



Faculty Forum

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NSSE: What Is It and Why Should We Care?

The results of the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced "Nessie") are in, and your students gave Western high marks on all five of the benchmark measures. In many cases, we exceeded similar measures for our Carnegie peers and the national average for more than 500 participating colleges and universities. What does this mean to you and why should you care about our NSSE results? The NSSE is an attempt to reintroduce the idea that colleges and universities should be judged by how well and to what extent our students engage in activities that we know contribute to *learning and development*. This is a relatively rare notion in higher education today with university systems, state legislatures, and state and federal bureaucracies all demanding accountability on the one hand but proposing measures that are, at best, indirect reflections of institutional quality on the other.

The tax-paying public and a variety of college and university constituents are demanding more information on institutional quality and performance, but how we conceptualize quality among our colleges and universities is shifting away from the triumvirate notions of institutional wealth, selectivity, and prestige to that of an institution's actual contribution to student learning and development. Examples abound that reflect this shift. Regional accrediting agencies have moved en masse to affirm the primacy of student learning in their standards over that of traditional institutional inputs. University presidents and chancellors are publicly questioning the value and validity of high-stakes ranking schemes such as the annual *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings guide. And, in 2006, the U.S. Secretary of Education convened a national Commission on the Future of Higher Education with the explicit charge to consider how best to ensure that our colleges and universities are graduating students that are well prepared to fulfill future workforce needs. A prominent recommendation from this group was for more transparent mechanisms for colleges and universities to report on student learning.

In this context, many institutions have sought standardized measures that will allow comparisons *between* institutions as well as a meaningful measure that can be used *within* institutions to guide programming and services. Enter the National Survey of Student Engagement, organized conceptually around five benchmarks of effective educational practice:

1. level of academic challenge
2. active and collaborative learning

3. student-faculty interaction
4. enriching educational experiences
5. supportive campus environment

The survey is administered to first-year and senior students only, representing points of entry and exit from our institutions.

WCU participated in NSSE in 2001, 2004, 2006, and 2007. The early administrations indicated we were performing fairly well in most benchmarks, but anemic response rates and a general lack of interest resulted in little use of the results at an institutional level. In 2006, however, WCU's NSSE results came to the attention of the campus committee charged with developing our Quality Enhancement Plan. WCU's NSSE results figured prominently in the identification of areas in which we could have a significant impact. In 2007, a concerted effort to advertise the survey among students resulted in a significant increase in our response rate, which increased our confidence in the representative nature of the NSSE results for WCU.

The table below provides you a quick comparison of WCU benchmark scores relative to our Carnegie peers and that of the total 2007 NSSE cohort.

	Benchmark	WCU	Peers	Total NSSE 2007
First Year	Level of Academic Challenge	52.6	49.7	51.7
	Active & Collaborative Learning	48.1	41.4	41.2
	Student-Faculty Interaction	40.2	33.8	32.8
	Enriching Educational Experiences	28.4	25.4	27.1
	Supportive Campus Environment	62.0	59.7	59.8
Senior	Level of Academic Challenge	55.7	54.4	55.6
	Active & Collaborative Learning	54.7	51.9	50.1
	Student-Faculty Interaction	46.7	42.8	41.2
	Enriching Educational Experiences	39.8	37.9	39.9
	Supportive Campus Environment	58.3	58.0	56.9

As you can see, WCU scored as well as and, in most cases, better than our peers and the national cohort on all the benchmarks for both first year and senior students. Of particular note is how well WCU scored on the two benchmark categories most attributable to faculty: Active and Collaborative Learning, and Student-Faculty Interaction. Indeed, these scores qualify WCU as a strong national performer in these benchmark categories. And, that is something every faculty member on this campus should care about and of which all can be proud.

Melissa Canady Wargo, Office of Assessment

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to Gary Jones's "Due Process Before Discharge," (11/1/07)

Post-Tenure Review: Is it doing its job?

The UNC General Administration is concerned that Post Tenure Review (PTR) is not holding tenured faculty to a high level of achievement. They suspect that dead wood is absorbing high salaries without reflecting well on the System. They do not believe that faculty colleagues are rigorous enough in their demands for continuing quality. They may be right.

Part of the problem has been with the initial tenure process. The Faculty Senate revised our tenure document, which is being held up as a model for the UNC System. Provost Carter is encouraging departments to be much more specific and measurable in their criteria for reappointment, tenure, and promotion. Departmental TPR committees ask what evidence there is that a colleague can be expected to maintain and even expand desired contributions once tenure is granted. We are claiming and improving collegial review.

The problem may begin during the hiring process. There are good reasons for moving from job to job in an academic career, but the candidate who leaves each job after five years without achieving tenure should receive careful scrutiny. Anybody applying ABD should expect to negotiate a clear plan, timetable, and allocation of resources for completion of a required doctorate. We have all seen the dissertation take a back seat to the tasks (and the enjoyment) of creating new courses and even new programs.

Let's say the hiring was appropriate and tenure was well-deserved. Does the department have a culture of mutual enthusiasm for the ongoing improvement of teaching skills, scholarly activity, and community service? Are release time and extra money distributed with faculty input? Are there opportunities and funding for interdisciplinary development outside the department? Is there constructive feedback aimed at improving the department's cohesive function and reputation?

What is the role of student feedback in PTR? It is not unknown for faculty going up for tenure to seek glowing endorsements from their students, only to reveal their dark sides once they are secure. Student reports cannot be ignored, but they must be substantiated by peer observation and review before either positive or negative decisions are reached.

PTR must remain a collegial function to help faculty improve if they are not maintaining agreed-upon standards. If they do not improve, then it becomes administration's job to wield the axe.

Sharon Jacques, Nursing