The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) collects information annually from first-year and senior students about the nature and quality of their undergraduate experience. Since its inception, more than 1,500 bachelor’s degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States and Canada have used NSSE to measure the extent to which students engage in effective educational practices that are empirically linked with learning, personal development, and other desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, and graduation. NSSE data are used by faculty, administrators, researchers, and others for institutional improvement, accountability, and related purposes. Launched in 2000 by a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, NSSE has been fully supported by institutional participation fees since 2002.

Over one and a quarter million first-year and senior students from 577 institutions in the United States (554) and Canada (23) were invited to participate in the 2012 NSSE administration. Of this survey population, 321,649 students responded to the survey. A searchable list of participating institutions by year is available on the NSSE Web site.

The standard NSSE sampling methodology calls for either a census of first-year and senior students or an equal number of randomly sampled students from each group (with the sample size based on the total number of undergraduate students enrolled). Census administrations were only offered to institutions opting for the Web-only survey mode, in which students received all contacts by email and completed the survey online. Web-only institutions numbered 486 (84%). The Web+ survey option was used by 80 institutions (14%). This mode includes multiple email contacts and one paper questionnaire sent to a portion of nonrespondents. The remaining 11 institutions (2%) chose the paper administration mode.

Only census-administered and randomly selected students are included in the respondent profiles below, and in each institution’s NSSE Institutional Report 2012 comparison groups. Some Web+ and paper-mode institutions request random oversamples to increase the number of respondents, thereby reducing sampling error and enhancing their ability to examine results by subgroups. Additionally, some participating institutions choose to oversample certain student subpopulations.

Data from eight institutions were excluded from respondent profiles and from report comparison groups due to nonstandard population files or survey administrations. Thus, the remainder of this Overview includes results from 569 institutions, (546 U.S. and 23 Canadian) except where otherwise noted.

2012 U.S. Respondent Profile

NSSE 2012 U.S. respondents profiled here include 285,926 first-year and senior respondents from 546 institutions. The first two columns in Table 1 show how NSSE 2012 U.S. institutions compare with the profile of all bachelor’s degree–granting colleges and universities in the United States. Comparative data for these tables are from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). NSSE 2012 institutions closely match the U.S. profile in most categories. Research Universities with high research activity and Master’s Colleges and Universities with larger programs are somewhat overrepresented, while Baccalaureate Colleges-Diverse Fields are somewhat underrepresented. Public institutions and those with 2,500-9,999 undergraduates are slightly overrepresented in NSSE 2012, while very small institutions–those with fewer than 1,000 undergraduates–are underrepresented.

Table 1 also shows the distribution of NSSE 2012 respondents and the national distribution of students by these same characteristics. NSSE 2012 respondents largely