

The Role of Integrator: Potential Opportunities for Librarians to Connect NSSE to Institutional Improvement

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During the 2003-03 academic year, AAHE and NSSE are conducting six roundtables to explore uses of NSSE data for improvement of student learning. A roundtable discussion at the Association of College and Research Libraries annual conference in April 2003 involved librarians from a range of institutions across the country and focused on understanding institutional uses of NSSE data, especially how librarians have used this new source of information. Specific questions examined:

- impacts of use of NSSE data;
- how participants use the data to meet their divisional mission;
- ways librarians can interpret NSSE data for faculty, students, and other members of the community; and
- applications of the data that participants have not made yet but would like to.

At previous roundtables, most individuals were familiar with the uses of NSSE data and were actively using data within their own offices or divisions. In contrast, librarians were generally not integrated into the information dissemination process of NSSE data. Although librarians are familiar with ways to display and interpret data for multiple constituents, campuses have been slow to see the role of librarians in the use and interpretation of NSSE data. A key discovery of this focus group was that librarians are an untapped source of support and interpretation of NSSE.

What Role Might Librarians Play in Using NSSE Data?

This question generated many important ideas. The range of ways that librarians can use NSSE data for campus improvement was striking in its potential impact and suggests campuses should involve librarians as they move forward with planning efforts.

Providing a neutral basis for interpretation of data: Each participant agreed that because librarians tend to be seen as neutral parties on campus they can be reliable interpreters of NSSE data, especially related to poor or disputed results. Librarians are seen as having no agenda, and the library is a place where all faculty, students, and staff come and mingle. One librarian described the integrating role of the library: "There are no divisions at the library. People do not see themselves at the library as in the sciences or humanities or in academic or student affairs. People come here as researchers and learners." One campus story helped to demonstrate the important role librarians can play in data interpretation:

We conducted the NSSE student survey as well as a comparative report of faculty and their impressions of the learning environment. The results demonstrated that students and faculty have quite distinct views. Students feel the campus is less rigorous than faculty. The General Education Committee is going to take up the issue, and I think librarians can play an instrumental role. However, most faculty want to disregard the student data. Also, the institutional research office is seen on many campuses as an instrument of the administration. Therefore, the institutional research office's interpretations of the NSSE results are seen as laden with administrative values or priorities. Librarians, however, are not seen as vested or tied to any interest group. Therefore, we can help to create discussions around the data that no other group on campus can develop.

The perception that librarians are neutral interpreters and lack individual agendas was seen as a great resource for helping to create an environment where data are used for campus improvement.

Using their role on campus teams and networks to create change: In addition to being seen as neutral interpreters, librarians are often asked to serve on campus-wide committees. A main service role of librarians is participation on committees that examine specific issues like general education reform or problems on campus like low retention. On such teams, librarians can use their special status as neutral interpreters to help people examine the NSSE data in non-defensive ways. In addition to roles on campus teams, each librarian is usually assigned to a set of departments or divisions. Through these assignments, they interact with faculty and staff across campus. This boundary crossing work can be instrumental in helping to interpret NSSE data for institutional improvement. As one librarian commented: “We talk to people across campus in ways that most other employees do not. This provides us a special vantage point for using NSSE data to enhance performance.”

Increasing academic rigor: For most of the campuses in this focus group, academic rigor is a concern. Recent accreditation visits have highlighted problems and the need for change. One librarian commented: “We have had regional, discipline-, and profession-specific accreditation visits. Each visit provided the same message to our campus: we needed to think of ways to improve the student learning experience, especially academic challenge. I now see that I can use NSSE to work with other employees on campus to achieve this goal. Librarians are seen as key sources for interpreting data on our campus.” This librarian, like others, sees that NSSE data can be used to help resolve problems identified by external groups and stakeholders.

Identifying information literacy as engagement: Notions of engagement and learning are changing to focus on information literacy. Over time, the NSSE survey might want to include more items that focus on how students use Internet and virtual resources, what kinds of specialized databases they use, and the degree to which students merely play on the Internet. Because information literacy is the future of academic engagement, campuses need to frame engagement and academic challenge in this way. Librarians understand this type of engagement and, therefore, have some understanding about the level of literacy among students. Librarians hope that faculty and staff can partner with librarians to rethink engagement as including information literacy.

Increasing active and collaborative learning and a supportive campus environment: Today’s students, savvy users of technology, tend to define active learning in terms of technology. The library is a site where technology supports active learning. Librarians are usually highly trained in technology usage and can make an important contribution to active and collaborative learning on campuses. Because librarians have been trained in active pedagogies, they can be models of this type of teaching on campus.

Librarians also can contribute to creating a supportive campus environment. Most libraries offer a host of support services critical for student success in their coursework, including research training, technology support, and time management courses.

Assisting in course and assignment redesign: One of the most concrete uses of NSSE data is for assisting in course design. A librarian described the way she thought about using NSSE for this purpose: “Occasionally faculty come to the library with questions. NSSE provides us with data for helping faculty to redesign assignments or ideas for developing library training sessions. It also provides us with ideas for outreach to faculty.” Librarians also noted how they can now design a workshop on how to raise the academic challenge of course assignments. As one person stated:

I can now discuss how academic challenge is seen as low on campus and provide techniques for making an assignment more challenging through the types of research students conduct and the resources they are asked to use. Before, I would not have had these specific types of ideas for improvement. With NSSE, I can make these specific recommendations for course redesign and truly become a partner with faculty in the learning process.

Supporting campus diversity: On many campuses, diversity initiatives are the responsibility of one office or the division of student affairs. The NSSE data, however, have helped librarians to see their broader role in the learning environment, especially in creating a campus supportive of diverse students. One librarian noticed that her campus had low scores on engaging students in discussions with diverse students. She wants to work with other organizations on campus to design structured conversations among diverse students. She noted creating a space for open dialogue is a natural role for the library. In addition, the survey results helped her to see support for campus diversity as the responsibility of all teaching staffs on campus, not just student affairs. Embracing all the benchmarks as part of each employee’s role was an important commitment expressed by several librarians.

Establishing relationships among reference librarians, students, and other educators: Several people mentioned how items on the survey reflect the quality of relationships of staff and students with reference librarians. These data help librarians understand their level of effectiveness in engaging students. Some questions explore whether students are engaging with library resources. Other questions examine whether faculty or academic departments/divisions are appropriately partnering with library staff. This quality of relationship with the reference librarian is important to engagement and success on several benchmarks. Thus, the survey indirectly examines the way learners or partners in learning relate to and capitalize on the reference librarian role.

Being a repository for NSSE data: After learning about the NSSE data, one librarian has committed to being a repository for the data: “The library can be the place where people go to find NSSE results, keep an historical record, and make sure it is available for various committees that might need the information.” Other librarians agreed that the library could provide this important service. Although some campuses have NSSE results posted on their websites, the data is password protected, allowing only limited access. Other campuses post only partial NSSE results, often the positive results. Librarians commented that a central location where information can be kept over time and where the full set of data is available to campus working groups is important.

How can NSSE help librarians?

NSSE can help librarians on a range of issues from making librarians more central to decision making, to improving use of the library, and to building an argument for more interaction between librarians and faculty members.

Becoming more central to campus decision making: Since librarians have expertise about how to use and interpret data, they should have more input into institutional decision-making. Feeling marginal and even forgotten, some librarians explained that few campus stakeholders think of librarians as key resources around issues of teaching and learning. Instead, librarians are seen as experts on specialized forms of research. However, focus group participants saw working with NSSE data as a way to be more involved in decision making about learning and to demonstrate their expertise in teaching. One librarian commented that: “I really see the possibility of becoming more central on our campus by serving on a committee or team that is tasked with interpreting NSSE data and making recommendations for change. Although we are not at the table now, I am going to find a way to get us there.”

Becoming “seen” as part of the instructional fabric: Although librarians are part of the instructional fabric, they are usually not seen in this light on their campuses. Many librarians noted their involvement in first-year seminars, courses, training of faculty, and their role as part of the teaching cadre. Yet they also realized that this involvement was overlooked by most on campus. NSSE provides the potential for having the library be seen as part of the instructional fabric and can be a platform for increasing this role. One librarian commented about the success of using NSSE to make the librarians seen as central to learning:

Through our NSSE results and other surveys we are conducting, we were able to demonstrate a 15 percent improvement in retention in the last five years. We still have an even higher goal to reach. The first year experience courses that the librarians teach have been instrumental in these efforts and highlighted our role in teaching.

Understanding the role of librarians in the learning process: Each librarian indicated that the NSEE benchmarks helped him or her to make a case for the role of libraries in the learning process, although mostly indirectly. A few librarians were teaching first-year seminar courses or involved in formal campuses programs measured by NSSE. For these librarians, the survey results helped them to make a case for their role in student engagement and learning and to measure their success and to design improvements. As one librarian stated: “Having NSSE data has been instrumental in helping us to understand how well the first-year experience courses contributed to students.”

Using additional questions option: Most librarians realized that the current NSSE survey did not answer specific questions about involvement with the library as a facilitator of engagement. However, questions adopted from the Survey of College Student Engagement or developed independently could help to provide needed data that librarians are trying to obtain about student learning related to library usage. There is potential to use NSSE to understand, more specifically, the contribution of libraries to the learning mission of the institution. Librarians who struggle to demonstrate the role of libraries in the learning mission have almost no resource for understanding. Campuses collect data about libraries through surveys, but most focus on satisfaction with services such as whether the photocopy machines are working or whether staff members are courteous. NSSE could help build the evidence of how well libraries contribute to engagement and learning.

Building an argument for faculty-librarian interaction: Most librarians described their struggle to get faculty engaged in discussions about learning and the way that the library can support faculty work. Faculty often design assignments in ways that make it difficult for students to maximize their learning. One librarian noted:

A faculty member came to complain to me that the students in his course used only Internet resources whereas he wanted them to search specialized databases and use books and articles. I told him that he could design the assignment so that using only Internet sources would not be appropriate. These strategies often do not occur to faculty.

Other librarians commented on the impact of the disconnect between faculty members and librarians on students becoming information literate. In the words of one: "Our students are getting farther and farther behind in understanding information, but there are limited ways for us to connect with faculty to bridge this growing gap." However, NSSE data were seen as a potential resource for bringing faculty and librarians together. The definition of learning in NSSE is broad, and the benchmarks cross many campus functions. NSSE forces people to think outside the classroom for sources of learning and has the potential for having faculty think more consciously about other partners in the learning process. One librarian had hope for change on her campus: "I am hoping that NSSE will be the bridge so that many people on campus are seen as educators and our roles as interconnected."

Measuring the extent of information literacy: Two benchmarks were seen as critical for measuring information literacy: active and collaborative learning and academic challenge. The survey questions related to "type of assignments" help to determine whether students are expected to be consumers and critical analysts of information. Several librarians expressed interest in reviewing NSSE data to develop a benchmark related to information literacy for their campus. All librarians had reported dismay to campus officials about the low level of information literacy among students on their campus. However, in the past, there had been limited data to support their claims. NSSE provides the first set of systematic data for making the case for students' limited ability in this area and the need to prioritize this on campus. NSSE's high response rate is helpful for building an argument for information literacy as a priority.

Improving use of the library: The NSSE data can be used to demonstrate the usage of the library on campus. Although there are not direct questions to this effect, questions about assignments and rigor allude to whether faculty require students to use the library. The NSSE results can be used to show that faculty members need to engage students in discussions about the use and importance of the library for their academic development. Faculty development programs or outreach by librarians can be opportunities to help faculty realize the need for students to use the library resources and training.

All participants registered optimism and promise that the ideas discussed in this session could lead to decisive changes on their campuses.

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