



Institutional Research Reports University of Kentucky

The National Survey of Student Engagement: 2007 Results January 2008

Last spring, UK students participated in the eighth annual administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This assessment project was originally designed as an alternative to media rankings that rely primarily on each institution’s reputation and resources. Since its inception in 2000, NSSE has fueled a national discussion about undergraduate learning and institutional excellence. The questions on this survey instrument address best practices that engage students, foster learning and promote academic success. The administration of the survey by a respected ‘third-party’ survey organization is one of the major advantages of this assessment project.¹

Over 320,000 first-year students and seniors from more than 600 institutions participated in this year’s survey. Students were randomly chosen from electronic data files furnished by participating institutions. The administration of this year’s survey marked the fourth time that UK students have participated in this national research project. A total of 709 first-year students and 746 seniors completed the survey. All seniors and most (79%) first-year students completed the questionnaire on the Web; a small sub-sample of freshmen completed paper questionnaires as part of the Wabash National Study. The response rate for UK students was 24 percent, down five percentage-points from the 2005 administration.² The sampling errors for UK’s first-year students and seniors were plus or minus 3.3 percent and 3.2 percent, respectively.

¹ NSSE is administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research under the leadership of Dr. George D. Kuh, Chancellor’s Professor at Indiana University.

² In recent years, nationwide response rates for various types of surveys have declined considerably. The NSSE response rate for our Carnegie peers was six percentage-points lower than that achieved in the 2005 administration. Still, UK’s response rate in 2007 was two percentage-points below the overall rate for students at Carnegie peer institutions and three percentage-points lower than our benchmark institutions that participated.

Benchmarks of Effective Practice

NSSE researchers clustered thirty-nine items on the survey into five benchmarks of effective educational practices: 1) level of academic challenge, 2) active and collaborative learning, 3) student-faculty interaction, 4) enriching educational experiences, and 5) supportive campus environment. This research brief compares the benchmark scores achieved by UK freshmen and seniors in 2005 and 2007 to the scores achieved by our Carnegie peers. In the tables below, a statistically non-significant difference between UK students and their counterparts is signified by a level, two-directional arrow (↔). When UK students achieved benchmark scores significantly below their peers at the $p \leq .05$ level or beyond, their performance was signified by a downward arrow (↓). UK students did not achieve significantly greater scores than their Carnegie peers on any of the benchmarks during 2005 and 2007.

Benchmark I: Level of Academic Challenge

The “Academic Challenge” benchmark consists of 9 items that measure the degree to which students report expending academic effort and meeting high expectations in their coursework. The indicator examines a variety of activities and conditions, including:

- Students’ level of preparation for class (studying, reading, writing, etc.)
- The number of assigned books and written papers or reports of varying length
- The types of cognitive demands emphasized by coursework

Table 1
Level of Academic Challenge:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

| Class | 2005 | 2007 |
|---------------------|------|------|
| First-year Students | ↔ | ↔ |
| Seniors | ↔ | ↔ |

UK first-year students and seniors did not differ significantly from their Carnegie peers in their reported levels of academic challenge in 2005 and 2007.

Benchmark II: Active and Collaborative Learning

Seven items assess students’ level of involvement in their education on this NSSE benchmark. Examples of questions from the “Active and Collaborative Learning” benchmark include the frequency of:

- Participation in class discussions
- Work with other students on class projects
- Discussions about readings with others outside of class

Table 2
Active and Collaborative Learning:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

| Class | 2005 | 2007 |
|---------------------|------|------|
| First-year Students | ↓ | ↓ |
| Seniors | ↔ | ↔ |

Seniors did not differ significantly from their counterparts at like institutions on this benchmark during the last two survey administrations. However, first-year students reported less active and collaborative learning than their Carnegie peers in 2005 and 2007.

First-year students reported significantly less frequent ‘active’ learning on the following items:

- Made a presentation in class
- Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- Tutored or taught other students
- Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course

Benchmark III: Student-Faculty Interaction

This benchmark of effective educational practice is based on six items that tap students’ involvement with faculty in and outside of the classroom. Questions on this indicator ask students to report the frequency of their discussions with faculty on such varied topics as:

- Grades or assignments
- Career plans
- Ideas from class readings

Table 3
Student-Faculty Interaction:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

| Class | 2005 | 2007 |
|---------------------|------|------|
| First-year Students | ↔ | ↔ |
| Seniors | ↔ | ↔ |

In 2005 and 2007, UK first-year students and seniors did not differ significantly in their amount of interaction with faculty from students at similar Carnegie institutions.

Benchmark IV: Enriching Educational Experiences

This benchmark is based on 11 items that measure students’ reported involvement and exposure to enriching experiences. Benchmark items include self-reported involvement or plans to participate in the following:

- Community service or volunteer work
- Internships or co-op experiences
- Co-curricular activities, such as student government, sports and organizations
- Serious conversations with groups of diverse students

Table 4
Enriching Educational Experiences:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

| Class | 2005 | 2007 |
|---------------------|------|------|
| First-year Students | ↓ | ↓ |
| Seniors | ↔ | ↓ |

For the past two survey administrations, UK first-year students have reported significantly fewer enriching educational experiences than their counterparts at similar institutions. Our seniors did not differ from their peers on this benchmark in 2005, but reported significantly fewer enriching educational experiences to their comparison group in 2007.

The relatively poor performance of our first-year students and seniors on this benchmark can be attributed largely to their answers on several diversity-related items. Relative to their comparison groups, freshmen and seniors reported significantly less frequent:

- Serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own
- Serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values

Freshmen and seniors also reported less institutional encouragement “for contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.” The responses of UK students on these NSSE items have been relatively consistent since the survey was first administered in 2001.

NSSE also asks students about which educational activities they have done or planned to do before they graduate from their institution. First-year students reported significantly fewer plans to participate or actual involvement in the following educational activities:

- Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment
- Participation in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together
- Study abroad
- Independent study or self-designed major
- Culminating senior experience (capstone course, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, etc.)

Benchmark V: Supportive Campus Environment

The final benchmark measures students’ perceptions regarding institutional support for their academic and social concerns. The six items in this cluster assess the level of support provided by the campus environment to help students:

- Succeed academically
- Cope with non-academic responsibilities
- Thrive socially

Other items measure the perceived quality of relationships with other students, faculty members, and administrative personnel.

Table 5
Supportive Campus Environment:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

| Class | 2005 | 2007 |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| First-year Students | ↓ | ↓ |
| Seniors | ↔ | ↓ |

In 2005 and 2007, UK first-year students’ evaluations of campus support were below their counterparts at comparable institutions. Seniors rated the level of campus support no differently than their peers in 2005, but gave significantly poorer evaluations on this benchmark in 2007.

In 2007, first-year students and seniors reported significantly less institutional emphasis than their Carnegie peers on the following dimensions:

- Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically
- Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)

In addition, freshman reported comparatively less institutional emphasis on “providing the support you need to thrive socially.”

Other Findings of Interest

Advising

NSSE assesses the quality of academic advising students have received at their institutions. In 2005, first-year students and seniors at UK and comparable institutions did not differ from one another in their evaluation of academic advising. In 2007, however, UK seniors gave lower marks to the quality of academic advising than students attending similar Carnegie institutions.

Overall Student Satisfaction

The NSSE questionnaire asks students, “How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?” Judgments are made on a four-point scale ranging from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent.’ In 2005, evaluations given by our first-year students and seniors did not differ significantly from counterparts at like institutions. Both groups of UK students expressed significantly less satisfaction with their entire education experience than their Carnegie peers in 2007.

Web-based Accountability Reporting

During the past few years, the U.S. Department of Education has called upon postsecondary institutions to demonstrate greater accountability to students, parents and policy makers. In response to these demands, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) established a partnership to develop a Voluntary Accountability System (VAS). Seventy-nine high-level administrators from public colleges and universities were selected to develop recommendations for this new accountability initiative.

The primary objective of the VAS is to disseminate three types of information on each participating institution's website: Student and Family Information, Core Educational Outcomes and Campus Student Engagement. Using a common set of definitions and formats, VSA will furnish information about each participating university and its programs. The plan is to have the student and family information component posted on university websites by mid-2008. The value-added learning outcomes and campus engagement measures of VSA will, in all likelihood, take longer to develop and present on institutional website.

According to a recent memo to the NASULGC Presidents on the organization's website³, participating institutions' web pages will feature:

- descriptive data about the university, the programs offered and characteristics of its students,
- a mechanism for the students to calculate their estimated net cost of attendance,
- various success measures such as graduation rates and continued enrollment of students who transfer into other universities,
- a measures of post graduation plans,
- direct learning outcome measurement of the value-added by the university to undergraduates in the areas of critical thinking, analytic reasoning and written communications ability,
- indicators of the engagement exhibited by the campus' students in several strategic areas.

Presented below is a template from the NASULGC website that captures student experiences on campus. The percentages mentioned in the text below are derived from the responses of UK seniors to selected items on this year's NSSE. This example will give members of the UK community a sense of how the results will appear on the UK website in a couple of years.

Student Experiences on Campus

Students who are actively involved in their own learning and development are more likely to be successful in college. Colleges and universities offer students a wide variety of opportunities both inside and outside the classroom to become engaged with new ideas, people, and experiences. Institutions measure the effectiveness of these opportunities in a variety of ways to better understand what types of activities and programs students find the most helpful. Examples of how UK evaluates the experiences of its students can be found by [CLICKING HERE](#).

Following are the selected questions from the 2006-07 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The questions have been grouped together in categories that are known to contribute to student learning and development. The results reported below are based on the responses of UK seniors who participated in the survey.

Student Satisfaction

76% of students would attend UK again if they started over

80% of UK students rate their educational experience as good or excellent

Active Learning Experiences

63% of students at UK participated in community service or volunteer work

95% of students at UK made a class presentation last year
23% of students at UK worked on a research project with a faculty member

³//www.nasulgc.org/

Group Learning Experiences

89% of UK students worked with classmates on a group project

26% of UK students participated in a learning community where groups of students take two or more classes together

Institutional Commitment for Student Learning and Success

61% of students believe the UK provides “quite a bit” of support for student success

61% of students rate the quality of academic advising at UK as good or excellent

15% of students report that UK provides help in coping with work, family and other responsibilities

Student Interaction with Campus Faculty and Staff

59% of students report that faculty members (often or very often) provide prompt feedback on their academic performance

23% of UK students often discuss readings or ideas with faculty members outside of class

Experiences with Diverse Groups of People and Ideas

52% of UK students report that they often try to understand someone else’s point of view

42% of students believe they have a better understanding of people of other racial and ethnic background

45% of UK students often have serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity

Future Steps

The 2007 NSSE results provide important information about programs and services that may be needed to engage our students and create a campus environment that fosters academic success. While it is discouraging that UK students lag behind their Carnegie peers on several benchmarks, it is important to note that the magnitude of these differences is generally small.⁴ Ever since NSSE was first administered to UK students in 2001, the results have suggested that our greatest challenge is in raising first-year students’ scores on the Active and Collaborative Learning benchmark and the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark. Unfortunately, this year’s seniors also reported relatively lower participation in educationally enriching activities. UK freshmen need to be encouraged to work with their classmates outside of class on assignments. Faculty members can bolster active learning by incorporating community-based projects as a component of their regular courses. In addition, the entire academic community must undertake the challenge of creating a more intellectual atmosphere on campus—one in which students look forward to discussing ideas covered in class with their classmates at lunch or over a cup of coffee. Students benefit most when they spend more time on task and are required to meet high expectations. Shortly after NSSE was launched, Dr. George Kuh, the Director of NSSE, forcefully made this point:

“What students do in college and how they use an institution’s resources for learning are critical to their success broadly defined . . . Students do better academically and socially when they apportion reasonable chunks of time to a combination of the right kinds of activities, such educationally purposeful things as studying, interacting with faculty members, advisors, and right-minded peers, performing community service, and participating in co-curricular activities.”⁵

UK can further enrich the experiences of students by intensifying its efforts to attract a more diverse student body. The fall 2006 freshman class set a record for the number of African American students enrolled at UK. This recruiting milestone is a step forward in creating a less homogeneous student population. Research has shown that interactions with students from diverse backgrounds often produce a variety

⁴ Statistical significance refers to the likelihood that an observed difference between two or more groups can be attributed to chance. The ‘effect size’ refers to the “practical significance” of a difference between two groups. The largest effect size between UK students and their peers was -.34, and the others ranged from -.19 to -.21. An effect size of .20 is generally considered ‘small’ while an effect size of .5 is considered ‘moderate.’

⁵ Kuh, G.D. (2000, p. 1). Tools for assessing the first-year student experience. *First-Year Assessment Listserv*. <http://www.Brevard.edu/fyc/listerv/remarks/kuh.htm>.

of positive educational outcomes. Another initiative aimed at broadening the educational experiences of our students is the Education Abroad Program. Currently, UK first-year students are significantly less likely than their Carnegie peers to make plans to study overseas.

This year's decision to employ a web-based method of administering NSSE resulted in fairly large sample sizes. The Office of Institutional Research has access to the raw survey data and will disaggregate the results of key items for each undergraduate college. While the sampling errors for some colleges may be somewhat high, the findings will still be informative and could play a role in strategic planning and policy development.

We suggest that an ad hoc committee of faculty, staff and administrators be appointed and given the charge of reviewing survey results. The committee should focus primarily on educational practices and activities where UK students perform below the level of our Carnegie peers and identify initiatives to shore up our weaknesses in both the academic and student affairs domains. Conducting focus groups with students to review the findings may offer new interpretations and suggest further avenues for policy development. Moreover, the committee should study how other institutions are now using their NSSE findings with an eye toward identifying best practices.

The 2007 NSSE results reveal that our first-year students and seniors believe that this institution is doing less to support their academic and social needs than students at comparable institutions. This perception has important implications for faculty and staff who work in academic units and in student affairs. If UK is to achieve top 20 status, it will be critical to develop initiatives that address the shortcomings identified by our students in this survey. Ultimately, our ability to retain and graduate more students will depend on our ability to provide students with the support they need to succeed academically and thrive socially.

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