

UK Institutional Research Brief:

Results of UK Students' Participation in the 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement

Part I: Focus on Individual Survey Items

Summer 2005

UK students participated last spring in the sixth annual administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement. In 2000, the NSSE sparked a national conversation about undergraduate learning and institutional excellence. The survey was designed as an alternative to media rankings that rely heavily on an institution's reputation and resources as the primary indicators of collegiate quality. Annual rankings of the nation's best colleges are often of limited value to institutions because they generally ignore what students experience in the classroom and around campus. NSSE was intended to be used by colleges and universities to assess the effectiveness of their undergraduate programs. Survey items focus on best practices known to engage students and foster learning. A large body of research has confirmed the expected link between student engagement and academic success.

About 240,000 students from over 500 colleges and universities completed the 2005 edition of NSSE. Students were randomly chosen from electronic data files furnished by participating institutions. Most students had the option of completing either a standard paper survey or a Web-based version. At UK, a total of 231 first-year students and seniors completed the survey. Three-quarters of our first-year students and just over half of our seniors completed the questionnaire on the Web. The response rate for UK students was 29 percent, three percentage-points less than the overall rate for students at doctoral research extensive institutions. The sampling errors for UK's first-year students and seniors were 8.8 percent and 9.2 percent, respectively. It should be noted that these margins of error are relatively large and raise some questions about the stability of this year's survey findings.

Major Findings Related to Individual Survey Items

In 2005, UK students and their peers at participating doctoral research extensive institutions differed statistically in their responses to 35 survey items. Interestingly, all but one of the significant items involved first-year students.¹ In many instances, the differences in the response patterns of UK freshmen and their counterparts are small in magnitude and are of little practical significance. However, several areas of concern were

¹ UK seniors differed significantly from their counterparts at like institutions on an item assessing the time students spend providing care for dependents who live with them. The analysis revealed that UK seniors spend less time caring for dependents. This finding is not surprising, given the high percentage of traditional-age students in UK's undergraduate population.

identified based on the results of a cluster of diversity-related items and several questions that assess curricular offerings and co-curricular activities.

Diversity-Related Issues

In 2001 and 2003, first-year students and seniors scored relatively low on several items that assess students' diversity-related experiences. UK seniors did not differ from their peers at like institutions in their responses to these questions in 2005, but our first-year students again lagged behind their peers on four diversity-related items.

Table 1
Comparison of First-year Students at UK and Doctoral Extensive Institutions
On Four Diversity-Related Items from NSSE 2005

Diversity-Related Item	UK Freshmen Responding 'Often' or 'Very Often'	Doctoral-Ext. Freshmen Responding 'Often' or 'Very Often'
How often have you had serious conversations with students of a different race/ethnicity than your own?	33%	54%
How often have you had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values?	43%	61%
How often have you tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective?	44%	62%
To what extent does your institution emphasize encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial/ethnic backgrounds?	32% *	50% *

*Note: reflects the percent of students who responded 'quite a bit' or 'very much'

Responses on these diversity-related items reveal that our first-year students are having comparatively few serious conversations with students who differ in terms of race/ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, etc. To some extent, UK's relatively poor standing on these items reflects the fact that this is a relatively homogeneous student body compared to many national research universities. Nine of ten UK undergraduates are white (88%). And a similar percentage of the undergraduate population is age 24 years or younger (89%). Finally, four of five (84%) undergraduates are from the state of Kentucky. The Campus Climate Survey and the NSSE Survey provide an important gauge of the frequency of our students' diversity-related experiences. But we will need to move beyond assessment and focus on the development of more powerful initiatives in this area if we are going to transform the nature of students' social interactions on UK's campus.

Coursework and Co-curricular Activities

NSSE asks students to evaluate the extent to which their experiences at an institution have contributed to their knowledge, skills and personal development in a number of areas. Several significant differences between UK first-year students and their counterparts at doctoral research extensive institutions appeared on items evaluating coursework and co-curricular activities:

- In evaluating their coursework, just over half (55%) of UK students reported that it ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ emphasizes synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences, compared to nearly two-thirds (64%) of their peers at similar universities.
- Just under half (46%) of UK first-year students reported ‘often’ or ‘very often’ learning something that “changed the way you understand an issue or concept,” compared to six in 10 (62%) freshmen at doctoral research extensive universities.
- Only two in five (38%) UK freshmen indicated that their institution contributed quite a bit or very much to solving complex real-world problems. Half of their peers (51%) reported that their institutions made a similar contribution to their skills in this area.
- Only one in ten (12%) UK freshmen reported often or very often attending an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance, or other theater performance during the current school year. One of four (27%) freshmen enrolled at doctoral research extensive institutions reported ‘often’ or ‘very often’ attending such activities.
- One in four (25%) UK freshmen reported that their collegiate experiences contributed quite a bit or very much to their personal development in “contributing to the welfare of your community.” Two of five (43%) students at like institutions reported that their universities had contributed to the same extent in this area.

All in all, several of the disappointing results associated with our freshmen compel us to evaluate the quality of the first-year experience along several dimensions. While differences between our first-years students and their peers at like institutions have generally been small, they have nearly always been in the less desirable direction on all three NSSE surveys where UK students have participated. The Honors Program and the Discovery Seminars appear to be enriching educational experiences for select groups of students, but these programs serve a relatively limited number of first-year students. Engaging the average first-year student in educationally purposeful ways represents a fundamental challenge facing UK administrators and faculty members.

Selected Items from the Kentucky Consortium

UK has participated in NSSE as a member of a consortium of eight public universities in the Commonwealth. Membership in the consortium enables institutions with a common background or purpose to develop additional survey items and compare how their

students respond in relation to the Consortium. Several of the items developed by the Consortium provide an interesting glimpse at the thinking of students at Kentucky's state-supported universities. Students experiencing trouble earning their degrees in a timely manner were asked to identify the factor most responsible for slowing their progress.

Figure 1

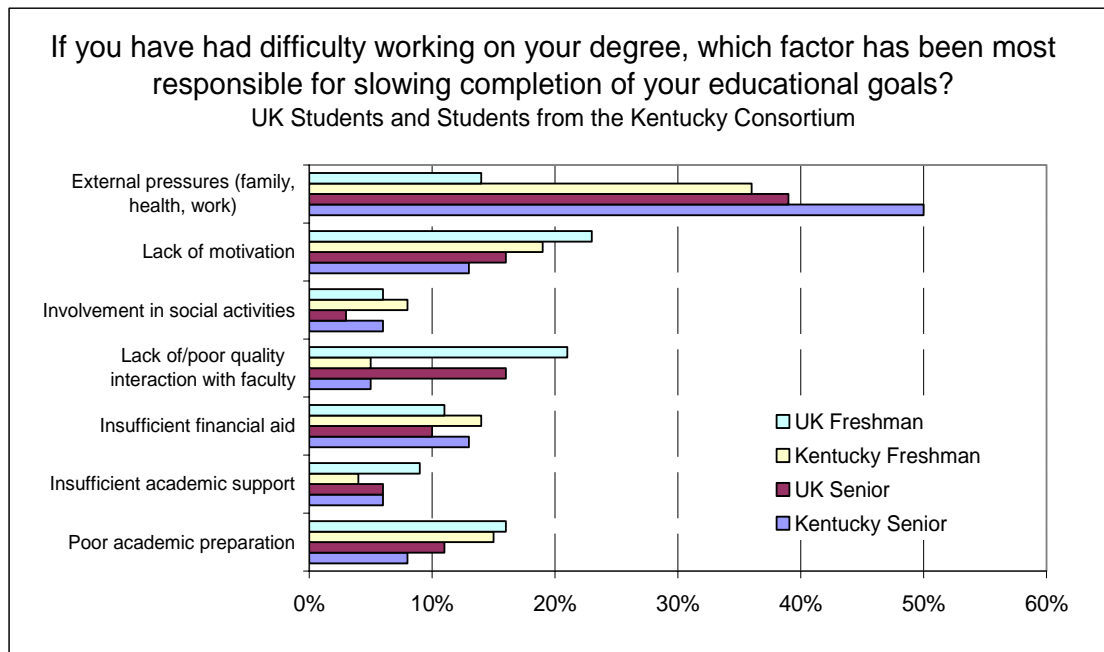
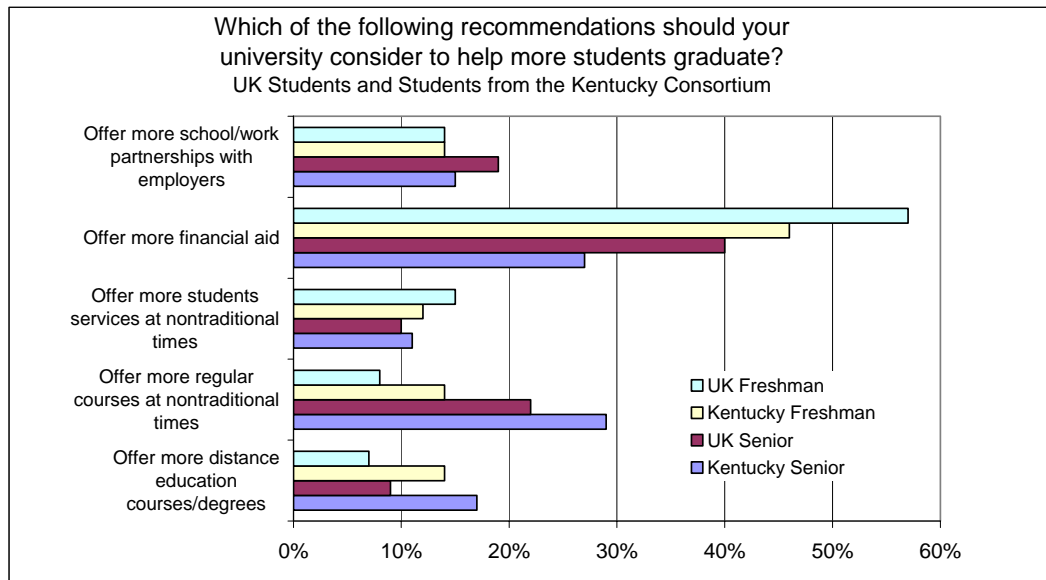


Figure 1 shows that Kentucky university students primarily attributed their lack of academic progress to external pressures (e.g., family, health and work), lack of motivation, and lack of/poor quality interaction with faculty. Two of five (39%) UK seniors selected external pressures as the most important factor hampering their ability to complete their degrees. Interestingly, UK freshmen were the least likely among Kentucky students to choose this factor. Nearly one-fourth (23%) of first-year students at UK attributed their difficulties in making academic progress to lack of motivation. Finally, both UK first-year students and seniors identified “lack of/poor quality interaction with faculty” more frequently than students from other state-supported universities.

Students enrolled at universities in the Kentucky consortium were also asked which of several listed recommendations they would endorse as ways to help more students earn their degrees. Figures 2 shows that the most frequent recommendation involved offering students more financial aid, a suggestion endorsed by well over half (57%) of UK freshmen. The most frequent recommendation identified by one in five (22%) UK seniors involved offering more regular courses at nontraditional times.

Figure 2



Other Consortium items of interest showed that, relative to students at other Kentucky universities . . .

- UK students who live on campus spend more weekends per month on campus
- UK students who live off-campus spend more hours per week on campus outside of class time
- UK students report that computers at their university are more available

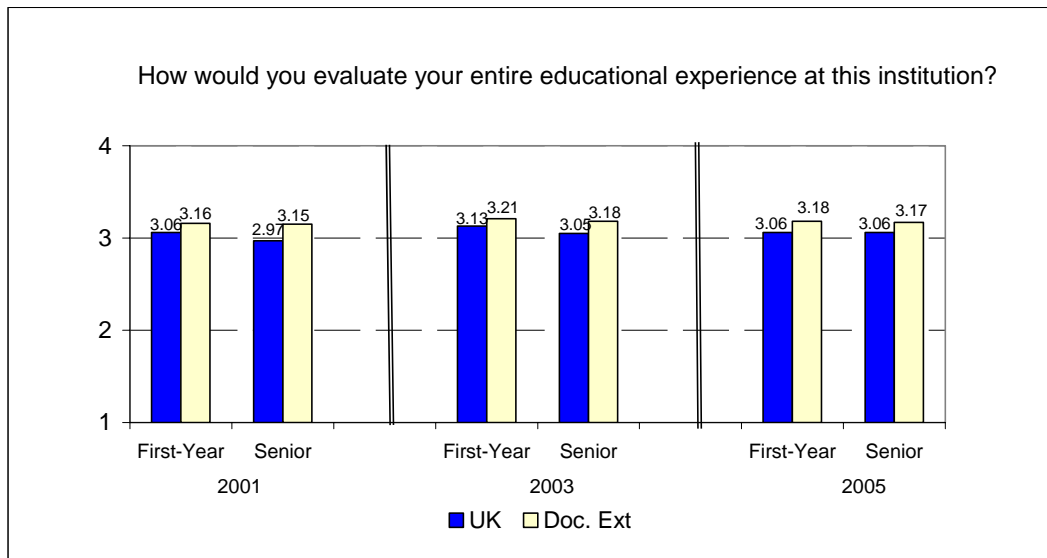
Compared to their counterparts at other Kentucky universities . . .

- UK seniors report having taken fewer on-line courses
- UK freshmen report less concern about their ability to pay for college

Student Satisfaction

The NSSE questionnaire asks students, “How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?” Judgments are made on a four-point scale ranging from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent.’ Figure 3 compares the average ratings of UK freshmen and seniors with their peers at other doctoral/research institutions. In 2001, our first-year students’ evaluations did not differ significantly from counterparts at like institutions. But UK seniors assigned significantly lower ratings to their educational experience relative to their comparison group. Two years later, despite an increase in the favorability of UK students’ ratings, both groups of students reported significantly less satisfaction than students at other large research universities. Finally, in 2005 UK students’ overall satisfaction did not differ significantly from their peers’ evaluations, although the differences in mean evaluations appear fairly consistent with previous survey results.

Figure 3



Reflections on NSSE and UK's Strategic Plan

From the standpoint of our strategic 'scorecard,' the absence of significant item-level results for seniors may be a relatively positive set of outcomes. It suggests that seniors' benchmark scores will probably not differ to a significant degree from their peers at doctoral research extensive institutions. If this is the case, it is reasonable to predict that UK will probably meet most, if not all, of its strategic goals, which involve seniors' exceeding their predicted levels of performance. There is no way to know with certainty whether UK seniors will exceed their predicted levels of performance because the benchmark analysis conducted by NSSE researchers is based, in part, on a statistical weighting of institutional demographics (e.g., selectivity, public/private status, size, 'urbanicity,' and Carnegie Classification) and student background characteristics (e.g., sex, age, race/ethnicity, part-time/full-time status, major). However, if our participation in NSSE 2003 offers a clue about the role that weighting plays in generating predicted outcomes, it appears that UK's particular demographics and background characteristics work in our favor. Benchmark scores for UK and other participating institutions are not scheduled to be released until November 2005. Part II of this Institutional Research Brief will focus on the benchmark analysis and UK's success in reaching its goals on this set of key strategic indicators.

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