

EDITORS' NOTES

This volume is about three contemporary trends in American higher education that affect the work of institutional researchers. The first is the unabated appetite for more evidence, accountability, and transparency of student and institutional performance. State and federal governments and other groups continue to demand that colleges and universities demonstrate that they are using their resources in an efficient and effective manner while delivering the best education possible at a reasonable cost (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006). Colleges and universities are expected to assess and evaluate their curricula, programs, and services at all levels to maximize student learning and demonstrate faculty productivity and institutional quality. These circumstances have made additional demands on the time and expertise of institutional research professionals (Howard, 2001; Knight, 2003).

This leads to the second trend: the increased visibility and importance of institutional research offices staffed by highly skilled and competent professionals who can provide campus leaders with objective, trustworthy data about student and institutional performance (Howard, 2001; Terenzini, 1993). Institutional researchers provide evidence for planning, policy formation, and decision making to help an institution more effectively allocate resources in line with its missions, goals, and objectives, thereby demonstrating that the college or university is worthy of the support of its various stakeholders (Saupe, 1981; Dressell, 1981). Toward this end, institutional researchers gather evidence to inform the approval of new academic programs, program reviews, and reports to external bodies such as accreditors. They conduct analyses of existing data that range from the simply descriptive to multivariate modeling to determine what various units are doing and how well. Recently institutional researchers have become more involved in activities to assess institutional conditions that support teaching and student learning outcomes.

The third trend is the ascendance of student engagement and other process indicators that serve as both proxy measures for institutional quality and actionable information to inform improvement efforts. The most widely used of these tools is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE's popularity is a function of forces in the external environment that in retrospect all but guaranteed its success, although its developers could not know this at the outset. By the late 1990s, regional accreditors were requiring that all institutions provide evidence of the quality of the undergraduate experience and that institutions use the information they

were gathering to strengthen their programs and practices. NSSE was almost a perfect tool in this regard, inasmuch as it was designed and its reports formatted so that a campus could benchmark its results against those of similar schools and use the data almost immediately to point to places where changes in policies and practices could enhance student engagement. The final report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly known as the Spellings Commission, *A Test of Leadership* (2006), recommended NSSE as one of the instruments institutions should use. Subsequently, the Voluntary System of Accountability, a joint effort of the National Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, designated NSSE as one of the preferred tools for reporting selected dimensions of the quality of the student experience.

In addition, business leaders and policymakers called for colleges and universities to graduate more students, especially those from historically underserved populations, in order for the United States to remain economically competitive in a global marketplace. Some colleges and universities turned to NSSE because it provided data about activities and institutional actions that decades of research indicated were linked to student persistence and graduation.

Another reason NSSE has been well received is that from the beginning, its staff were unequivocally committed to continuous improvement and working closely with their “customers”: institutional researchers and assessment personnel, academic administrators and student life programmers, and leaders of national associations with similar aims. Its National Advisory Board held NSSE staff to high performance expectations, one of which was to make the case to the media for why student engagement mattered to student learning in contrast to institutional resources and reputation, the two major planks on which popular college rankings rested.

As a result, student engagement is now part of the higher education lexicon in North America. This *New Directions for Institutional Research* volume explains the value and relevance of the student engagement construct and how NSSE results have been used for various purposes.

In Chapter One, George Kuh describes in detail the circumstance out of which NSSE emerged, its conceptual roots, and its empirical foundations. He then traces NSSE’s development, discusses its mission and guiding policies and practices, and concludes with some observations about how NSSE has influenced the role of institutional researchers.

NSSE was designed to be used by colleges and universities to inform planning, assessment, and improvement. In the second chapter, Trudy Banta, Gary Pike, and Michele Hansen draw on their experiences at different institutions to illustrate how student engagement results can be used toward these ends.

Although NSSE is a fairly short questionnaire, the data can be analyzed in different ways to shed light on aspects of the student experience that are

linked to student learning and other dimensions of collegiate quality. In addition, students' responses can be linked to other information an institution has to provide a somewhat nuanced picture of what undergraduates do and what they gain from college. In Chapter Three, Pu-Shih Daniel Chen and colleagues, research analysts familiar with NSSE data, discuss some of the key issues in getting the most out of an institution's student engagement results.

Students do not start college with a clean slate; rather, they come pre-disposed to engage in certain activities and not others. In Chapter Four, James Cole, Marianne Kennedy, and Michael Ben-Avie describe the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement and how it can be used to measure entering first-year students' precollege academic and cocurricular experiences, as well as their interest in and expectations for participating in educationally purposeful activities during college. The goal is to better understand the influence of the institution on student performance.

One of the unequivocal findings from the NSSE project is that students generally do what their instructors ask them to do. In Chapter Five, Thomas Nelson Laird and colleagues discuss how faculty members influence student engagement through their teaching methods, priorities for student participation in effective educational practices, and campus leadership. The authors detail four roles faculty can play in assessing student engagement, an approach that can help institutional researchers and others work constructively with faculty members, some of whom tend to dismiss or ignore assessment findings.

In the next chapter, Jillian Kinzie and Barbara Pennipede further illustrate how institutions have used their NSSE results to induce positive changes in teaching, learning, and other institutional practices. Examples from different types of colleges and universities show how faculty, student affairs professionals, academic administrators, and others have worked together to implement policies and practices that foster higher levels of student engagement. They offer six recommendations for how institutional researchers can turn engagement survey results into action.

The founders of NSSE envisioned that eventually student engagement results could be used along with other information to demonstrate institutional effectiveness and respond to public calls for transparency and accountability. In Chapter Seven, Alex McCormick discusses NSSE's contribution toward these ends and how the project has helped shift the national conversation away from institutional resources and reputation as markers of collegiate quality to a focus on what students actually do. McCormick's cogently explicated concept of reflective accountability sits in contrast to notions of external accountability and appeals to the professional sensibilities of educators and institutional leaders committed to quality improvement and public transparency.

Finally, Robert Gonyea and George Kuh use an organizational intelligence framework to tie together the key themes addressed by the authors of

the previous chapters. They conclude that effective use of student engagement as an organizing construct for institutional improvement, accountability, and transparency requires that institutional researchers use multiple layers of organizational intelligence (Terenzini, 1993): technical knowledge, analytical skill, and comprehensive understandings about the relevance of engagement the current context.

Taken together, the contributors to this volume make plain why and how student engagement is a concept and data source with which institutional researchers must become familiar and use to help colleges and universities deal productively with the challenges of assessment, improvement, accountability, and transparency.

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