

Using NSSE to Assess the First-Year Experience

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California Lutheran University

California Lutheran University (CLU) participates in numerous external and internal surveys to gather direct and indirect evidence of educational effectiveness at many levels of the university. The Provost and other senior administrators actively disseminate NSSE results to CLU's campus constituents and makes assessment information available on the institution Web site. CLU's Assessment Committee reviews The First-Year Experience program as part of the Foundations of Excellence process using NSSE, BCSSE, and BCSSE-NSSE combined results. The Office of Student Life staff reviewed NSSE results and noticed a gap in the co-curricular engagement of transfer and commuter students. This finding prompted an increase in programs focused on the needs of commuter students and the creation of a peer mentor program for transfer students.

California State University, Chico

Chico State's Freshman-Year Experience Initiative is based upon the University's primary goal which is to assure student success. Driven by priorities of the University's Strategic Plan, and its creation of and commitment to Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, Chico State analyzed student responses on selected NSSE items to determine whether or not the seven principles were being practiced and if the campus was engaged in practices that enhanced student learning. NSSE results indicated a need to examine more closely the experiences of first-year students. As part of Chico State's involvement with the "Foundations of Excellence" project, a self-study and improvement process for the first-year experience designed and supported by the Policy Center on the First Year of College, a campus-wide task force used selected NSSE data to determine how well first-year students were doing and to initiate improvements where needed on the nine-performance indicators of the Foundations process. A first step was the development of a philosophy of the First-Year Experience which was distributed to the entire campus. The document promotes the design, restructuring, and nurturing of learning environments to facilitate a broad scope of first-year student engagement that includes academic, intellectual, cultural, social, and civic engagement, and personal development.

Franklin Pierce University

Efforts to assess quality in undergraduate education at Franklin Pierce began with an emphasis on assessing the impact of the required first year seminar, Individual and Community IC101. The institution revised the seminar in 2008 to provide incoming students with more choices, build greater faculty enthusiasm for the course, and increase curricular commonality via common summer readings, advising and community service projects. Two of the major common learning goals for the seminar include the development of collaborative learning skills and active involvement in the community. The seminar's requirement of a number of hours of civic and community engagement activities predetermined by each professor, introduces the university mission of preparing students to become active, engaged citizens and leaders of conscience. NSSE results showing that first-year and seniors involvement in community service and volunteer work far exceeded students at comparison institutions provided confirmation of the learning goal of active involvement in the community and for strengthening students' responsibility toward and contribution to community.

Norfolk State University

Results from NSSE, BCSSE, and FSSE were used in Norfolk State's Wal-Mart Minority Student Success Grant to demonstrate the gap between student expectations, student experiences, and faculty perceptions. Results from interviews with faculty and study and survey results on in-class engagement and other items with larger gaps such as class presentations and group work, helped the institution determine that greater attention from faculty was needed to improve the student experience. The grant provided funds for a faculty-led mentoring program for first-generation students who participate in Summer Bridge. Mentoring clusters of five to seven students, one faculty member, and peer leaders were established to promote collaboration and student success.

Southern Connecticut State University

Knowing who your students are, particularly their expectations and misconceptions about educational activities, is part of good teaching (Bain, 2004). At Southern Connecticut State University, faculty were surprised (and concerned) by some of the "disconnects" between students' expectations revealed by BCSSE and their actual first-year experience reported in NSSE. During faculty development events, BCSSE and NSSE results were reported and discussed with faculty to provide more insight into the high school experiences and college expectations of their first-year students. A panel of upper-class students who attended the discussion was asked to comment on some of the findings, resulting in an in-depth discussion between students and faculty. Faculty commented that they thought they knew their students, but seeing the data provided them with new insight into students' experiences and presented provocative challenges for pedagogy.

Tarleton State University

In 2010, the Tarleton administered BCSSE during freshmen orientation sessions then chose a local NSSE administration in the spring 2011 semester. Combined results from the surveys will be used to continue assessment of the effectiveness of Duck Camp, a three-day, off-campus orientation program for first-year students designed to assist in the transition from high school to college and promote engagement. The initiative was created in 1995 to help first-year students develop friendships with their peers prior to the start of the academic year as well as learn about the opportunities and activities available at Tarleton. The transition camp is

a student-led event designed and implemented in conjunction with the Division of Student Life and sponsored by the First-Year Experience Office. The desired outcomes for the Duck Camp experience are for students to:

- Interpret academic expectations and responsibilities
- Establish relationships with students of various backgrounds
- Develop a sense of pride in Tarleton history and traditions
- Discuss the importance of team building skills.

University of Akron

UA used NSSE results in the “Dimensions” groups for its Foundations of Excellence self-study to help identify areas for increased focus that included the need to develop and distribute a campus-wide philosophy; the need to create more exposure to diversity in first-year and general education courses; more professional development for faculty and administrators who work with first-year students; creation of more common components in the first-year curriculum; better and more effective ways of communicating with first-year students; and promoting service learning, mentoring, and undergraduate research programs as vehicles to foster student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom.

The First Year Task Force, members of the Dimensions committees, key administrators, and members of the UA’s Diversity Council established a list of priorities that included:

- a “One Voice” syllabi for first-year courses
- development of a reward system for faculty teaching first-year courses
- development of a First-Year Council comprised of faculty and administrators with responsibility for first-year classes or programs
- assessment of FYE programs and initiatives – in particular, the Student Success Seminar

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

The Equity Scorecard Project is part of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Access to Success initiative – a strategic plan for closing the achievement gap and enhancing access to success for all students. NSSE data was used for assessment and planning of the Scorecard Project’s retention-related goals to:

- increase first-year retention and performance of all freshmen, particularly those of targeted students (African American, Latino, American Indian, and Southeast Asian students)
- decrease the gap in first-year retention and performance between targeted students and White students
- decrease the gap in first-year retention and performance between students placing in transitional courses and those who don’t require these courses

Responses of new freshmen on NSSE survey items related to work commitments were triangulated with family income and academic profile broken down by racial and ethnic group. The analysis revealed that lack of financial resources was the main reason that students left school. Further in-depth analyses incorporated six-year retention and graduation rates for targeted and non-targeted populations and resulted in a series of intervention strategies that were implemented on campus.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) requires all undergraduates to complete three inquiry-based projects: one in the humanities and arts, one in the major, and one relating science and technology to social issues and human needs. The projects emphasize independent research, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and application of knowledge in real-world settings.

WPI’s NSSE results indicate that first-year students experience less academic engagement than WPI seniors and first year students at other doctoral-intensive institutions. WPI’s president appointed a commission to recommend changes to enhance the WPI first-year experience. The commission defined five objectives: to encourage critical thinking, information literacy, and evidence-based writing; to engage first-year students with current events, societal problems, and human needs; to promote in each first-year student a personal foundation for lifelong learning; to cultivate a more intellectually stimulating environment at WPI; and to contribute to civic engagement and community partnerships.

A faculty-appointed committee began developing a new first-year curriculum featuring interdisciplinary, inquiry-based seminars, better integration of the disciplines, and more engaging introductions to major areas of study. In addition, an associate dean was appointed to lead a newly-formed Office for the First Year. These first-year initiatives constitute the most significant curricular change at WPI since the inception of the project-based curriculum 35 years prior. An assessment plan is being developed; NSSE indicators will be a key component of that assessment.