NSSE
national survey of student engagement

Frequently Asked Questions About NSSE

Following the November release of *Engagement Matters: Survey Findings on the Quality of Undergraduate Education— Annual Results 2017,* you or your colleagues may receive questions from the media regarding the National Survey of Student Engagement, the contents of the report, or specific results from your campus.

When talking about the NSSE project and findings, you can justifiably take pride in being part of a national project that focuses on how colleges and universities promote student learning. Thanks to you and your colleagues, we now have broad-based indicators of the extent to which undergraduate students engage in practices important to their learning.

This document* suggests ways to think about your NSSE results and to respond to the media and other constituents who may inquire about your NSSE participation. Also included are answers to questions you might have for NSSE staff.

Annual Results 2017 and the press release for the report are available at the NSSE website:

nsse.indiana.edu/html/annual_results.cfm

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 1,600 institutions that have participated in NSSE over the last 18 years. Some campus leaders use NSSE results to demonstrate progress on campus initiatives to improve student learning. Others participate in NSSE to catalyze campus discussions about institutional improvement. Still others use NSSE results for benchmarking purposes or to document 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 know that the student experience matters.

Will you release your NSSE results? Can anyone (press, students, faculty, parents, etc.) get institution-specific results from NSSE?

NSSE encourages public reporting of student engagement results in ways that increase understanding of college quality and promote productive dialogue, but each participating institution decides whether and how to release its results. NSSE will never release or comment on 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 the findings. Some colleges and universities release results within the College Portrait of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), but most craft their own data displays or releases about student engagement results. Remember, 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.

If you choose to release information about your participation in NSSE, you may wish to adapt the press release for NSSE *Annual Results 2017* to provide additional information about survey results to local media. For help in conceptualizing public presentations of results, NSSE features a gallery of website displays. **nsse.indiana.edu/links/website_displays**

What findings from your institutional results are most encouraging or suggest a need for improvement?

Different institutions will understandably want to focus on different areas. It is important to interpret your results in the context of your institutional mission and to determine the desirable level of student involvement in various campus activities. You may decide to report Engagement Indicators or individual items. The ten Engagement Indicators, explained in more detail in *Annual Results,* summarize students' responses on a set of related survey questions—concisely distilling key aspects of the student experience in and outside the classroom. Although your customized reports display Engagement Indicators in comparison to peer institutions, examining variations in the student experience within your campus is instructive to understanding engagement differences among student groups.

How did your institution rank?

NSSE does not rank institutions. Engagement Indicators are presented that assess the engagement of students on your campus compared to that of students at peer institutions. While Engagement Indicators are a useful reference point for assessment, they are not appropriate for institutional rankings. However, the Engagement Indicators report (part of the *Institutional Report* package) includes comparisons with groups of high-performing institutions to help each campus gauge the relative strength of their performance.

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 (for example, high service-learning participation at institutions in the Carnegie Community Engagement classification). Your results may be 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 for some time, and using NSSE is a key step we are taking to monitor our progress. 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 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. *Annual Results* provides examples of how different institutions use their 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 use results to inform improvement efforts.

One approach is to convene small groups of faculty and staff to carefully review results and determine what may constitute reasonable levels of student engagement given circumstances such as institutional mission and student characteristics. Groups responsible for the undergraduate program—curriculum committees, institutional improvement task forces, academic and student life administrators, student leaders, and others involved in assessment—should examine results and discuss their meaning and implications. Such discussions can help convert NSSE data into action toward institutional improvement.

To facilitate connections between NSSE results and the interests of campus units and committees, we have mapped NSSE Engagement Indicators, High-Impact Practices, individual survey items, and Topical Modules to a range of campus interest groups.
nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/NSSE_Item_Campuswide_Mapping.pdf

When will your institution participate in NSSE again?

More than 500 colleges and universities are registered for the spring 2018 NSSE administration. (See the NSSE website for details.) Most participating institutions administer the survey every two or three years to ensure their data reflect the experiences of currently enrolled students. Some institutions participate every year because of local assessment needs and accreditation cycles.
nsse.indiana.edu

Questions You Might Ask NSSE Project Staff

What other resources are available to gain a better understanding of patterns in student engagement?

As a NSSE participant you have access to the Report Builder–Institution Version, which creates customized reports using your institution's 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 Report Builder via the Data and Reports page on the secure NSSE Institution Interface.
nsse.indiana.edu/links/interface

NSSE also provides summary tables of all participating U.S. institutions' item frequencies (including Topical Modules) and means and Engagement Indicator statistics by Carnegie Classification, gender, and major-field category.
nsse.indiana.edu/html/summary_tables.cfm

Why don't you adjust for institutional differences on key variables (e.g., endowment, average SAT scores)?

NSSE's purpose is to document the levels and characteristics of student engagement at bachelor's-granting colleges and universities. We make only a few statistical adjustments to ensure representativeness and comparability of results. Participating institutions can customize up to three comparison groups in order to benchmark themselves against similar peers.

Does the research show that student engagement matters?

Research supporting the use of effective educational practices represented by NSSE is mentioned in *Annual Results* and is discussed in various publications including:

- Kuh, G. D. (2009). The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual and empirical foundations. In R. M. Gonyea & G. D. Kuh (Eds.), Using NSSE in institutional research. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2009*(141), 5–20.

- McCormick, A. C., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2013). Student engagement: Bridging research and practice to improve the quality of undergraduate education. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 28, pp. 47–92). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

- Pascarella, P. T., & Terenzini, E. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

To explore these topics further, visit NSSE's searchable database of scholarly research by NSSE staff on students, faculty, and institutional quality.
nsse.indiana.edu/links/publications

Do NSSE questions reflect what employers are looking for and what experts consider the characteristics of an educated person?

NSSE focuses on educational processes linked to many outcomes that informed observers consider essential for a college-educated person in the 21st century. Students also report progress they have made since starting college in ten areas, many of which are key general education outcomes.

Because students begin college at different levels of knowledge and development, perceived gains should be interpreted within an institution-specific context. Colleges and universities may use the gains to identify areas that warrant attention by curriculum committees, general education task forces, and other groups.

Do you publish information about best practices from institutions that perform 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 the 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 NSSE results to improve programs and services. The NSSE Institute provides a repository of practical ideas for evidence-based assessment and improvement initiatives in the *Lessons from the Field* series, with data-use examples from participating institutions:

- *Vol. 1. Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education*
- *Vol. 2. Moving from Data to Action*
- *Vol. 3. Using Data to Catalyze Change on Campus*
- *Vol. 4. Digging Deeper to Focus and Extend Data Use*

All volumes of the *Lessons from the Field* series can be downloaded from the NSSE website.
nsse.indiana.edu/html/lessons_from_the_field.cfm

Many other resources and guides for using results are available on the NSSE Institute website.
nsse.indiana.edu/institute

Do you advocate policies that link funding 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 effective teaching and learning. We also believe it is important to identify and increase public awareness of key aspects of institutional effectiveness and collegiate quality. One way is to incorporate NSSE data in accountability templates that policymakers, institutional leaders, and others consider fair and appropriately focused on activities associated with desired college outcomes.