



UK Institutional Research Brief: Results of UK Students' Participation in the 2009 National Survey of Student Engagement

October 2009

Since it was first piloted in 2000, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been administered annually to first-year students and seniors at approximately 1,400 colleges and universities across North America. NSSE's content is grounded firmly in the student development literature and addresses best practices associated with student involvement and learning. Questionnaire items ask students to report on the amount of time they devote to "educationally effective educational practices" and to assess activities and opportunities intended to support academic programs.

The University of Kentucky has participated biennially in this research project since 2001. NSSE survey administrators at the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning select random samples of freshmen and seniors from population files provided by each participating institution. A total of 2,285 UK students responded to the online questionnaire between February and April of 2009. UK's 38 percent response rate was the highest in recent years and surpassed the rate for our Carnegie peers (29%) for the first time in our history of participation. The sampling errors for UK's first-year and graduating senior students were plus or minus 2.6 percent and plus or minus 2.4 percent, respectively.

Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

NSSE researchers identified five benchmarks of effective educational practice using 42-items including: 1) level of academic challenge, 2) active and collaborative learning, 3) student-faculty interaction, 4) enriching educational experiences, and 5) supportive campus environment. Mean scores for UK first-year and graduating senior students are compared to mean scores of our Carnegie research-university peers. In the tables below, a statistically non-significant difference between UK students and their counterparts is signified by a level, two-directional arrow (\leftrightarrow). When UK students achieved benchmark scores significantly below their peers at the $p < .05$ level or beyond, their performance was signified by a downward arrow (\downarrow). When UK students achieved benchmark scores significantly above their peers at the $p < .05$ level or beyond, their performance was signified by an upward arrow (\uparrow).

Benchmark I: Level of Academic Challenge

The "Level of Academic Challenge" cluster consists of 11 items that measure the degree to which students report the experience of high expectations and academic effort. The indicator examines a variety of activities and conditions, including:

- Students' level of preparation for class (studying, reading, writing, etc.)
- The number of assigned books and written papers or reports of varying length
- The different levels of learning experienced (analysis to synthesis to application)

Table 1
Level of Academic Challenge:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

Class	2005	2007	2009
First-year Students	\leftrightarrow	\leftrightarrow	\leftrightarrow
Seniors	\leftrightarrow	\leftrightarrow	\downarrow

UK first-year students did not differ significantly from their Carnegie peers in their reported levels of academic challenge in 2005, 2007, and 2009. Seniors scored significantly lower than Carnegie peers on this benchmark in 2009.

Senior students scored a significantly lower mean score on the following items:

- Synthesis and organization of ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships
- Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings
- Amount of time preparing for class
- Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work

Benchmark II: Active and Collaborative Learning

This benchmark consists of seven items and was designed to assess the level of involvement of students with others in their learning activities. Developing this skill is extremely useful for students post-graduation in “real world” situations related to their employment and personal lives. Examples of questions from this benchmark include the frequency of:

- Participation in class discussions
- Work with other students on class projects
- Discussions about readings with others outside of class

Table 2
Active and Collaborative Learning:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

Class	2005	2007	2009
First-year Students	↓	↓	↔
Seniors	↔	↔	↔

First-year students and seniors responded similarly to their Carnegie class peers on this benchmark.

Benchmark III: Student-Faculty Interaction

Student-faculty interaction score is assessed using six items about the relationship between the student and faculty members inside and outside of the classroom. Students are asked about the frequency of discussions with faculty such as about:

- Grades or assignments with faculty
- Career plans
- Involvement in activities other than coursework
- Involvement in a research project outside of requirements

Table 3
Student-Faculty Interaction:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

Class	2005	2007	2009
First-year Students	↔	↔	↑
Seniors	↔	↔	↑

In 2005 and 2007, UK first-year students and seniors did not differ significantly in their amount of interaction with faculty from students at similar Carnegie institutions. However, 2009 results indicated significantly more frequent interactions with faculty compared to their peers at like institutions. Both

first-year and senior students reported meeting more frequently with faculty to talk about career plans, as well as reporting more prompt feedback from faculty about their academic performance. Seniors spent more time discussing grades and assignments with faculty than their Carnegie peers.

Benchmark IV: Enriching Educational Experiences

This 12-item benchmark measures the frequency with which students experience a variety of activities encountered outside of the classroom. Several items focus on students' experiences with diversity. Students reported their involvement in activities outside of the regular classroom, including:

- Community service or volunteer work
- Internships, practica, study abroad, field experience, and independent studies
- Co-curricular activities, such as student government, sports and organizations
- Interactions with diverse groups of students

Table 4
Enriching Educational Experiences:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

Class	2005	2007	2009
First-year Students	↓	↓	↓
Seniors	↔	↓	↓

UK first-year students have reported significantly fewer enriching educational experiences than their counterparts at similar institutions for the past three administrations of NSSE. Our seniors did not differ from their peers on this benchmark in 2005, but reported significantly fewer enriching educational experiences than their comparison group on the last two surveys.

The relatively poor performance of our first-year students and seniors on this benchmark can be attributed largely to their answers on several diversity-related items. Relative to their comparison groups, freshmen and seniors reported significantly less frequent:

- Serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own
- Serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values

First-year students reported less institutional encouragement "for contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds". The responses of first-year students on this NSSE item have been relatively consistent since the survey was first administered in 2001. Seniors however, did not score differently than Carnegie peers on this item, an improvement over all previous administrations of the NSSE.

Seniors reported significantly less participation in activities including study abroad, independent study or self-designed major, and culminating senior experience. First-year students indicated they are not planning to participate in learning communities or take foreign language coursework to the same degree as students at like institutions.

Benchmark V: Supportive Campus Environment

Six items assessed students' perceptions of the academic and social support provided in the campus environment. This final benchmark helps faculty and administrators understand students' perceptions of their relationships with others in the university community and support services provided on campus. Examples of these items are:

- Campus environment provides support to succeed academically
- Campus environment provides the support to thrive socially
- Quality of relationships with other students, faculty, and administration

Table 5
Supportive Campus Environment:
Comparison with Carnegie Peers

Class	2005	2007	2009
First-year Students	↓	↓	↔
Seniors	↔	↓	↓

In 2005 and 2007, UK first-year students' evaluations of campus support were below their counterparts at comparable institutions. However, first-year students' evaluations were no different than their Carnegie peers in 2009. Seniors rated the level of campus support no differently than their peers in 2005, but gave significantly poorer evaluations on this benchmark in 2007 and 2009.

In 2009, seniors reported significantly less institutional emphasis than their Carnegie peers on the following dimensions:

- Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically
- Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)

Two Key Findings of Interest to the UK Community

Advising

Each student is prompted to rate on a four-point scale the quality of academic advising received in their time at UK. In 2005, first-year students and seniors at UK and students at comparable institutions did not differ in their evaluation of academic advising. In 2007, however, UK seniors gave lower marks to the quality of academic advising than students attending similar institutions. In 2009, first-year students rated the quality of advising significantly higher than students at peer institutions. However, seniors rated the quality significantly lower than their peers.

Overall Student Satisfaction

The NSSE questionnaire asks students, "How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?" In 2005, evaluations given by our first-year students and seniors did not differ significantly from counterparts at like institutions. However, both groups of UK students expressed significantly less satisfaction with their entire education experience than their Carnegie peers in 2007 and 2009. Clearly, we need to make improvements that will boost students' satisfaction ratings. But one should not conclude from this finding that students are dissatisfied with how their time has been spent at UK. Eighty-eight percent of first-years students and 79 percent of seniors rated their educational experience at UK as *good* or *excellent*.

UK's Success in Meeting CPE Goals for NSSE 2009

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education requires institutions to propose annual goals on a variety of key indicators, including NSSE results. A process has been established whereby CPE and each

public postsecondary institution negotiate the final goals that will be presented in the system-wide accountability report.

The CPE has focused on 18 NSSE-related indicators involving the five benchmarks of effective educational practice and four survey items that assess civic engagement, such as voting and volunteerism. Separate goals are established for first-year students and seniors. For each indicator, UK set targets that constituted a statistically significant gain over the scores earned in 2007.

Table 6 shows the performance of UK freshmen and seniors on NSSE 2009 in relation to the CPE goals. NSSE survey administrators converted the benchmark scores to a 100-point scale to make it simpler for institutions to compare themselves to other similar institutions and to the entire sample. The percentage scores reflect the proportion of students who gave certain answers (e.g., 'quite a bit' or 'very much') to the four civic engagement items.

Table 6 Performance on CPE's Key Indicators for NSSE 2009

NSSE	2009*	2009 Goal
Student Engagement	<i>First-Year Students</i>	
Academic challenge	54	53
Active/collaborative learning	41	38
Student/faculty interaction	34	32
Enriching educational experiences	28	27
Supportive campus environment	60	57
Student Engagement	<i>Seniors</i>	
Academic challenge	55	55
Active/collaborative learning	49	49
Student/faculty interaction	42	41
Enriching educational experiences	41	41
Supportive campus environment	54	54
Civic Participation	<i>First-Year Students</i>	
Volunteering	43%	39%
Community projects	40%	31%
Voting	50%	35%
Community welfare	48%	43%
Civic Participation	<i>Seniors</i>	
Volunteering	49%	49%
Community projects	42%	42%
Voting	41%	31%
Community welfare	44%	44%

*Note: Scores are rounded to the nearest whole number in accordance with CPE reporting guidelines.

The results presented in Table 6 show that UK was successful on each of 18 NSSE indicators. This appears to be a genuine accomplishment, given the statistical manner in which each goal was set. In all likelihood, these findings suggest that certain initiatives to improve the quality of undergraduate education are beginning to pay dividends.

NSSE and the Strategic Planning Efforts of Colleges

Colleges are currently developing objectives and metrics that will support the University's Strategic Plan for 2009 – 2014. In the areas of student preparation and promotion of diversity, UK's success in meeting several objectives and strategies in the Plan could be measured, in part, by students' responses on the NSSE.¹ The Office of Institutional Research has taken the raw survey data, disaggregated the results for each undergraduate college, and soon will distribute the results to each dean. Listed below are three relevant metrics from the Strategic Plan for 2009-2014 that could be used by colleges as a starting point in the development of their own plans:

Metric 1-4 Increase the number of high impact co-curricular activities that support the student's classroom experience in the areas of research, community service, leadership development, internationalization, and inclusion.

Metric 4-1 Ensure that all educational and administrative units implement strategies to achieve inclusive excellence.

Metric 4-5 Improve student ratings of curricular and co-curricular effectiveness in promoting diversity and inclusion, according to results of a university-wide survey

UK students first took NSSE in 2001. The findings have repeatedly suggested that our greatest challenge may involve raising scores on the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark. First-year students indicated they are not planning to participate in learning communities or take foreign language coursework to the same degree as students at like institutions. In the past two administrations of the survey, seniors reported relatively lower participation in educationally enriching activities, such as study abroad, independent study or self-designed major, and a culminating senior experience. Compared to their peers at similar institutions, UK freshmen and seniors have consistently reported fewer meaningful interactions with students of a different race/ethnicity or demographic background than their own. Colleges may want to reflect on the range of enriching educational experiences available to their students and plan to implement and assess their initiatives accordingly.

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¹ The decision to employ a web-based method of administering NSSE and to oversample students yielded fairly large sample sizes in 2007 and 2009. While the sampling errors for some colleges may be somewhat high, the findings are still informative and could play a role in strategic planning and policy development.