

Accreditation Toolkit: Middle States Commission

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“Accreditation is a process by which an institution of postsecondary education evaluates its educational activities, in whole or in part, and seeks an independent judgment to confirm that it substantially achieves its objectives and is generally equal in quality to comparable institutions or specialized units.”

—K. E. Young, E. E. Chambers, H. R. Kells and Associates (1983). *Understanding accreditation: Contemporary perspectives on issue and practices in evaluating educational quality*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.



Introduction and Rationale for Using NSSE in Accreditation

Accreditation organizations have responded to the growing salience of learning outcomes in a variety of ways. Virtually all now include explicit references to student learning in their standards for accreditation. Most also require institutions or programs to examine student achievement or “institutional effectiveness” as part of their self-study and review process – usually in the form of some kind of “assessment.”

—Ewell, P. (2001). *Accreditation and student learning outcomes: A proposed point of departure*. CHEA Occasional Paper. CHEA, Washington, DC.

The single most powerful contributor to assessment’s staying power has been its championing by regional and professional accreditors.

—Wright, B. (2002). Accreditation and the scholarship of assessment. In T. W. Banta & Associates, *Building a Scholarship of Assessment*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

One of the most common institutional uses of NSSE data is for accreditation. In fact, NSSE schools report that accrediting agencies are the primary external group with which they share NSSE results. There are two major reasons for this.

First, accreditation agencies are giving less weight to indicators that represent institutional resources such as library holdings and inputs such as student characteristics. More emphasis is being given to evidence of student learning. Indeed, regional associations and various specialized accrediting organizations are urging colleges and universities to more thoroughly measure student learning and to demonstrate that processes are in place to assess and enhance learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness on an ongoing basis. Student engagement results from NSSE are one direct indicator of what students put into their education and an indirect indicator of what they get out of it. That is, NSSE data show how engaged various types of students are in effective educational practices in the first and last year of college.

Second, regional and discipline- or program-specific accreditation standards encourage institutions to focus on self-evaluation and formative reviews that guide improvement efforts. So, rather than fashion self-studies as a stand-alone document for one time use, they have begun to feature more elements of strategic planning and program evaluations that can be used to identify areas where institutions wish to improve. NSSE data are especially valuable for this

“Accreditation is probably the most widely known and respected form of quality assurance among parents, government officials, and other civic friends of American higher education.”

—Bogue, J. G., & Hall, K. B. (2003). *Quality and accountability in higher education*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

“While changes in behavior typically lag behind changes in concepts, significant changes have already been implemented in the rhetoric, standards, and practices of most accreditation agencies.”

—Angelo, T.A. (2002). Engaging and supporting faculty in the scholarship of assessment. In T. W. Banta & Associates, *Building a Scholarship of Assessment*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

purpose. The results are actionable, in that they point to aspects of student and institutional performance that institutions can do something about related to the curriculum, pedagogy, instructional emphases, and campus climate. In addition, because NSSE benchmarks allow a school to compare itself to others, the results often point to areas where improvement may be desired. NSSE results help answer key questions such as what institutional policies and programs at your college are associated with high levels of student engagement and learning.

Specific applications of student engagement information for accreditation varies, ranging from minimal use such as including the results in a self-study appendix to systematic incorporation of NSSE results over a several year period to demonstrate the impact of improvement initiatives on student behavior and the efficacy of modifications of policies and practices.

An effective accreditation plan is context specific. No one approach or template can do justice to the wide variety of institutional missions, curriculum, and campus environments the plan is designed to address. However, two common early steps to developing an accreditation plan are to identify the assessment practices already in place and the data that are available, and then how to augment this evidence with the self-study process ([ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report](#). “Why does accreditation matter?”).

NSSE as a Tool for Documenting Student Learning Outcomes

Here are several examples of how student engagement information can respond to accreditation goals related to documenting student learning processes and outcomes:

- NSSE is a national survey that can help institutions measure their effectiveness in key areas of interest.
- Used systematically over time, NSSE provides data that illustrate (1) a college or university is using assessment to determine the extent to which it is meeting its educational objectives, (2) whether current institutional goals remain appropriate, and (3) various areas of teaching and learning in need of improvement.
- Participating as part of a NSSE consortium allows an institution to benchmark its performance against standard or aspirational peer comparison groups.
- Information about student engagement and institutional effectiveness is evidence of efforts to meet accrediting standards and continuously improve.
- NSSE results can yield insights into widely held assumptions about the nature of students and how they use the institution’s resources for learning.
- Student engagement results are intuitively accessible and understandable by different groups of stakeholders, on and off the campus.

This toolkit provides suggestions for incorporating NSSE into regional accreditation processes and products with an emphasis on mapping student engagement results to regional accreditation standards. In addition we offer examples of how to use NSSE data in your regular accreditation processes.

NSSE and Regional Accreditation Timelines

NSSE results can be used in all components of the institutional accreditation process. These include but are not limited to (a) the self-study that responds to evaluation criteria established by the accrediting body; (b) the visit by the team of peer evaluators who gather additional evidence; and (c) response to a decision by an accreditation body requesting an improvement plan or additional evidence of student learning and related areas.

When and how often to collect and integrate student engagement data in the accreditation process are decisions facing all colleges and universities. The answers will vary, depending on several factors. Some schools want to collect student engagement information to establish a baseline. Ideally, this would be done three to five years before preparing the self-study. This way, the institution has enough time to analyze, interpret and vet the results with appropriate audiences, identify areas for improvement, take action in these areas, and administer the survey in subsequent years to demonstrate whether student and institutional performance are moving in the desired direction.

Other institutions will establish different timelines to meet their self-study objectives. For this reason, some schools administer NSSE on an annual or biannual basis. The appropriate NSSE participation cycle for your school depends on how you intend to use your data. Many institutions have found it valuable to have several years of NSSE results to establish a reliable baseline of data. Then, institutions assess their students every few years to allow time for institutional changes to take effect. This planned administration cycle maximizes the use of student engagement data for most accreditation purposes. To illustrate, the table below shows how often institutions have used NSSE during the most recent five year period.

Frequency of Participation in the 2004 NSSE Administration	
First-Time Participants	126
Two-Time Participants	114
Three-Time Participants	113
Four-Time Participants	70
Five-Time Participants	50

A substantial number of schools have gathered student engagement information multiple times. This suggests that they may be comparing the results over time to estimate areas in which student performance is changing. It may also indicate that some of these colleges are carefully monitoring student learning processes to track trends over time and to make certain that institutional performance remains at the desired level.

While the reasons schools use NSSE at different intervals can legitimately vary, the best answer to how frequently an institution should obtain student engagement data depends on the needs of a given college or university.

Listed on the next page are suggestions for determining when and how often to administer NSSE as part of a self-study process, depending on the length of the accreditation cycle.

Examples of Administering NSSE in Regional Accreditation Timelines

WASC – 10 year cycle

- Year 1 Proposal approved
- Year 2 Preparatory review
(Register for and administer NSSE)
- Year 3 Educational effectiveness review
- Year 8 Begin preparing for new proposal
(Register for and administer NSSE)
- Year 10 Progress report or new proposal

Middle States – 3 year cycle

- Year 1 (Before start of fall semester) Choose model and approach
- Year 1 (fall) Subcommittees begin work
(Register for NSSE)
- Year 2 (spring) Committee receives subcommittee drafts
(Administer NSSE)
- Year 2 (fall) Feedback from campus on draft of self-study
(Review NSSE data and share with accreditation team)
- Year 2 (fall) Accreditation team chair’s preliminary visit
- Year 3 (early spring) Final report mailed to accreditation team
- Year 3 (late spring) Accreditation team visit, report, and institutional response
- Year 3 (summer) Commission action

Northwest – 2 year cycle

- Year 1 Preliminary visit and draft report
(Register for and Administer NSSE)
- Year 2 Submit final report
- Year 2 (1 month later) Accreditation committee visit and report
- Year 2 (2 months later) Commission action and follow-up requirements

Recent Trends in Accreditation

- Campuses and accrediting bodies are moving toward self-studies that systematically over time review existing processes (like strategic planning or program evaluation or student services or enrollment management), as contrasted with one-point-in-time reports that have limited utility.
- Accrediting bodies have shifted away from setting and holding institutions to rigid quantitative standards that feature inputs and resources toward empirically-based indicators of institutional effectiveness and student learning.
- Regional and program accreditors are emphasizing the importance of cultivating “cultures of evidence” that nurture and sustain continuous improvement.
- Progressive campus leaders increasingly are harnessing the regional re-accreditation process as a “chariot for change.” Rather than viewing the process as a burden or hurdle to be overcome, presidents, provosts, and deans are using the self-study and team visit as an opportunity to stimulate productive dialogue and to guide constructive change.

Using NSSE in a Short Accreditation Cycle

If your institution is conducting its self-study over a three year time-span, the most useful time to administer NSSE is in year one. The survey is administered each spring between February and May (schools must register the preceding summer). Institutional Reports complete with analyzed results are returned to participating schools in August of the year the survey is administered with an additional Benchmark Report and Institutional Engagement Index arriving that November. The Benchmark Report contains national norms and the Institutional Engagement Index uses a regression model to compare your school’s actual student engagement scores against predicted levels of performance, taking into account student and institutional characteristics.

In years two and three of the self-study, your institution can review and share results across campus, and determine your course of action to improve in specific areas.

Timeline for NSSE Administration on a 7 to 10-Year Accreditation Cycle

On a longer accreditation cycle it may be wise to administer NSSE more than once. In the first year or two of the self-study, NSSE results can assist your institution to determine where to focus attention. After obtaining your results and implementing campus improvement plans, another NSSE administration three to four years later would help determine the impact of such changes. This would allow ample time for assessment of results and perhaps additional adjustments to priorities in the Progress Report for your accreditation commission.

What if Accreditation is around the corner?

For some institutions, a self-study or site visit review may be just a year away. In this case, NSSE can still provide some valuable information to schools during a single year. Keep in mind that schools must register for NSSE by September, the survey is administered during the spring semester, and results are provided to schools in August. This timeline offers institutions baseline data to demonstrate educational strengths and weaknesses and results to corroborate institutional evidence. In addition, subsequent NSSE administrations can be used to evaluate institutional improvement efforts outlined in the self-study.

Mapping NSSE to Middle States Standards

A successful accreditation plan is authentic to each institution. However, an important step to developing an accreditation plan is to determine what evaluation practices are currently in place and the evidence that can be linked to accreditation standards. This document maps specific items from *The College Student Report* questionnaire to regional accreditation board standards. Individual NSSE items can be used as evidence of specific standards and overall NSSE findings and benchmark scores can be used to support and document institutional improvement efforts. Finally, NSSE results will be most meaningful when coupled with other measures of student learning outcomes from your campus.

NSSE Items	<i>Middle States Standards</i>
1. Academic and Intellectual Experiences	
a. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	14
b. Made a class presentation	12, 14
c. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	14
d. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources	14
e. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing	6, 14
f. Come to class without completing readings or assignments	14
g. Worked with other students on projects during class	14
h. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	14
i. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions	14
j. Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)	14
k. Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course	14
l. Used an electronic medium (list-serv, chat group, Internet, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	12, 14
m. Used e-mail to communicate with an instructor	14
n. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor	10, 14
o. Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor	10, 14
p. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class	14
q. Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral)	10, 14

Middle States

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | <i>The institution's mission clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education and explains whom the institution serves and what it intends to accomplish. The institution's stated goals and objectives, consistent with the aspirations and expectations of higher education, clearly specify how the institution will fulfill its mission. The mission, goals, and objectives are developed and recognized by the institution with its members and its governing body and are utilized to develop and shape its programs and practices and to evaluate its effectiveness.</i> |
| 3 | <i>The human, financial, technical, physical facilities and other resources necessary to achieve an institution's mission and goals are available and accessible. In the context of the institution's mission, the effective and efficient uses of the institution's resources are analyzed as part of ongoing outcomes assessment.</i> |

NSSE Items		Middle States Standards
Middle States Commission on Higher Education		
6	<i>In the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, the institution demonstrates adherence to ethical standards and its own stated policies, providing support to academic and intellectual freedom.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> r. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations 11, 14 s. Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.) 10, 14 t. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, coworkers, etc.) 14 u. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own 6, 14 v. Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, 6, 14
9	<i>The institution provides student support services reasonably necessary to enable each student to achieve the institution's goals for students.</i>	<p>2. Mental Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same 12, 14 b. Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in 12, 14 c. Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and 12, 14 d. Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of 12, 14 e. Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations 12, 14
10	<i>The institution's instructional, research, and service programs are devised, developed, monitored, and supported by qualified professionals.</i>	<p>3. Examinations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent have your examinations during the current school year challenged you to do your best work? 11, 14
11	<i>The institution's educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence that are appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings.</i>	<p>4. Reading and Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings 11, 14 b. Number of books read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment 14 c. Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more 11, 12, 14 d. Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages 11, 12, 14 e. Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages 11, 12, 14
12	<i>The institution's curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy.</i>	<p>5. Problem Sets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Number of problem sets that take you more than an hour to complete 11, 14 b. Number of problem sets that take you less than an hour to complete 11, 14

NSSE Items	<i>Middle States Standards</i>	
6. Culture, Health, and Spirituality		
a. Attended an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance, or other theater performance	12	
b. Exercised or participated in physical fitness activities		
c. Participated in activities to enhance your spirituality (worship, meditation, prayer, etc.)		
7. Enriching Educational Experiences		
a. Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment	13, 14	<p style="text-align: center;">Middle States Commission on Higher Education</p> <p>13 Institutional programs or activities that are characterized by particular content, focus, location, mode of delivery, or sponsorship meet appropriate standards.</p> <p>14 Assessment of student learning demonstrates that the institution's students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional goals and that students at graduation have achieved appropriate higher education goals.</p>
b. Community service or volunteer work	6, 13, 14	
c. Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together	13, 14	
d. Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements	10, 13, 14	
e. Foreign language coursework	14	
f. Study abroad	13, 14	
g. Independent study or self-designed major	13, 14	
h. Culminating senior experience (comprehensive exam, capstone course, thesis, project, etc.)	13, 14	
8. Quality of Relationships		
a. Relationships with other students	6	
b. Relationships with faculty members	6, 9, 10	
c. Relationships with administrative personnel and offices	5, 6, 9	
9. Time Usage		
a. Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other	9, 14	
b. Working for pay on campus		
c. Working for pay off campus		
d. Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, social fraternity or sorority,	11	
e. Relaxing and socializing (watching TV, partying, exercising, etc.)		

NSSE Items	Middle States Standards
f. Providing care for dependents living with you (parents, children, spouse, etc.)	
g. Commuting to class (driving, walking, etc.)	
10. Institutional Environment	
a. Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work	1, 14
b. Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically	1, 9
c. Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds	1, 6
d. Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	1, 9
e. Providing the support you need to thrive socially	1, 9
f. Attending campus events and activities (special speakers, cultural performances, athletic events, etc.)	1, 11
g. Using computers in academic work	1, 12
11. Educational and Personal Growth	
a. Acquiring a broad general education	12, 14
b. Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills	12, 14
c. Writing clearly and effectively	12, 14
d. Speaking clearly and effectively	12, 14
e. Thinking critically and analytically	12, 14
f. Analyzing quantitative problems	12, 14
g. Using computing and information technology	12, 14
h. Working effectively with others	14
i. Voting in local, state, or national elections	6
j. Learning effectively on your own	14
k. Understanding yourself	6
l. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	6

NSSE Items	Middle States Standards	
m. Solving complex real-world problems	12, 14	
n. Developing a personal code of values and ethics	6, 14	
o. Contributing to the welfare of your community	6	<p><i>“Accrediting bodies are also moving away from seeking institutional conformity to encouraging individuality. Many accrediting agencies now recognize that their mission is to provide guidance for the accreditation review, not to rely on some third-party set of standards. This approach is part of accrediting associations’ general movement away from the philosophy of external review of resource inputs to more emphasis on self-evaluation, outcomes assessment, and formative development.”</i></p> <p>— Alstete, J. W. (2004). Accreditation matters. <i>ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports</i>, 30(4), 1-131.</p>
p. Developing a deepened sense of spirituality	6	
Academic Advising		
12. Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution?	9	
Satisfaction		
13. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?	14	
14. If you could start over again, would you go to the <i>same institution you are now attending</i> ?		

Accreditation Tip #1:

Student engagement results provided by NSSE are one direct indicator of what students put into their education and an indirect indicator of what they get out of it.

“Good evaluation practice, such as using evidence and standards appropriately, is a learned professional skill like any other.”

—Wergin, J. (2002). Academic program review. In R. Diamond (Ed), *Field guide to academic leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Institutional Examples

Interest in using NSSE in accreditation is growing across all sectors and types of institutions. Because NSSE focuses on student behavior and effective educational practices, colleges and universities have found productive ways to incorporate survey results in their institutional self-studies. In this section, we describe how selected institutions are using NSSE in accreditation.

NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION (NCA)

Lawrence Technological University: Improvement of Student Writing

The university assessment committee at Lawrence Technological University (LTU) in Southfield, Michigan began assessing oral and written communication at the university level in 2001 and later incorporated department level assessment. LTU participated in NSSE in 2002 and used writing item results as additional data in their assessment efforts. NSSE data indicated that students at LTU write less than their counterparts at other universities. Although these results were not unexpected for a technical school, LTU wanted their students to get more practice in writing.

LTU’s NSSE results encouraged the institution to conduct a more in-depth study of the type and amount of writing required of students. This led to the development of a university-wide writing matrix, which documented the type and amount of writing assignments for each undergraduate major offered at the university. This examination of writing assignments and expectations resulted in changes across departments. Several programs identified upper-level courses in which writing requirements should be enhanced or modified. The university developed an action plan to improve student writing, including initiatives such as stating clearer expectations about the quality of writing required in courses, a junior writing portfolio required for graduation, and a junior writing course for students needing improvement. Finally, the institution incorporated the results of their data and inquiries into the quality of writing, and their improvement plan, into their NCA self-study. The effectiveness of these initiatives will be assessed with future administrations of NSSE, a two year cycle of writing assessment, and follow-up with students and departments regarding intended changes in required writing.

University of Missouri-St. Louis: Linking NSSE and FSSE to Engage Faculty

The University of Missouri-St. Louis administered NSSE annually between 2000 and 2004 and plans to incorporate its results into their NCA self-study. In preparation for their self-study, the institution orchestrated a multi-year strategy for building enthusiasm for using student engagement and related data for decision-making and improvement. For example, in fall 2001, discussions were held with a select group of early career faculty. In winter 2002, institutional research staff members made several presentations to senior administrators to discuss how to incorporate student engagement results in the University’s strategic indicator reporting scheme. The institution also examined its NSSE data in relation to its 2003 FSSE results, and began discussions among faculty concerning the quality of student-faculty interactions and creating learner-centered classrooms. These activities resulted in greater understanding and appreciation of student engagement among faculty and staff. NSSE data are being reported by each University

being reported by each University of Missouri campus as part of the annual report to the Board of Curators on progress toward strategic goals, and will be used to demonstrate compliance with NCA standards related to cultivating an institutional culture that values life-long learning, enacting activities that value and support effective teaching, and nurturing a challenging yet supportive learning environment.

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES (NEASC)

Gordon College: Using NSSE Results to Document Selected General Education Outcomes

Gordon College, a faith-based undergraduate institution of 1600 students in Wenham, Massachusetts, used NSSE results as evidence of learning outcomes and general education achievements in their *NEASC* self-study. After developing cross-campus outcome measures entitled ‘Goals for Learners’ and Core Purpose Objectives to evaluate general education courses, the College used NSSE results from 2000 and 2001 along with locally administered assessments of graduating seniors and new alumni and other national normative studies of first-year students and seniors to document curricular and co-curricular student learning.

Gordon used NSSE results to demonstrate evidence of *NEASC 4.19* “*Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind. In addition, graduates demonstrate an in-depth understanding of an area of knowledge or practice and of its interrelatedness with other areas.*”

Gordon specifically used their NSSE results to document an intentional focus on writing across the curriculum. In their self-study, the College reported that 2001 NSSE findings demonstrated first-year students scored considerably higher than comparative institutions on questions about engagement in writing and revision. This finding documented the additional emphasis given to preparing multiple drafts of papers in the College’s First Year Seminars and the effects of faculty attending workshops to enhance writing across the curriculum. These outcomes, in turn, demonstrated how Gordon’s curriculum promoted students’ advanced levels of reflection and analysis.

Plymouth State University: Using NSSE as Evidence of Planning and Evaluation

Plymouth State University (New Hampshire) used their NSSE participation as evidence for *NEASC Standard Two*, which is focused on documenting planning and evaluation efforts within colleges and universities. Plymouth State’s NSSE 2001-2004 results were used as evidence of institutional assessment activities along with their institutional fact book and a consultant review of enrollment management. Further, a University Assessment Task Force inventoried their NSSE results, and combined the results with an investigation of assessment best practices, a review of comparable institutions assessment programs, and faculty and staff input on student learning outcomes, to develop an administrative structure for Plymouth State’s assessment program.

Accreditation Tip # 2

NSSE items can be used to analyze the resources and appraise the effectiveness of the institution in fulfilling its mission. For example, NSSE measures of the extent to which students’ experiences at the institution have contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in acquiring a broad general education; and to developing a personal code of values and ethics, could be used to demonstrate achievement of the institution’s mission and goals.

Accreditation Tip #3:

NSSE data are actionable, in that they point to aspects of student and institutional performance that institutions can do something about related to the curriculum, pedagogy, instructional emphases, and campus climate. In addition, because NSSE benchmarks allow a school to compare itself to others, the results often point to areas where improvement may be desired.

“The self study process should involve the gathering of information from across campus to provide evidence of improvement...”

— Gray, P. (2002). The roots of assessment. In T. W. Banta & Associates, *Building a Scholarship of Assessment*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF ACCREDITED SCHOOLS (NAAS)**Self-study Report Highlights What Southern Utah University Learned from NSSE to Improve**

Southern Utah University (SUU) participated in NSSE in 2001 and 2002 and then used the results extensively in their 2003 accreditation self-study for the *Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS)*. SUU used NSSE to document how students viewed the learning environment. This information informed the development of a new general education curriculum in 2002 and also the planning of a first-year success program for new students in 2003. In assessing their own goals for improvement to present in the self-study report, SUU noticed on NSSE that their students rated themselves lower on measures such as writing clearly and effectively and thinking critically and analytically. As a result, SUU revised its learning objectives for the general education component of its curriculum. In the future, SUU intends to use NSSE results to get more information about the student experience at the departmental level in addition to the institutional level to guide other improvements that will enhance the quality of the undergraduate experience.

Incorporating these directives into efforts to improve student learning mirror the types of human, financial and physical resources that NAAS considers important in facilitating and enhancing student achievement of program objectives (*Standard 2.A.1*).

Portland State University Creates Portfolio for Accreditation

Administrators at Portland State University (PSU) took a creative route to preparing for an upcoming accreditation self-study. Through use of an on-line portfolio, PSU was able to create an easily accessible tool for all members of the accreditation committee to track the progress and show how various pieces of the puzzle were fitting together. One important piece used bar graphs to depict how PSU stacks up against its peer institutions in areas measured by NSSE, such as supportive campus environment and the amount of reading and writing reported by first-year students.

MIDDLE STATES COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION**Saint Francis University Uses NSSE and Catholic College Consortium Data in Accreditation**

Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania incorporated NSSE as part of its ongoing assessment and institutional improvement initiatives. Using a combination of NSSE 2003 comparison results and data from the consortium of Catholic colleges and universities, SFU presented a comprehensive picture of the quality of general education in its 2003 General Education Ninth Year Implementation Assessment Report.

NSSE items and consortia questions were mapped to specific general education outcomes to evaluate general education goals. SFU featured several items from NSSE as indicators: rewriting papers, working with faculty on research, number of papers written, time spent studying, number of class presentations, and numbers of assigned readings. These measures provided faculty clear assessments of essential

skills. NSSE data were similarly used in creating meaningful and actionable outcome measures for the connections among different majors, disciplines, and ideas, promoting familiarity with primary resources, and fostering creative, critical, and mathematical thinking skills.

These findings present evidence of college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills indicated in *MSA's Standard 12* (general education), and provide SFU ample support for its *MSA* re-accreditation. In addition, by joining a consortium, SFU was able to customize questions to measure students' understanding of the school's Franciscan heritage, values, positive traditions, and the role of service at the institution. Results from consortium questions offer evidence for *Standard 1: Mission, Goals, and Objectives*.

Shippensburg University: Identifying Institutional Strengths and Weaknesses

Shippensburg University administered NSSE in 2003 and 2004 to add student behavior data to its assessment efforts. The institution was interested in replacing their longstanding assessment tools that focused primarily on student attitudes rather than experiences and behaviors, assessed limited courses, and did not allow for comparisons with a broader national student sample. NSSE provided the institution an opportunity to focus on student behaviors, and to compare its students' experiences with those of students at similar institutions across the country.

The university's use of NSSE reflects its growing commitment to using assessment as a means of adjusting programs and services in keeping with larger goals and proposed outcomes. The data identified a number of institutional strengths. For example, first-year students were significantly "above average" in terms of the frequency with which they made classroom presentations, worked with other students on class work, communicated with professors via e-mail, developed communication skills, and reported receiving a broad general education. In addition, the survey also pointed to areas of concern. In comparison to the national sample, students at all levels were less likely to undertake an independent study or have a capstone experience; they also wrote fewer papers. Seniors reported making less progress in writing clearly and effectively. Seniors were less likely to have classes that emphasized synthesizing ideas and information. In addition, students reported that their college experience contributed less to areas related to civic engagement, such as participating in elections, contributing to the community, and interacting with and understanding those from different backgrounds.

Targeting these areas of concern, the administration initiated an action plan that began with focus group sessions and surveys in departments and programs across the university. These findings and the NSSE results were then analyzed by the university-wide Planning and Budget Committee and their recommendations were sent to the University Forum, the institution's major representative governing body. The Forum will in return review these suggestions and establish an action plan aimed at addressing these potential weaknesses. The institution featured NSSE data in their accreditation report to demonstrate compliance with *MSA's* emphasis on ongoing planning and utilization of assessment activities for institutional renewal (*Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal*), and to highlight how they used their data to improve institutional programs, and shape their institutional improvement plan.

Accreditation Tip #4:

Share NSSE results widely to expand the audience's view of the accreditation data. Spend time thinking about with whom you will share specific results from your data. For example, Oregon State University has disseminated its NSSE results to relevant student affairs departments, like housing and academic advising, who in turn can use the data to better understand how their students interact with available services.

“...evidence is strong that institutions and programs remain only marginally engaged. Few have progressed beyond superficial engagement with “assessment,” though accrediting organizations have been asking them to do so for years. Meanwhile, the demands for accountability and the changes in instructional delivery that originally stimulated national concern about student learning outcomes are unabated.” - p. 11

—Ewell, P. T., (2001). *Accreditation and student learning outcomes: A proposed point of departure*. CHEA Occasional Paper. Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Washington, DC.

Accreditation Tip #5

The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) measures faculty expectations of student engagement in educational practices that are empirically linked with high levels of learning and development. Taken together, the combination of NSSE and FSSE results can be used to identify areas of strength as well as aspects of the undergraduate experience that may warrant attention and to stimulate discussions related to improving teaching, learning, and the quality of students' educational experience.

SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS (SACS)

Radford University: NSSE and the SACS Quality Enhancement Project

Radford University (RU) used NSSE as its key assessment tool for the SACS' pilot of the new Quality Enhancement Project (QEP). In 2000, the RU SACS leadership team identified student engagement as the main focus for improvement and decided to use their 2001-2003 NSSE results toward this end. The University organized its QEP around the concept of student engagement, using the rationale that engaging students at higher levels will lead to enhanced expectations for student academic performance and learning, which would result in a stronger academic reputation for the institution and intellectually vibrant learning climate on campus.

Agnes Scott College: Use of NSSE in the QEP

Agnes Scott College's *SACS Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)* outlined a comprehensive approach to increase intellectual vibrancy on campus by focusing on key aspects in each year of the undergraduate program. These included enriched First Year Seminars, a new Sophomore Year Experience, an expanded Junior Year experience, and the creation of a departmentally based culminating experience for seniors.

NSSE data were used to help identify the focus and features of the *QEP*, and will serve as a baseline from which to measure the success of the interventions once fully implemented. In addition, a variety of measures, including direct and indirect quantitative and qualitative indicators as well as a mix of institutionally administered instruments and nationally normed surveys will be used to assess the overall effectiveness of the plan. The College is considering a variety of ways to use NSSE over the next few years to further assess the quality of the undergraduate experience and to identify other areas for further improvement. The next administration will be timed to assess the impact of initiatives in the *QEP*. For example, a 2006 administration of NSSE is intended to examine the experiences of senior students after the capstone courses are fully implemented across the curriculum.

WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES (WASC)

California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB): Building a Comprehensive Picture of Student Outcomes

CSUMB had existed only six years before undergoing its first accreditation review. NSSE findings played a critical role in planning for accreditation, as data were used to inform enrollment management, student retention, academic program review, strategic planning, and other initiatives. CSUMB administered NSSE twice prior to their WASC accreditation site visit. As part of the institution's commitment to accountability and to be more transparent to the public, NSSE results were posted to the Office of Institutional Assessment and Research website along with the institutional self-study.

NSSE results were used as evidence for several WASC standards, and were also included as an electronic appendix to the supportive essay submitted for the institution's Educational Effectiveness Review. For example, NSSE data were used to demonstrate effectiveness for *Standard 2.5: Teaching and Learning*. Individual

NSSE items, such as levels of active participation in class and frequency of prompt feedback, were used to show that academic programs actively involve students in learning, challenge them to achieve high expectations, and provide students with appropriate and ongoing feedback about their performance and how it can be improved. Use of NSSE results in institutional planning also provided evidence that responds to *Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement*, which focuses on sustained institutional planning and systematic evaluation.

Finally, NSSE data were used to address specific questions raised by the accreditation review team regarding outcomes data. More specifically, NSSE results were used to corroborate the findings of a CSUMB alumni survey about the influence of the university's core values. Statistically significant, moderate to- large mean differences between CSUMB NSSE scores and national or system scores were found on the following items:

- Applied, active, and project-based learning
- Multicultural and global perspectives
- Technological sophistication
- Service learning
- Collaboration

These NSSE findings provided additional evidence that CSUMB graduates rated themselves better prepared in selected areas related to personal and professional development than alumni in a national sample. When combined with additional alumni survey results, these findings provided a more comprehensive response to the Extension of Candidacy WASC team question regarding CSUMB's unique student outcomes. The team found that the CSUMB educational model "does yield unique intended outcomes for students."

Chapman University: Using NSSE as Evidence of Student Outcomes

Chapman University (CA) featured its NSSE 2003 results in its Institutional Proposal for Self-Study submitted to WASC in preparation for their 2004-05 accreditation visit. The first two goals that grew out of the Self-Study were:

1. conceptions and practices of personalized education, linking the curriculum and classroom to the co-curriculum and campus community;
2. conceptions and practices of student writing as an essential skill, linking liberal arts, and professional education and general education and the academic major; and; institutional capacity for assessment, linking learning outcomes assessment, program review, and institutional planning through a shared focus on student learning and educational effectiveness.

To this end, Chapman matched NSSE survey items with identified student outcomes and educational experiences. For example, Chapman outcome goal of "Psychological-Cognitive" relates to one's ability to reason, write and speak clearly and effectively. Matching NSSE items include the extent to which experiences at Chapman contributed to:

- writing clearly and effectively,
- speaking clearly and effectively, and
- thinking critically and analytically.

"Assessment activities should be embedded in the existing infrastructure of an institution and not built into separate set of structures and activities."

—Wolff, R. & Harris, O. D. (1994). Using assessment to develop a culture of evidence. In D. F. Halpern and Associates, *Changing college classrooms: New teaching and learning strategies for an increasingly complex world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Accreditation Tip #6:

Share NSSE results with appropriate campus community members to help sharpen their reports to the accreditation team. For example, distribute NSSE results regarding the experience of first-generation and commuter students to academic support services and commuter student offices. Data regarding the degree to which students report the institution helps them cope with non-academic responsibilities and helps them succeed academically, and their satisfaction with advising, can be used to demonstrate adequate provision of services to meet students' learning and personal development needs.

Accreditation Tip #7:

NSSE results regarding the degree to which the institution encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds, and the extent to which students report that their experiences at the institution have contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, can be used to demonstrate institutional effectiveness in responding to the increasing diversity in society through educational and co-curricular programs.

Other matching items used were the number of:

- assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings
- written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
- written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages
- written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages

Chapman's first two Self-Study goals are a direct response to *Standard 2.2*, to address the issue of providing academic programs that ensure development of "core learning abilities and competencies," particularly as they relate to students' verbal and written communication skills, critical thinking, and quantitative skills. The importance of assessment is addressed in many of the standards, assigning accountability and assessment at many levels, whether it includes institutional resources (*Standard 1.3*), student needs (*Standard 2.10*), or program (*Standard 2.7*) and faculty effectiveness (*Standard 3.3*).

University of California, Santa Cruz: Using a Series of Surveys to Demonstrate Educational Objectives

UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) used a variety of indicators to demonstrate evidence of *WASC Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions*. By using multiple data points and comparison data, the institution had corroborating evidence for its educational outcomes. UCSC administered a series of surveys the two years prior to creating its Institutional Proposal to measure students' attainment and satisfaction relative to other national research universities and to sister UC campuses.

The institution used its NSSE 2001 data, the University of California Undergraduate Education Survey (SERU21), and a local survey of graduating seniors to demonstrate several educational outcomes. NSSE results showed that UCSC students are substantially more engaged than those in the national cohort on such measures as hours of reading and studying and personal acquaintance with instructors. The University of California Undergraduate Education Survey (SERU21) was used to show that UCSC students report similar aspirations and progress towards those aspirations as students at other UC campuses, but UCSC students give higher assessments than at other campuses on such factors as: active solicitation of feedback, political engagement, advising, social and cultural environment, and overall academic satisfaction. The institution used a local survey of graduating seniors, administered for the first time in spring 2003, to demonstrate remarkably high levels of satisfaction with most aspects of the Santa Cruz experience. Finally, to illustrate the success of UCSC graduates, the institution pointed to a national study demonstrating that a higher percentage of UCSC graduates attend graduate school than any other public research university except UC Berkeley.

NSSE results were also used to identify the programs and practices related to success in graduate school, such as the quality of the senior experience, including the proportion of students who have a culminating experience (which is a UCSC capstone requirement), course work that encourages seniors to demonstrate high-level mastery and synthesis of undergraduate course work, and participation in independent research.



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