

Chapter 2

Refocusing the Quality Discourse: The United States National Survey of Student Engagement

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Introduction

The National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE (pronounced ‘nessie’), traces its origins to longstanding frustration with the dominant discourse about quality in US higher education. The formal quality control mechanism for institutions of higher education is the accreditation process, a voluntary system rooted in self-study and external peer review that is carried out by a group of private, non-profit accrediting organisations. Accreditation is intrinsically valued by institutions because of its objective validation of quality. However, it is also important for a more instrumental reason: eligibility to receive funds from federal student financial aid programs—which provide significant support to students attending both public and private institutions—is contingent upon accreditation by an agency recognized by the US Secretary of Education. However, accreditation is not well understood by the general public, and the detailed findings from the accreditation process are confidential. Only formal actions taken (for example, the decision to grant, renew, or terminate an institution’s accreditation, or place an institution on probation) are available to the public. In addition, the accreditation system has been faulted for a disproportionate emphasis on resources, capacity, and infrastructure over teaching and learning, and for insufficient attention to evidence that institutions achieve results consistent with their missions, especially with regard to student learning. However, in recent years, accreditors have increased attention to institutional procedures for assessing learning outcomes (for more information about accreditation in the USA, see Eaton; Ewell 2008).

A more visible and publicly accessible self-appointed arbiter of quality in the USA postsecondary education is the influential “America’s Best Colleges” ranking conducted each year by *US News and World Report*. There are many complaints

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about the *US News* rankings, but one of the most commonly voiced ones involves its heavy emphasis on reputation and resources, and the related focus on inputs rather than educational processes and outcomes. There are also abundant technical and methodological objections, such as false precision of numerical rankings, arbitrary weighting of criteria and reliance on unaudited self-report. The ranking system was designed to largely reproduce the extant status hierarchy and attendant assumptions about quality, which explains its emphasis on reputation and selectivity rather than objective measures of teaching and learning (Thompson 2000). Kuh and Pascarella (2004) found that among the top 50 'national universities', the correlation between an institution's rank and its mean entrance examination score was -0.89 , indicating that the prior preparation of entering students accounted for nearly 80% of the variation in institutional standing. A further concern has to do with what one critic has called 'ranksteering' (Thacker 2008), in which institutions act strategically to improve their position by seeking to influence the measures used in the ranking calculations (for example, liberalizing what counts as an applicant so as to appear more selective, or increasing the importance of test scores in admission decisions to boost the institutional average).

The NSSE project was intended, in part, to shift the national conversation about quality to focus squarely on teaching and learning, and specifically on those educational conditions and practices shown by decades of research to be linked to student learning (Kuh 2001). 'Student engagement' refers to two critical features of undergraduate education. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution's resources, curricula and other learning opportunities support and promote student experiences that lead to success (e.g. persistence, learning, satisfaction, graduation). The latter feature is of particular interest, because it represents the institutional contribution to educational quality and is therefore subject to institutional intervention.

Administered each spring as a census or to randomly sampled first-year and senior-year (i.e. 'final-year') undergraduates at participating bachelor's degree-granting colleges and universities, NSSE assesses the extent to which students engage in and are exposed to a wide range of effective educational practices, such as collaborative learning, high expectations and prompt feedback on the part of instructors, and coursework that emphasizes higher-order thinking skills. A related survey called the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, operated by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, is used at 2-year colleges, which offer sub-baccalaureate undergraduate training. In addition to shifting the conversation about quality in undergraduate education, another central goal of these projects is to provide information that faculty and administrators can use to assess and improve the quality of undergraduate education.

NSSE is not government sponsored or endorsed. Institutions elect to participate, though some state university systems mandate participation by their constituent campuses. A generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts financed NSSE's initial development and subsidized its first 3 years of full-scale operation. Following a year of testing, NSSE's first full-scale national administration was held in

2000, with 276 institutions participating (see Ewell 2010; Kuh 2009; McCormick et al. 2013 for fuller accounts of NSSE's origins). Signifying both the hunger for authentic measures of college quality that permit peer comparisons and increasing demands that colleges and universities undertake systematic and rigorous assessment of student learning and the conditions that promote it, NSSE participation has grown considerably. In 2013, 614 bachelor's degree-granting institutions in the USA and Canada participated and 1.6 million students were invited to complete the survey. Over its first 14 years of operation, 1,539 institutions in the USA and Canada administered NSSE at least once. Repeat participation is high, with about 90% of participating institutions administering the survey at least twice within 4 years. The project has been fully self-supported by institutional participation fees since 2004.

Designed by a panel of prominent experts in undergraduate education and survey research, the NSSE survey can be completed in about 15–20 minutes. Institutional personnel assemble and submit population files containing student identifiers and contact information for all first- and final-year students. The Indiana University Center for Survey Research (CSR) handles all aspects of survey administration in close collaboration with NSSE project staff. Institutions have the option to customize the content and signatory of survey invitation and follow-up messages so as to encourage participation, subject to compliance with NSSE protocols for research involving human subjects. The submission of population files, customization of recruitment messages, monitoring of survey administration and retrieval of data files and reports all take place through a password-protected online interface.

Random sampling or census administration, combined with standardized administration procedures, is one of the essential components. They maximise the comparability of results across institutions, which permits legitimate comparisons of results across institutions, as well as aggregate estimates by institution type or by student sub-population.

NSSE Resources

The version of the NSSE questionnaire in use through 2012 (an updated version was launched in 2013) includes 85 items inquiring into students' experiences and activities inside and outside the classroom; the cognitive tasks emphasised in their courses (memorisation, analysis, synthesis, judgment and application); perceived quality of relationships with other students, faculty and administrative staff; allocation of time across a range of activities (preparing for class, working for pay, relaxing and socializing, and so on); perceptions of institutional emphases (for example, spending time on academic work, providing academic and social support, and encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds); students' self-assessed gains in learning and personal development in several domains; and satisfaction with advising and with the institution overall. The survey includes an additional set of items on students' background and enrollment characteristics as well as other contextual information such as college major and type of residence.

The survey instrument can be viewed online at <http://nsse.iub.edu/links/surveys>. Survey responses are weighted by gender and enrolment status (full- or part-time) to adjust for differential response patterns, producing institution-level estimates that reflect first- and final-year populations. Aggregate reporting also includes adjustments to compensate for variations in institutional response rates, and to preserve appropriate representation for institutions of varying sizes.

Participating institutions receive detailed reports on their students' responses, alongside results for students in three customizable institutional comparison groups (drawn from other institutions participating in the same year), annotated with statistical tests of difference and effect sizes. In addition, institutions receive an identified student data file, permitting the linkage of student responses to other institutional records to facilitate more complex and nuanced analyses. Institutions also receive a wealth of materials to assist in the interpretation and use of their results.

The NSSE project issues an annual report that documents the state of student engagement on a national scale, calling attention to both promising and disappointing findings, providing examples of how institutions are making productive use of their NSSE data and promoting effective educational practices. The *Annual Results* report provides an occasion for media attention, and it is an important means of advancing the national conversation about college quality. Examples of these materials are available at <http://nsse.iub.edu>.

To assist institutional users and others in managing and making sense of the large volume of data collected, NSSE divides 42 survey items into 5 clusters of related items, or 'benchmarks of effective educational practice', that tap into distinct dimensions of educational quality: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment. Each benchmark is reported on a 100-point scale to facilitate interpretation, and the five benchmarks are reported separately for first- and final-year students. A score of 100 on any benchmark, for instance, would signify that every respondent selected the highest possible response on each of the component survey items, while a score of zero would mean that every respondent chose the lowest option on every item. These benchmarks and their component survey items are listed in Appendix A. (The 2013 update of the NSSE survey was accompanied by changes in the data reduction scheme described here.)

United States colleges and universities vary considerably in their capacity to undertake assessment programs and interpret the results. Some institutions—especially large ones—have well-staffed institutional research offices with considerable analytic expertise, while others have little or no infrastructure and analytic capability for this work. Some have characterized NSSE as 'institutional research in a box', meaning that participation provides any institution with a relatively sophisticated analysis of teaching and learning processes, with national and peer comparisons. The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice (the NSSE Institute hereafter) offers further assistance for data interpretation and application through regional workshops, webinars and individual consultations. The NSSE Institute has also developed a number of print resources to assist institutions in making effective use of their NSSE results. Many concrete examples of such uses have been documented in NSSE's annual reports and in a report series called *Lessons from the Field*.

Reflecting NSSE's goal to shift public understanding of college quality, the NSSE Institute also produces a short brochure called *A Pocket Guide to Choosing a College*, designed for use by high school students, parents and counsellors (see: http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pocket_guide_intro.cfm). The *Pocket Guide* recommends questions that prospective students should ask during campus visits—questions that emphasize student engagement. NSSE participating institutions receive a companion report that shows how their NSSE respondents answered those questions.

As noted earlier, quality assurance in the USA is formally provided through the accreditation system. Because many accreditors now have standards related to assessment processes and learning outcomes, institutions are interested in incorporating their NSSE results into the self-study reports that are part of the accreditation process. Responding to this need, the NSSE Institute developed a series of 'Accreditation Toolkits' that illustrate how selected items from the NSSE survey map to the standards of various accrediting bodies.

The NSSE project has also developed several companion surveys, including the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) and the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), both of which are designed to complement NSSE. FSSE asks faculty members about their expectations of student engagement in educationally effective practices, and it provides a useful way to bring faculty members into meaningful conversations about NSSE results and how to improve teaching and learning. BCSSE provides baseline data on entering students' engagement behaviour in high school and their expectations for engagement during the first year of college. BCSSE results can be used in tandem with NSSE to assess the first-year experience (for example, to examine actual first-year engagement relative to expectations).

Using NSSE Results to Inform Improvement

From its inception, NSSE was designed as a diagnostic tool to facilitate improvement in undergraduate education. Because questionnaire items are drawn from college impact research and are expressly connected to principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005), they are educationally meaningful and highly actionable. NSSE results provide participating institutions with accessible information about strengths and shortcomings in the undergraduate experience and point to practices worth bolstering to promote student engagement. For example, results indicating that low proportions of first-year students collaborate with their peers in class or receive prompt feedback about their performance may immediately suggest the need for greater opportunities for collaborative learning in first-year courses and for more timely feedback. They may prompt faculty development workshops on collaborative learning, the use of peer evaluation techniques and the importance of prompt and meaningful feedback, targeted at faculty teaching first-year courses. In addition, knowing that first-year students who experience these practices to a lesser extent than their counterparts at peer institutions might strengthen the case for institutional action. NSSE presents results so as to facilitate such practical uses.

The importance of taking action on results is a prominent aspect of the NSSE project. Indeed, assessment can only be a worthwhile undertaking when meaningful data are generated and evidence-based improvement initiatives are thoroughly considered and implemented, so that results are ultimately used to improve educational effectiveness. Each year, more campuses use their NSSE results in innovative ways to improve the undergraduate experience. Institutional accounts of data use, chronicled in publications including *Annual Results* and *Lessons From the Field* and compiled in a searchable online database, provide instructive lessons for maximising the use and impact of NSSE results. In addition, a 2009 edited volume provides a number of examples focused around the use of student engagement results in institutional research (Gonyea & Kuh 2009). Colleges and universities have found many productive ways to use survey results in their assessment and improvement initiatives including efforts to document quality and demonstrate accountability, accreditation self-studies, quality improvement projects, strategic planning, program review processes and faculty and staff development activities.

Although there are many ways institutions can use NSSE results, this section highlights brief institutional examples from three major areas: regional accreditation and quality improvement; increasing student retention and improving the first-year experience; and enhancing opportunities for effective educational practice.

Georgia State University (GSU) used NSSE results in the preparation of its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for reaccreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). NSSE data revealed that, when compared to other institutions with the same Carnegie classification, GSU final-year students wrote fewer short papers and felt their undergraduate experience did not contribute as much to their critical thinking abilities. Members of the QEP team corroborated these findings with an internal survey administered to recent graduates that measures learning outcomes and academic program satisfaction. These findings informed a plan to improve students' critical thinking and writing skills in their major field of study.

Illinois College participated in several NSSE and FSSE administrations, yet results did not get much attention. It was not until the College found that student retention rates were about to fall below acceptable levels that the NSSE results were brought into prominence. The College formed an early intervention task force to address retention concerns and conducted a student engagement retreat during which faculty and administrators reviewed NSSE results and focused on NSSE–FSSE comparisons to expose gaps between student survey responses and faculty perceptions. The retreat agenda led with the idea that Illinois College was doing well, but that improvement was needed. The retreat spurred small but important structural changes in courses; for example, faculty added more opportunities for students to make presentations and collaborate with their peers in and out of class and provided more explicit rationale for assignments in their syllabi. Another outcome from the retreat was the need to create a more supportive campus environment. Illinois College outlined an approach, based on the importance of relationships among faculty, staff and students. It deployed faculty, advisors and coaches to reach out when students were in trouble and advise students about educational practices that would help them get back on track. The College also

implemented a unified academic support center, making it easier to deploy tutoring and supplemental instruction, and improved advice to help students make a successful transition in the critical first year. Since implementing these changes, there has been a decline in the number of students in academic difficulty at mid-term and more students earn at least 20 credits in the first year. In addition, a year after implementing these practices, the College saw an increase in its NSSE supportive campus environment score. This early feedback helped demonstrate that changes were having the desired impact and motivated further action.

Tulane University used its NSSE results related to students' expectations for and involvement in service-learning, undergraduate research and internships, plus other indicators of students' interest in public service and research, to justify a new Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching (CELT). Growing out of Tulane's recognized strength in public service and service-learning, as well as students' keen interest in engaging in public service programs, CELT serves as the hub for fostering experiential learning and providing opportunities for more students and faculty to participate in meaningful experiences that complement their academic and career goals.

Many NSSE users report that sharing NSSE results on campus has helped foster a data-informed culture, encouraged more frequent discussions about assessment results and facilitated collaboration to address deficiencies in the undergraduate program. Paying attention to data and research on best practice can help advance institutional improvement. What institutions *do* in response to what they learn from their NSSE results is a critical element of NSSE's institutional improvement agenda.

Selected NSSE Findings

NSSE's *Annual Results* reports, available on the NSSE website, document what has been learnt about student engagement over NSSE's first decade. Following is a brief summary of some of these findings.

An important set of findings documents the disproportionate positive impact of engagement for different student populations. With support from the Lumina Foundation, NSSE undertook a research project to examine the relationship between student engagement and selected indicators of success in the first year of college (Kuh et al. 2008). Nineteen institutions provided data on first-year college grades and also on which students returned for the second year. In addition to documenting a positive relationship between engagement and these outcomes, the research revealed differential effects for different student populations. Engagement was found to have a stronger positive effect for students with lower levels of performance on a college entrance examination. The research also found that the positive relationship between engagement and propensity to re-enrol was stronger for ethnic minority students compared with their White counterparts. These findings are particularly important in light of increasing rates of postsecondary participation in the USA by under-prepared students and students from historically under-represented groups, as well as related national priorities to improve levels of learning and degree attainment.

Another important set of findings used BCSSE data to examine predisposition to engagement in college based on engagement behaviour during high school. Not surprisingly, the analysis revealed a relationship between high school engagement and engagement during the first year of college. But there were departures in both directions, suggesting that ‘disposition is not destiny’, and that there was a potential to increase college-level engagement above what would be expected based on high school experiences (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). Another important strand of this work examined students’ stated intent to re-enrol for the second year relative to both engagement disposition and actual engagement. Here, the important finding was that those who were highly engaged during college were more likely to intend to return compared with those with low levels of engagement *regardless of their engagement disposition based on high school experiences*. In other words, actual engagement trumps engagement disposition in predicting intent to return (National Survey of Student Engagement 2008).

In 2009, after NSSE’s tenth national administration, project staff undertook an examination of institutions that had administered the survey multiple times to investigate institution-level patterns of change in student engagement. A simple but important question was asked: Do NSSE data show any evidence of improvement in the prevalence of effective educational practices? NSSE data for more than 200 institutions that had administered NSSE at least four times between 2004 and 2009 were examined. Three-quarters of the subject institutions had administered the survey five or six times. (The analysis began with 2004 due to changes made in the NSSE survey during its first few years.) The results revealed an appreciable share of institutions with detectable positive trends over at least four administrations, and only a handful with negative trends. Forty-one per cent of institutions in the analysis of first-year engagement showed at least one positive trend, as did 28% of those in the analysis of engagement among final-year students (National Survey of Student Engagement 2009). Importantly, the positive trends were not confined to specific institutional types (for example, small private colleges). Rather, improvement trends were found across a wide spectrum of institutional difference. In a follow-up study, with support from the Spencer Foundation, the authors engaged in a systematic investigation of institutions with positive trends to discern valuable lessons about how to effect positive change.

The findings outlined here and other results highlighted in NSSE *Annual Results* reports provide insights about the state of effective educational practice in US higher education and also offer valuable information for participating institutions.

With support from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, NSSE founding director George Kuh and colleagues carried out the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project. This work involved the identification of a number of institutions with higher engagement scores than expected, given their circumstances (size, student body characteristics, etc.). Twenty institutions were identified for intensive case study research to illuminate what accounts for their effectiveness. The DEEP researchers summarized their findings in their influential 2005 book (updated in 2010), *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter* (Kuh et al. 2005). In it,

they identify and describe in detail six common features seen as promoting student engagement and success at the 20 campuses: ‘a “living” mission and “lived” educational philosophy; an unshakeable focus on student learning; environments adapted for educational enrichment; clearly marked pathways to student success; an improvement oriented ethos; [and] shared responsibility for educational quality and student success’ (p. 24). This project illustrates how NSSE results not only support improvements at individual institutions, but also lead to valuable insights that can inform the broader conversation—among researchers and practitioners—about educational effectiveness.

The Complications of Public Reporting and Accountability

Although NSSE was developed in part as a response to newsmagazine rankings, early in its development it became clear that most institutions would agree to participate only on the condition that their results would not be made public. This reflects at least three distinct but related factors or dynamics. First is the inherent diversity of US higher education: about 2,500 public and private baccalaureate degree-granting institutions with distinct structures and missions, and considerable variation in their student populations with respect to such factors as age, residential situation (on-campus versus commuter), quality of prior preparation, socio-economic status and life circumstances. Many feared that public reporting of results would lead to inappropriate comparisons that would only reproduce the unfortunate consequences of the rankings, in which the wealthiest and most selective institutions reap the greatest rewards, while those institutions seeking to extend opportunity to less fortunate and less well-prepared students would be punished for pursuing this mission.

A second dynamic, related to the first, is the heightened sensitivity that exists around any third-party comparisons. This is attributable in part to the rankings, but it also reflects institutional leaders’ desire to ‘control the message’ about performance and success that can affect their institutions’ access to valued resources, both human (students and faculty) and financial (support from individuals, charitable organisations, and government).

The last factor behind the preference for confidentiality involves the tension between improvement-motivated diagnosis and accountability-motivated performance reporting. Improvement-motivated diagnosis requires a frank assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and its findings target interventions to improve performance. Such a candid diagnosis presupposes a genuine desire to improve and the consequent need for ‘the unvarnished facts’ (i.e. information that is accurate, unbiased, and actionable). When the diagnosis is confidential, the improvement interests of policy makers, students and institutional actors are in close alignment, and evaluation by an objective outside party is particularly valuable. This is different in the case of accountability-motivated performance reporting, and this alignment is much more difficult to achieve. Because unsatisfactory performance can result in punitive actions or externally imposed directives, institutional leaders who want to preserve

resources and autonomy will not be enthusiastic about candid and objective assessments (Ewell 1999). Indeed, such assessments can be very threatening. As noted above, leaders in this situation can face powerful incentives to control the message about performance, accentuating the positive, while avoiding or downplaying the negative.

Although the NSSE project does not publicize institution-specific results, participating institutions are at liberty to release them, and public institutions are typically obliged to do so under the so-called ‘sunshine’ laws. Making information available is not necessarily the same as making it readily accessible, yet many institutions have elected to publish their NSSE results on their websites. Systematic data on the public dissemination of NSSE findings do not exist, but Google searches on the phrases ‘NSSE data’, ‘NSSE findings’ and ‘NSSE results’ limited to web addresses in the ‘.edu’ domain yielded some 15,000 hits after removing results from Indiana University domains that host project-related sites (searches conducted November 27, 2011). In addition, about 45 % of institutions that had administered NSSE within a 3-year window opted to share their benchmark results with the national daily newspaper *USA TODAY* for use in an online database designed for prospective students and their families.

Accountability has been an enduring issue in the US higher education, and in recent years it has emerged as a major concern on the part of policy makers. NSSE was not created as an accountability tool, but it has received considerable attention in the accountability discourse. In its 2006 report, *A Test of Leadership*, the US Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education (the so-called Spellings Commission) stated:

Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families... This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities. (Commission on the Future of Higher Education 2006)

NSSE was identified in the report as one of four ‘examples of student learning assessments’ (another one being NSSE’s community college counterpart). As the Spellings Commission was engaged in its work, the two largest national associations representing public 4-year institutions, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (now called the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities), launched a significant accountability initiative, motivated in part by a desire to forestall a government-imposed system. The resulting ‘Voluntary System of Accountability’ (VSA) provides a standard template for public colleges and universities to report a range of descriptive and performance information from specified sources. NSSE is one of four possible sources of information that participating institutions can use for the ‘student experiences and perceptions’ section of the template and most institutions participating in the VSA have opted to report NSSE results (for more information on the VSA, see: www.voluntarysystem.org).

Challenges Going Forward

Despite the considerable achievements of its first 13 years, NSSE faces a number of challenges. Naturally, the project is dependent upon students to complete its surveys, and the credibility of results depends on both representativeness and adequate response rates. Overall, NSSE respondents are sufficiently representative to provide population estimates after weighting to account for the over-representation of women and full-time students among respondents. Response rates have been a greater challenge. In NSSE's early years, institutional response rates averaged about 42 %, but in recent years, the average has dropped as low as 30 %. The response rate challenge is not unique to NSSE, of course. In part, due to increased accountability and accreditation pressures, college students are more aggressively surveyed and tested than ever before. In addition, new web-based survey tools have dramatically reduced the financial and technical barriers to entry by anyone who wishes to survey students. As a result of these pressures, virtually all undergraduate survey operations have witnessed a decline in response rates among this heavily-surveyed population. NSSE institutions have employed a combination of promotional campaigns and participation incentives to boost response rates, but the results have been mixed. Although analyses of non-response have generally shown little evidence of bias, low response rates remain a cause of concern and a convenient basis for challenging or rejecting disappointing results. Alternative approaches to survey administration that would address the response rate challenge have been considered, but they involve trade-offs that, to date, have been deemed unacceptable. Offsetting the decline in response rates has been the increasing use of online administration. This has afforded substantial increases in institutional sample sizes, with a consequent reduction in sampling error.

While it is gratifying to see media attention on the NSSE project and calls for its wide adoption, there are associated risks. One is the possibility that, as NSSE gains wide acceptance, institutions may adopt it as a matter of compliance or legitimacy-seeking behaviour rather than out of a genuine desire for evidence-based improvement. Thus, mere participation in NSSE is not sufficient evidence that an institution is committed to the improvement of teaching and learning. More important is what institutions are *doing* in response to what they learn from NSSE. This is one reason why the project gathers and publicises information about how colleges and universities are making constructive use of their NSSE results.

Another aspect of media attention is frequent calls to make the data public. In their extreme form, these appeals argue that NSSE results should be the basis for a new, better ranking system. While many institutions have already made their results public, there are several ways that compulsory release of results could do more harm than good. In one version, the public relations cost of participation would exceed the diagnostic benefit, and many institutions would simply opt out. Another way the situation could go wrong would be if NSSE results themselves come to define the institutional pecking order. In this version, students' survey responses would determine their institution's position and, by extension,

the value of their degree. Students would be tempted to respond strategically so as to enhance their school's standing, and as a result confidence in student survey responses—fundamental to the project's work—would be severely undermined (McCormick 2007).

Another challenge—one that is exacerbated by the emphasis in the accountability discourse on institution-level performance measures—is the importance of examining within-institution variation in student engagement. Despite strong interest in comparing institutional performance, the fact is that 90–95 % of the variation in NSSE benchmark scores occurs between students within institutions, rather than between institutions (Kuh 2007; National Survey of Student Engagement 2008). This complicates appealing but simplistic notions of institutional performance. But even a cursory examination of the elements of engagement—what students do in and out of class, the nature of their coursework, their interactions with faculty and other students—reveals that fundamentally, engagement manifests itself at the individual level (student effort and activity in the context of particular courses) or at best among small collectives (e.g. among peer groups and by academic major). This is not to say that institutions cannot introduce policies and practices that promote engagement (Kuh et al. 2005). However, it is wrong to think of engagement as a phenomenon that occurs at the institutional level. A significant imperative for the NSSE project going forward is to find compelling ways to document within-institution variation and to discourage an exclusive focus on measures of central tendency.

Currently, the dominant mode of interpreting NSSE results is relative to a comparison group. However, that is only one of three possible comparisons. The other two are trend analysis (comparing an institution against itself over time) and comparisons against an absolute standard. Now that a critical mass of institutions has administered the survey at least three times, the project has developed reports and guides to assist institutions in examining trends in their results. In some cases, it may also be important to assess results against an absolute standard. For example, a fairly consistent finding from NSSE is that students report spending considerably less time preparing for class than what is typically expected or assumed. In such cases, positive results relative to other institutions (above the mean or even in the top quartile or quintile) may not be sufficient.

Examining the list of institutions that have participated in NSSE over the years, there are some notable absences. The most elite private research universities have yet to participate. In one sense, this is not a serious problem because they serve such a small proportion of the undergraduate population. On the other hand, however, it may be a problem, because the elite institutions lead what David Reisman called 'the meandering procession' of US higher education, and in that sense what they do matters. Several elite public research universities have participated, as have several elite private liberal arts colleges, but the most elite and selective private universities have been conspicuously absent. Whether this signifies supreme confidence in their educational quality, or concerns about the survey itself and its relevance or possible revelations, is hard to speculate. When Harvard president Derek Bok, author of the 2006 text *Our Underachieving Colleges* and past member of NSSE's national

advisory board, was asked at a symposium on student success why Harvard does not participate, he cited the absence of comparable institutions.

While many members of the research community have embraced NSSE's goals and made effective use of the data (for example, see Pascarella et al. 2010), NSSE has been the subject of occasional conceptual and methodological critique by higher education researchers. Two themes dominate. One involves the validity of college student surveys in general, and NSSE in particular. The critique focuses largely on criterion validity, with little regard for how NSSE results are actually used (i.e. to make comparisons among groups, and not to provide precise point estimates of, for example, students' college grades, the number of papers written or objective learning gains). Because of the implied tension between what is ideal from a purist's perspective and what is achievable given practical constraints, the validity critique is emblematic of the gap that can exist between the worlds of research and practice, a gap that NSSE itself seeks to fill (see McCormick et al. 2013; McCormick and McClenney 2012).

The second strand of critique involves the validity of NSSE's data reduction scheme, the Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice. The primary objection here involves the psychometric qualities of the benchmarks and that they do not represent unitary constructs. While the details are beyond the scope of this chapter, interested readers may wish to consult Campbell and Cabrera (2011), McCormick and McClenney (2012) and Pike (2013).

A final and important point to remember is that student engagement as assessed by NSSE is not a 'magic bullet'. For virtually all of the effective practices represented in the survey, there is a hidden quality dimension that cannot reasonably be assessed in a large-scale survey. In other words, NSSE is neither the only source nor the best source for assessing educational quality. However, it is a useful and significant first step toward a data-informed discussion of quality in undergraduate education. On countless campuses, NSSE has demonstrated that its most powerful contribution may be as a conversation starter, or as a catalyst for more intensive, varied and nuanced efforts to examine educational effectiveness.

Concluding Comments

Examining student engagement offers a promising response to two vexing problems. The first is the poverty of discourse about quality in higher education, where dominant conceptions revolve around reputation, resources or research prowess rather than undergraduate teaching and learning. The second problem is the lack of consensus around how to assess the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Direct observation of educational quality confronts considerable conceptual and practical obstacles. Generic or subject-specific educational outcomes can be measured, but these enterprises are complicated and costly, and it is not necessarily straightforward to translate the results into specific prescriptions for

the improvement of teaching and learning. By examining students' exposure to and engagement in practices with empirically confirmed links to desirable learning outcomes, assessment work can be concentrated on those aspects of educational practice that are vital elements of educational quality. Armed with this information, practitioners can design interventions to improve quality, and thereby improve outcomes.

Appendix A: NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Level of Academic Challenge

- Number of assigned textbooks, books or book-length packs of course readings
- Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
- Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages
- Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages
- Coursework emphasizes analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in-depth and considering its components
- Coursework emphasizes synthesizing and organizing ideas, information or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships
- Coursework emphasizes making judgments about the value of information, arguments or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions
- Coursework emphasizes applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
- Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations

Active and Collaborative Learning

- Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
- Made a class presentation
- Worked with other students on projects during class
- Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)
- Participated in a community-based project (e.g. service learning) as part of a regular course
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)

Student–Faculty Interaction

- Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
- Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral)
- Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)
- Worked on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements

Enriching Educational Experiences

- Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values
- Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own
- Institutional emphasis: contact among students from different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds
- Used an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, Internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment
- Participation in:
 - Co-curricular activities (organisations, campus publications, student government, social fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.)
 - A learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together
 - Community service or volunteer work
 - Foreign language coursework
 - Study abroad
 - Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment
 - Independent study or self-designed major
 - Culminating senior experience (capstone course, thesis, project, comprehensive exam, etc.)

Supportive Campus Environment

- Institutional emphasis: Providing the support you need to thrive socially

- Institutional emphasis: Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically
- Institutional emphasis: Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
- Quality of relationships with other students
- Quality of relationships with faculty members
- Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices

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