

# Foreword

Russ Edgerton, president emeritus of the American Association for Higher Education, was the Education Program Director at the Pew Charitable Trusts from 1997 through 2000. Among the big bets he made during his watch was earmarking about \$ 3.7 million over 4 years to design, test, and implement a project that would give US colleges and universities information about what really mattered to the quality of undergraduate student learning and personal development. We know that project today as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “nessie”). By 2006, Russ started to playfully and fondly refer to NSSE as *uber alles*, meaning it had seemingly become so large so as to encompass everything else.

Roll the calendar back to 1998 and none of us involved with NSSE imagined it would become part of the higher education lexicon in the USA, let alone be the underpinning of a global epiphenomenon as this book illustrates. We were convinced that our aspirations were noble and on the right side of history. However, we had no idea the work would blossom into a multinational reform movement. In fact, when NSSE began to get requests from other countries to adapt the tool, NSSE’s national advisory board expressed misgivings, worried that the staff would become distracted and dilute the much-needed effort in the USA to champion promising educational practices and use data to guide improvements in teaching and learning.

One of the story lines of this book could be that it is hard to stop a good idea from taking root. After all, within a few years, NSSE had extensive institutional participation in North America; Canada’s embracing of the NSSE was a major surprise, as NSSE did no marketing of its services in that sector. Indeed, as this book shows, there are operational student engagement projects not only in North America, but also in Australia and New Zealand (AUSSE), South Africa (SASSE), China (CCSS), and Ireland (ISSE). In addition, a host of other countries have at one time or another adapted NSSE for trial administrations. So, Edgerton’s exaggerated language of several years ago sounds less far-fetched today.

Even so, the literature about the diffusion of educational innovation makes plain that it is very unusual for a new project to spread and its products and services to be widely used, not to mention become self-sustaining. Certainly, external conditions have to be ripe for acceptance, and in the case of NSSE, they were. In the USA at the turn of this century, accreditors, the media, and policy makers were all close to the same page in wanting more and better information about the performance and quality

of the postsecondary enterprise and especially the undergraduate experience. As the following chapters illustrate, similar external conditions exist in the other countries that have adapted and adopted their own student engagement survey. But there is more, much more to how and why NSSE caught fire as it were, first in the USA, then Canada, and then Australia and beyond. Indeed, if it were not for a strategic, systematic campaign to build, promote, and continually improve a high-quality information gathering and dissemination operation, it is almost certain that what now may seem to have been the natural course of events would not have unfolded.

From the beginning, the NSSE board and staff understood that NSSE could not just be another survey of undergraduate students if it was to help change the national conversation about what matters to collegiate quality away from the resources institutions have (which is, at root, the basis of most rankings) to what students did with these resources, which is the key to learning. And the counterpoint could not be simply exhortation; it had to be based on reliable, trustworthy, institution-specific information. To be true to its mission, NSSE had to embark on a multi-year campaign and be relentlessly persistent in its communications strategy using a language lay people would understand. We were laser-focused on becoming such an enterprise and aimed to establish an industry-leading standard in terms of the quality of its products and services.

Another key to NSSE's success was creating a questionnaire that was both substantive and easy for students to answer and also easy for institutions to use. Another priority for the NSSE Design Team led by Peter Ewell in 1998 was making sure that the survey questions would yield actionable results (Kuh 2001). That is, faculty, staff, and students could look at the data and identify student and institutional behaviours that were not satisfactory, and take action to address them. Chapter 2 by McCormick and Kinzie offers some examples; many more can be found in materials posted on the NSSE website. Also important was using leading edge survey data collection and reporting methods buttressed by an ethic of continuous quality improvement. In this regard, an understated but never under-appreciated advantage to NSSE's acceptance and subsequent prominence was its ongoing partnership with the Indiana University Center for Survey Research (Kuh 2009). Every year, the survey administration materials and the service and materials provided to institutions—from registering for the annual survey and downloading the data files to institution-specific and national reports—were improved in some way. As important as all this was to NSSE establishing itself as a valued partner in the service of improvement and accountability, these achievements could have been realized without anyone beyond NSSE staff and institutional research officers knowing about them. This leads me to another major reason why NSSE thrived which, in turn, led other countries to take notice and weigh the potential for having their own student engagement tool.

From its earliest days, NSSE's national advisory board challenged as well as supported the NSSE staff to seek the interest and explain the importance of student engagement to external audiences, with a special emphasis on the national media, both popular and academic. I have recounted the critical nature of this strategy elsewhere (Kuh 2008, 2013). Suffice to say that without the guidance of a media relations expert (William Tyson) and the imprimatur of a stellar national advisory board which gave the project instant credibility, a college student survey would not have received column space in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and

other major print media outlets, a partnership with a national newspaper (*USA TODAY*), along with annual feature stories in US higher education media such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* among others. Media attention was also important to NSSE's emergence as the survey of choice in Canada. Even the sometimes animated exchanges with staff at the *Macleans* magazine about its wrong-headed efforts to include student engagement results in its annual ranking of Canadian universities were more often than not helpful to the cause. All this is to say that the "selling" of NSSE was—in its early years—essential to becoming a well-known and widely used instrument for good. And the work with media paid off in another, perhaps more important way. It is, today, rare that an article about the quality of undergraduate education appears in a US publication that does not include student engagement as a necessary component of a high-quality experience.

Finally, as important as anything else, the NSSE project prospered because of the commitment and expertise of the people who signed on to the enterprise. This is not the place to name them all, but they include the research analysts and graduate student project associates who work directly with participating institutions as well as support staff, past and present. Many people in the USA and abroad have told me the NSSE team comprises the best professionals with whom they have worked. I agree. But as important as these people are, the enterprise could not have made its mark without many champions at universities, both in the USA and elsewhere in the world. Some of these champions were senior academic leaders and faculty; others held posts in national institutional membership organizations. And, especially germane to the topic of this book, some were thought leaders in other countries—Coates in Australia, Strydom in South Africa, and so forth. At the end of the day, as well as at the beginning, projects like national student engagement surveys effectively deliver on their promises if skilled, thoughtful, right-minded people are at the helm and those of similar bearing are doing well the critical, never-ending daily tasks that ensure the quality of information that allows institutions to take action with confidence.

I mention these factors, which to my mind have been essential to NSSE's success because I am fairly certain that for student engagement projects in other countries to have the desired impact, an approach akin to what I have described will be needed. Yes, contextual conditions vary from country to country. One of the more obvious lessons from the chapters in this book is the relative influence different entities have on quality assurance functions. In the USA, state and local governments as well as accreditors are keenly interested in quality assurance, but none of them had a stake in the development or sustenance of NSSE. NSSE was launched with private foundation support, with nary a dollar from public coffers. In this regard, contrast the US experience with, for example, Canada, Ireland and Australia, where government interest in and/or funding of student engagement projects have been instrumental in undertaking the work.

More striking to me after perusing the chapters in this book is the similarity in how the project work has unfolded, once the student engagement survey was developed. While the scope of projects varies, most started with small numbers of institutions on a try-out basis before achieving a grander scale of participation. Most have found the student engagement results to be similar from one administration cycle to the next, which is (happily) to be expected with a psychometrically reliable tool.

Most are learning how to interpret the patterns of findings for local consumption. And most, sooner or later, realise that they must disaggregate the data to the lowest level of the institution possible in order for faculty and staff to have confidence in and take ownership of the results and begin the challenging work of changing policies and teaching and learning practices.

Not as evident in many of these chapters is the degree to which efforts have been made to introduce and explain the importance of student engagement to audiences beyond the project staff, participating institutions, and funders. Granted, it is a noisy world, and media are partial to stories that titillate rather than educate. Nonetheless, cultivating media—at least those responsible for reporting on education issues—and, for example, positioning student engagement data as a superior indicator of quality compared to the nonsense employed by the all-but-ubiquitous rankings regimes—will sooner or later be necessary if student engagement is to become part of the higher education lexicon in other parts of the world.

The student engagement projects described in this volume and the data they produced are important, probably even necessary, to persuade people to focus on what works to promote learning and personal development and then to use promising practices more frequently and effectively. At the same time, we must position this work so it complements—not competes with or tries to substitute for—the kinds of instructor-designed assignments and other class/lab/studio-based activities that induce students to demonstrate high levels of accomplishment across the domains of desired twenty-first century proficiencies. True, student engagement is itself, as Shulman (2002) persuasively argued, a valued outcome of postsecondary education, in that students who are involved in educationally productive activities in college are developing habits of the mind and heart that likely enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development. Equally important, student engagement represents the kinds of conditions that will help more students attain the skills and competencies they need to survive and thrive after college. And that is more than enough to justify the good and important work that the contributors to this book and their colleagues are doing and to recommend the volume to educational leaders and policy makers.

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