

# Insights into Effective Educational Practices

*Study reveals a different way to evaluate the quality of undergraduate education — not based on institutional resources and public reputation*

By **John Hayek** and **George Kuh**

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides data and information that colleges and universities can use to improve educational practices. The NSSE 2001 report, *Improving the College Experience: National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice*, summarizes the project's first two years.

NSSE results challenge the view of college quality popularized by national news magazines, which rate colleges largely on the basis of their institutional resources and public reputation. In fact, a school's academic reputation as judged by others says very little about the extent to which active learning, student-faculty interaction, and a supportive environment characterize a campus. By focusing on whether colleges are using their resources to help students learn and get the most out of school, the study provides new information to students and parents in the college search process and gives campuses additional insight into effective teaching and student learning.

## The Study

NSSE is an annual survey that collects information directly from undergraduate students — information that colleges and universities can use to improve student learning. The results of the survey provide comparative benchmarks for determining how effectively colleges are contributing to learning in five areas: level of academic challenge; active

and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; enriching educational experiences; and supportive campus environment.

NSSE refers to the combination of these measurements as "student engagement." The survey measures student engagement by asking students questions about their campus experiences, such as their classroom responses, their interactions with faculty, their interactions with other students, their study habits, and their university's support of their efforts.

The national database includes more than 155,000 first-year and senior students at 470 four-year colleges and universities. NSSE data is gathered by administering the survey to randomly selected first-year students and seniors at participating colleges and universities. Students can complete a paper or Web-based version of the survey. The average institutional response rate is approximately 42 percent for both modes.

## Observations

Although experiences of students at the same school differ a good deal, NSSE results point to some generalizations:

- Schools of similar sizes and missions vary widely on student engagement, though students at smaller colleges and liberal arts colleges tend to be more engaged than their counterparts attending larger institutions.
- Many schools use a variety of pro-

grams and practices to influence student engagement, such as first-year seminars, service learning courses, internships, and capstone experiences. The broad range of educational practices demonstrated by participating schools provides evidence that many institutions already have established the foundations that lead to optimum student learning, while others still have a way to go.

- A gap exists between the amount of time students spend on educational activities and what faculty members and others say is optimum. For example, students spend only about half as much time preparing for class as their teachers recommend, and 22 percent of all students frequently come to class unprepared.

A number of other encouraging and disappointing findings arose from the study.

Encouraging findings:

- Almost all students (98 percent) at least "occasionally" ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions.
- Most students (90 percent) worked at least "occasionally" with other students on projects during class.
- Two-thirds of all seniors are involved in community service and volunteer work, and 72 percent participate in internships.
- Half of all first-year students and seniors frequently have serious conversations with students from

different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

- Most students say their academic advising is either “good” (43 percent) or “excellent” (27 percent).

Discouraging findings:

- About one-fifth of both first-year students and seniors say their institution gives little emphasis to studying and spending time on academic work.
- Almost half (45 percent) of the first-year students surveyed never discussed ideas from their classes or readings with a faculty member outside of class.
- Commuter students and part-time students view their campus environments as less supportive than do on-campus students and full-time students.
- African-American students are comparatively less positive about relationships with other students and faculty, while Asian-American students report overall lower quality


relationships with peers, faculty members, and administrators than do other students.

## Using Information for Institutional Change

Representatives from colleges, universities, and state systems from across the country are using NSSE information to initiate public discussions about institutional performance. Schools are comparing themselves with peer institutions and the national benchmarks to get a sense of their strengths and weaknesses. In most cases, the results point to things institutions can address almost immediately to improve the undergraduate experience.

It is unusual and refreshing for faculty members, provosts, deans, and student affairs professionals to talk openly about areas they wish to strengthen, sharing what seems to be working and what isn't, and then deciding what actions to take. The

NSSE 2001 report contains numerous examples of how different types of colleges and universities use their results for institutional assessment and improvement.

The full study and supporting materials are available online at <<http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/report-2001.shtml>>. 

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