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National Survey of  
Student Engagement

# Viewpoint

NOVEMBER 2002



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*“NSSE should be a key instrument for every college and university that wants to improve its undergraduate education. The NSSE indicators are sound surrogates for learning and signposts of good practice.”*

—Thomas Ehrlich,  
Senior Scholar, The Carnegie Foundation for  
the Advancement of Teaching

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*“NSSE adds value to several different facets of our educational mission, providing invaluable data on students’ experiences and helping us evaluate the extent to which we are successfully broadening and diversifying the learning environment.”*

—Nancy Cantor,  
Chancellor, University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign

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*“NSSE findings can help campuses explore the connections between their expectations for student achievement and what students actually experience. The results also encourage faculty to delve into the research on campus practices that support—or frustrate—liberal education.”*

—Carol Geary Schneider,  
President, Association of American  
Colleges and Universities

## From Promise to Progress

### *How Colleges and Universities Are Using Student Engagement Results to Improve Collegiate Quality*

**O**ccasionally an idea comes along that seems to clarify complex issues and to potentially resolve fundamental problems in a given line of endeavor. Such is the connection between student engagement and collegiate quality. Student engagement represents the intersection of the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in such activities.

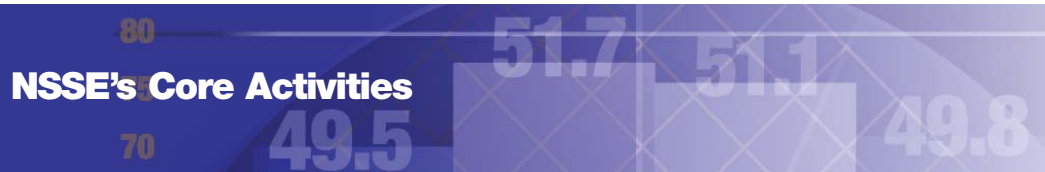
It’s a deceptively simple premise: the more students do something, the more proficient they become. For example, the more students study a subject, the more they learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice a skill—reading, writing, or problem solving—the more adept they become at the respective activity. Faculty members and administrators in all types of colleges and universities know this. And students realize it as well. Moreover, decades of research studies show that students learn more when they direct their efforts to a variety of educationally purposeful activities, inside and outside the classroom.

Colleges and universities cannot accurately judge their effectiveness in the absence of good information about what

**“Colleges and universities cannot accurately judge their effectiveness in the absence of good information about what students do and the quality of the student experience.”**

students do and the quality of the student experience. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides a new way to look at and talk about teaching and learning. Thus, it helps stimulate conversation on campus and can help determine whether student behavior and institutional practices are headed in the right direction.

**The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)** annually collects information directly from more than 100,000 undergraduate students at hundreds of colleges and universities that is used to improve student learning and collegiate quality.



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*“Assessment in higher education remains controversial. But NSSE’s solid foundation clearly shows faculty and administrators that it is possible to systematically assess student learning. Future developments in assessment in higher education will build on but not replace NSSE...”*

—Roger Benjamin,  
President, Council for Aid to Education

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*“It is always instructive to listen carefully to the voices of those ‘in the trenches.’ The National Survey of Student Engagement is long overdue and will surely in time affect parents’ perceptions of what is best for their youngsters.”*

—Deborah Wadsworth,  
President, Public Agenda

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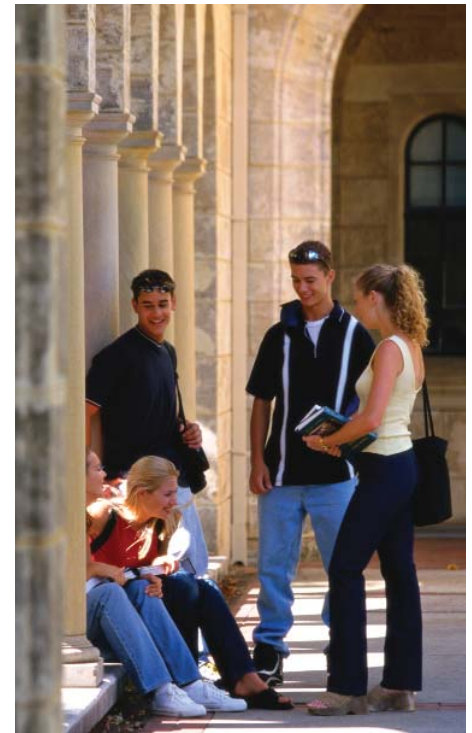
*“I’ve reviewed most of NSSE’s technical reports and analyses and it’s a very impressive set of evidence.”*

—Patrick T. Terenzini,  
Senior Scientist and Professor of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State University

**N** SSE’s core activities can be depicted as a triangle. The different size sections represent the relative emphasis NSSE gives to the respective activity.



NSSE devotes its largest share of time and resources to gathering, reporting, and interpreting student engagement data, with an eye toward enhancing student learning and promoting student success. Through its Institute for Effective Educational Practice, NSSE discovers and reports educational practices that seem to work in a variety of



different settings with different groups of learners. Finally, NSSE champions effective educational practice as a compelling, meaningful indicator of collegiate quality. In this regard NSSE is refocusing the national conversation about what constitutes quality in the undergraduate experience.

**The NSSE survey was designed by experts and extensively tested to ensure validity and reliability and to minimize non-response bias and mode effects.**





## Selected Results

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*“NSSE clearly identified our strengths but more importantly showed us some areas where we could improve the educational experience for our students. We have incorporated NSSE into our strategic plan and will use it as part of our comprehensive institutional assessment to strengthen our academic program...”*

—Nancy Hensel,  
President, University of Maine  
at Presque Isle

**E**ngaging in effective educational practices benefits all students. Some students are more engaged than others, so it’s important to discover how particular groups of students are performing in order to take appropriate action. For example:

- Students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds generally engage in effective educational practices at comparable levels.
- International students are generally more engaged in various college experiences than American students.
- Senior transfer students interact less with peers and faculty members and are less involved in campus activities and programs, but perform academically on par with non-transfer students.
- Diversity-related experiences are positively related to many other effective educational practices.
- Learning communities are positively linked to a variety of other educationally purposeful activities and desired outcomes.
- Engagement and grades go hand-in-hand in that GPA is positively related to all five benchmark scores and nearly all of the effective educational practices represented on the NSSE survey.



## Promising Findings

- 57% of all students say diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs) are frequently included in class discussions or assignments
- 87% of all students rated their college experience as “good” or “excellent” and about four-fifths of all students would “probably” or “definitely” attend the same institution if they started college over again.
- Two-thirds of seniors did community service or volunteer work during college.
- 70% of all students reported the quality of their advising as “good” or “excellent.”

## Disappointing Findings

- 63% of first-year students and 47% of seniors never worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework.
- 71% of first-year students and 58% of seniors never participated in community-based projects as part of a regular course.
- 42% of first-year students and 26% of seniors never discussed ideas from their reading or classes with faculty members outside of class.
- Only about 14% of full-time students spent more than 25 hours per week preparing for class, the approximate number that faculty members say is needed to do well in college. More than two-fifths (41%) spent 10 or fewer hours per week.
- Fewer senior women major in Computer and Information Sciences (3%) and Engineering (2%) than senior men (10% and 13%, respectively). More women are choosing health-related fields (8%) and education (13%) versus men (3% and 5%, respectively).

### Percentage of Seniors who Participated in Various Educational Enriching Activities by Institution Type\*

	Doc- Ext	Doc - Int	Master’s	Bac-LA	Bac-Gen	Total
Practicum, internship, field experience	71%	70%	71%	73%	75%	<b>72%</b>
Community service/volunteer work	62%	57%	60%	74%	67%	<b>63%</b>
Learning Communities	22%	22%	23%	21%	25%	<b>23%</b>
Research with faculty member	27%	22%	21%	34%	22%	<b>25%</b>
Foreign language	42%	34%	35%	64%	38%	<b>41%</b>
Study abroad	16%	13%	13%	36%	16%	<b>18%</b>
Independent study/self-designed major	25%	25%	27%	42%	32%	<b>29%</b>
Culminating senior experience	46%	52%	53%	74%	66%	<b>57%</b>

\*Please refer to NSSE Web site for definitions of institution types



## Using NSSE Data

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*“We’re using NSSE in three strategic ways: 1) as a barometer to measure global changes to create a student-centered campus, 2) as a lightning rod to stimulate campus discussions on ways to challenge and engage students, and 3) as a thermometer to measure our progress on the five areas of effective educational practice which we are using in our upcoming regional accreditation.”*

*—Anne Gormly,  
Vice President for Academic  
Affairs, Georgia College and State University*

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*“We’re in the business of constantly improving student learning. We use NSSE to structure conversations about priorities for teaching, learning, and assessing, and we are working on new ways to help prospective students and others in the college’s community understand the complex factors that contribute to the college experience.”*

*—Sister Joel Read,  
President, Alverno College*

**N** SSE provides campuses with information they can use almost immediately to improve various aspects of their performance and help students get the most out of their college experience. Schools are using their NSSE results in many ways, including:

- Assessment and improvement**
- Curricular reform**
- Benchmarking**
- Alumni outreach**
- Accountability**
- Advising**
- Grant writing**
- Institutional research**
- Recruitment and promotion**
- Accreditation**
- Self-studies**
- Retention**
- State system performance reviews**



A number of state and university systems have participated in NSSE to help gauge performance in areas such as institutional effectiveness, general education, and student satisfaction including the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, University of Missouri, University of Wisconsin, and more than a dozen others.

## National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

*NSSE results fall into five key clusters of activities that research studies show are linked to desired outcomes in college.*

### Level of Academic Challenge

■ Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.

### Student-Faculty Interactions

■ Students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life long learning.

### Active and Collaborative Learning

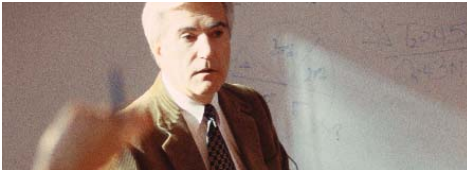
■ Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, during and after college.

### Enriching Educational Experiences

■ Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment academic programs. Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and others. Technology facilitates collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge.

### Supportive Campus Environment

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



## Next Steps

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*“NSSE is an invaluable resource that gives us independent and benchmarked verification of the impact we have on learners’ lives. It sheds light on our strengths, while at the same time pointing us to areas where improvement is needed. It also gives us confidence to continually improve, a benefit of participation in the survey that is difficult to calculate.”*

—Peter Smith,  
President, California  
State University-Monterey Bay

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*“The NSSE survey has been valuable at the System level for accountability purposes, allowing us to provide national benchmarks along with System data.”*

—Frank Goldberg,  
Associate Vice President  
for Policy Analysis and Research,  
University of Wisconsin System

**N** SSE is now established as a valid, reliable assessment tool. Building on this foundation, NSSE is working with an expanding cadre of partners to further strengthen institutional accountability for student learning.

**The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)** is based at the University of Texas at Austin. NSSE and CCSSE envision a number of collaborative efforts, such as examining student engagement at two-year and four-year campuses within a single state or university system and tracking the movement and performance of students between the two sectors.

**The NSSE Institute** focuses on helping schools use information about student experiences to improve academic programs and support services. **Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice)** is looking at promising practices at educationally effective institutions and convening teams from institutional consortia to guide and support change efforts that will enhance student success and institutional performance. Partners in DEEP include the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), Lumina Foundation for Education, the Wabash

**“NSSE is working with an expanding cadre of partners to further strengthen institutional accountability for student learning.”**

College Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, as well as such organizations as the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

NSSE also is working with AAHE and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education on the **BEAMS Project (Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students)** in an effort to help reduce the national gap in educational attainment for African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans by increasing the number of students from these groups who earn a bachelor’s degree ([www.aahe.org/BEAMS](http://www.aahe.org/BEAMS)).

This expanded workscope is transforming NSSE from an annual survey of undergraduates into a national movement for using data to improve the undergraduate experience.

## Lessons Learned

*Student engagement results appear to have the best chance of guiding institutional change efforts when:*

1. Faculty and staff understand and endorse the concept of student engagement
2. Enough results are available to use the information at the department or unit level
3. Results are examined from multiple perspectives
4. Institutions understand what student engagement data represent and use the results wisely
5. Institutional performance is reported in a responsible way
6. Results are placed in the proper context and interpreted carefully
7. Results are linked to other information about the student experience and institutional performance
8. Institutions work on improvement as part of a consortium



# National Survey of Student Engagement Quick Facts



## Survey

The *College Student Report* is available in paper and Web versions and takes about 15 minutes to complete.

## Objectives

Provide data to colleges and universities for improving undergraduate education, inform state accountability and accreditation efforts, and facilitate national and sector benchmarking efforts.

## Partners

Supported by grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Co-sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning.

## Participating Colleges and Universities

More than 285,000 students at 618 different four-year colleges and universities thus far. More than 400 schools are registered for the spring 2003 program.

## Consortium and State or University Systems

Numerous peer comparison groups (urban institutions, women's colleges, research institutions, Christian colleges, engineering and technical schools) and state and university systems (California State University, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, Wisconsin) have asked additional mission-specific questions and share aggregated data.

## Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

- Level of Academic Challenge
- Active and Collaborative Learning
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Enriching Educational Experiences
- Supportive Campus Environment

## Data Sources

Randomly selected first-year and senior students from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities. Supplemented by other sources such as institutional records, results from other surveys, and data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

## Administration

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning in cooperation with the Indiana University Center for Survey Research and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).

## Validity and Reliability

The NSSE survey was designed by experts and extensively tested to insure validity and reliability and to minimize non-response bias and mode effects.

## Response Rates

Average response rate for paper and Web versions is about 41-42%.

## Audiences

College and university administrators, faculty members, and governing boards; external authorities such as accreditors and government agencies; prospective students and their families; and college advisors, institutional researchers, and higher education scholars.

## Participation Agreement

Participating institutions agree that NSSE will use the data in the aggregate for national and sector reporting purposes and other undergraduate improvement initiatives; institutions can use their own data for institutional purposes, and that results specific to each institution and identified as such will not be made public except by mutual agreement.

## Cost

Institutions pay a minimum participation fee ranging from \$1,500 to \$7,500 determined by undergraduate enrollment.

## New Initiatives

Working with the American Association for Higher Education on two major initiatives, Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) and Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students (BEAMS).

## Special Services

Faculty survey, NSSE workshops, faculty and staff retreats, consulting, peer comparisons, norms data, and special analyses.

## National Survey of Student Engagement

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