for students. Student representatives are included on assessment committees at some institutions. Sharing results with student government and other student organizations is a typical way to inform students.

- Based on some apparent "disconnects" between faculty and student perceptions based on the combined use of NSSE and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), Saint Xavier University combined NSSE data with other institutional data to conduct multiple linear regressions to tease out factors related to measures of academic challenge. Reports based on this analysis were used as the basis for a student-faculty roundtable to review the NSSE findings and provide richer contextual information. The roundtable received enthusiastic reviews from student participants and revealed other unanticipated aspects of the student experience.
- At Oregon State University, first-year students in a leadership development program examined assessment data, including NSSE results, as a way to learn how to make informed decisions about organizational improvement. Students were allowed to plan how they would use the information to lead in a positive direction. The students presented recommendations based on their analysis to administrators, who used this information to make institutional changes.

### Enriching the Undergraduate Experience

Several schools have responded to their NSSE results by increasing opportunities to study abroad, adding service-learning components to courses, creating living-learning communities, and further developing capstone experiences for seniors.

- In order to encourage student involvement in summer research with faculty, Centre College has increased student stipends and expanded the number of research opportunities in the grants they seek.
- A review of NSSE data by a Jackson State University team representing a cross section of university faculty and staff recommended stronger encouragement for students to join professional organizations related to their major.
- Faculty at Towson University used NSSE data as a starting point and dug deeper into the research on effective educational practice in which NSSE is grounded. One strategy that emerged was to implement capstone experiences, prompting faculty in several academic programs to begin exploring ways to add capstone experiences to their curricula.
- After discovering their students did not compare favorably to peer institutions in the area of interacting with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, the University of Wisconsin-Platteville initiated a series of campus discussions on topics such as multi-racial dating. They also created diversity advocate groups that implement multicultural activities in residence halls.
- In an effort to increase student volunteerism as measured by NSSE, the University of Kentucky has implemented several initiatives: development of a Student Volunteer Center as a clearinghouse for information on volunteer opportunities; creation of the UK Fusion program that takes students to various community venues for a day of service; expansion of living-learning communities, including one that may focus on community service; and efforts to introduce students to the larger Lexington community through the freshman orientation seminar. NSSE data will be used to compare courses that utilize service-learning versus those that do not.

### Faculty and Staff Development

NSSE results may be appropriate for faculty and staff development workshops and retreats, such as those sponsored by the local chapter of The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). Presenting student engagement data is one way to initiate discussions about a variety of teaching and learning issues, and the use of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) can be used to compare faculty and student perceptions.

- NSSE data have informed faculty professional development at the University of Southern Indiana in such areas as integrating technology into curriculum delivery, student learning styles, service-learning and civic engagement, and diversity issues.
- The University of Hawai'i- Hilo used NSSE results to demonstrate to faculty how it measures areas of desired improvement with relation to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven principles for good practice in higher education*. Experienced UH Hilo faculty then led workshops about those practices, using examples such as a large lecture class where active learning was fostered by calling students up on stage to dance out the structure of DNA. Other faculty discussed ways to involve students in community research projects.

### **NSSE Tip #4**

#### Linking NSSE Data with Other Sources

NSSE results can be linked to other data sources on campus to determine whether improvement efforts are having the desired effect.

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

*Jacksonville University uses NSSE “to pinpoint areas for improvement, to compare disparities and (make) comparisons of faculty perceptions through FSSE, and to utilize the results to spark creative thinking on campus concerning engaged learning.”*

**-R. Bryan Fuller**  
Director or Institutional Research,  
Jacksonville University

## NSSE Research

The following publications provide detailed information about national data and benchmarks.

**NSSE Viewpoint** — This annual publication provides a condensed overview of NSSE findings for that year as well as guidelines for interpreting the data.

**Annual Report** — The annual report summarizes major findings for the year and highlights ways that schools are using NSSE data to improve collegiate quality at their institutions. The report also outlines the NSSE conceptual framework and lists which schools have participated.

**NSSE Technical and Norms Report** — This report provides technical and statistical information, in addition to descriptive statistics for first-year students and seniors, broken down by class, sex, race, age, enrollment status, major field of study, and by Carnegie classification.

**Comparative Data on NSSE Benchmarks** — Tables on NSSE's web site show the specific items that make up the benchmarks by class and by Carnegie classification. Another column reports results for schools scoring in the top 5 percent nationally.

**Research Papers** — NSSE staff have published a number of articles focusing on specific areas of the results, as well as the research methodology. Details can be found on our website ([www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/research.shtml](http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/research.shtml)).

## Enrollment Management and Recruiting

NSSE data are also used to provide more accurate and realistic descriptions of campus life to prospective students and parents. Some schools use NSSE data to present empirically-derived portraits of the typical student in viewbooks, recruitment literature, brochures, and gatherings of prospective students to accurately convey expectations for college life. Others use NSSE results to guide decisions about institutional size.

- NSSE findings indicating a marked decline in student engagement at institutions with an undergraduate student body exceeding 4,000 were used to support a recommendation for the Butler University strategic planning to limit the size of their student body for the next five years.
- By disaggregating NSSE data on seniors according to those who entered as first-year students compared to those who entered as transfer students, Towson University began to realize their limited understanding of the transfer student experience at their institution. As a result, they are administering the CIRP to all incoming transfers as well as first-year students and will oversample seniors in their next NSSE administration to develop a fuller portrait of the transfer student experience.
- Indiana University Bloomington, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, and other schools link first-year student NSSE data with fall sophomore enrollment records to discover student engagement factors that predict persistence, with an eye toward developing an early warning system to identify students at risk of premature departure.

The NSSE pocket guide, *College. What You Need to Know Before You Go*, provides prospective students with a list of questions organized around NSSE benchmarks to help them focus on issues of student engagement as they investigate various college options. The guide is provided free to high school guidance offices as well as college and university admissions offices. Schools with NSSE data can design publications and train staff to answer the questions students might ask based on this guide.

## Accreditation

As mentioned earlier, about one third of NSSE schools use student engagement data in accreditation, both for regional and discipline-specific reviews (teacher education, social work, music, nursing, business, etc.). For more information on applying NSSE to accreditation please see our Accreditation Toolkit, which is available under a tab in the Institutional Report binder or at the NSSE website: <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/>. The toolkit provides guidelines for using NSSE in accreditation self-study and maps NSSE items to accreditation body standards.

- Shippensburg University plans to use NSSE to help demonstrate its commitment to institutional assessment during its five year periodic review to Middle States.
- Evergreen State College used NSSE data to meet an accreditation requirement to compare student assessment results with national norms. Evergreen State researchers feel NSSE not only meets the requirement, but is suited to their own needs as well.
- College of St. Scholastica used NSSE data in each of the five criteria for its self-study for North Central accreditation, with the data being particularly useful for demonstrating outcomes.

### **Student-Faculty Interaction**

The level of student interaction with faculty members is a frequently expressed concern. For instance, some small liberal arts colleges were surprised to find that students did not report as much contact with faculty as institutional leaders expected. NSSE results related to student-faculty interaction are also disquieting for many research intensive universities.

- Based on a discussion of their student-faculty interaction results, Pace University is discussing the following action steps: providing more informal places for faculty and students to meet, developing more faculty-student seminars, increasing faculty availability before and after class to supplement face-to-face instruction, and providing more opportunities for students to research with faculty.
- To facilitate interaction between students, faculty, and administrators at Wheelock College, starting this year first-year seminars will be held just before dinner time to provide opportunities for faculty to go to dinner after class. First-year seminars will also include a student-organized "Family Learning Conference" in the spring semester, enabling faculty to interact with students and their families. The possibility of developing faculty living spaces within residence halls is also being considered.

### **Supportive Campus Environment**

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

- At the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, NSSE results have been used as an indicator of its goal to "provide a campus environment that fosters learning and personal growth."
- Kalamazoo College secured funding to bring together faculty, staff, and students to explore lower than predicted scores in the Supportive Campus Environment benchmark. The resulting report and recommendations for improvement will be shared with the campus community.

### **Planning and Accountability**

NSSE results are used along with other surveys and existing institutional data for strategic planning and key performance indicators to fulfill standards established by state systems and other governing agencies.

- Franklin Pierce College incorporated concepts from the NSSE instrument into information requested from academic programs as part of an academic prioritization process.
- Some state and university systems are incorporating NSSE data as indicators of institutional effectiveness, such as the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, the University of Wisconsin System, and the University of Texas System.
- California State Polytechnic University plans to participate in NSSE on alternate years to develop and improve its institutional outcomes assessment program and assist with its biennial CSU accountability process. For this purpose, Cal Poly joined 12 other CSU campuses in a consortium to address some common system-wide questions. Analysis of the NSSE data from two years was presented as part of an institutional accountability report to CSU and its Board of Trustees.

### **NSSE Tip #5**

#### **Faculty Development Activity**

One activity that helps increase faculty and staff interest in using NSSE results is to ask groups to identify the college activities, listed on page 1 of the survey, that would lead to the greatest gains in student learning and development.

Results of this activity can then be tallied and used to narrow in on three or four activities. Faculty and staff members can then brainstorm ideas and strategies to increase the frequency of student engagement in these locally identified high priority areas.

*"I think it (NSSE) has prompted administrative cohesion in addressing some of our shortcomings. It was easier to convene a team, given that data were available to document the actual areas needing improvement."*

**-Debra Buchanan**  
Vice Provost,  
Jackson State University

*“We are able to analyze the results of the NSSE in the context of our institution's student outcomes assessment framework, which helps our institution — as well as our individual schools, colleges, and programs — actually use the data for assessment purposes.”*

**-Ken Boning,**  
Research Coordinator  
Saint Louis University

## Coordinated Uses of NSSE Results

In the first five years, nearly 400 colleges and universities participated in 46 self-selected consortia. The consortia represent very different types of institutions — women’s colleges, urban universities, Jesuit institutions, engineering colleges, art and design colleges, and research universities. Institutions participating in consortia or state systems typically share results with a central office, though some communicate directly with other members of the group. Schools in two consortia exchanged student-level records after removing individual student identification information. One group was composed of four public universities in Ohio, the other of 15 Doctoral-Extensive universities.

- The eleven campuses in the University of Wisconsin system have coordinated NSSE administrations as a system twice, yielding comparable indicators for the system’s annual *Achieving Excellence* accountability reports. This approach allows for system-wide assessment while also providing each institution with data to guide local initiatives.

NSSE results can be linked with information from academic transcripts, retention studies, focus groups, and results from other surveys to develop a rich, comprehensive picture of the undergraduate experience.

## State & University Consortia from 2000-04



NSSE's First Five Years	
<u>Number of Participating Colleges &amp; Universities</u>	
2000	276
2001	321
2002	366
2003	437
2004	473
<u>Number of Different Colleges and Universities</u>	
2000 - 2004	858
<u>Frequency of Participation in the 2004 Administration</u>	
First-Time Participants	126
Two-Time Participants	114
Three-Time Participants	113
Four-Time Participants	70
Five-Time Participants	50

## How Often to Use NSSE?

On average, a school’s NSSE results do not change dramatically from one year to the next. Knowing this, NSSE recommends that an institution use the survey every 3-4 years. That said, some colleges and universities have specific reasons for using NSSE more frequently, even annually. For example, some schools want data every year for longitudinal tracking purposes or to monitor the impact of specific improvement initiatives. Sometimes NSSE participation is linked to an institution’s accreditation cycle. Still others are using NSSE to obtain information they can use in funding proposals. Ideally, NSSE should be used in combination with other assessment tools to capture a comprehensive picture of the college student experience.

## Public Disclosure of Student Engagement Results

Prospective students, parents, the media, and others have expressed interest in seeing institution-level NSSE results. So far, at least one quarter of NSSE schools have made some or all of their NSSE results available to the public (e.g. website, alumni magazine, press release). Other schools see NSSE primarily as a tool for internal improvement initiatives. Some schools are triangulating the results with other institutional data before deciding on appropriate communication strategies.

### NSSE's Position on the Public Disclosure of Student Engagement Data

- 1. NSSE encourages public disclosure of student engagement results in ways that serve to increase understanding of collegiate quality and that support institutional improvement efforts.**

Disclosing institutional results from the NSSE survey provides an opportunity to help educate the public about the value of student engagement as a new metric for defining and examining collegiate quality. NSSE especially supports public reporting of student engagement results in ways that enable thoughtful, responsible institutional comparisons while encouraging and celebrating institutional diversity.

- 2. Whether a participating institution makes public its student engagement results is up to the institution.**

Consistent with the NSSE Participation Agreement, NSSE does not make institutional scores available to third parties. Institutions may do so if they wish as stated in the NSSE Participation Agreement. While organizations and individuals are entitled to request NSSE results from participating schools, NSSE is neutral as to whether institutions supply their results. In the near term, 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 vetted and had an opportunity to take action on the results. Premature disclosure could inadvertently divert the focus away from improvement if the data are used in inappropriate or irresponsible ways.

- 3. NSSE does not support the use of student engagement results for the purpose of rankings.**

The NSSE National Advisory Board and NSSE co-sponsors—The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning—believe that reducing student engagement to a single indicator obscures complex dimensions of student behavior and institutional performance. For this and other reasons, rankings are inherently flawed as a tool for accountability and improvement, whatever the information on which they are based. Such comparisons become even more problematic in the case of schools that differ in terms of mission and resources and percentages of students who are enrolled full- or part-time, who are transfers, or who major in various fields.

### NSSE Tip #6

#### Improving Campus Confidence in Your 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 school.

In response to skeptics who question whether their results really capture students' educational experiences, some schools 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 amassed a good bit of information to establish the robustness of the survey. Consider reviewing the "Frequently Asked Questions About NSSE's Psychometric Properties" (see "Additional Information" section) when planning a faculty or administrative retreat and, perhaps, have a few copies on hand.



### NSSE Tip #7

#### Using the NSSE Video to Increase Awareness and Buy-in

A professionally produced video (in both VHS and digital formats) is included with the institutional reports as a tool for introducing the student engagement construct and how NSSE measures it.

Schools can use this video as an opener to faculty workshop sessions or presentations to student government or trustees to give an overview of what NSSE entails.

### NSSE Institute Services

NSSE Institute associates are available to provide direct assistance to individual institutions or university systems.

**Campus Audits** — NSSE staff can conduct comprehensive or targeted campus audits to identify institutional strengths and weaknesses.

**Consulting** — NSSE staff can help develop improvement initiatives and address accreditation or other campus goals.

**Presentations & Conferences** — NSSE staff may be available to participate in panels or research presentations at professional meetings and conferences.

**Workshops and Retreats** — NSSE staff can assist with presenting information at faculty and staff workshops and retreats.

## Overcoming Potential Obstacles to Using NSSE Data Effectively

Converting assessment information into action is a challenge for all colleges and universities. Below we provide ways to address some of the more common obstacles.

<u>Obstacle</u>	<u>Approach</u>
<i>Small number of respondents</i>	Check to see how representative the sample is compared to the respective populations. Review sampling error. Try over-sampling to increase number of respondents.
<i>Questions about validity and reliability</i>	NSSE has conducted a number of studies to document the validity of the instrument, including stability analyses, test-retest, focus groups, and non-responder bias checks. The FAQ section of the NSSE psychometrics report (located in the Additional Information section of this report) provides more information about this important set of issues.
<i>Inappropriate comparison group</i>	Contact NSSE for another peer comparison or special analyses to capture a better fit.
<i>Limited capacity to analyze and report results</i>	The reports that NSSE sends institutions can be quickly packaged and sent to faculty and staff with little work.
<i>“Average” results across the board</i>	Try using a different comparison group or consider a criterion-based approach to determine to what degree student performance is inconsistent with institutional expectations.
<i>Lack of faculty awareness of, or interest in, learning about and using student engagement results</i>	Consider administering the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), a modified version of NSSE that looks at student engagement from the faculty perspective. Results may be useful to discuss at a retreat or workshop. Also, make available a summary of the literature on the value of effective educational practices.

## Final Word

Collecting and documenting how NSSE colleges and universities are using their results is an ongoing process. We would very much like to hear about how you are using your NSSE data. Please send us specific examples of internal reports or brochures highlighting NSSE data, usage strategies, and special activities. 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.

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