

A key benefit of your NSSE *Institutional Report* is the ability to customize up to three comparison groups. NSSE enables you to identify the most relevant, appropriate institutions from current-year NSSE participants. Below are some options, considerations, and tips to help you make your selections.

## Customization Options

To customize any of your comparison groups, you have four options: (1) Identify individual institutions from a list of current-year NSSE participants, (2) Filter by institutional characteristics, (3) Generate a list by selecting institutional characteristics, and then add or remove individual institutions to refine your group, or (4) Accept default groups (below) which provide relevant comparisons for most institutions.

### Default Comparison Groups

*Default Group 1* – For institutions not in a NSSE consortium, this group contains all current-year NSSE institutions within your geographic region (New England, Mid East, Great Lakes, Plains, Southeast, Southwest, Rocky Mountains, Far West, or Canada) and sector (public/private). For consortium-participating institutions, this group contains the other consortium members and *is not customizable*.

*Default Group 2* – All current-year NSSE institutions sharing your institution's Basic Carnegie Classification (Doc RU-VH, Doc RU-H, Doc DRU, Masters-L, Masters-M, Masters-S, Bac-AS, or Bac-Diverse).

*Default Group 3* – For U.S. institutions this includes all current-year U.S. NSSE institutions. Canadian universities receive all current-year Canadian and U.S. institutions.

## Approaches to Building Comparison Groups

A variety of goals drive comparison group selection. Four common approaches to building comparison groups include:

*Peer groups* – The most common approach is to identify a group of institutions similar to your own, based on characteristics such as Carnegie classification, enrollment size, type of educational offerings, and other defining criteria.

*Aspirational groups* – Institutions may assess themselves relative to colleges and universities they view as exemplars on important dimensions.

*Overlap groups* – This comparison is with institutions that overlap in the available array of students, faculty, or resources. For example, a college may be interested in how it compares with those that recruit from the same pool of prospective students.

*Pre-existing groups* – Institutions may want to be compared with members of a pre-existing group, especially those sharing a common mission or goals. Examples include athletic conferences, special missions (e.g., religious affiliation, HBCU), university systems, consortia, and so on.

## Other Factors to Consider

*Keep it simple* – NSSE offers a wide variety of criteria for use in selecting comparison groups. Selecting one or two dimensions such as size, region or educational offering is often better than basing group selection on too many criteria. Keeping selection criteria simple may ease interpretations of results.

*Comparison group size* – NSSE recommends that institutions consider the various sizes of their comparison groups. Groups with fewer institutions may offer more specific criteria for comparability, while larger groups may be more stable, especially across multiple NSSE administrations. Thus, a mix of both small and large groups may be most beneficial.

*Involve stakeholders* – You may want to solicit input from various campus stakeholders regarding the selection of comparison groups. Involving administrators, faculty and others in evaluating peer comparison results will improve the utility and impact of your NSSE reports.

*Comparison group stability* – While NSSE encourages institutions to periodically evaluate their comparison groups to determine whether they are still appropriate, using similar comparison groups over time will be valuable in evaluating change. In most cases, using as many of the same comparison group institutions as possible across consecutive NSSE administrations can be most useful.

## How Institutions Typically Select Comparison Groups

In 2011, three in four (77%) NSSE institutions utilized the online Report Form to actively review their comparison groups, rather than simply accepting the default groups. Of these, we observed the following patterns:

1. *About one-third (37%) chose all three NSSE default groups, while two-thirds (63%) customized at least one comparison group.*
2. *Among the default comparison groups, the Basic Carnegie Classification (67%) and all current-year NSSE institution (71%) defaults were most popular. By contrast, 51% of non-consortium participants customized the first group rather than accepting the default (region and sector).*
3. *Institutions that customized a comparison group most often did so by selecting individual institutions from a list. Across all three groups, 73% of the customization was done this way, whereas only 23% selected institutional characteristics and 4% made minor modifications to their default group.*
4. *The average size of comparison groups selected from a list was fourteen institutions. To ensure the confidentiality of each institution's results, NSSE requires that a comparison group contains at least six institutions. There is no upper limit on comparison group size, but NSSE does verify large groups with institutional contacts to be sure no mistakes were made.*
5. *The most common institutional characteristics used to build comparison groups were Carnegie Classification and sector (public/private). Of 131 cases where a comparison group was constructed using characteristics, 61% used sector and 52% used the Basic Carnegie Classification (alone or in combination with other criteria). Other commonly-used characteristics included undergraduate enrollment (34%) and geographic region (31%).*

6. *Where institutional characteristics were used, institutions elected to keep it simple. Most used only one (28%) or two (36%) options to define their comparison groups. Few institutions (10%) used more than four characteristics.*

About a quarter (23%) of NSSE 2011 institutions did not access the online Report Form and received all three default comparison groups as a result. Because email invitations and reminders described the default comparison groups, it is likely that many non-responders were satisfied with the defaults.

## Summary

Identifying three comparison groups from all current-year participants can be complicated, but relevant, appropriate comparison groups are a vital component of your NSSE reports. The ability to customize these groups to suit your analytic needs is an important way to ensure the usefulness of your results. Although the NSSE default groups may be appropriate in many cases, NSSE encourages you to consider tailoring at least one comparison group.



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