

**EVIDENCE OF A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT  
FOR STUDENT SUCCESS AT KSU: SELECTED RESULTS FROM THE  
2004 NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

**Center for Institutional Effectiveness  
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KSU's results from the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) yielded solid evidence of the university's provision of a friendly and supportive learning environment for first-year and senior undergraduates. Many of KSU's initiatives to create a facilitative campus environment were operating well according to student respondents to the NSSE. First-year and senior students judged their relationships with other students and with faculty members as very strong. Support provided to students for academic success was given high marks. Evidence of a campus climate that honors student diversity was found. Opportunities for improving support for student success were also indicated in administrative offices, non-academic and social support systems, academic advising, and services for nontraditional students.

**Student and Faculty Relationships at KSU Get High Marks**

KSU's first-year and senior students gave their relationships with other students especially high marks (item 8a). Their relationships with faculty members were also very highly rated (item 8b). Roughly nine out of every 10 first-year and senior respondents rated other KSU students as more friendly, supportive, and inclusive than not. A similar proportion of respondents judged KSU faculty members to be more available, helpful, and sympathetic than not. In contrast, relationships with administrative personnel were not evaluated as favorably (item 8c). The proportions of respondents who evaluated administrative personnel as more helpful, considerate, and flexible than not were significantly lower at roughly six out of every 10. (See Table 1.) There appears to be substantial room for improvement in "customer relations" at KSU between administrative personnel and students.

All of the average ratings given by first-year and senior students in these three relationship categories were similar to and not statistically different from those of the national comparator groups of the total NSSE sample and the sample for the Master's I and II Carnegie classification. This suggests that KSU's high marks fell within the patterns for the national mainstream and were not exceptional relative to comparator groups. It also suggests that administrative personnel get less favorable ratings than other students and faculty nationally, not just at KSU.

**Table 1**  
**Percent of KSU Respondents Giving Favorable Ratings**  
**to the Quality of Relationships on Campus**

| <b>Relationships Evaluated at KSU</b>  | <b>% with a rating of 5, 6, or 7</b> |               |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------------|
|  | <b>First-Year</b>                    | <b>Senior</b> |
| Relationships with other students who were rated more friendly, supportive, and inclusive than not         | 87%                                  | 91%           |
| Relationships with faculty who were rated more available, helpful, and sympathetic than not                | 82%                                  | 90%           |
| Relationships with administrative personnel who were rated more helpful, considerate and flexible than not | 67%*                                 | 59%*          |

\*Significantly different from faculty and other students using Chi Square at  $p < .05$ , d.f. = 1.

**Support for Academic Success is Strong but First-Year Students Find Support Systems in General to be Slightly Below Par**

Nearly seven out of every 10 first-year respondents and eight out of 10 seniors reported that KSU provided "quite a bit" or "very much" of the support needed to succeed academically (item 10b). These results were very affirming. In contrast, only a third of the first-year students and a quarter of the seniors reported that KSU provided high levels of support needed to thrive socially (item 10e). Furthermore, only about one-fifth of the respondents said that KSU provided high levels of support to help students cope with their non-academic responsibilities of work, family, etc. (item 10d). Unexpectedly, the average ratings of KSU's first-year respondents were modestly, but significantly, lower than the average ratings of national comparators in all three of these support functions. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2**  
**Significant Differences in Ratings of Support for Student Success**  
**Between First-Year KSU Students and National Comparators**

| <b>KSU Support for First-Year Success</b>        | <b>% "Quite a Bit" or "Very Much"</b> |                |             |
|--|---------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
|  | <b>KSU</b>                            | <b>Masters</b> | <b>NSSE</b> |
| Provided Support Needed to Succeed Academically  | 69%*                                  | 77%            | 78%         |
| Provided Support Needed to Thrive Socially       | 33%*                                  | 41%            | 42%         |
| Provided Support Needed to Cope Non-Academically | 20%*                                  | 32%            | 32%         |

\*Significantly lower as determined by NSEE in means comparisons (two-tailed)  $p < .05$

Despite KSU's long history of substantial initiatives in promoting student success, especially for first-year students, significantly fewer KSU respondents than their counterparts in national comparator groups reported getting strong support for student success, especially in coping with the non-academic challenges of work and family life. Although students nationally gave non-academic support services relatively low marks, that finding may be more understandable and acceptable for the national comparator groups since the vast majority of their students are "traditional." KSU's respondents were much more heavily "nontraditional," and the non-academic support needs of that major segment of first-year students are apparently not being served or addressed strongly. The significantly greater work and family demands of KSU's first-year students were reflected in the findings that 77% of KSU's first-year respondents worked off campus compared to 39% and 33% of the two national comparator groups. Similarly, 55% of KSU's first-year respondents reported providing care for dependents compared to 26% and 22% of the two national comparator groups. Clearly, coping with the non-academic challenges of work and family responsibilities is a substantially greater and wide-ranging challenge for first-year students at KSU than at comparator institutions nationally. KSU's first-year experience may need to address these needs more strongly and substantially.

Similarly, the disproportionate number of older nontraditional age freshmen at KSU (47% compared to 15% and 12% in the national samples who were 20 or older) may be affecting the results for social success. The highly nonresidential nature of the KSU first-year sample (84% compared to 37% and 32% in the national samples) could be contributing as well. Older adult students who live off campus, have family responsibilities, and are employed off campus may not need as much support to thrive socially as traditional age residential students. The social networks of nontraditional first-year students may already be highly established when they come to KSU. That may not be as true for traditional freshmen. Accordingly, finding ways to improve support for social success may need to involve different strategies for traditional and nontraditional students.

### **Results on First-Year Participation in Learning Communities are Mixed**

Significantly more of KSU's first-year students reported having participated in a learning community than did first-year students in the national samples (item 7c). That finding probably correlates with KSU's extensive commitment to the CLASS initiative, especially for residential freshmen. The involvement of KSU's freshmen in learning communities is a progressive strategy for promoting academic and social success.

While this finding is notable, its impact is rather modest. Only 21% of KSU's first-year respondents had participated in a learning community compared to 12% of the first-year students in the national samples. Another 17% at KSU planned to do so. In contrast, two-thirds of KSU's first-year students were either undecided about participating (20%) or did not plan to do so (42%). Perhaps this divided interest in learning communities reflects differences between traditional and nontraditional students.

## Facilitating Student Success Through Co-Curricular Involvement Remains an Exceptional Challenge at KSU

Significantly fewer first-year and senior students at KSU than in the national comparator groups reported participating in collegiate co-curricular activities (item 9d). Whereas six out of every 10 first-year students in the national samples reported spending at least one hour per week in co-curricular involvement, only two out of every 10 KSU freshmen were engaged in co-curricular activity. A low rate of co-curricular involvement at KSU was also found for seniors. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3**  
**Significant Differences in Co-Curricular Time Allocations of KSU Students\***

| Student Group and Time Allocation                    | % of Respondents |          |      | KSU Differences |
|--|------------------|----------|------|-----------------|
|  | KSU              | Master's | NSSE |                 |
| First-Year Working Off-Campus More Than Half Time    | 48%              | 16%      | 12%  | Significant     |
| Seniors Working Off Campus More Than Half Time       | 59%              | 34%      | 28%  | Significant     |
| First-Year Providing Care for Family Dependents      | 55%              | 26%      | 22%  | Significant     |
| Seniors Providing Care for Family Dependents         | 50%              | 39%      | 34%  | Significant     |
| First-Year Participating in Co-Curricular Activities | 22%              | 57%      | 62%  | Significant     |
| Seniors Participating in Co-Curricular Activities    | 32%              | 51%      | 56%  | Significant     |

\*Significance of differences was determined by NSSE in means comparisons (two-tailed)  $p < .05$

Compared to their national counterparts, the heavily nontraditional and nonresidential first-year and senior samples of KSU students reported significantly more hours per week working for pay off campus and providing care for dependent family members. Consequently, the finding that KSU students at both levels reported significantly less time devoted to participating in co-curricular activities each week is understandable. Juggling academic studies, work, and family responsibilities can constitute a heavy load that leaves little time for co-curricular activity. The substantially lower participation of KSU students in on-campus co-curricular activities greatly restricts KSU's opportunities to facilitate the development of student success through such activities.

Consistent with the results for co-curricular participation, KSU's first-year students reported significantly less activity than their national counterparts in working with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.). Eight out of every 10 KSU freshmen (78%) reported never working with faculty on co-curricular activities compared to six out of every 10 for the national samples of freshmen (62% of the Carnegie Masters I & II and 60% of the total NSSE samples). KSU seniors, on the other hand, did not differ significantly from their national counterparts on this item of engagement (item 1s).

KSU's first-year students also reported significantly less institutional emphasis on attending campus events and activities (speakers, performances, athletics, etc.) than their counterparts reported for their institutions in the national comparator groups. About half of KSU freshmen (47%) reported "quite a bit" or "very much" emphasis on attending campus events compared to two-thirds of the national samples (63% of Carnegie Masters I & II and 65% of total NSSE). KSU seniors, on the other hand, did not differ from their national counterparts on this item (item 10f).

When asked if they attended an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance or other theater performance during the current year (item 6a), significantly more KSU seniors reported not having done so (45%) than KSU freshmen (30%). In this case, significantly fewer KSU seniors reported attending arts events than seniors in the two national samples, but there was no significant difference between first-year students at KSU and at comparator institutions.

### **More KSU Students are Disengaged with Physical Exercise**

Physical exercise reduces stress and promotes wellness which are important elements of student success. Regrettably, significantly fewer KSU first-year and senior students reported exercising often in comparison with their counterparts in the national samples (item 6b). A third of the KSU freshmen and a third of the KSU seniors reported exercising often during the current year. In contrast, about half of the national samples of freshmen and seniors exercised often. The heavy representation of nontraditional students and a lack of fitness facilities for student use at KSU may be contributing to these findings. Perhaps this disengagement with physical exercise will diminish when KSU's new fitness facility becomes available.

### **Academic Advising Gets Relatively Strong Ratings but is Slightly Below Par for First-Year Students at KSU**

About seven out of every 10 respondents evaluated the quality of KSU's academic advising as "good" or "excellent" (item 12). First-year students gave advising a "good" rating more often (46%) than any other rating, and seniors gave advising an "excellent" rating more often than any other (35%). However, a third of both groups assigned a low quality rating to academic advising of either "fair" or "poor." The average rating of advisement for KSU seniors was very similar to and not significantly different from the averages for seniors in the national comparator groups. However, the average rating of academic advisement for KSU's first-year students was modestly and significantly lower than the averages from the two national comparator groups. There appears to be substantial room for improving academic advising at KSU, especially for first-year students.

A related advisement item on the NSSE asked students to report how often they talked with a faculty member or advisor about career plans (item 1o). Despite the strong career interests of most KSU students, a fourth (24%) of KSU's seniors and 41% of the first-year students said they had "never" discussed career plans with a KSU advisor. In comparison, 15% of the two national samples of seniors and 23% of the national first-year pools reported never discussing their career plans with a college advisor. KSU's average ratings on this item for first-year and senior students were significantly lower than the average ratings for both national comparator groups. The need for greater attention to career advisement from the first year to the senior year at KSU is indicated.

### **Interaction Among Diverse Student Groups is Experienced More Often at KSU**

About half of KSU's first-year and senior students reported being encouraged greatly to interact with students from different economic, social, racial/ethnic backgrounds (item 10c). These results were similar to and not significantly different from those in the national comparator groups. However, when asked how often they had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity, KSU seniors reported a modestly and significantly higher frequency of such conversations than seniors in the two national comparator groups (item 1u). KSU seniors also reported significantly higher frequencies of serious conversations with students of different religious, political, and value orientations (item 1v). Although the effect sizes for these significant differences were small, the results are consistent with a long history of campus-wide efforts at KSU to promote and honor student diversity. (See Table 4.)

**Table 4**

#### **Contact and Conversations Among Students of Diverse Backgrounds as Reported by Seniors**

| <b>Type of Contact</b>   | <b>% "Often" or "Very Often"</b> |                 |             | <b>Differences*</b> |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------|
|  | <b>KSU</b>                       | <b>Master's</b> | <b>NSSE</b> |                     |
| Contact Among Students from Different Backgrounds is Encouraged          | 44%                              | 43%             | 44%         | Not Significant     |
| Respondents Had Serious Conversations with Students of Different Races   | 67%                              | 49%             | 55%         | Significant         |
| Respondents Had Serious Conversations with Students of Different Beliefs | 66%                              | 54%             | 55%         | Significant         |

\*Significance determined by NSSE in means comparison (two-tailed)  $p < .05$

## **Opportunities for Follow-up and Campus Conversations About Improving a Supportive Environment for Student Success at KSU**

The evidence presented in this report from the results of KSU's participation in NSSE suggests several questions and opportunities for follow-up and campus-wide deliberation:

1. What campus-wide campaigns should be undertaken to improve the relationship between students and KSU's administrative faculty and staff so that more students appreciate our helpfulness, consideration, and flexibility?
2. Even though most students gave KSU high marks for our support systems for academic success, what more could be done to strengthen academic support services in the future?
3. How could academic advising and career counseling be strengthened substantially at KSU, especially for the first-year student?
4. Are we articulating persuasively to students and colleagues the potential academic and social benefits of CLASS learning communities, and are we concentrating our best efforts or realizing those potentials?
5. What realistic goals might we set for improving the support services that facilitate social and non-academic success at KSU, and should our strategies for addressing the needs of traditional freshmen be different from those for nontraditional freshmen?
6. What could we be doing better to help a very large segment of our undergraduates cope with the challenges of getting a college education while working more than half-time and living off campus with family dependents?
7. How can the co-curricular involvement of KSU students be more strongly encouraged and increased in practice?
8. What should be KSU's next set of strategic moves for advancing our strong position of honoring human diversity?
9. Once our new fitness facilities are completed, what will we do to get our undergraduates more engaged in the benefits of physical exercise and wellness?
10. In what ways should KSU, and our first-year experience in particular, excel in facilitating undergraduate success relative to our national comparators, and what could we do differently to get there?