Frequently Asked Questions About NSSE

Introduction

On November 14, 2013, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) will release *A Fresh Look at Student Engagement —Annual Results 2013.* You or your colleagues may receive questions from the media regarding the NSSE project, the contents of the report, or specific results from your campus. This document suggests ways to think about your NSSE results and respond to the media and other constituents who may inquire about your NSSE participation. This document also includes answers to questions you might have for NSSE staff. The question topics range widely and include NSSE's resources for participating institutions, NSSE's research methodology, and the relation of NSSE results to student success outcomes.

This document is sent **only 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 broad-based indicators of the extent to which undergraduate students engage in practices that are important to their learning.

Fairfield University

Questions the Media Might Ask

Why did your institution participate in NSSE?

The reasons for participating in NSSE are as varied as the more than 1,500 institutions that have participated in NSSE over the last 14 years. Some campus leaders use NSSE results to demonstrate progress on campus initiatives undertaken to improve student learning. Others use participation in NSSE as a catalyst for discussions about institutional improvement on the activities that matter most to student learning and success. Still others utilize NSSE results for benchmarking purposes or for documenting institutional effectiveness for accreditation. Effectively articulating your reasons for participating demonstrates to external audiences an institutional commitment to improvement, and fosters a campus culture in which students and faculty alike are confident that the student experience matters.

Will you release your NSSE results? Can someone (e.g., press, students, faculty, parents) get institution-specific survey results from NSSE?

Each participating institution decides whether and how to release its NSSE results; NSSE will never release or confirm institutional results without explicit permission from the institution.

When and how to report results is best decided carefully, factoring in the depth of data available and whether or not your institution has had an opportunity to digest findings. Administering NSSE is only the first step; putting data to work in ways that positively impact student learning is the next and most important step. NSSE encourages public reporting of student engagement results in ways that increase understanding of college quality and promote productive dialogue.

Whether it makes sense to release your results is up to you. Some colleges and universities release results within the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) or the University and College Accountability Network (U–CAN).

If you choose to release information about your participation in NSSE, you may wish to adapt the *NSSE Annual Results 2013* press release to provide additional information about survey results to local media.

For help in conceptualizing public presentations of your results, NSSE now features a Web site display gallery on the NSSE Web site.

nsse.iub.edu/links/website_displays

What findings from your institutional results are most encouraging or suggestive of the need for improvement?

Institutions will understandably want to focus on different areas. It is important to interpret your results in the context of your institutional mission. It is up to you to determine the desirable level of student involvement in various activities on your campus.

You may decide to report Engagement Indicators or individual items. The ten Engagement Indicators summarize students' responses on a set of related survey questions. They were created as a way to concisely distill important aspects of the student experience inside and outside of the classroom. They are explained in more detail in *Annual Results* and include item level results. Although Engagement Indicator results are displayed in comparison to peer institutions, looking within at variation in the experiences of students on your campus is instructive to understanding differences in levels of engagement.

Bloomfield College

How did your institution rank?

NSSE does not rank institutions. Engagement Indicator scores are presented in comparison with your selected peer groups and assess how students on your campus score on engagement measures compared to students at peer institutions. Engagement Indicator scores are a useful reference point for assessing engagement on campus, but do not constitute rankings. Graphical displays in your *Institutional Report* Engagement Indicators report show the range of engagement on the various Engagement Indicators.

How do you explain your institution's performance in the areas in which students are highly engaged? Will these areas remain a priority?

Your *Snapshot* report highlights selected results from your institution and also features the five questions on which your first-year and senior students scored the highest and the five questions on which they scored the lowest, relative to students at your selected comparison group. By examining individual NSSE questions, you can better understand what contributes to your institution's overall Engagement Indicator scores. Your institutional mission may explain specific findings, such as the large numbers of students doing service-learning at institutions in the Carnegie Community Engagement classification. Perhaps your 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 a key step we are taking to achieve that goal. We will carefully study the *Annual Results* report along with our *Institutional Report* and use this information to further enhance the quality of our undergraduate programs."

How will you use your institution's results? How will you address the areas in which you fell short?

At most colleges and universities, NSSE results can help identify areas in which there is room for improvement. The *Annual Results* provides examples of how different institutions are using the results toward this end. Patterns of student performance measured by NSSE will not likely change without intentional interventions. You know best what will help your campus make use of results to improve student engagement.

One approach is to convene small groups of faculty and staff to carefully review NSSE results and determine what may constitute "reasonable" levels of student engagement, given local circumstances such as institutional mission and student characteristics. For example, is it necessary for 90% of the students to be highly engaged across all Engagement Indicators? 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—curriculum committees, institutional improvement task forces, academic and student life administrators, student leaders, and others involved in assessment. Such discussions can help convert NSSE data into action toward institutional improvement.

When will your institution participate in NSSE again?

Over 700 colleges and universities are registered for the spring 2014 survey administration. Visit the NSSE Web site to see if your institution is registered. Most institutions administer the NSSE survey every two or three years to ensure that their data reflect the experiences of currently enrolled students. Some institutions use the survey more frequently because of local assessment needs and accreditation cycles.
nsse.iub.edu

Bucknell University

Questions You Might Have for NSSE Project Staff

What other resources are available to better understand patterns in student engagement?

As a NSSE participant you have access to the NSSE Report Builder–Institutional Version, which creates customized reports using your institution's NSSE data. You can create tables of Engagement Indicator statistics or individual item frequencies that compare subgroups of students within your institution or that compare your students to those from a selected comparison group of institutions. Access your institution's customized Report Builder via the Data and Reports page on the NSSE Institution Interface.
webserv.indiana.edu/nsse/interface/login.cfm

NSSE also creates summary tables on an annual basis that compare all participating U.S. institutions' item frequencies and means and Engagement Indicator statistics by Carnegie Classifications, gender, and major category.
nsse.iub.edu/html/summary_tables.cfm

Do you advocate policies that link funding decisions to NSSE results? What about other accountability initiatives?

The NSSE project does not typically endorse specific policy recommendations, but we believe campuses should not face sanctions for efforts to assess and improve conditions for teaching and learning. We also believe it is important to identify and increase public awareness of important aspects of institutional effectiveness and collegiate quality. One way to accomplish this is to incorporate NSSE data in accountability templates that policy makers and other groups consider to be fair and appropriately focused on educational activities associated with desired college outcomes.

Does the research show that student engagement matters?

Annual Results mentions some of the research supporting the use of effective educational practices represented by NSSE. Additional information can be found in documents available on the NSSE Web site. For example, see NSSE's Psychometric Portfolio.
nsse.iub.edu/links/data_quality

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 (using gender, part-time status, and enrollment size) when preparing the reports because their purpose is to document the current state of student engagement at bachelor's degree-granting colleges and universities. We also allow institutions to customize up to three comparison groups, so institutions can benchmark themselves against similar peers. We believe that all students should be exposed to and involved in effective educational practices.

Do the NSSE questions reflect what employers are looking for? Do they reflect what some scholars think constitutes an "educated person?"

NSSE focuses on educational processes linked to many of the outcomes considered by informed observers to be essential for a college educated person in the 21st century. Students also report the progress they have

made since starting college in 16 areas, many 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. Colleges and universities may use the self-reported gains to identify areas that warrant attention by curriculum committees, general education task forces, and other groups.

Massachusetts College of Art and Design

Will you publish information about best practices from institutions that performed exceedingly well?

NSSE works with an expanding cadre of partners, including the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, The Teagle Foundation, The Council of Independent Colleges, and American Association of State Colleges and Universities, among others, to strengthen attention to and advance practices that improve student learning and success.

The **NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice** helps institutions use information about students' experiences to improve academic programs and services. As a repository of practical ideas for NSSE institutions to improve evidence-based assessment and improvement

initiatives, the NSSE Institute has published *Moving from Data to Action* and *Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education: Lessons from the Field—Volumes 1 and 2,* as a repository of practical ideas for NSSE institutions to improve evidence-based assessment and improvement initiatives. Other examples and guides for using NSSE results are available. **nsse.iub.edu/institute**

Why did you revise the NSSE instrument?

After a decade in the field, we know more about what matters to student success, institutional improvement efforts, and properties of the NSSE survey itself. Moreover, as higher education faces increasing demands for assessment data, NSSE must stay relevant to current issues and concerns.

How does NSSE 2013 compare to earlier versions of NSSE?

Survey changes range from new items to minor revisions. Compared to NSSE 2012, about a quarter of the 2013 questions are new, and nearly the same proportion unchanged. Of the half that has been changed, an equal number were modified in major or minor ways. Of course, some items needed to be deleted. An item-by-item comparison showing how the survey was updated from 2012, indicating items unchanged, slightly modified, significantly altered, and deleted, is available on our Web site.

Where can I find additional information about the NSSE 2013 instrument and its development?

A one-page summary of the updated instrument is included with your *Annual Results*. For additional information or to share your ideas, comments, and questions, contact us via e-mail (nsse@indiana.edu) or phone (812-856-5824). Also please visit the NSSE 2013 Web page for more information. **nsse.iub.edu/nsse2013**

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