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.

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

The Center of Integrated Learning (COIL) at IUPUI provides support for general education and integrative learning through a focus on IUPUI’s Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs). One of COIL’s projects is Themed Learning Communities (TLCs), which integrates two or more disciplinary courses with a first-year learning experience. NSSE data on survey items such as the frequency of class presentations, working with other students outside of class, participation in community-based projects, along with items related to students’ perception of a supportive campus environment, are used as evidence to suggest that students who participate in TLCs report higher levels of engagement than those who do not participate.

Northern Arizona University

A first-year taskforce that included academic affairs and student affairs staff was established to review first-year students’ success. Results from NSSE and other surveys were used to gauge students’ progress. The taskforce examines the first-year experience, reviews program evaluations, and outcomes-based assessments.

Plymouth State University

Student Affairs at PSU looks at NSSE data for its first-year students to determine how well they are meeting student needs for out-of-class personal support. NSSE results and an institutional survey have been used to revise the General Education program. NSSE results supported a grant application that was funded to establish a faculty development center charged with improving the first-year experience with special focus on undeclared students.

St. Olaf College

The St. Olaf’s Committee on First-Year Experience (CoFYE), comprised of faculty and staff representing student support services and the first-year curriculum, proposed a self-study to more clearly define the purpose, methods and desired outcomes of the first-year experience at St. Olaf’s. The committee compared St. Olaf’s students with students nationally to determine if the first-year experience they offered was compatible with the needs and sensibilities of the students they were enrolling. The CoFYE used their NSSE results to measure to what extent first-year
students are engaged academically and socially. The Committee reviewed current campus support services for first-year students and gathered documents from these areas to set up a one-stop clearinghouse for first-year resources.

The CoFYE conducted a series of focus groups with students and faculty to provide greater insight into their NSSE survey results. Student responses in the focus groups allowed the Committee to ascertain a need for improvement in the areas of curricular and faculty development in the first-year experience. The CoFYE released a report listing the outcomes of the self-study, recommendations for other institutions planning a self-study of the first-year experience, some thoughts on what the Committee had learned about liberal arts education, and an analysis of trends among their first-year students.

**Truman State University**

In spite of a retention rate of 84% for students continuing to the second year, the president of Truman formed the First Year Experience (FYE) Task Force to review and improve first year programs to ensure that the institution continued to achieve the desired outcomes for student learning that form part of its mission. The charge of the Task Force was to review and update current FYE objectives and goals, assess FYE program strengths and weaknesses, carry out comparisons with other institutions, especially other liberal arts institutions, and recommend changes and initiatives.

FY student NSSE responses on academic advising were used to support three of the 24 major recommendations of the Task Force review. Although FY students rated professional campus advisors more highly than faculty advisors, overall, students were not as satisfied with the quality of their academic advising. The Task Force’s first recommendation was that professional advisors well-versed in development theory with a comprehensive knowledge of campus programs be housed close to residence halls to more easily advise FY students. Truman’s 2004 and 2005 NSSE results also indicated that students were less satisfied with their advising than students at other institutions. Those results in combination with an institutional survey which reported that 50% of faculty said they could use a workshop on advising, led to a second recommendation to provide faculty “with regular, high-quality opportunities for professional development as academic advisors including workshops and a regular/faculty staff advising newsletter.” The third recommendation urged that an advising task force created by the VP of Academic Affairs carry out a comprehensive assessment of FY advising.

**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 Massachusetts Lowell
The University of Massachusetts Lowell is examining differences in NSSE responses of first-year students who persist and those who leave the subsequent spring. The pattern was the same for all five NSSE benchmarks; the scores of students who returned for the second year were higher than those of the other group; i.e. students who persisted were more engaged in educationally purposeful activities. Because about half of Lowell's students are commuters, infusing effective educational practices into the classroom is essential.

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.
Using NSSE and BCSSE Results for Studying the First-Year Experience

When used with NSSE, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) can provide campuses with additional information about first-year students’ experiences and campus programs. BCSSE collects data on the pre-college experiences of entering students and the importance these students place on their participation in educationally purposeful activities. Several schools have put their results from the BCSSE pilot study to good use. The inaugural administration of BCSSE took place in 2007.

Brigham Young University and Radford University compared students’ descriptions of their academic experiences (NSSE) with the expectations they described prior to starting classes (BCSSE).

Illinois State University uses NSSE, BCSSE, and FSSE findings to guide campus conversations among current students, prospective students, faculty, student affairs personnel, and other stakeholders about the differences between the nature of student engagement in high school and what is expected at ISU.

To support its new mission and vision statements which focus on making student success a topic priority while creating a student-centered institution, Southern Connecticut State University reviewed data from the BCSSE pilot and NSSE administrations as part of a 18-month strategic planning process that resulted in several new initiatives related to first-year students. The initiatives included implementation of a pilot FYE program in the fall of 2007, increased emphasis on recruitment and retention, and improvements to the undergraduate advising process. BCSSE results were distributed to advisers to help them better understand first-year students' expectations. Furthermore, a number of FYE instructors have shared BCSSE results with students in their FY seminars in an effort to actively involve students in the assessment process. Future administrations of BCSSE and NSSE will be used to evaluate the success of these initiatives.

Using NSSE, BCSSE, and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), the University of Maine at Farmington established a baseline against which to assess the impact of its shift from three-credit to four-credit semester courses.

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