

Making Headlines: The National Survey of Student Engagement

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The National Survey of Student Engagement received wide recognition this past year after going public with its first annual report. Because the survey is housed at Indiana University, we wanted to offer our readers an opportunity for an inside look at the project. The following are excerpts from an interview with George D. Kuh, Director of the National Survey of Student Engagement. Dr. Kuh has been a faculty member at IU since 1976 and was recently named Chancellors' Professor, a title that is bestowed upon people who have demonstrated evidence of outstanding teaching and scholarship. Dr. Kuh is also the Director of the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) program, which transferred to Dr. Kuh and IU in 1994 at the request of UCLA professor C. Robert Pace who originally developed the CSEQ.

What is the National Survey of Student Engagement?

We call it NSSE (pronounced "nessie"). It's an effort to inform the public, as well as participating institutions, about the level at which students are taking advantage of an institution's resources for learning. We call this engagement, a concept that has a long history in the literature of higher education. It probably goes back 350 years; but at least in the literature engagement started showing up in the 1940s and 1950s and took off in the 1970s and 1980s. Engagement means the extent to which students are actively engaged in things that we know matter to their learning; whether it's reading or writing or interacting with peers on a substantive level about things that are meaningful, complicated, or related to their careers, studies, or out-of-class activities- whatever it might be- there's a wide array of things that can be educationally purposeful.

So NSSE is an attempt to measure the amount of time and energy students expend in these activities. In this important regard it's similar to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire. But the distinctive twist of NSSE is that the data institutions are given are also to be used to inform the public about what constitutes quality or excellence in the undergraduate experience. And, while there have been a lot of studies, (Sandy Astin's work is best known, and Bob Pace, myself and others have also done a lot with the CSEQ), the findings have been largely restricted to the research community and there has been little

leakage into the popular press and media about these things. The popular press knows about the CIRP data. This information is more about who students are when they start college, not about what students in college actually do with their time. That's what NSSE is designed to do: focus on that aspect of collegiate quality and to that degree, shift the conversation from college rankings, to what students are actually doing. To help us get NSSE off the ground we've been fortunate to have the strong financial backing of The Pew Charitable Trusts (\$3.3 million for three years) and the guidance of national experts on our National Advisory Board and Technical Advisory Panel. Also, the project is cosponsored by the prestigious Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (where former IU president Tom Ehrlich is a senior scholar and serves as vice chair of the NSSE Advisory Board).

How is the NSSE administered?

We started with field testing in 1999, close to 70 schools with two cycles, one in the spring with 12 schools and one in the fall with 56 schools. Looking back on it, I don't know how we thought we could move that quickly and run that fast and have so many plates spinning in the air without having a bunch of them fall. We actually did though, and 2000 was the inaugural administration of NSSE. We had 276 four-year colleges and universities. So, 276 schools and about 150,000 students in the sample. We have data from 63,000 in the national norms, overall a 42% response rate. This spring (2001), we're surveying 227,000 students at about 320 schools. We thought, based on our budget with Pew and institutional fees, we would have enough resources to work with 250 schools in year 2000 and maybe 275-300 schools in 2001. We've actually gone beyond what we originally proposed we thought or could do. Our goal is to have as many four-year schools in the national database as possible. Realistically, if we get 1000 different four-year colleges and universities we'll be happy campers. That's a lot of schools and we have about 475 different schools in the first two years. Close to 125 are "overlap" schools, institutions that used the NSSE survey both in 2000 and 2001. This will be very helpful to use in order to estimate the stability of the results. That is, will the findings from the same colleges change from year to year? That could mean the survey is not as reliable as we'd like, so people want to know if they can trust what the results are saying. Fortunately we'll know soon about this, almost to everyone's satisfaction.

We rely on the good offices of the Center for Survey Research

at Indiana University to physically conduct the survey; as I say, they do all the heavy lifting. They do all the sampling; they randomly identify the students from the participating schools and they prepare the survey packets. Of course, my NSSE project team does plenty on our end — we're busy all the time as well. But the prospect of mailing 227,000 packets...no one does surveys this big. Even the large national survey organizations and the social science survey institutes — nobody comes close to what we are doing at IU with NSSE in terms of collecting data directly from several hundred thousand randomly sampled students. That is, the participating institutions don't know who we're surveying. We can tell them, and sometimes do, if they can help boost response rates. The point is the schools don't determine who gets the survey, NSSE does. This puts everybody on a level playing field, which is why the data are viewed as highly credible and useful for comparison purposes.

What are some uses for NSSE data?

In addition to some level of public reporting, institutions are encouraged to compare their performance with peer institutions (institutions that they consider to be like them in some way) and this has predictably leveraged some state interest. A lot of states have performance indicators as part of their accountability systems. They use information about student behavior, for example, to demonstrate to an oversight board that state-funded institutions are performing at high levels. One of the best ways to do that is with comparative data and there is very little comparative data about the student experience. This was very obvious in *Measuring Up*, the national state-by-state report card on higher education performance that came out last November, about two weeks after our first NSSE national report came out. We actually staged the release of our NSSE report so that the two documents would be complementary and be helpful to the larger accountability agenda.

Measuring Up evaluated all states in six areas, giving a grade in five areas. The one that wasn't graded was student learning. This is because there simply was not common data or indicators that states had related to how much students were learning in postsecondary education. NSSE doesn't measure student learning, per se, but it serves as a proxy by pointing to the activities that predict desired student learning outcomes. That is, NSSE isn't an outcomes instrument; rather, it measures process indicators. Even when we get better outcome measures, we'll still need a NSSE-like instrument so institutions can

figure out where they ought to be investing their own energy in order to improve.

One surprise so far was that a group of about 15 NSSE 2000 public research universities have decided to exchange student-level data. The reason this is so surprising is that something quite like this has not been done before. Many schools might share some average scores or student characteristics, but they almost never allow data to be shared at the level of the individual student record — directly compare student performance at the University of Colorado-Boulder, IU Bloomington, Ohio State or Michigan State. The people doing this have a common understanding that they will not publish or report this information publicly. Their analysis is strictly for internal purposes to help their faculty and other people understand the nature and quality of student performance. What's very gratifying is the level of trust that has been established there because of the potential of the NSSE data to help their schools improve.

How can NSSE be used with other national surveys?

Some schools are already linking NSSE data to other institutional data, like results from the CIRP freshman year survey. Several of us (Sandy Astin and Linda Sax from UCLA, myself, Peter Ewell from NCHEMS) are talking about ways that we might link our data at the institutional level, which would serve a couple of purposes. It would provide institutions with a sort of "cradle to grave" look at their students — from the first week of college using CIRP, the end of first year with the NSSE, the CIRP follow up survey that can be given at different times, and NSSE data from the senior year. In other words, it's possible to link, at the institutional level, these different data sets so that a school could see how their students are performing at different points — from the beginning of college to the end. Also, we could use one another's data for cross-validity purposes. That is, are similar items on each survey measuring the same thing and, if so we can argue more convincingly the validity, reliability and stability of these measures.

The American Council of Education along with the Association for Institutional Research commission, and Vic Borden from IUPUI has been identifying, objective, low-threat ways of comparing the various national instruments available. All this will be helpful and useful because I often get questions like, which instrument should we use? You should use the survey that best determines your needs. These surveys don't all measure the same things. There's some overlap between the items on the

UCLA surveys and the CSEQ and NSSE, but not as much as many people think. Comparing NSSE and CSEQ, if you're looking for robust peer comparison and you want to be in a national database and you want to be sure you've got data that will serve your state requirements for performance indicators than NSSE is a pretty good choice. On another hand, if you want to dig a little deeper into the student experience then the CSEQ is probably a preferred instrument; it's longer, it goes into more detail about many aspects of student behavior covered on the NSSE.

What institutional initiatives have emerged from NSSE results?

George Tech, for example, was immediately disappointed with the number of students engaged with faculty on research projects. Research universities like Tech say that one of their strengths is this type of activity. So they set aside \$250,000 to encourage faculty to apply for small grants that would involve undergraduates in research activities. Another institution has established \$3000 grants to support faculty members who are modifying courses or creating some other kind of activity to engage their students in one or more of the educationally effective practices from the NSSE. So institutions are starting to move money around to emphasize the things that the NSSE features, the activities that our research says are important. So, again, this is meeting one of NSSE's purposes — getting folks to talk about these kinds of measures, but mostly what the measures are saying, more seriously and focus people on why it's important to do these kinds of things.

There are other examples too. I was doing a panel discussion at a meeting a couple of weeks ago, sitting next to a university president. And he begins to tell me how his school's NSSE data has got his campus talking and how they were really delighted with their senior results, but their freshman data stunk. And so he's charged a task force to figure out how to improve the first year experience. It's not like the first year has been ignored, thanks to people like John Gardner, formerly of the University of South Carolina and now the policy center at Brevard College — that's his life's work. But NSSE data gives an empirical basis, a frame of reference.

I've been working with a small liberal arts college that has a deep commitment to diversity. Even so, students are not satisfied, complaining that the institution has failed to live up to its diversity commitments. Ironically, by every kind of objective measure, you'd say it's more diverse than most places. But diversity brings its own challenges. The more diverse a campus becomes, the more difficult it is for people to figure out

how to get along with one another. Remember that 30-35% of this group is new every year. Many have moved half way around the world to come to this place. I asked them about their NSSE data related to diversity. The response was that the NSSE data has not been made public. The president's cabinet has seen it but no one else. "Too bad," I said, "because your NSSE results affirm what you've been trying to do." That is, students' perceptions of the college's emphasis on creating an environment that respects and appreciates diversity scored in the top decile nationally. Students say that they frequently interact with student of different backgrounds political, social, racial/ethnic. In other words, this school was among the highest performing in the diversity category. Knowing this doesn't "fix" or solve all the diversity challenges — it doesn't make this little college a satisfying, congenial place for all people. But it does affirm that what they've been trying to do has been pretty successful. They are dealing with a by-product of their success — they've got lots of students and faculty members who want more to be happening in terms of diversity on campus.

The results can be used for accreditation purposes, because all the accreditation agencies are asking for evidence of student engagement. In fact, about three-quarters of NSSE schools say they have or will use NSSE results in their self-studies for accreditation. For student affairs staff looking to make connections with faculty these data can be analyzed in different ways at the campus level, especially if schools survey enough students to make such comparisons meaningful.

I got a call from a public institution on the east coast where the provost thinks the NSSE data are correct, but his faculty do not like the results because it doesn't say very positive things about the institution. To get faculty to take it seriously, he said, he needs to tell them about sampling and then get support to talk with faculty openly about the data and the issues. I haven't been to a place where somebody hasn't whispered in my ear, "the results are accurate, this is pretty much the way we are."

The big challenge for American higher education is finding a way to talk to one another, first internally, which is tough enough, and then to external audiences about the quality of our performance. We don't do that very well, so in order for NSSE to be successful across the board we're all going to have to learn to think and talk differently about our performance. One of those first things is how to talk about data openly with one another without becoming defensive and without shutting down conversations. The whole point of this exercise is to show people things

that they wouldn't ordinarily find out about their students themselves.

Can the NSSE database be used for research?

Well, yes and no. No, because our advisory board wants us to maintain the integrity of the instrument and database for some period of time in order to insure that the data from participating institutions is not released and used in unintended ways. I agree with this personally, because there is still some apprehension on the part of institutions about how NSSE data might be used. Indeed, the initial intent was to make NSSE data public. But we've decided to hold fast to a non-disclosure policy and to not release any data for research purposes at this point. My guess is that we'll end up evolving into something akin to the CSEQ policy where we do allow people to use slices of the CSEQ dataset with institutional identifiers removed and the understanding that people cannot name institutions. I'm sure we'll get to something similar with NSSE data.

How has NSSE leaked into the public sphere?

That's a little hard to judge because it's a bit early and also hard to know exactly who to ask. We've intentionally cultivated people at key media outlets because it's a very noisy world, and it's hard to get the attention of the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal for a higher education project. In order to get the public to understand this it has to be explained in a way that will be understandable and interesting. This is why we report only 5 educational benchmarks, not 67 discrete items. People can remember 5 concepts, not dozens of numbers. We're trying to appeal to a number of different audiences at the same time. But just having 5 numbers isn't going to get you into the Christian Science Monitor or the Washington Post, there also has to be a story behind the numbers, and someone has to draw the attention of the reporter to what the story is. Fortunately, many schools allowed us to name them as high performers in our NSSE report which generated considerable media coverage.

We can't do everything in one year. Ten years from now we'll be able to say a lot more about how schools are using NSSE data. Right now, we're still cultivating interest on the part of the larger public. The good news is that so far, the national and local media really seem to get it, to see why this information is so much more important for assessing collegiate quality than what we usually talk about - resources and reputation - which mean very little in terms of what students get out of their college experience.

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