

Stakeholder Summary

Efforts to Improve Student Engagement Should Be Aimed at the Program, Student Service Level

Measuring student engagement is a valuable tool for postsecondary education institutions attempting to improve the student experience and evaluate educational quality. While student engagement surveys like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) can be misleading when used for broader institutional comparisons, a recent study commissioned by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)** found that they can reveal clear patterns of engagement that vary dramatically by program.

According to the study, *The NSSE National Data Project: Phase Two Report*, these patterns could help institutions develop targeted approaches to improving student engagement

Project Description

Initially developed in the United States, NSSE is one of the leading methods of gathering student engagement data at the university level. The NSSE National Data Project, commissioned by HEQCO, is an ambitious, cross-Canada analysis of NSSE student responses and student records data from 44 universities. Among its goals is helping institutions identify student engagement strengths and weaknesses independent of fixed characteristics such as institutional size and mix of students. With the data, institutions can more effectively identify best results and practices that lead to more engaged students.

[Phase one of the project](#) examined if NSSE benchmarks could be used for institutional comparisons and improvement strategies. While the findings showed student engagement data to be poorly suited for that use, it did suggest further examination was needed to see if patterns emerged at the program and student demographic level. Phase two of the project focused on the nine academic programs that were offered by at least 20 institutions and received an acceptable number of survey responses -- nursing, English, history, political science, psychology, biology, business, engineering and fine arts.

Findings

The wide range of survey responses shows that while student characteristics certainly play a role in student engagement across different programs, they don't necessarily allow institutions to predict outcomes and design wide-reaching improvement strategies. For example, being a first generation student in a nursing program does not predict positive or negative student engagement outcomes. However, being a first generation student in psychology shows consistently negative student engagement outcomes.

These program-specific patterns can provide insight to institutions, program heads and student services offices as they attempt to improve student engagement. The authors say such an approach is likely to be far more effective than a faculty-wide or university-wide strategy based on benchmark goals.

Some institution-wide patterns emerge specifically related to the size of the university and the authors argue that large and small institutions can learn from each other's student engagement strategies and results. For example, small universities generate high scores on internships and practical training, while seeing lower results in student interactions and foreign language study participation. Conversely, larger universities see high scores on student interaction as well as independent study opportunities, but score poorly on creating a "climate of diversity."

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