

# HOW ARE WE DOING AT ENGAGING STUDENTS?

*Charles Schroeder Talks to George Kuh*

**D**URING THE PAST TWO DECADES, more than twenty national study groups have issued clarion calls for reform of undergraduate education by urging colleges and universities to “put student learning first.” These calls have not gone unnoticed by state legislatures, who demand more accountability; by parents, who want more value in return for escalating costs; and by accrediting boards, who require more hard evidence that student learning outcomes are indeed being achieved. Even publications such as *U.S. News & World Report* are starting to question traditional approaches to ranking colleges. Everyone, it seems, is

looking for more evidence of the quality of undergraduate education.

Throughout his career, George Kuh has been a leading proponent of focusing much more attention than we do on the nature of the undergraduate experience—particularly the degree to which students are meaningfully engaged in a variety of educationally purposeful activities that enhance their learning and success. Charles Schroeder recently spent time with Kuh to learn about his leadership in improving undergraduate education and how he is using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to address concerns about college quality on multiple fronts.

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**CHARLES SCHROEDER:** George, tell me about the development of the NSSE [pronounced “nessie”] project. Why was it initiated?

**GEORGE KUH:** Many college presidents and others were becoming increasingly concerned with the attention given to *U.S. News* and other college rankings because they were neither accurate nor useful indicators of quality in undergraduate education. So, in the late 1990s the Pew Charitable Trust hosted a series of meetings, and one outcome was a recommendation that getting valid, reliable information directly from students about the nature of their experiences would be extremely useful for several purposes. NSSE was the result.

NSSE is both a college student survey and a new way to think about collegiate quality. As a survey, NSSE annually assesses the extent to which more than 100,000 randomly selected first-year and senior students at four-year colleges and universities take part in educational activities that many research studies show are strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development. The survey asks about student behaviors and institutional policies and practices such as those highlighted in the classic report “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.”

We're trying to assess two aspects of student engagement. One is how much time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The other is how the institution gets students to participate in activities that lead to student success. Such student involvement is influenced by how a school allocates its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services. Although NSSE doesn't assess student learning directly, the results of the survey point to areas where colleges are performing well, and to aspects of the undergraduate experience that could be improved.

**SCHROEDER:** How long has the project been under way?

**KUH:** We spent part of 1998 developing the survey. Peter Ewell led that effort, and other experts helped—Sandy

Astin, Art Chickering, John Gardner, and Ted Marchese among them. Then we did two field tests in 1999 to see how the survey and administration procedures were working, including the Web version. You see, students can either complete a traditional paper survey or complete it on the Web. The first full national rollout was in 2000, with 276 four-year colleges and universities participating. In 2001 there were 321 schools and about 365 in 2002. All told, we now have student engagement results from about 265,000 first-year students and seniors from about 620 different institutions. More than 400 schools are doing NSSE in spring 2003.

**SCHROEDER:** Many of our readers are familiar with the College Student Experiences Questionnaire [CSEQ]. Does the NSSE project build on that work?

**KUH:** Yes, NSSE builds on CSEQ directly, although CSEQ is more than twice the length. NSSE is a more tightly focused survey based almost exclusively on what we would call “best practices” identified by studies that link certain student behaviors to empirically validated desired outcomes of college. NSSE also draws items from some other long-standing surveys, such as the HERI [Higher Education Research Institute] UCLA first-year student survey and its follow-up. We relied heavily on items that had already been used, which of course gave the instrument immediate credibility.

**SCHROEDER:** What are some of the broad measures included in NSSE?

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**KUH:** Because one of our goals was to steer conversations about collegiate quality toward effective educational practice, we clustered key questions from the survey into a handful of concepts so that people on and off campus could more easily grasp and talk about student engagement and understand why engagement is important to student learning and institutional improvement. The great appeal of student engagement measures is that they provide “actionable” data, as Dean Hubbard at Northwest Missouri State University likes to say, meaning that when institutions get their results, they can tell almost immediately where they are high or low. So we picked about forty key questions from the survey and created five benchmarks of effective educational practice that are understandable to a wide range of audiences and have compelling face validity. (See “Five Benchmarks of Educational Practice,” p. 12.)

**SCHROEDER:** What sorts of data do you provide?

**KUH:** NSSE gives each school a report that allows it to compare itself to institutions of its type as well as to the national results. Some schools select a specific set of peers to make the comparisons even more meaningful. A few states, such as Kentucky, Missouri, and Wisconsin, are using NSSE results in their performance indicator systems. We’ve also developed an Institutional Engagement Index that allows a school to compare itself to itself. That is, using a regression model, we take into account student characteristics, such as age, sex, enrollment status, and so forth, and institutional characteristics, such as percent that live on campus and the institution’s selectivity, to predict how students at the school should perform. We then compare that to what they actually report on each of the five benchmarks. At some schools, students are more engaged than one might expect; at others, not as engaged. Often institutions already have a sense of why the difference might exist.

We’ve used this analysis and some other information, such as graduation rates, to identify about twenty colleges and universities for our DEEP project. DEEP,

or Documenting Effective Educational Practices (see p. 15), will help us learn what these strong performing schools do to promote student success. So there are several complementary purposes that NSSE data can serve.

**SCHROEDER:** Now that the project has been under way for a few years, what have you found to date?

**KUH:** NSSE is confirming a lot of what we already know about the college student experience. This should be no surprise because all of the items are based on behaviors that previous research has shown to be important for student learning. Some results are especially noteworthy. We’ve been encouraged to find that substantial proportions of students are getting experience with collaborative and active learning as well as service learning. More than 90 percent of the students surveyed worked with other students on projects during class, and more than 60 percent performed community service or volunteer work. In addition, most students viewed their campus environments as supportive and responsive. But we’ve also found that student-faculty interaction takes place less frequently than research has suggested is optimal. On average, first-year students appear to interact with their teachers outside of class only once or twice a month, and seniors at research universities had no more interaction with faculty members than first-year students at liberal arts colleges. Equally troubling, students spent less than half the amount of time preparing for class than faculty claim is needed to do well in college.

**SCHROEDER:** Are there major contrasts between different kinds of institutions’ performance on NSSE?

**KUH:** Smaller is generally better when it comes to engaging students—to getting them involved more deeply in their own learning and in the life of an institution. But NSSE results also make it plain that not all small schools outperform all large institutions. My favorite data display—what I call the EKG of college student engagement clearly shows that first-year students at some large universities view their campus envi-

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# NSSE: FIVE BENCHMARKS OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

## *1. Level of Academic Challenge*

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance. This benchmark is measured by student assessments of such activities or conditions as the following:

- Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations
- Coursework emphasizes synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences
- Number of written papers or reports of twenty pages or more

## *2. Active and Collaborative Learning*

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter during and after college. Students assess such activities as the following:

- 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

## *3. Student Interactions with Faculty Members*

Students see firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors,

and guides for continuous, lifelong learning. Students assess such activities as the following:

- Discussed ideas from your reading or classes with faculty members outside of class
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
- Worked with a faculty member on a research project

## *4. Supportive Campus Environment*

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and that cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus. Conditions appraised by students include the following:

- Campus environment provides support you need to help you succeed academically
- Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially
- Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices

## *5. Enriching Educational Experiences*

Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment the academic program. Such experiences make learning more meaningful and ultimately more useful because what students know becomes a part of who they are. Activities and conditions assessed for this benchmark include the following:

- An institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
- Participating in study abroad
- Using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments

ronment as more supportive than do their peers at some small colleges. And the same is true for the other four benchmarks. Well, this is kind of an eye-opener! So, the fact of the matter is that while smaller is generally better, it's also the case that it depends on the two schools being compared. Many small colleges are more engaging than most large universities, but some larger schools do better than certain small colleges. This finding should give some hope, if not inspiration, to people working at large universities, because there are places that have been able to shrink themselves psychologically or intentionally arrange their resources in a variety of ways to engage students across these five benchmarks at relatively high levels. We're looking at some of those universities in the DEEP project to see what they do in this regard.

**SCHROEDER:** Let's explore this in a little more depth. Has NSSE helped us understand more about the campus conditions that enhance or constrain student learning?

**KUH:** For the most part the results themselves essentially confirm what other researchers have discovered about what's related to student learning, along with some new findings about international students, transfer students, and students in various majors. The major contribution of NSSE is that the results allow us to further document the utility of certain kinds of behaviors, such as the amount of time students spend studying and the relationships of experiences with diversity to other aspects of the undergraduate experience. They also provide some relatively rare between-institution comparative insights, such as what I just mentioned—that some large universities can be as supportive in terms of campus environment as small colleges, which are supposed to have a clear advantage in this area. Moreover, the results allow the kinds of comparisons that help remind institutions what they ought to be focusing on—inducing students to take advantage of learning opportunities. Equally important, the NSSE benchmarks give us a common language to talk about these important matters. This is a key aspect of NSSE's mission—engaging people in conversations about learning-centered practices.

There are dozens of instances where NSSE data have corroborated what a campus is doing or is trying to do. For example, Stephanie Quinn, the provost of Millikin University, told me that their NSSE results were exactly what they expected. The institution looked really good for first-year students and not so good for the senior year. That's because they recently implemented a new first-year curriculum that is having the desired effect on first-year students. Quinn expects that in two or three years when seniors take the NSSE again their performance will be much improved. And we've got other examples where schools such as Xavier University of Chicago, Elon, Juniata, Southwest Texas State, and others are changing some of the things they are doing in order to move their benchmarks in the desired direction.

**SCHROEDER:** You haven't mentioned faculty yet. What sort of involvement do they have with NSSE?

**KUH:** Faculty members, of course, are critical to improving undergraduate education. So, it's key to find ways to help them develop a common language for talking about learning and connecting with student affairs staff and others. For NSSE to have this impact, we have to be sure that there are enough data to have meaningful conversations at the department level, where faculty members are more likely and more quickly to take ownership of student performance. Bob Smallwood, associate vice president for academic affairs at Southwest Texas State, has, with our permission and enthusiastic support, redesigned the NSSE instrument for completion by faculty. It poses such questions as, What are your students currently doing? To what extent are these specific behaviors important for you to reach your own teaching goals? What would be the desired level of performance on these behaviors?

The purpose of the faculty survey is not to do national benchmarks or to compare schools, but to get faculty members to talk locally about what they are trying to accomplish and to focus on organizing student learning experiences to have the desired effect. The idea of a faculty version of NSSE has caught on, and other

Our goal is to get people to better understand what the rankings say and cannot say about an institution. We've some evidence already to suggest that NSSE is beginning to change the nature of the conversation.

We expect that over the next four to five years we will work with more than one hundred of these institutions, first to arrange to administer the survey and then to help them develop a capacity for using the data.

schools, including Alverno College, Edgewood College, Ohio University, and University of Akron, are doing something similar. The interest is so great, in fact, that we've developed a Web version of the faculty survey and we're pilot testing it this spring with about 150 schools.

**SCHROEDER:** At the start of this interview you mentioned the *U.S. News* and other college rankings that served as catalysts for the NSSE project. Can NSSE shift the conversation from these reputational factors to what really matters, and isn't this in some ways a political land mine? Aren't some institutions, maybe most institutions, really unwilling to disclose their NSSE results?

**KUH:** College rankings have been with us for more than fifteen years, and it's not likely that NSSE will dramatically affect the public's interest in them. Our goal is to get people to better understand what the rankings say and cannot say about an institution. We've some evidence already to suggest that NSSE is beginning to change the nature of the conversation. In the past couple of years national magazines like *Time* and newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have featured NSSE. And the 2002 *U.S. News* rankings issue devoted six pages or so to NSSE and selected results from schools that agreed to share them. This is an important step for taking into account the kinds of experiences that NSSE measures. That said, we are dead set against using student engagement results in rankings. Reducing a school to a single number or even five numbers (one for each of the NSSE benchmarks) doesn't say much of value about collegiate quality. There are too many other variables that need to be factored in to understand whether students and institutions are working well.

**SCHROEDER:** I understand that you have initiated roundtables across the country at different times with some presidents, chief academic officers, and chief student affairs officers to discuss their views of NSSE. What are you learning from these roundtables?

**KUH:** NSSE is an annual survey, but it also has to be a way of thinking about institutional improvement. The

roundtables are intended to help us do that by talking with people who are at the ground level using student engagement and other related data. We ask a series of questions—for example, How are participants using NSSE data? What kind of success stories have they enjoyed? and What obstacles have they encountered in efforts to make more productive use of NSSE data? We also ask what kinds of assistance might be useful to them by way of consultants or consortia work. There is genuine enthusiasm for using NSSE data to improve, both from schools that do well on NSSE and from schools that in some instances will likely never be in the top 10 percent of a national distribution, such as state institutions that have essentially open admission policies. In partnership with the American Association for Higher Education [AAHE] we'll continue to conduct roundtables over the next year or so as part of the DEEP project.

**SCHROEDER:** There are many benefits of the NSSE project, but none seems to hold more promise than institutional improvement. You have seen, as I have, over two dozen reform reports on undergraduate education in the last twenty years, yet some would argue that there has been very little institutional improvement. In your mind, how can we use NSSE and other tools to strengthen the undergraduate experience? What kind of leadership is needed within an institution to make this happen?

**KUH:** Like any other effort to change student and institutional behavior, it's helpful to have good quality information—data that are meaningful and understandable by a variety of different groups. The five NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practice allow schools to compare their results with those of institutions with similar missions and student characteristics. This adds legitimacy and often a sense of urgency to institutional improvement efforts. The majority of NSSE schools tell us that they will probably use the survey results in their accreditation self-studies. For example, Bob Glidden, president of Ohio University, has shaped his school's accreditation around student engagement, as has Rad-



ford University and California Lutheran. Wisconsin-Stout, which is the first institution of higher education to receive a Baldrige award for excellence, incorporated its NSSE results in its application. Whatever the particular focus, we have to find ways to involve faculty and student affairs staff—ideally in a collaborative mode. Southwest Texas is a great example once again: Jim Studer, the vice president for student affairs, and Bob Smallwood, whom I mentioned before, are bringing together groups of faculty and student affairs staff to talk about NSSE findings at the institutional level so they can learn from one another about opportunities and prospects for changing policies and practices to achieve the desired effect. We're aware of dozens of other efforts and have featured some of these in our 2001 and 2002 annual reports. Much of this information can be found at the NSSE Web site (<http://www.iub.edu/~nsse>).

**SCHROEDER:** I am aware that some institutions have chosen voluntarily to put their NSSE results on Web sites. As the cost of higher education continues to rise, parents are increasingly interested in where they are going to get the best bang for their buck. When they get information from institutions about their NSSE data, are they getting involved in trying to make some comparisons and pushing others to say, "Well, how about old Siwash U down the road—how are they doing on NSSE?"

**KUH:** This generates some obvious tensions for us. We don't release NSSE results from individual institutions by name, but as NSSE becomes better known, there is more interest on the part of parents. We got calls after our first national report in 2000, and we got many more after the second because NSSE was reviewed in *USA Today*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *New York Times*, and other national media. Some parents are mildly perturbed when we say, "We can't tell you the scores of specific schools, but if you contact the individual institutions you are interested in, perhaps they will." In some instances this has put people at colleges in awkward positions because they don't know how to respond. They know how to fill out reports for *U.S. News*, but they don't quite know what to do with NSSE information. Add to this the knowledge that the stakes are higher with NSSE because the results reflect things about undergraduate education that are really supposed to matter to learning. So how do you respond to parents' question, "What are students doing at your place that we know matters to their learning?"

Let me give you a couple of examples. A father of a prospective student called my university and said, "I've got NSSE results from Chapel Hill and Bowling Green

and one other place. I can't find yours, and I want them." Our institutional research person didn't know whether he was authorized to release the data; the topic simply hadn't come up before. After a few days of waiting for a response, this father began to make noises about lawsuits. My institution was willing to give him the data, but we just couldn't figure out in what form. Our experience is not atypical in this regard. Another example: I was at a campus on the East Coast to do a NSSE workshop. This was the first time the data would be released publicly. We all met with the president's cabinet in the morning to talk about this, among other things, and the media relations person said, "You should know that the education reporter from the regional newspaper knows about the session and will be there." This caused a reappraisal of the day's plans and led to the decision to share just part of the institution's NSSE results with the public. The data looked very good for first-year students because they've been working hard to change the character and the quality of the first-year experience. But the results for seniors were not nearly

## Documenting Effective Educational Practices to Promote Student Success

NSSE and AAHE are sponsoring a new project, Documenting Effective Educational Practices, or Project DEEP, to learn what a variety of educationally effective colleges and universities do to promote student success. The Project DEEP research team is preparing detailed case studies of twenty colleges and universities with better-than-predicted scores on the five NSSE national benchmarks and higher-than-predicted graduation rates. These institutions have created unique practices and cultures, programs, services, and policies that support students. By documenting and sharing the success stories from these institutions, Project DEEP will help other schools improve by giving faculty members and student affairs administrators ideas about ways to affect student engagement positively, and by providing information about the policies and practices that are especially powerful in helping students succeed. Support for DEEP comes from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Wabash College Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts.

as positive. In part it's because more than 70 percent of their graduating seniors every year are transfer students. All the people in the room could think about was the likely headline the next morning: "XYU University Seniors Well Below National Average." We ended up talking only about first-year student engagement at the workshop, and the reporter did a fair, balanced job of discussing the importance of student engagement and what the university was trying to do to improve. This was a sound decision in that it wasn't fair to an institution to possibly be embarrassed publicly for an honest effort to determine the quality of the student experience before it had a chance to do something about it.

**SCHROEDER:** What is the future of NSSE? Where do you plan to take the project?

**KUH:** We'll continue to do the annual national survey of first-year and senior students. Once the project is fully implemented in 2004, we'd like to have about a thousand colleges and universities with fresh student engagement data in the national database. Assuming a data shelf life of four years, most schools will participate every third or fourth year. As institutions learn more about NSSE and program options, some may not participate in a national survey in a given year but instead locally administer NSSE. We also want more schools to target specific groups of students, say those in certain majors, or types of students, such as transfers or students of color. This will ensure that enough of these students respond so that the numbers are robust enough for us to have confidence in the results. We're also testing new items on the Web version, which is where we can experiment. We'll continue to do additional psychometric analyses to improve the quality of the instrument and results. We make these analyses available in our norms and on the NSSE Web site. In addition to the DEEP project I mentioned earlier, we're also working with AAHE and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education on BEAMS—Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students. This effort is funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and is intended, among other things, to increase the number of historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges participating in NSSE.

We expect that over the next four to five years we will work with more than one hundred of these institutions, first to arrange to administer the survey and then to help them develop a capacity for using the data. In addition, the two-year version of NSSE—the Community College Survey of Student Engagement—is in the midst of its first national administration after being field-tested at the University of Texas at Austin. When that is up and running, we will be able to get a fix on what student engagement looks like in the first year of college at two-year as well as four-year institutions.

By the end of this spring's survey cycle, the NSSE database will represent about 57 percent of undergraduates attending four-year colleges and universities, and we can expect some new questions to arise—for example, How might the data be used at the state level? Is this appropriate? and What would institutions think about their data being used in this way? Finally, we anticipate developing a cadre of consultants—people who via their own experience and their increasing knowledge of NSSE and student engagement can assist institutions, working either through consortia or through organizations such as AAHE, which is a partner in this enterprise.

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#### NOTES

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#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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