

Putting Student Engagement Results to Use: Lessons from the Field

George D. Kuh

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MEASURES make valuable contributions to an institution's assessment program. Combined with other relevant information, such data help to tie together what students and institutions do, student outcomes, and other indicators of institutional performance. The results can be used in a variety of ways, from comparing student performance associated with different forms of orientation programs or first-year seminars to institutionwide uses such as meeting accreditation requirements for evidence about teaching and learning processes. Equally important, the information often points to aspects of student and institutional performance that a college or university can address almost immediately to improve the quality of the student experience. The versatility of student engagement data explains in large part why more than 850 four-year colleges and universities have used the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at least once since its introduction in 2000 (Kuh, 2001, 2003). This article briefly describes two institutions that are putting their NSSE data to use, Elon University and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. They are among scores of institutions that are using NSSE for the purpose for which it was intended—identifying areas in which improvement is desirable and then doing something about it.

Elon University

The story of Elon University's transformation from a little-known college to one

of national distinction is told by George Keller (2004). One of Elon's distinctive characteristics is student engagement, which is one of the products of the sweeping change in 1994 that saw the curriculum change from three-credit-hour courses to four-credit-hour courses along with an experiential learning requirement for all students. The objective of changing to four-credit-hour courses was not to cover more content but to ensure higher levels of active, engaged learning on the part of students. Indeed, one legislated component of the increase in credit hours per course was that the additional hour

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Some of the targets of opportunity are strengthening the general studies program, enhancing the undergraduate research program, increasing to 80 percent the number of students participating in internships and engaging in service, and providing additional living/learning options for students. Elon also uses its annual NSSE results to identify areas that could be strengthened in the context of strategic planning. According to provost Gerald Francis, Elon changed its core general studies course in mathematics from college algebra to statistics in an effort to increase

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was not to be used for passive pedagogy (such as lecture) but was to involve students more deeply in their own learning. Elon's NSSE scores are consistent with this intent.

In summer 2000 a committee of trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students began to formulate Elon's new strategic plan <www.elon.edu>, which was designed to strengthen components of an Elon education that correspond to NSSE's five clusters of effective educational practices: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus envi-

ronment. Some of the targets of opportunity are strengthening the general studies program, enhancing the undergraduate research program, increasing to 80 percent the number of students participating in internships and engaging in service, and providing additional living/learning options for students. Elon also uses its annual NSSE results to identify areas that could be strengthened in the context of strategic planning. According to provost Gerald Francis, Elon changed its core general studies course in mathematics from college algebra to statistics in an effort to increase academic challenge and to emphasize analysis and data interpretation. In addition, Elon's NSSE results in 2003 showed a modest decrease in two areas: fewer students reported that they had discussed their career plans with a faculty member or adviser, and fewer reported that they had had serious conversations with students from different ethnic backgrounds. Subsequently, a new director of employee relations position was created to increase the contact between Career Center staff and academic departments and to expand employment opportunity contacts throughout the eastern United States. Elon also created a new minority

recruitment admissions counselor position to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body and intends to further diversify the faculty as well. Although the strategic initiative was designed as a multiyear effort, Francis says that substantial progress has already been made after only one year.

UNIV 112 or an honors seminar tended to be more satisfied overall with the quality of relations with peers, faculty members, and administrators. Based on these findings, along with other information, the campus is considering a requirement that entering first-year students take a new student seminar designed to assist them in

indiana.edu> or directly to *Assessment Update* <banta@iupui.edu>. ■

SIUE students who took the freshman experience course, an academic development course, or the honors seminar participated more in class, more frequently attended campus events, gained more in self-understanding, and were more satisfied with their first year of college.



Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) uses its NSSE results for several purposes, including curriculum planning and faculty development. In spring 2003, SIUE was one of an increasing number of colleges and universities that requested an oversample when the NSSE was administered. That is, in addition to NSSE's standard random sample, surveys were sent to all freshmen who had taken selected first-year courses, including SIUE's freshman experience course (UNIV 112) and academic development courses. Four questions were of particular interest: items pertaining to whether students asked questions in class or contributed to class discussion; whether students attended campus events and activities (for example, special speakers, cultural performances); students' understanding of themselves; and students' evaluation of their entire educational experience at the institution.

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making the transition from high school to college-level work and expectations, to orient them to the services and culture of the university, and to engage them in an intellectual community of students and faculty.

Do You Have a Story to Tell About the Use of Student Engagement Data?

These brief reports from Elon and SIUE are just two of many that are worth sharing with assessment teams and others working to improve teaching and learning. Additional examples of how colleges and universities are using their NSSE data for various purposes can be found in NSSE annual reports and in "Using NSSE Data," both available at the NSSE Web site <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/using_data_2002.htm>.

In future *Assessment Update* issues, we intend to feature more examples of how colleges are using their student engagement results in combination with other information for accreditation, for faculty development activities, and for other purposes. Consider this your personal invitation to send your story to Jillian Kinzie at the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice <jikinzie@

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Resources

- National Survey of Student Engagement. *Converting Data into Action: Expanding the Boundaries of Institutional Improvement*. Bloomington: Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University, 2003.
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