

**The “NSSE” Experience:  
What Have Ontario Universities Learned?**



**Report on the Workshop Sponsored by the  
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario**

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## Introduction

Drawing on the scholarly literature on student learning in higher education, an American research team first piloted the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 1999 at 68 universities in the United States. Focusing on student behaviors and practices that are associated with active participation in the learning process, the survey instrument has now been administered at over 1100 postsecondary institutions<sup>1</sup>. In 2002 a group of Canadian universities began to work together to explore the development of a Canadian version of the survey instrument; a Canadian English survey was administered for the first time in 2004 and a French version was administered in 2005. Following the recommendations of the review of postsecondary education conducted by the Honourable Bob Rae, the Canadian version of NSSE has now been administered at every provincially-supported university in Ontario.

On April 27, 2007 the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario held an invited workshop focusing on the experience of Ontario universities with NSSE. Given its mandated role in the development of a quality framework for postsecondary education, the Council brought together senior academic administrators from across the province to share experiences and discuss challenges and opportunities. The objective of this report is to document the key issues and themes that emerged from this discussion. Following a brief description of the workshop, the report has been organized to address the four key questions that underscored the structure of the

workshop: What have Ontario universities learned from NSSE? How have NSSE findings been used within the universities? How have universities responded to these findings? Should NSSE form part of the quality framework in Ontario and should it be used as an indicator of the performance of Ontario universities?

## The Workshop Program

The workshop was designed to include a balance of presentations and facilitated discussions. In his opening remarks, the Honourable Frank Iacobucci, Chair of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, noted that the Council wanted to learn from the experience of the university sector as well as provide a forum for the exchange of information between institutions. James Downey, the President and CEO of the Council, noted that the Council was focusing considerable attention on issues of quality in postsecondary education in Ontario, and it was logical that its first workshop would look at the Ontario experience in adopting a survey tool designed to illuminate the quality of the student experience.

A panel session included presentations from four individuals who have played a leadership role in the administration and analysis of NSSE findings at their respective institutions: Chris Conway from Queen’s University; Louis Mayrand from Laurentian University; Phil Wood from McMaster University; and Tony Chambers from the University of Toronto. Each panelist reviewed the history of the use of NSSE at their institution, what had been learned from NSSE, how these findings had been disseminated, and how each university had responded. Following the presentations, the workshop moved into a plenary discussion

<sup>1</sup> The Director of the National Survey of Student Engagement is Professor George Kuh at Indiana University. Detailed information on NSSE is available at <http://nsse.iub.edu>.

where participants raised questions for the panel, and identified other issues and themes.

The question of how student engagement was being studied in the Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology was the subject of a major presentation by Peter Dietsche at Mohawk College. He described the history of the development of the Ontario College Student Engagement Survey and provided an overview of the major findings. Student engagement in the college sector is influenced by a range of factors, including the difficulty of balancing the demands of school and family, the number of hours that students work while attending college, faculty teaching methods, and institutional characteristics such as the availability of study space and student support services.

Participants moved into small groups to continue the discussion of the four key workshop questions. The notes from each discussion group provided input for this report<sup>2</sup>. A preliminary summary of themes that had emerged during the workshop was then provided by the author, followed by concluding observations from Ken Norrie, the Vice-President Research at the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

### **What Have Ontario Universities Learned From NSSE?**

Based on the panel presentations and workshop discussions, it is clear that Ontario universities have learned a great deal from their participation in NSSE. Universities have

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<sup>2</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of three graduate students in the Higher Education Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto who prepared the notes summarizing these small group discussions: Bryan Gopaul, Pam Gravestock, and Emily Gregor.

learned about the engagement of students in the learning process through the analysis of NSSE data. The survey has provided institutions with a tool for collecting and analyzing data from students on their behaviours and experiences. Survey findings confirm that there are many institutional practices that are supporting and contributing to student development and learning, but they have also signaled areas for improvement. Each university has devoted considerable time and energy to analyzing these institution-specific findings, as well as comparing these findings to American, Canadian, and Ontario peer institutions.

The analysis and interpretation of NSSE data have also required those in academic leadership and research support positions to increase their understanding of the theoretical foundation for the study of student engagement. While these theories and concepts have received considerable attention in the research literature and had already been taken up by those working in the support of teaching and student development, the implementation of NSSE within the Ontario university sector has led to a growing interest in this area of research. The analysis of survey data has also become increasingly sophisticated as analysts learn more about the research tool, the opportunities for benchmarking and comparative analysis, and the limitations associated with the research design.

Universities have also become increasingly aware of the limitations of NSSE. Since NSSE focuses on student engagement rather than learning, this approach may represent a shift in direction for those institutions that have been focusing on the assessment of student learning outcomes. The survey provides a snapshot view of the student experience, but it does not provide

longitudinal data in terms of tracking the changing perceptions of students over time. There are also concerns about whether some of the questions included in the NSSE survey are problematic in the Canadian context; the current survey questionnaire is based on an attempt to Canadianize an instrument developed within the American higher education context.

Universities have also learned that there are significant differences in NSSE results within institutions. Drilling down the analysis to the faculty or department level has illuminated differences in student experience and raised questions about the relationship between these findings and faculty or department initiatives. Some of these differences were unanticipated, signaling a need and opportunity for additional research. A number of institutions have also found that focusing on the student experience at the local level has increased local unit interest in NSSE and student engagement on the part of deans, chairs, and individual faculty. Some universities are now looking for ways of facilitating conversations about “best practices” within the institution to learn from what appear to be successful activities or approaches that have a positive impact on the student experience. A number of participants noted that the most valuable analyses comes from looking at responses to individual items at the local unit level, though small sample sizes limit the degree to which this approach can be utilized at smaller universities.

Finally, universities have learned that this research provides a mechanism for facilitating a new level of discussion about teaching and learning on Ontario campuses. Faculty, staff, and students are interested in the NSSE findings, and there has been an increased engagement in issues related to the student experience at some institutions.

These findings have raised a number of difficult questions about the relationship between institutional practices and survey responses. The findings have sometimes challenged local assumptions about programs and raised new questions for further study.

### **How Have NSSE Findings Been Used Within The Universities?**

The NSSE findings have been used in wide range of ways within the universities. Some institutions have used the findings in a quite limited way and positioned NSSE as an instrument for institutional analysis. Others have adopted a more comprehensive strategy linked to the central university offices responsible for student development, teaching enhancement, and/or initiatives at the level of the faculty or division. There are multiple audiences within each institution, and these audiences can use the NSSE findings in quite different ways. It was noted that academic leaders can play an extremely important role in the NSSE conversation. The strong support of the senior administration of the university may be a necessary condition if the NSSE findings are going to be used as a foundation for implementing change in institutional practices. Participants also noted that there are important differences among academic leaders in terms of how they want to use the survey findings; some view NSSE as a mechanism for facilitating or encouraging institutional improvements in the quality of the student experience, while others view the survey findings as the end product. The NSSE findings have provided useful input to existing institutional processes and review mechanisms. Responses to some questions are being used as indicators of institutional performance and are publicly posted on university websites. The findings

are being used by some universities as inputs for institutional planning processes and curricular reviews.

The findings are also being used as a foundation for new processes and reviews at a small number of institutions. Task forces have been created at some universities to analyze the findings and provide recommendations. Some institutions are providing financial support for new initiatives that focus on strengthening the student experience.

### **How Have Universities Responded To These Findings?**

Individual institutions have responded to the NSSE findings in a multitude of ways, and different approaches to the dissemination of findings have probably had an impact on differences in institutional responses. A number of universities organized special workshops for academic administrators and faculty to review NSSE findings and encourage local initiatives. The list of initiatives identified during the workshop that had emerged as a direct response to NSSE findings or where NSSE findings played a legitimizing role was extremely impressive, and included the development of new community service learning programs, learning community initiatives, changes in the organization of student development units, new research initiatives to collect complementary data, curricular reforms, and the development of new courses, workshops and training programs.

While universities have learned from and responded to the NSSE findings, it may be difficult for institutions to sustain this level of interest on the student experience within their communities. The recent wave of interest in this topic in Ontario universities

may wane without the continuing push of the central academic leadership or the engagement of deans and chairs. There needs to be a broadening of the sense of ownership and responsibility for student learning and the student experience within Ontario universities.

### **Should NSSE Form Part of the Quality Framework in Ontario and Should It Be Used As An Indicator Of The Performance Of Ontario Universities?**

There was a general consensus among workshop participants that NSSE could form part of the quality framework for postsecondary education in Ontario, but not as a direct indicator of institutional performance. The NSSE instrument clearly provides data on certain elements of the quality of the student experience, but it is extremely important to recognize that NSSE does not measure student learning and that the interpretation of NSSE findings, like those of any research study, must be pursued carefully and critically. Since most Ontario universities have only administered the survey once and are still analyzing the 2006 findings, it is far too early to make any assumptions about the utility of NSSE as an indicator of quality in Ontario higher education.

Rather than view NSSE responses as a quantitative performance indicator of institutional quality, workshop participants concluded that institutions could be assessed on how they use, analyze and respond to the NSSE findings. Institutions could report their NSSE findings, and describe institutional initiatives to respond to areas of weakness or build on institutional strengths. Institutions could be held accountable for their performance in terms of the ways in which they use NSSE and the findings of

other relevant surveys as part of their approach to improving the quality of the educational experience.

A number of participants noted that NSSE is only one instrument for evaluating elements of the student experience at institutions of higher education. It is important not to place too much emphasis on this one tool at the expense of others, especially since there are a number of limitations and problems associated with NSSE. There may be good reasons to develop a survey instrument that more clearly addresses the needs of the Ontario university sector, or to use NSSE in combination with a number of other instruments in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of student learning and student engagement in this province.

Participants noted that the universities could learn a great deal from each other in terms of sharing data from, and experiences with, NSSE. Data sharing arrangements might allow for comparative analyses at the local unit level. An annual conference or workshop could be organized to provide a forum for exchanging information on best practices in the interpretation and utilization of NSSE data among Ontario universities.

## Conclusions

The workshop provided a wonderful forum for senior academic leaders at Ontario universities to share experiences with the National Survey of Student Engagement. It was clear that the universities have learned a great deal from NSSE, though there have been major differences by university in how the survey findings have been disseminated and used. NSSE is viewed as a useful instrument for studying student engagement, but it is one of several surveys being used in

Ontario universities and there are important limitations associated with NSSE. Some institutions are focusing considerable attention on student engagement and using NSSE as a component in a broader movement to improve the student experience. There may be important ways that universities can learn from each other in terms of sharing data and information on best practices. Workshop participants did not believe that NSSE findings should be used as a direct measure of institutional performance in the development of a provincial quality framework, but that institutions could be assessed in terms of how they are using and responding to research on student engagement and student learning in the context of institutional missions and goals.