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## What is NSSE

Measuring student learning outcomes has never been an easy task and prior to 1999 most assessment for an institution was based upon the reputation of an institution. The accreditation process offered an opportunity for institutions to access billions of dollars in federal funding for student financial aid if the institution allowed itself to participate in a self-evaluation (inspirational) and peer review (pragmatic) approach with the accreditation process (Volkwein, 2009). This accreditation process allowed for self-improvement and external accountability to the various constituents that all wanted a say in the governance of higher education institutions. As higher education institutions have become more and more complex and more and more specialized, there was a need to move away from typical measures of assessment (time in the classroom, gpa, faculty credentials, facilities, number of books in the library, admissions selectivity, retention rates, and time to graduation) to judge the quality of the education (Volkwein, 2009).

Volkwein (2009) and Brittingham (2009), make specific note that the accreditation process shifted from the previously mentioned rigid forms of measurement to much more flexible forms of measurement to better meet the needs of each institution and to actually measure student learning outcomes (Brittingham, 2009). However, with this switch, the accreditation process still remained largely numbers based (NSSE, 2001).

In 1998, with grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, and with questions from the College Student Report, a survey was conducted under the auspices of generating “best practices” for college student engagement, the NSSE survey was envisioned as a survey that “could provide colleges and universities—as well as a potential range of stakeholders—with far more valuable information about institutional quality than established measures of reputation” (NSSE, 2001).

A team was created from the best minds in higher education and student development theory (Astin, Barnes, Chickering, Ewell, Gardner, Kuh, Light, Marchese, and Pace) to come up with a survey that will measure student outcomes. Taking questions from many different surveys such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) and revisions from many stakeholders in higher education (US News and World Report, accrediting agencies, etc) the National Survey of Student Engagement survey was created and implemented for the first time in 1999 (NSSE, 2001).

The team that created the NSSE survey had envisioned that the survey would be beneficial in many different areas of higher education. Their intention was that the NSSE Survey could help improve the quality of education at institutions and allow them the opportunity to truly reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and improve on their weaknesses (NSSE, 2001). The survey could also help gauge institutional effectiveness outside of just standard typical measures that are used in the accreditation process and allow for easier benchmarking from institutions across all of higher education and lastly, the information could be used to help constituents make better decisions about institutions of higher education and if an institution is really the right fit for them. Because data and variables can be overwhelming and complex for people to look at and examine, NSSE wanted to create reports and tools that would make the data easily understandable for the common constituents (students, parents, etc) that may not have background experience in institutional research.

The survey is administered to first year students and college seniors and can be used to cross-reference the many variables in a series of 28 questions. Looking at the variables and through careful analysis, researchers can determine student learning and the impact that best practices on education can have on student learning. The survey can also be used to track student engagement and the impact that engagement can have on students academic involvements.

The NSSE Survey is made up of 28 questions that ask students about their experiences in and out of the classroom and how their academic experiences have helped shape learning inside and outside of the classroom.

Question 1: Student motivation in the classroom	Question 12: Academic Advising
Question 2: Use of Higher Learning Cognitive thinking skills	Question 13: Student Satisfaction (rate educational experience)
Question 3: How much reading and writing happened in class	Question 14: Student Satisfaction (Start over at same place)
Question 4: How much homework was assigned	Question 15 – 22: Student demographics
Question 5: Examinations challenged students to do best work	Question 23: Involvement in Fraternity and Sorority Life
Question 6: Student co-curricular experiences	Question 24: Involvement in Student Athletics
Question 7: High Impact Practices	Question 25: Grades
Question 8: Faculty, Staff and Student relationships.	Question 26: Living Options for Students
Question 9: Time Commitments	Question 27: Parent's Education
Question 10: School Motivation to study, attend events	Question 28: Major/Minor
Question 11: Has the school challenged you to develop personally	

The NSSE Survey has been used by over 1500 institutions in the United States and Canada over the years, however a lot has changed in higher education since the first NSSE survey was implemented in 1999 (NSSE, 2). In 2013, the NSSE survey underwent major renovations that would meet new and emerging trends in higher education. The new NSSE survey also allowed for more institution-specific modules and also created questions that focus on new aspects of teaching such as the emergence of new technology and the use of high impact practices (internships, capstones, research, etc) (NSSE, 2). The survey also has questions that have been broken down into engagement indicators that focus on academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty and the campus environment (recognizing that the environment on campus and the culture of the campus play a huge role in the success of the student) (NSSE, 2).

The NSSE Survey is administered by a self-sustaining unit within the Center for Postsecondary Research located at the Indiana University School of Education. The survey encourages institutions to participate and a selection of students that meet the necessary criteria (first year and seniors) are invited to participate in the survey. The survey allows for the collection of data nationally from all participating institutions, allows for institutional assessment through individual institutional reports and also provides an opportunity for institutions to benchmark their data with institutions that are in their “peer” group. Each year the NSSE in the CPR produces a yearly report about NSSE findings and updates to the data from these findings.

The data comes in a raw format for institutions to utilize and can be processed for easier understanding. It is important for the appropriate people at each institution to look at the data and prepare it for presenting the findings for each institution. There are also many tools that NSSE administers that allow institutions to create customizable reports to help analyze the data that is in the NSSE survey.

Using the NSSE data, in conjunction with other assessments that the institution administers such as a pre-college characteristics and other demographics such as retention can allow an institution to truly paint a picture of how student learning outcomes, student engagement and academics play in the importance of institutional effectiveness.

Brittingham, B. (2009), Accreditation in the United States: How did we get to where we are?. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2009: 7–27. doi: 10.1002/he.331

NSSE. “Our Origins and Potential.” National Survey of Student Engagement, 2001. Retrieved from: <http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/origins.cfm>, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

NSSE. (2) “Introducing the Updated NSSE.” National Survey of Student Engagement. Retrieved from: <http://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse-update/>, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

Volkwein, J.F. Accreditation, Accountability and Performance. *Assessing Student Outcomes: Why, Who, What, How? Assessment Supplement*. New Directions for Institutional Research, Winter, 2009. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass. 2010. 9780470878774. Ch. 1. pp. 3-12. Retrieved from: <https://reserve-libraries-psu-edu.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/hied/801/80102.pdf>.