

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN KSU'S FIRST-YEAR
AND SENIOR-YEAR EXPERIENCES:
MORE NUGGETS FROM NSSE**

**Center for Institutional Effectiveness
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In August 2004, "Nuggets from NSSE" summarized a number of key findings gleaned from the responses of KSU's first-year and senior students to the individual items on the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In November, NSSE released the Institutional Benchmark Report which contained multi-item institutional scores for KSU on five clusters or benchmarks of effective educational practice:

- 1) Level of Academic Challenge
- 2) Active & Collaborative Learning
- 3) Student-Faculty Interaction
- 4) Enriching Educational Experiences
- 5) Supportive Campus Environment

This report, subtitled "More Nuggets from NSSE," summarizes key findings gleaned from KSU's benchmark scores, KSU's score comparisons with Master's I & II institutions, and KSU's Institutional Engagement Index that takes key differences among student bodies and universities into account. Overall, KSU's report card on the 2004 NSSE benchmarks contained high marks for the senior-year experience and lower grades for the first-year experience.

KSU'S High Student Engagement Scores for the Senior-Year Experience

KSU's benchmark scores for Level of Academic Challenge and Active & Collaborative Learning were exceptionally strong. KSU's scores on these two vital domains of student engagement for effective learning were higher than those at more than 80% of all other Master's I & II institutions. Furthermore, KSU seniors were engaged in academic challenge and collaborative learning substantially more than was expected according to the Engagement Index adjustments for institutions and student bodies like KSU's.

KSU's benchmark scores for Enriching Educational Experiences, Supportive Campus Environment, and Student-Faculty Interaction were strong as well, but closer to the average scores for other Master's I & II institutions. KSU's scores for the first two of these benchmarks were slightly above comparator averages and higher than 60% of those at other Master's I and II institutions. KSU's score for Faculty-Student Interaction was slightly below average and higher than 40% of all comparators in the Carnegie classification. Here too, KSU seniors were engaged more than expected in all three of these domains according to the Engagement Index adjustments for institutions and student bodies like KSU's.

Overall, KSU's senior-year experience reflected average to exceptionally high student engagement on the five NSSE benchmarks. KSU's senior-year experience was especially strong

in Active & Collaborative Learning and Level of Academic Challenge, which are two benchmarks of long-standing institutional emphasis at KSU. These assessment results provide another set of supportive evidence that KSU's student learning outcomes are being achieved for its graduating students.

KSU'S Lower Student Engagement Scores for the First-Year Experience

KSU's first-year experience was strongest on two key benchmarks of Active and Collaborative Learning and Enriching Educational Experiences. On those benchmarks, KSU's scores were approximately equivalent to the averages for Master's I & II institutions and were higher than those at 50% of other comparators in the Carnegie classification. For both of these benchmarks, KSU first-year students were notably more engaged than expected when institutional and student characteristics were taken into account in the Engagement Index adjustments.

In contrast, KSU's Level of Academic Challenge for first-year students was substantially less than the average for comparable institutions. About two-thirds of the Master's I & II institutions were more challenging than KSU for first-year students. Surprisingly, KSU's benchmark scores for Student-Faculty Interaction and Supportive Campus Environment were exceptionally low among first-year experiences at comparable institutions. For both of these NSSE benchmarks, more than 80% of the Master's I & II institutions had higher scores than KSU on these facilitative dimensions of student engagement. Furthermore, KSU's benchmark score on Supportive Campus Environment for the first-year experience was the only one of KSU's ten benchmark scores for which KSU students were less engaged than would have been predicted once adjustments for the characteristics of the institution and its student body were taken into account.

In sum, KSU's first-year experience reflected below average to average student engagement on the five NSSE benchmarks. KSU's first-year experience was particularly weak in Student-Faculty Interaction and Supportive Campus Environment. Unlike its senior-year experience, KSU's first-year experience was not uniformly strong or exemplary on the five NSSE benchmarks when compared to other universities. Consequently, the first-year experience may not be achieving the optimal levels of student learning and student success that are expected. Room for improvement of student engagement in KSU's first-year experience is indicated.

KSU'S Change in Student Engagement from the First Year to the Senior Year

KSU's scores on all five NSSE benchmarks for the senior year were higher than the corresponding scores for the first-year experience. With the exception of Supportive Campus Environment, sizeable increases in benchmark scores were observed from the first-year to the senior-year experience. This was an affirming finding since it suggests that KSU's level of student engagement grows substantially from the first year to the senior year. These assessment results support KSU's expectation that its undergraduates will become increasingly challenged academically, active and collaborative in their learning, enriched by their educational

experiences, involved with the faculty, and supported in their student success as they progress from the first-year experience to the senior-year experience.

In addition, KSU's percentile rankings among Master's I & II institutions on all five NSSE benchmarks rose to higher positions by the senior year. In fact, KSU's low rankings on several student engagement benchmarks in the first-year experience were raised substantially to higher, and sometimes exceptionally high, rankings by the senior year. For example, KSU's low ranking on Supportive Campus Environment during the first-year experience exhibited an especially strong recovery by the senior year.

For all Master's I & II institutions, the average student engagement scores for the senior-year experience were higher than those for the first-year experience with the exception of Supportive Campus Environment where the average for seniors was lower. KSU's benchmark score on Supportive Campus Environment for seniors increased modestly and did not decline from the first-year level. That helped raise KSU's ranking for seniors by about 50 percentage points over the comparative ranking of the first-year score. KSU's benchmark scores from the first year to the senior year typically increased more than those of comparators which contributed to KSU's rise in its rankings for the senior-year experience.

A Closer Look at the Weaknesses in the First-Year Experience

KSU's first-year experience was especially weak on two NSSE benchmarks: 1) Student-Faculty Interaction, and 2) Supportive Campus Environment. A closer look at the items that comprised these benchmark scores may be useful for planning improvements in the first-year experience.

Of the six NSSE survey items that were used to calculate Student-Faculty Interaction scores, KSU's first-year students reported significantly less engagement than their Carnegie classification comparators on only two of the six: "Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor" and "Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)." KSU's lower scores on these two items were key factors in the institution's low ranking on this particular benchmark of student engagement. It is important to note, however, that KSU students reported significantly less extracurricular involvement than other students, probably due to their greater competing obligations of work and family responsibilities. Being less engaged in extracurricular activities explains in part why KSU students reported having less extracurricular contact with faculty.

Caution is advised when attempting to interpret KSU's weak showing on Faculty-Student Interaction. This benchmark score is derived from six survey items, only one of which pertains to student advisement ("Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor."). Three of the six items concern course-related student engagement with faculty ("Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor," "Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance [written or oral]," and "Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class"). The sixth item ("Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements") concerns undergraduate research which typically engages more upper-division students than freshmen. Strategies to increase the engagement of

first-year students with faculty would have to focus on the specific kinds of student-faculty interaction reflected in the six items that make up this benchmark score before KSU's first-year experience ranking among peer institutions would improve.

KSU's low ranking on Supportive Campus Environment also requires careful scrutiny. First-year students reported significantly less engagement than their Carnegie classification counterparts on three of the six survey items used to calculate this benchmark score. These included rating the KSU experience on "Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)," "Providing the support you need to thrive socially," and "Providing the support you need to succeed academically." On the first two of these pertaining to social and non-academic support, KSU was rated substantially lower than on the third involving academic support.

It is important to note that KSU's first-year students were much more nontraditional and carried heavier employment and family obligations than their counterparts at Master's I & II institutions. Consequently, the need for greater help in coping with non-academic responsibilities may be particularly important for improving KSU's benchmark score on Supportive Campus Environment. Furthermore, traditional-age freshmen who take on nontraditional characteristics (such as working more than half-time, enrolling part-time, and residing off campus) may need additional help in coping with non-academic responsibilities as do the nontraditional-age students.

The other three items that were included in KSU's low benchmark score on Supportive Campus Environment pertained to the quality of the relationships between first-year students and other students, the faculty, and administrative personnel. Relationships between first-year students and other students and the faculty received high ratings. Substantially lower ratings were reported on the quality of student relationships with administrative offices and personnel. However, KSU's ratings were not significantly different from the averages of national comparators on any of the relationship questions. Although opportunities exist to improve relationships with all three groups, the greatest room for improvement appears to be between first-year students and administrative personnel.

Keep in mind that KSU's first-year respondents had more nontraditional student attributes than their comparison groups. Consequently, first-year programming and initiatives that focus primarily on traditional students may be overlooking opportunities to improve the first-year experience of the nontraditional students who make up a substantial portion of KSU's student body. However, simply including nontraditional students in the same first-year experience programs as traditional students may not be an effective educational strategy to remedy this situation. Some of the different needs and circumstances of traditional and nontraditional students may warrant different kinds of supportive interventions. KSU's benchmark score on Supportive Campus Environment may not improve until the unique needs of all first-year students are better served.

Additional Analyses Still Pending in 2005

By the end of 2005, KSU will have received its NSSE benchmark scores from a second survey administration. At that time, the stability of 2004 NSSE results can be tested against another set of samples of KSU's first-year and senior-year students. Some of the 2004 results could be replicated if the effects noted in the 2004 findings are stable and well-established. Others could change, especially for the first-year experience since recently adopted programmatic improvements in 2004-2005 could impact first-year respondents in 2005 as they progress through the early stages of forming their impressions of KSU.

Two additional analyses of responses to the 2004 NSSE are also still pending which could shed further light on KSU's standing relative to the NSSE benchmarks and other Master's I & II institutions. Both pending analyses will take an in-depth look at the effects of KSU's heavy weighting of nontraditional students in its respondent samples. One of these will compare KSU with a national pool of 20 metropolitan universities that participated in NSSE in 2004. The other analysis will examine respondent differences between KSU's traditional and nontraditional students. It is possible that KSU's standing relative to other metropolitan universities will be stronger than its standing among all Master's I & II institutions, many of which have more traditional student bodies than KSU's. It is also possible that KSU's standing for its traditional students will compare more favorably with other universities when the effects of the nontraditional students are separated out of the analysis.

Although KSU's low marks on the engagement levels of its first-year experience were disappointing, the pending analyses involving metropolitan university comparators and differences between traditional and nontraditional respondents might yield additional positive findings. Regardless, the assessment findings described in "More Nuggets from NSSE" should serve to stimulate constructive campus conversations and actions to improve the KSU experience for all students, especially in the first-year experience.