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References

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WHAT I HEAR YOU SAYING IS... : ANALYSIS OF STUDENT COMMENTS FROM THE NSSE

A major challenge of assessing students' experiences in postsecondary education is collecting an array of information that inform institutions about what students do and how they make meaning of their experiences during their time in particular educational environments.

While the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is highly respected and broadly administered throughout higher education, most, if not all, of the analyses of NSSE data have been conducted on the quantitative responses to its survey items. Very little attention is given to students' responses to the open-ended question at the end of the NSSE survey, "Do you have any other comments?"

This study explored the open-ended responses undergraduate students provided on the NSSE regarding their engagement with educationally purposeful activities at a large urban research institution.

Content analyses were conducted on 739 coded responses from students, yielding 10 thematic categories organized into 4 experience domains. Additionally the study explored the distinctions among the categorical and domain responses across and among the nine colleges/faculties within the study institution.

Potential implications, limitations and opportunities related to the study findings are discussed as well.

Considerable research on college student development suggest that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pace, 1980). Quality institutions can be viewed as those that fully engage their students in a variety of activities that contribute to valued and meaningful educational outcomes. A major challenge is collecting an array of information that inform

institutions about what students do and how they make meaning of their experiences during their time in particular educational environments.

An often cited set of intentional institutional practices that purportedly add value to students' learning and development is the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The seven principles are 1) student-faculty contact, 2) cooperation among students, 3) active learning, 4) prompt feedback, 5) time on task, 6) high expectations, and 7) respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Based, in part, on the seven principles is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is an empirically based instrument specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged and what they gain from their postsecondary experience (Kuh, 2001). The NSSE instrument assesses engagement in effective educational practices within five benchmarks of an engaged campus: 1) academic challenged) student interactions with faculty, 3) active and collaborative learning, 4) enriching educational experiences, and 5) supportive campus environments (Kuh, 2001).

While NSSE is highly respected and broadly administered throughout higher education, most, if not all, of the analyses of NSSE data have been conducted on the quantitative responses to its survey items. Very little, if any, attention has been given to students' responses to the open-ended question at the end of the NSSE survey, "Do you have any other comments?" Presumably, the responses students provide to this question can clarify, contextualize, and/or expand on the more quantitative-based forced choice survey items in the NSSE instrument. The results of such analyses from NSSE open-ended question responses can be important to individual institutions as additional data to better understand students and inform institutional decisions regarding student learning and development. Additionally, open-ended response data from NSSE that is collected and aggregated among multiple institutions can be helpful in identifying more nuanced commonalities and distinctions among comparative institutions.

Purpose
The purpose of this study was to explore the open-ended responses undergraduate students provided on the NSSE regarding their engagement with educationally purposeful activities at a large urban research institution. The three research questions that guided this study were: 1) What do students say about their experiences with their engagement at this institution? 2) What organizing themes emerged from students' expressed experiences at this institution? and 3) What differences were there among students' experiences by academic college/faculty at this institution?

Methodology
To determine the expressed experiences of students' engagement in educationally meaningful activities, responses to the 2006 NSSE open-ended question at one large urban research institution were analyzed.

Participants
At this institution, the overall total number of valid (complete) responses on the NSSE survey was 2656 students, of which 1628 were first year students and 1028 were fourth year students. Most of the students (87%) in this sample were under age 24, lived off campus (82%), and enrolled full-time (90%). Women outnumbered men in the sample (62% to 37%), and those who identified as being from a visible minority group (55%), outnumbered those who were not (45%).

Regarding the data used for the analyses in this paper, 596 students, or 22% of all those who provided valid and complete responses to the entire 2006 NSSE survey, provided responses to the open ended question "Do you have any other comments?" Some students' comments contained more than one code; hence the total number of codes counted in this study was 739.

Institution

The higher education institution examined in this study is an urban, research intensive institution with approximately 74,000 students on three campuses representing over 130 countries, with over 40 different languages spoken by students on campus, 57% of students speak another language other than English as their first language, 56% are women, and roughly 56% self-identify as minority. The study institution has identified "enhancing the student experience" as a priority objective in its 2004-2010 academic plan.

Approach to the Study Design

This study adapted the combined paradigms of phenomenology and constructive inquiry to serve as conceptual methodological frameworks for designing the study and guiding the organization of data collection and analyses.

Phenomenology. According to Patton (1990), phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question, "What is the structure and essence of the experience on this phenomenon for these people?" The phenomena being explored in this study are the experiences that students have with their engagement in educationally meaningful activities, and the subsequent meaning they make of those experiences.

Constructivist Inquiry. This study also uses an adaption of the constructivist inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Manning (1999), the purpose of constructivist inquiry is "to produce depth of understanding about a particular topic or experience" (p. 12). Within the perspective of constructive inquiry, knowledge does not and cannot produce representations of an independent reality, but instead is rooted in the perspective of the knower (Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, this study intends to explore those contextualized understandings that emerged through experiences and reflections of students regarding their experiences with their engagement in educationally meaningful activities at one urban research university.

Content Analysis. A content analysis method is used to approach the data provided by students in this study (Patton, 1990). According to Patton, content analysis "is a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data". Additionally, the purpose of classifying qualitative data for content analysis is to "facilitate the search for patterns and themes within a particular setting or across cases."

Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Krippendorff, 1980). Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." Content analysis enables researchers to sift through large volumes of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion. It can be a useful tool for allowing researchers to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention (Weber, 1990). Content analysis can involve any kind of analysis where

communication content (speech, written text, interviews, images, etc.) is categorized and classified. In this sense, a content analysis may be a standard methodology for studying the content of open ended questions.

Data Coding and Analyses

Strauss and Corbin (1990) viewed the conceptualizing of data as the first step in coding. This conceptualization was facilitated by highlighting relevant passages within each of the comments. They further describe conceptualizing as focusing in on comments of observations, and determining the meaning behind them. Based on the highlighted material, descriptive concepts were attached to each comment. Strauss and Corbin also refer to this process as labeling. The next step described by Strauss and Corbin is known as categorizing, which involves organizing and grouping labels to reduce the number of concepts that must be worked with. In the case of this study, the categories were not predetermined, and emerged based on the concepts in the comments. Content analysis extends far beyond simple word counts, however. What makes the technique particularly rich and meaningful is its reliance on coding and categorizing of the data. Weber (1990) argues that a category is a group of words with similar meaning or connotations.

The initial codes were inductively generated after the comments were carefully read to reveal the recurring issues from their comments. The QSR NUD*IST 6.0 qualitative analysis software program was utilized to help the organizing coding procedure. Some comments contained more than one code; therefore there were more codes than the total number of individual responses recorded (i.e. 739 codes vs. 596 individual student responses).

Code counts were transported to a spreadsheet so as to calculate the percentage of themes and draw charts of the themes. The analysis was based on individual Colleges/Faculties or academic departments and programs. Hence, there is a ranking table for each College/Faculty regarding students' comment categories. Codes in nine Colleges/Faculties were then integrated to discover the common elements concerning students' experience. Ten categories were developed out of the 739 codes. These categories were loosely arranged into 4 thematic domains. Domain one deals with students' Academic needs and includes sub-codes such as academic experience and international expectation. Domain two looks at their Non-academic needs and includes social experiences, financial issues, student services and campus environment. Other concerns made up domain three, consisting of survey issues, racial issues and other general issues. Domain four looked at Student satisfaction and is the only group that does not include sub themes.

Reliability

Weber (1990) notes that "to make valid inferences from the text, it is important that the classification procedure be reliable in the sense of being consistent: Different people should code the same text in the same way" (p. 12). As Weber further states, "reliability problems usually grow out of the ambiguity of word meanings, category definitions, or other coding rules" (p. 15). Yet, it is important to recognize that the people who have developed the coding scheme have often been working so closely on the project that they have established shared and hidden meanings of the coding. The obvious result is that the reliability coefficient they report is artificially inflated (Krippendorff, 1980). In order to avoid this, one of the most critical steps in content analysis involves developing a set of explicit recording instructions.

These instructions then allow outside coders to be trained until reliability requirements are met.

Reliability may be discussed in terms of intra-rater reliability, or "Can the same coder get the same results try after try?" And in terms of inter-rater reliability, or "Do coding schemes lead to the same text being coded in the same category by different people?" In this study, the data was coded three times by the initial coder: the first and second time over a 10 day period and the third time over a one-week period. The intra-rater reliability score was calculated by dividing the number of matches by the total number of identifications; the average score was .95. For inter-rater reliability, all data were coded by a second coder who was a researcher working in the research unit where the study was undertaken, though not directly involved in this project. The inter-rater coding reliability was calculated to be .90.

Results

The results section will present the study's findings in three overlapping parts that respond to the research questions for this study. Conceptual analysis results will illustrate the experiences of students at this institution, as recorded by their open ended comments to the 2006 NSSE questionnaire. Parts one and two present how a select group of student participants verbalized their experiences at this institution. As well, parts one and two present how students' comments were coded and organized. Lastly, differences according to the categories of student experiences by academic college/faculty are presented.

Frequency and Rank of Student Experiences

Inductive analyses of comments provided by students on the 2006 NSSE open ended question, "Do you have any other comments?" yielded 10 categorical areas of students' experiences with their engagement at this institution. Table 1 is the summary of students' coded comments organized according to emergent categories, relative rankings by the frequency of observed category related comments and domains into which categories are further organized.

Seven hundred thirty-nine codes were recorded from the total 596 comments, explicitly reflecting categories of student experiences in the following order of frequency of comments mentioned: academic experience (37%); overall satisfaction (17%); social experience (17%); student services (9%); campus environment (6%); financial issues (6%); survey (5%); racial issues (1.5%); other (1%); and international expectation (.5%). The rankings shown in Table 1 also give a picture of how students perceive the overall importance of matters that influence their experience and engagement.

Further analyses reduced the 10 categorical areas to 4 experience domains: Academic Needs (Academic experience and International expectation); Student satisfaction (Overall satisfaction); Non-Academic Needs (Social experience, Student services, Campus environment, and Financial issues); and Other Concerns (Survey, Racial concerns, and Other).

What I hear you saying is…

The findings in this section were generated from students' comments and are integrated across the nine Colleges/Faculties. Select comments highlight each particular coded domain and thematic category.

Academic Needs

Academic needs accounted for the majority of students' comments (37.5%). The two main issues

related to academic needs included academic experience and international expectation.

Academic experience. Comments about students' academic experience contained several issues that students report as having an influence on their success and engagement. Responses indicate concerns for ways in which individual faculty approach their teaching relationship with students; however, students nonetheless perceive that the university's academic quality remains relatively high. One first year student reflected on this dynamic thusly:

```
Although I sincerely feel the quality and expectation for
 gained knowledge is higher at this institution than other
 universities in the country, I feel the professors are less
 sincere and interested in the students they are teaching.
```

Many comments illustrated that teachers' language and teaching skills need to be enhanced or they would come across difficulties when building intellectual enthusiasm among students. Some students indicate that language is the most critical issue for quality teaching.

```
I can not stand a professor who stands before the class and
 speaks with little or no enthusiasm about the subject. If the
 professor is not interested in what he or she is teaching, it
 is likewise difficult for us, the students, to be interested
 as well.
Don't expect us to learn anything if you don't provide us with
 professors who speak English. I don't care how many PhD s they
 have or where they are from. If they can not speak this country's
 language, I can not learn anything from them and consequently have
 wasted my time and money.
```

The following responses are indicative of the program expectation in the academic experience. Several respondents provided comments such as these ones about course materials placing too much emphasis on memorization, heavy work load and unfocused programs.

```
Everything is too much about remembering facts that we forget shortly
 afterwards. Too many courses felt like a mass produced (too many
 students) and consumeristic (remembering so many facts) atmosphere.
Overall this institution is an excel-, lent university; however they
 have allowed their prestigious reputation to lead to a workload and
 difficulty level far above that of other universities on the same
 level for similar courses.
```

Academic support is stressed as being important to retention of students in higher education. Students who received less academic support characterize it as a necessity for their academic success. They also imply that more academic advising counselors are needed.

```
There should be better coordination among exams, assignments, labs,
 tutorials and simple course classes. Sometimes all of these occur
 at the same time and it becomes very stressful. This also might
```

```
affect our academic performance.
There needs to be a better program in place for academic advising.
 I feel as if I have no one to discuss my future with. Currently
 what's available to me is a person in an office who only has
 time to answer one question at a time because there is a line.
```

Some responses clearly critique the accessibility of their professors and the resulting degree of academic support from faculty members.

```
Professors do not seem to care greatly about undergraduate students.
 Going to this institution feels like you are going to a
 colony… The campus is depressing; the professors tend to
 be inaccessible.
```

The size of classes was also an issue raised by respondents regarding their academic experience. Many respondents noted that they required a smaller class size in order to have a better learning atmosphere.

```
This university is a world-class and fine school. The only
 improvement I may suggest is to reduce the 100 level class sizes.
This institution provides excellent academic opportunities; however
 during the first two years of a life science undergraduate,
 the class sizes are much too large to foster a proper learning
 environment.
```

The following responses suggest that the availability of undergraduate research opportunities are highly valued although in need of enhancement.

```
Definitely should allow more research activities with faculty
 members, with fewer restrictions on student's experience prior
 to work with the faculty members.
```

Some students reported concerns regarding a lack of, and need for, flexible course offerings and expected that certain courses delivered in summer sessions should be taught by full-time professors instead of temporary lecturers.

```
Students should be allowed to take courses on different campuses
 of the university according to their own schedule and the time
 limit to drop a course should increase.
I believe that there are not enough courses offered during the
 summer term. Even if they are offered, the instructions/lectures
 given in those courses are not taught by the professors during
 the regular academic term.
```

The following responses highlight issues related to grading systems. Comments indicate a belief that the grading system is not fair and grades do not necessarily reflect students' abilities.

```
I learned a lot but my grades do not reflect my ability.
This place is so oriented towards proper distribution of
 student grades that it can lead to a reduction in
```

```
opportunities for post-graduate students.
```
International expectation. Although very few responses mentioned international expectation, in fact, the College of "C" was the only one that identified the notion of learning experience in the international context. Students in this College expressed a stronger need for international experiences compared to students of other Colleges; nevertheless, it still shows low concern in the overall percentage, with only .5% of comments referring to international learning expectations. One fourth year student expressed concern for the guidance they received regarding international learning experiences this way,

```
International opportunities are not encouraged (my program
 advisor did not encourage me to pursue one. I regret this)
```
Another student expressed frustration regarding perceived obstacles to acquiring international learning experiences.

```
There are many obstacles that students wishing to study internationally
 are facing. The first of which is where to search for the info and
 if the institution they wish to attend is even recognized by this
 institution.
```

Non-Academic Needs

Social Experience. Responses report a very low satisfaction with students' social experience while studying at this institution. The three areas of concerns in this category all reference the degree to which students experience a sense of community at the study institution. Both of the following comments are from first year students.

```
I find the university to be very cold.
 It is hard to meet people on campus unless you are
 a part of a club.
The overall feel I have received from my university studies at
 this institution is that we as independent students do not
 matter. Our individual concerns and problems have not been treated
 with importance making us seem like numbers and a source but not
 members.
```

Given the broad structural diversity at this institution, it was surprising that a few comments surfaced that focused on students' experiences with engaging other students from diverse background. One 4th year student said that:

```
This institution does very little to encourage communication among
 its students, both in the academic setting and in social settings.
 I find campus to be very segregated amongst ethnicities, and there
 is nothing done to curb this trend.
```

Some comments assume that the problem is due to the fact that majority of students at the university are commuters and suggest one way to improve this situation is through enhancing student life. Another 4th year student offered the following observation:

```
Improve the student life; majority of students are commuters,
```

so there is no strong feeling of community as in other universities.

Student Services

The responses imply that students who provided comments on NSSE used very few student services. Furthermore, students expressed unfamiliarity with certain procedures of asking for help, as well as what kind of help is available to students.

```
I was very lost when I came to this university and I did not
 have very much direction or much help from any outside sources.
I guess I kind of wish that I had known all the resources
 available to me before starting university here.
```

Many students who responded felt that they also needed specific services to address their needs for future career and professional development.

```
This institution needs to address the issue concerning communication
 of students to real world career and job opportunities. This should
 be done specifically for each program or even course. Having a
 counselor that is not in the field is very useless.
```

Students are investing heavily in higher education. They face the personal cost of debt to cover their education expenses, and have high expectations for the future. However, as is evident from the following comment, many students feel lost after the completion of their studies and they seem to be aware of no appropriate service provided to guide them on to the next phase.

```
I feel that I came into this university knowing what I wanted
 to do, and am now leaving with no concrete idea and I have
 nowhere to gain help.
```

Students from non-English-speaking countries said that they needed help from peers and faculty to assist them with succeeding in their studies.

```
This institution needs to focus more in being a friendly
 environment. I am an international student and my first year
 was horrible, students and faculty were mean. Too much competition,
 it is okay that they want us to be the best, but they have to
 lead us in that direction.
```

Financial Issues

Access and equity to higher education have been normatively related to students' financial circumstances. The lack of financial assistance for people pursuing higher education may influence the completion of their studies.

```
You guys are criminal, milking everyone for every cent they have.
 Shameful. I will be trying to advise people to go elsewhere for
 university as you are putting so many people in debt, that it is
 not even funny. I am considering not going back.
```

Most of the comments about financial issues are regarding the high and increasing tuition that students and their families are not able to afford or will result in debts owed by students upon the completion of their degree. Also, the high fees for accommodation are another concern as well.

```
My tuition increased by 80% after my first year, and it was not
 feasible for me to transfer to a different university since the
 courses are not adequately transferable. Tuition should not increase
 beyond a reasonable amount for students.
The residences and tuition fees are getting ridiculously high.
 Fix that before you spend more money improving other stuff.
```

Several students, 1st and 4th year alike, expressed a need for more financial assistance in order to help those in financial need complete their studies.

```
My biggest concerns are financial.
 I do not think enough money is being given out in terms of
 scholarships and grants.
Indeed we need more financial help.
```

Campus Environment

Universities often pride themselves on providing a campus environment that has been designed as an integral part of the process of students' development. Respondents' comments about the campus environment in this study represent three aspects: residence; study space and dining facilities.

Although the university provides accommodations, as well as related support services, some higher education institutions have, through financial and educational administrative structures, become akin to commercial property owners by separating their accommodation function from the educational agenda of the institution. This observation from a 1st year students reflects the perception of this separation of institutional management from students' education:

```
Residence is horrible. They don't seem to care about the students.
 I have been forced to pay for things I did not break and have been
 threatened that my graduation will be delayed if I don't.
```

Students also complained about the lack of places to study. With respect to library services, students expect service to meet their diversified studying styles.

```
I wish that the library had a 24 hours service, because I tend
 to have times where I study very late, or come to school very
 early and go study. It is really critical for most of my friends,
 because we tend to study together.
```

Some comments indicate that interior renovations should be made more comfortable and meet modernized criteria.

```
Many of the buildings need interior renovations to bring them up to
 modern standards. I know that the campus has a historical identity
 through its buildings; however, the interiors of the buildings
 need major work to be made more comfortable.
```

There are also comments indicating that there is a greater need in terms of the dining facilities.

```
I suggest more food varieties and more places to sit and relax.
 Increase the places to access food after hours.
```

Other Concerns

Survey

The category of survey contains some concerns regarding the structure of the NSSE survey itself across all 9 colleges/faculties. Mostly, comments are coded to reflect students' concerns about the length of the survey or the design of the questions. Common responses resembled the following:

```
Please do not have repeated questions on the survey, it really is
 a waste of time and unnecessary, quality not quantity.
This was way too long and repeated questions.
```

Some students commented that the survey questions were not suitable or applicable to their majors or experience. For example, a student in the vocal performance program suggested that the survey questions were not applicable for him/her.

```
I am in a vocal performance program. I found many of these
 questions did not apply to my university experience as my program
 is very different from "normal" university.
As a mature student, many of the social activity questions
 do not apply.
```

While many students complained about the long questions and design of the survey, some students were not bothered by the survey and expressed their wish that the survey be of help to the university in making efforts for improvement.

```
I think this survey touched on many important factors dealing with
 the university experience and I hope there will be many great
 improvements for prospective students.
```

Racial issues

The total of 1.5% or 11 out of 739 codes commenting on the racial issues theme. Students commented most frequently on the cultural and ethnic diversity of their environment. It should be noted that "racial issues" do not necessarily mean "racist issues". Many of the codes focused on issues of race, but did not refer to issues of injustice pertaining to any racial group.

The comment from a 1st year student below suggests that students segregated themselves from various ethnicities voluntarily.

```
The university's environment does not inhibit people of other
 ethnicities to come together. Still, I find that students choose
 to segregate on their own. I myself talk more to people of the same
 ethnicity. I don't really know what steps the university is going
 to take.
```

Some comments however, reflect a level of intolerance when matters of race or ethnicity are raised. This student expressed disapproval of diversity even being addressed on the NSSE survey.

```
Who really cares about talking with students of different ethnicities,
 etc? Why do you include such questions in your survey? Are you
 planning to put race quotas in place? Oh no not enough talking
```

```
                  between races going on.
```
Some comments criticize the notion of ethnic diversity and its relationship to their experience in their college/faculty.

```
The biggest drawback about this institution is its severe lack of
 ethnic diversity within the Sciences. The student body [in my
 college/faculty] is over 85% East Asian and thus extremely frustrating
 for people trying to lean and interact with different cultures.
```
Some students felt that they were discriminated against because of their race. Although there were no concrete examples given, such comments nonetheless reflect important experiences students have at this institution that impact their learning and development.

```
There is discrimination in the school that is not seen; the
 office of the registrar employees are inefficient and not
 helpful. He [specific staff person] not only yelled at me about
 something the school messed up on but dismissed my request for help.
Should eliminate racism in classrooms and ensure fair grading for
 all students based on their work, not on who they are.
```

Other

Students' comments in this sub-theme do not necessarily suggest a central idea or express a particular common concern. To some extent the expressed concerns in this sub-theme reflect students' perceptions of the factors that influence their experience at this institution. These random, yet relevant, comments may have particular resonance with particular faculty, academic affairs and student affairs administrators, as well as student experience researchers.

```
It's challenging to return to a Bachelor's program after already
 having completed 2 others and (almost) a Master's degree. I have
 higher expectations than most in some areas and am also more
 self-directed.
Personally, I don't think that students who are planning to
 attend this institution ever have an appreciation for how truly
 big this university is, whether in terms of people, sheer physical
 size, or academic quality, until they get there.
```

Student Satisfaction

After the sub-theme "academic experience", students provided the second largest number of comments organized within the sub-theme "satisfaction/dissatisfaction" at the study institution. The majority of respondents in this area expressed a high level of satisfaction with their university experience. Some students expressed their dissatisfaction with the institution without providing suggestions for addressing their concerns or details about their dissatisfaction. However, other students provided suggestions for what they considered should be improved. These comments were coded in the appropriate thematic areas. Some responses may simply express how much students enjoyed their program/university without any further comments. Below are typical examples of how students commented on this theme:

```
I think this university is amazing in every aspect.
I love this university. It is a great learning experience and if I
 had to start all over again I would definitely attend this
 institution.
Overall, I am very pleased with what I have experienced already at
 this institution.
```

While most students compliment the institution, some seemed to have radically different experiences and opinions.

```
If it was not for the convenience of [the institution's branch
 campus], I would never attend this school, it is terrible.
This institution is potentially soul-killing, life-destroying
 experience.
I regret coming to this institution. I would have received a
 more useful and enjoyable education had I chose to attend any
 of the other universities I had been accepted to.
```

As many of the comments in this category do not indicate the exact source of students' satisfaction/dissatisfaction, it may be extrapolated from the various categories of comments that their responses are a reflection of their cumulative educational experience at this institution.

Students' Experiences by Academic College/Faculty

This section offers a view of how students' concerns and experiences with their engagement differed according to the academic College/Faculty they identified as their academic home. The discussion in this section responds to the final research question of the study, "What differences were there among students' experiences by academic college/faculty at this institution?" It should be noted when reading the results in this section that while students self identified as being within the particular Colleges that were provided as options on the NSSE, the institution from which this study's data was gathered had different names for its Colleges, or "Faculties" as they are referred to. What this means is that there may be an undeterminable misalignment between the real College, or Faculty, in which the student belongs and the College options provided by NSSE. It should be further noted that the names of the Colleges have been substituted for letters (i.e. College/Faculty of "A", College/Faculty of "B", etc) in order to avoid any potential recognition of specific College level information in the event that the study institution is identifiable. I felt that by anonymizing the College/Faculty identities would not affect the overall value of the analyses. For the discussion in this section, Table 2 will be referred to as it provides numeric counts of the coded responses for each category within and across the various Colleges/Faculties. .

Students in the College/Faculty of "A" provided 123 comments for a total 143 coded responses. As displayed in Table 2, the Academic Experience coded category reflected about the same number of coded responses (51) as the second and third highest number coded response categories, Overall Satisfaction and Social Experience , together (53). Respondents from the College/Faculty of "A" did not provide comments related to the category codes Racial Concerns or International Expectations.

Within the College/Faculty of "B", 118 comments yielded 152 coded responses. As with the

College/Faculty of "A", the first four category codes remained consistent with those of the overall category rankings, only with slightly different rankings of students' Social Experience and their Overall Satisfaction.

The College/Faculty of "C" recorded 47 responses for 64 codes discussing various themes regarding students' experiences at this institution. The College/Faculty of "C" was the only College/Faculty where students commented within the coded theme of International Expectations. While the number of coded comments were small (3), I felt that the content of each comment warranted an independent coded category. Other thematic categories remained consistent with the overall theme codes in Table 1.

There are 16 codes drawn from 12 responses in the College/Faculty of "D". As with most of the other Colleges/Faculties, as well as the overall theme codes, Academic Experience was the highest concern to students, followed by overall satisfaction. Nearly 19% of the codes commented on students' satisfaction with the study institution.

Of the 63 responses, there are a total of 74 codes for the College/Faculty of "E". Campus Environment, ranked as the eighth concern in the overall rankings, ranks fourth in the College/Faculty of "E".

More than 50% of the codes collected for College/Faculty of "F" commented on the Academic Experience in the College/Faculty. Comments on students' Overall Satisfaction with their experiences at this institution reflected only 5.26% of the coded comments.

Over half of the responses in the College/Faculty of "G" are regarding students' Academic Experience, which is consistent with the overall institutional trend. Given the direct link between degree completion and gaining entry to certain professional careers, concerns over the academic experience are even more emphasized among the professional faculties, of which this College/Faculty is a part. Social Experience remains as the second highest ranking concern expressed by students in this College/Faculty.

A total of 182 codes were drawn from 150 comments in the College/Faculty of "H". Although Academic Experience remained the highest concern among students in this College/Faculty, compared to students in other colleges/faculties it only accounted for 30 percent of total responses . In relative terms, Academic Experience codes are approximately 20 percent lower for the College/Faculty of "H" than for the College/Faculties "F" and "G".

Lastly, of the 63 codes in the College/Faculty of "I", the most significant difference regarding the category codes from all of the rest of the Colleges/Faculties was that Financial Issues appeared more prevalent while students' Social Experiences were less of a concern.

There was general consistency among the comments provided by students across College/Faculties at this institution. This consistency suggests that students' experiences at this institution may be largely a function of their broad experiences with the broader institution and not necessarily with discrete units of the institution such as the College/Faculty in which they are studying. With the data available in this study it is not possible or appropriate to conduct comparative analyses of responses across the

various Colleges/Faculties. The clear and obvious caveat is that College/Faculty size, character, academic foci, and student characteristics invariably impact the level of response, as well as the response content. My intentions were simply to provide a baseline sense of the issues students raised about their experiences at this institution, and as students connected to particular academic Colleges/Faculties. From this review, it is not my intention, nor should readers assume that categorized College/Faculty level comments necessarily reflect students' specific experience within their College/Faculty. It is safe to assume instead that the comments reflect students' experiences within the institution more generally.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine students' perspectives on the experiences that facilitate or hinder their ability to develop skills, awareness, and confidence, and the factors that influence student engagement and future success. The open ended comments provided by the research university's 2006 NSSE data in nine faculties were grouped and counted by themes and domains to help various constituencies better understand students' perspectives of their university experience. The identified areas where most students provided comments of concern suggest where improvements would enable them to have a more enhanced university life experience.

The findings from this study indicate that Academic Experience presented the most significant concern for students, although the details, of these concerns may vary in each College/Faculty. Regarding students' Academic Experience comments, the issues that emerged most frequently included academic support, class size, limited course offerings, teaching assistants, teacher quality, and program expectations.

Comments on teacher quality revealed that students were generally critical of unenthusiastic teaching approaches, lack of teaching skills and poor language ability. Some respondents acknowledged that while teachers often are good at doing research, they are poor at teaching. Teaching assistants were also criticized, especially when students had a difficult time understanding TAs due to what students considered English language skills deficiencies on the TAs part.

Further, from the findings of this study, there is an apparent need for academic support focusing on the ways in which the institution could assist students with both common and unique learning experiences. The issue of providing academic support for students to facilitate the continuity of their studies was mentioned by many respondents. Apart from this, it seems to be important that through their course work students establish relationships with faculty members with whom they can discuss certain disruptions to their studies and from whom they can expect support and educationally meaningful intervention. These types of faculty and student relationships could strongly enhance students' academic performance and success. Additionally, in some Colleges/Faculties, class sizes present significant learning and engagement obstacles.

A majority of students reported that they are satisfied with their experience at this institution. However, further analyses to determine the consistency with which students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction aligns with institutional goals would provide a much better understanding of students' experiences within the context of the particular campus environment.

As students' social experiences determine with which peers they spend time and from whom they seek approval, these experiences influence the values, attitudes, and beliefs that students explore, accept and reject as well as the ways in which students direct their attention and energy, how to have fun, with whom to associate, what work is worth doing, and how to get rewards and avoid punishment (Kuh and Hall, 1993). Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Tinto (1987) suggest that one's level of integration into an institution's social system has significant implications for educational attainment. For example, both involvement in extracurricular activities and the extent and quality of one's social interaction with student peers and faculty have a positive influence on degree attainment, educational aspirations, and school attendance. Thus, social experiences shape what students learn, both in class and out of class, as well as the nature and directions of intellectual and social development. As a consequence, social experiences affect the achievement not only of individual student goals, but the achievement of institutional educational purposes (Weidman, 1989). Student interactions with peers and others in the university environment, as well as with institutional processes and structures, can lead to the formation of students' social experience.

Students' comments in this study revealed that most students had considerable concerns with the social climate at the study institution. Their comments in this category focused on their sense of community, interaction with people, and extra-curricular activities. They described the institution they are attending as a lonely place. Students further suggested that there are not many activities outside the classroom in which to participate. This latter observation may well be a function of students' lack of awareness of out of class activities and/or their limited access to institutional information about these activities.

Students expected to have more interaction with their instructors as well. Research shows that students learn firsthand how to think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside of classrooms (Kuh, et. al, 2005). As a result, faculty members become role models, mentors, and guides for lifelong learning. Institutions should, too, create ways to enhance student interaction with peer groups since sharing with peers will enhance student engagement and learning experience (Kuh, et. al, 2005).

The concerns regarding student services include availability of information, services for various non-traditional populations, including international students, mature students, and students with disabilities; and administrative help. The findings revealed that many students (i.e. international students and mature part-time students) were unaware of student services and were not used to taking advantage of them.

Campus environment for both those who live in campus residences and those who commute has a significant influence on students' success. The findings in this study suggested that enhancing the campus environment of this institution would involve expanding places for dining and meeting for students, as well as spaces for quiet study and small group work.

Students' own expectations, experiences and learning invariably interact with institution environmental forces to further impact students' overall educational experience. Each student's experience is unique and transforms over time. No educational experience is static, nor is it divorced from other dynamics occurring in students' lives. The concerns that students voice about their educational experiences, both positive and negative, are real and can ultimately impact their persistence, performance and degree

completion at their home institution. These concerns need to be taken seriously by institutional leaders, educators, and policy makers. The findings therefore have the potential to:

Provide a supplementary reference in terms of students' perspectives when institutions and their respective colleges/faculties are initiating and revising their academic plans, or crafting innovative learning opportunities for students.

Illustrate the gaps or alignment between institutional goals and students' experiences as pathways to promote student success and enhances educationally meaningful student experiences.

Provide a baseline for discussions about institutional and public policies or practices related to student engagement, learning, and success in postsecondary education.

Serve as an additional data set for institutional researchers and independent scholars to mine for insights into the educational experiences of students within particular institutional contexts.

Contribute to institutional quality matrices or key performance measures.

Limitations of the study and Suggestions for Future Research

While the findings of this study reveal students' own sense of the multidimensional and rich experiences they have in educationally meaningful activities at one institution, there are a few primary limitation of this study that should be kept in mind when reviewing these findings. All of the data was gathered from one institution. It is my sense that institutional context played a significant role in the results of the study. Perhaps a multi-institutional study may have yielded different comments, codes and study conclusions. The location and designation of the institution (urban and research) impacted the results of the study, given the type of student attracted to this type of institution. As was previous noted, while students self identified as being within a particular College that was provided as an option on the NSSE, the institution from which this study's data was gathered had different names for its Colleges, or "Faculties" as they are referred to. What this means is that there may not be an exact alignment between the real College, or Faculty, in which the student belongs and the College options provided by NSSE.

Additionally, the makeup of participants was restricted to those students in their first and fourth years of enrollment at this institution. The institution's use of NSSE does not lend itself to longitudinal assessments. The data provided by NSSE at this institution are cross-sectional in nature in that they provide a "snapshot" of the population at a particular point in time. Students who respond to NSSE in their 1st year are not the same students that respond in the final year. The comments provided by students are subject to factors that reflect students' level of maturation, duration at the institution, personal and background circumstances, and life dynamics at that particular moment in time. There is ample evidence that students' experience, engagement, and academic performance change over the course of their time in postsecondary institutions. The asynchrony in the data collection points for this study may contribute to some of the expressed concerns about students' experiences at this institution. Perhaps collecting students' reflections on their experiences at multiple data points over a longer time trajectory would provide a more comprehensive and accurate composite of their experiences at an institution.

While the NSSE is an exceptional tool to get a sense of what students do with their time and how their behaviors might influence desired educational outcomes, as well as what they think about their experiences, I would recommend coupling NSSE with other sources of data to get an even more robust picture of the factors that influence student learning and development outcomes. Further, I would

recommend examining students' responses to the open ended question in relation to their forced choice responses to get a picture of the consistency and depth with which they reflect their experiences.

Conclusion

What I heard students saying was that while they were generally pleased with their experience at this institution, and would make the same choice if they were to choose all over again, they nonetheless had deep concerns about the institution's social and academic culture.

It is hoped that this study will add to existing research on students' experiences in postsecondary education by providing insight about students' perceptions of factors that influence their experience, engagement and development. It is also hoped that the indicated experiences of students may be considered in the process of future academic plans and institutional goal setting. With respect to further research, it is suggested that a comparative study be conducted between the quantitative findings of NSSE questionnaires and analysis results of open ended comments. Further, I suggest a more longitudinal and multi-methods approach to assessing students experiences. The inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data would enable a better, more comprehensive understanding of matters that influence students' experiences.

At the end of the day, the goal is to help students succeed, and prepare for opportunities and challenges after graduation, as well as providing a pool of direct experiences from which they can draw in making meaning of their complex lives.

Table 1 — Summary of Rankings and Frequencies of Coded Categories and Domains

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Legend for Chart:

A - Ranking
B - Thematic Categories
C - Frequency
D - Percentage
E - Experience Domains
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A	B	C	D
	E		
1	Academic Experience	276	37%
	Academic needs		
2	Social Experience	126	17%
	Non-academic needs		
3	Overall Satisfaction	125	17%
	Student satisfaction		
4	Student Services	63	9%
	Non-academic needs		
5	Financial Issues	46	6%
	Non-academic needs		
6	Campus Environment	41	6%
	Non-academic needs		

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7     Survey                          38      5%
      Other concerns
8     Racial Concerns                 11      1.5%
      Other concerns
9     Other                           10      1%
      Other concerns
10    International Expectations    3      0.5%
      Academic needs
```

Table 2 — Coded comments within and across College/Faculty

Legend for Chart:

A - College/Faculty A

B - College/Faculty B

C - College/Faculty C

D - College/Faculty D

E - College/Faculty E

F - College/Faculty F

G - College/Faculty G

H - College/Faculty H

I - College/Faculty I

J - Category Sums

K - Category Means

Thematic Category	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Academic Experience	51	64	19	5	33	10	14	53	27	276	30.7
Social Experience	26	28	12	2	9		7	33	6	126	14.0
Overall Satisfaction	27	23	7	3	16		0	39	9	125	13.9
Student Services	10	15	2	1	3'		1	23	6	63	7.0
Financial Issues	10	6	9	1	0		1	9	10	46	5.1
Campus Environment	8	4	10	2	4		2	9	1	41	4.6
Survey	10	8	0	2	7		1	5	4	38	4.2
Racial Concerns	0	4	2	0	2	0	0	3	0	11	1.2
Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8	0	10	1.1
International Expectations	0	0	3	0							

```
    0      0      0      0      0      3      0.3
College/Faculty Total Number of

Coded Responses                              143    152    64     16
    74     18     27     182    63     739
College/Faculty Mean Number of Coded

Responses                                    14.3   15.2   6.4    1.6
    7.4    1.8    2.7    18.2   6.3
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