Student Engagement

Student Engagement: A Qualitative Exploration of NSSE

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Abstract
This paper explores student reflections on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in order to understand their perceptions of the diversity block of NSSE questions. Researchers conducted focus groups after first-year student participants completed the NSSE. After participants read the NSSE question, they reflected upon the question explaining their interpretations and thoughts. After a qualitative content analysis of the focus groups, participant perceptions fed into four primary themes: Marketing, NSSE Impact/Clarity, Motivation, and living environment. Participants are more likely to attend events if peers are attending, find informal discussions in the residence halls impactful, review invitations through email but determine attendance based on peers and distance, and found some of the NSSE questions to be vague or unclear.

Keywords: Engagement, NSSE, college, involvement, diversity
Student Engagement

Universities nationwide conduct the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to examine college students’ participation and engagement at their universities. Upon receipt of results from each administration of the NSSE, the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness provides an overview of the most recent findings. Upon receipt of the 2013 results, faculty members sought to delve into the students’ thinking related to the answering of certain questions. Specifically, the faculty members sought to more fully explore the participants’ thoughts regarding the following questions: During the current school year, to what extent have events or activities offered at your institution emphasized perspectives on societal differences (economic, ethnic, political, religious, etc.); During the current school year, about how often have you attended events or activities that encouraged you to examine your understanding of the following (economic, ethnic, political, religious, etc.); During the current school year, about how often have you had discussions about the following: economic, ethnic, political, religious, etc.?

To address the faculty members’ desire to understand student thoughts when answering these questions, researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and held focus groups in spring 2015 within two weeks of the conclusion of the 2015 NSSE. Focus groups conducted within this timeframe allowed participants to recall their recent experiences clearly.

This paper details the project of seeking student input, presents a brief overview of related literature, reviews the methodology used, discusses findings and identified themes, and concludes with limitations and recommendations for future research.
Literature Review

This literature review covers the origins of the survey, the role of residential facilities, and student motivation theory. While not exhaustive, these introductions provide a foundation upon which the findings build.

The National Survey of Student Engagement

In order to provide a meaningful measure of quality to the uses of resources throughout regional accreditation processes, institutions adopted and used the NSSE. The NSSE launched, via pilot, in 1999. The next year, 2000, 275 colleges and universities participated in the nation-wide, inaugural launch. In 2015, 587 institutions totaling 323,801 students participated in the NSSE.

At the same time, third-party determinants of “quality” focused on student selectivity and faculty credentialing. A body of researchers and practitioners believed that “none of these get at the heart of the matter: the investments that institutions make to foster proven instructional practices and the kinds of activities, experiences, and outcomes that their students receive as a result” (National, n.d.). As a result, the instrument known as The College Student Report and the process known as the NSSE were born.

NSSE does not directly measure student learning. However, NSSE measures areas of perceived high quality and growth areas. NSSE states, “An extensive research literature relates particular classroom activities and specific faculty and peer practices to high quality undergraduate student outcomes (http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/origins.cfm accessed on June 27, 2016).
These high impact practices form 10 Engagement Indicators. The Engagement Indicators are Higher-Order Learning, Reflective and Integrative Learning, Learning Strategies, Quantitative Reasoning, Collaborative Learning, Discussions with Diverse Others, Student-Faculty Interactions, Effective Teaching Practices, Quality of Interactions, and Supportive Environment. These indicators provide information for each unique area by summing student survey responses. Colleges and universities may use these scores in various ways that may include tracking scores over time or comparing scores with aspirant or benchmark institutions.

The university began using the NSSE in 2001 and has administered the assessment every other year in odd years. The last administration was 2015. The university publishes all reports on its website.

Residential Facilities

Residence hall environments have the potential to affect a student’s success (Astin, 1977, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Generally, student residence is impacted by four areas. The four areas are (a) residence hall students are more likely to persist in college than nonresidential students, (b) residence hall students are more likely to acquire important skills such as establishing a sense of accomplishment, (c) residence hall students are more likely to be involved on campus, and (d) residence hall students obtain higher grade point averages and standardized test scores over non-residential students.

Retention. Retention to the university is a critical measure of both student and institutional success (Galicki & McEwen, 1989; Herndon, 1984; Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993). Currently, societal expectations provide inquiry into student and institutional
measures for success such as retention rates. Herndon (1984) and Thompson et al. (1993) demonstrate the positive influence on residential students’ retention compared to their peers who live off-campus. Further, Potts and Schultz (2008) found that students living off campus in their first year and having a low high school rank were a significant negative impact on retention. Thus, from early inception to today’s culture of accountability, residence halls have served an important role in university experiences.

Sense of self. Chickering and Kuper (1971) as well as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that during college, students’ sense of self develops and expands. Residence hall students are more likely to be involved in co-curricular activities (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Having a living and learning environment with blurred boundaries seems to provide multiple benefits.

Interactions with peers also strongly influenced many aspects of change during college, including intellectual development and intellectual orientation; political, social, and religious liberalism; positive academic and social self-concept; interpersonal skills, use of principled moral reasoning; maturity and personal development; and educational aspirations and attainment. Additionally, the impact of peer interaction was greatest when peers challenged beliefs, attitudes, and values, forcing introspection, reflection, and re-evaluation. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 614)

Grade point averages. Finally, students living on-campus achieve higher grade point averages than their off-campus peers. Kanoy and Bruhn (1996) utilized a living-learning environment while Pascarella et al. (1993) compared on-campus residents with commuter
students, ultimately finding that on-campus students have a statistically significant difference in grade point average and they retained at a higher rate.

Research illustrated that living on campus may offer multiple advantages. On-campus students retain at a higher rate, become involved in their college experience, have a higher grade point average, and develop certain skills better than their off-campus peers develop. The close proximity of peers who have different life experiences allows for diverse conversations that spark reflection and self-evaluation.

Self-Determination Theory and Motivation

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are components of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has a foundation in growth tendencies in the psychological constructs of autonomy, competence, and commitment and “is an approach to human motivation and personality that uses empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of human’s evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation” (p. 68). Each type of motivation has implications for learning.

As Ryan and Deci (2000) found, an individual whose motivation is self-directed demonstrates enthusiasm and interest in the outcome of an activity and has better performance and commitment to the activity. University officials may utilize this knowledge as a guide in determining if all aspects of the university environment (such as: advising, residential, activities, dining) foster conditions to develop intrinsic motivation.

External motivation is a form of motivation used in many world cultures. There are fines for exceeding speed limits, making payments in an untimely manner, and crossing the street at an
inappropriate location. Interestingly, as Ryan and Deci (2000) noted, these external motivations negatively influence intrinsic motivation. The greater the external motivation, the less interest, value, and effort an individual will have for the externally moderated activity.

In a university setting, it is imperative that one fosters intrinsic motivation while moderates external motivation or integrates it into intrinsic motivations. Through their research, Ryan and Deci (2000) found social context critical in facilitating the integration of external motivation into internal motivation. The social context should be comprised of role modeling the desired behaviors and expressing the value placed on the behaviors. Role modeling the desired behaviors increases the individual’s desire for relatedness, thus influencing the motivation to perform the modeled behaviors. If the culture of the university is such that every week students and faculty share coffee while discussing literature or current events, then new students begin to participate in coffee and discussion because they desire to be a member of the university community. When the individual makes this mental connection, the behavior becomes self-authored. Modeling desired behaviors is important to understand because universities have the ability to create environments in which an individual develops competence and autonomy, and has opportunities for appropriate challenge and support. Students may experience alienation and their well-being suffers without the intentional fostering of this context.

This literature review provides relevant information related to the NSSE, the role living environment holds for institutions of higher education and for students, and the role motivation has when working with individuals. In order to examine perceptions of the NSSE, researchers asked the following research question: How do first-year students report their perceptions of the NSSE assessment tool?
Methods

This study used a qualitative analysis of focus group responses to address the research question. Researchers secured IRB approval to conduct focus groups to understand how students perceived the NSSE in their first year of college. Students at a mid-sized public institution completed the NSSE during their spring semester. After completing the assessment, first-year students participated in focus groups to examine how they perceived the questions in the “diversity” subset of the NSSE. Questions from the NSSE were shown/read to participants, who then reflected upon their perception of the questions. Researchers held eight focus groups in the first-year student residence halls with the number of participants per group ranging from two to 11. Focus groups were 48% male and 52% females. Participants represented majors from all colleges on campus including Computer Science, Agriculture, History, Mathematics, Kinesiology, Psychology, Business Administration, Engineering, and Communication Studies. Seventy-six percent of participants identified as White, 12% as Black, 8% as Hispanic, and 4% did not report race/ethnicity demographics.

The researchers transcribed the focus group content. To secure identities, researchers assigned pseudonyms to participants. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided the analysis of transcriptions, leaving interpretation to unfold from the participants’ perceptions. Each researcher used open coding to look for themes in the transcribed focus groups. Intercoder reliability was checked (Neuendorf, 2002) for percentage of agreement. Because themes emerged and researchers did not establish codes prior to analysis, it was not necessary to compute agreement of chance and Cohen’s kappa. The researchers agreed on initial themes. Upon a second analysis, three themes were similar (email, notification, and awareness) and subsequently
collapsed into one theme: marketing. The themes led to four larger categories: marketing, NSSE Impact/Clarity, Motivation, and living environment.

Results

How did participants perceive the “diversity block” of NSSE questions? The focus groups revealed a wide perspective (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Sample comment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>“Yea, I know I just got an email recently about…it was all for girls and I can’t remember exact [sic] what the event was”</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSSE Impact/Clarity</td>
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<td><em>Informal conversations</em></td>
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<td><em>What is a discussion?</em></td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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<td><em>Attitude-Behavior Theory</em></td>
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<td><em>Ethnocentricity</em></td>
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<td>Living Environment</td>
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<td><em>Roommates</em></td>
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<td><em>Programs</em></td>
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<td><em>Proximity</em></td>
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<td>“It was kind of confusing, I guess the way it was worded, what it was asking, so that was what I thought on it, I didn’t know exactly what it was asking me.”</td>
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<td>“I think they (the University) do have enough and they promote them pretty well, it’s more of the fact of ignorance of the student that we don’t go and attend them.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My RL (Residential Leader) tells me, like she’ll write stuff on her board, outside her room”</td>
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While not always clear to the participants, the “block” of diversity-based questions from NSSE spurred reflection, and encouraged action. With this range of responses, researchers examined each theme in more detail.

Discussion

The data and coding process led to four broad themes. The four themes are marketing, the NSSE impact or clarity, motivation, and living environment. Marketing addresses the publicity
surrounding programs and events related to diversity and or inclusion. The NSSE impact or clarity describes the way the participants felt about and responded to the questions on the instrument itself. The heart of this project revolved around what the participants were believing, assuming, and thinking when answering the questions on the instrument. The third theme addressed motivation or the participants’ determination if programs and events deserved their engagement. The final theme is the role the student’s living environment may hold for the participants and the overall learning that occurs.

Marketing

Whether gathering in the kitchen of their residence hall or hanging around the gazebo on the university grounds, the students gather and talk about classes and life’s happenings. There are official events held on campus, formal classroom engagement, and relaxed or informal gatherings of friends where conversations and discussions happen. Outside of classes, the participants noted they engage in co-curricular activities and events largely because someone asked them to attend. They mentioned invitations from the Residential Leader as a major prompt for attending an event. Further, if one’s friends indicated attendance, the participant stated they are likely to attend. Relationships carry great weight in influencing an individual’s behavior and choices.

At this particular institution, many faculty and staff feel “students do not read their email.” Participants recalled emails for specific programs and repeatedly mentioned receipt of emails and often the subject line. Thus, while the institutional culture indicates that students do not read their emails, this project found that they are engaging with their emails more than the
culture believes. One participant noted, “Yea, I know I just got an email recently about it, it was all for girls and I can’t remember exactly what the event was.”

When asked about the university’s performance regarding the marketing of programs and events, the participants were generally satisfied. They believed themselves informed about most events and programs on campus through the multiple avenues used to present information such as email, sandwich boards, and word-of-mouth. While one student did remark, “I don’t hear about half of them,” this sentiment was not pervasive. Overall, the participants indicated being satisfied with marketing efforts used by the University to promote programs and services.

NSSE

Reflection on NSSE itself was a primary theme. The 2015 NSSE asked, “During the current school year, about how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups?” The survey then listed “people of a race or ethnicity other than your own, people from an economic background other than your own, people with religious beliefs other than your own, and people with political views other than your own.” The survey provided a four-point Likert scale including very often, often, sometimes, and never. The participants approached this question from different perspectives. Certain participants indicated engaging in discussions and provided examples of classes such as Anthropology, Sociology, Government, and English. When prompted to think about discussions, the focus groups showed consensus that this question largely addressed formal discussions that were a part of a class. One participant noted, “I think um, depending on who you’re with, and what classes you take there is a lot of room for debate over this stuff.”
Participants did not interpret all questions clearly during the NSSE. For example, one participant noted, “It was kind of confusing, I guess the way it was worded, what it was asking, so that was what I thought on it, I didn’t know exactly what it was asking me.” Other participants, when read/showed the question from the diversity “block” of questions, asked the facilitators what the question meant, “Are they saying as far as classroom things or like interactive things?” When asked how they interpreted the question during the NSSE survey, participants noted uncertainty, which may affect the results of this particular block of questions.

Informal Conversations

Conversely, other participants thought about informal conversations. These informal conversations seemed to be an outgrowth of typical conversation flow. When prompted as to where discussions happen, one participant said “in the dorm, in the living environment.” Another participant affirmed, “Most because we’re always together, we’re on the same hall and we’re all taking the same classes…plus our Residential Leader is as well so just being around them and being able to be in the same environment and being able to bring things up like that make it easier for conversations to just happen.”

Another participant stated, “[W]e would all sit outside and that is where it (discussion) usually happened.” Often, the discussions are an outcropping of casual conversations. One student said, “I mean my roommates and I will be sitting around and the conversation just kind of leads to something about economics or race, or whatever. Then just kind of keeps on going.”

Regardless of perspective, participants realized they might expand their viewpoint. Thus, participants answered the question from primarily a mindset of a formal classroom setting or from an informal, friend group perspective. Throughout the feedback related to discussion,
participants recognized their friend group as a major impact on their perspective. One participant noted, “It’s who you are surrounded by at all periods of time.”

*What Is A Discussion?*

The conversation regarding discussions resulted in a meta-analysis of discussions. Participants appeared quite deliberate in describing a discussion. One participant defined a discussion as “people RESPECTFULLY voicing opinions on the topic and listening to an alternating opinion, you know, soaking it up, if you keep your opinion that’s fine, if it changes your opinion that’s fine, you actually pay attention.” Another participant noted, “A lot of times other people attack other people in discussions, sometimes they don’t agree on that, I think it should be an open policy type thing, I think everyone should be able to voice their own opinion. If people are attacking each other it’s not really a discussion, it becomes an argument.”

The general desire from the participants was to have an exchange where everyone felt respected and without getting too intense. The participants seem comfortable discussing with their friend group but indicate a desire for listening and respecting others. They seemed to indicate a hesitancy to discuss topics too deeply or too rigorously, due to a fear of someone becoming upset.

*Motivation to Attend Events*

Participants discussed attending diversity events with distinction between deciding to attend and declining to attend. They frequently noted they attended events such as lectures or programs as a class requirement or because of a friend group. Friends also have a major role in deciding not to attend as well. Multiple participants mentioned that if friends did or did not want to attend a program, that decision swayed the individual’s decision regarding attendance.
Attitude-Behavior Theory

Of course, motivation is a multi-layered, complex enterprise. Participants discussed multiple reasons they chose to engage in programs related to diversity and multiple reasons they chose not to engage. One participant remarked, “When we’re on campus you’re not really thinking about race, or you know what’s going on, you just happy to be on a college campus and you doing you, you know what I’m saying?” While this is a privileged perspective noting a student of dominant culture may not “have” to focus on race, it does show how participants may explore internal motivation. Regarding attitude-behavior theory, Bean and Eaton (2000) noted multiple approaches related to student motivation. Pertaining to Attitude-Behavior Theory, they suggested that beliefs inform attitudes, which inform intentions ultimately leading to behaviors. Thus, a student’s beliefs related to his or her need for particular learning or experiences inform his or her intentions regarding attendance. A student’s beliefs or intentions determine event attendance.

Ethnocentricity

One participant underscored this by noting, “A lot of the emails we have people don’t check them or they see that they don’t pertain to them and they just swipe away.” This statement brings to light a very ethnocentric perspective. With such an outlook, an individual views others and different cultures based upon their own culture. Thus, a student from a dominant or majority group may perceive no need to attend an event because they believe they are sensitive and or aware. One participant said boldly, “I think they (the University) do have enough and they promote them pretty well, it’s more of the fact of ignorance of the student that we don’t go and
attend them.” Another participant said that the campus “is inclusive” so belief may lead to choosing not to attend a diversity event, as there is no identified need.

Living Environment

A major theme for this project is the role of the living environment. The residence hall proved to be a cornerstone for discussions. Participants repeatedly spoke of their residence hall as a place they were comfortable delving into conversations related to diversity. One participant, when asked where most of the discussions occur, set the foundation in noting, “In the dorm, in the living environment.” Further, the participant noted, “Being able to bring things up like that made it easier for the conversations to happen.” Another described, “I would have a lot of discussions with just me and my friends around here (residence hall).”

When answering the question, “During the current school year, about how often have you had discussions about the following: economic, ethnic, political, religious, etc.” within the NSSE, participants didn’t always consider “discussions” that were informal, though many noted conversations happened that way.

Roommates

Roommates consistently appeared as influential for all participants. As one stated, “Me and my roommate, we could just be telling a story and he’ll say yea, sometimes like that happened to me and he’ll tell about it.” These comments serve to indicate the importance of the residence hall as an environment where deep conversations take place. One member of the focus group commented, “It is usually the more heartfelt conversations come at night” and other participants laughed and said, “Like 11:59 or midnight, like as soon as it hits 12:00, it gets deep.” Again, it is unclear if participants fully understood these informal, often powerful, moments as
responses for their NSSE survey as many noted “discussion” might be restricted to formal classroom spaces when answering the survey.

Programs in the residence hall

The participants expressed that they preferred conversations and discussions in the residence hall because they were accustomed to having events provided in the residence hall. One event they reflected on was in the hall kitchen and was a poverty simulation. To emphasize the world population related to diversity, some sat at the counter island using nice plates and received a hearty meal. Others sat on the floor and received a scoop of rice on a paper plate. This simulation was in September of the fall 2014 semester with the participants still discussing it in April 2015. Another event, which was impressed upon their memories, was a conscientiousness awareness event. Students were able to experience the world from a new perspective. For example, an individual may be physically unable to navigate a building where a concert is or because one makes assumptions about race or ethnicity.

Proximity

The residence hall serves as a natural environment for the promotion of discussions. Some participants appreciated the proximity of events in the halls and actually noted displeasure when events were outside the hall, at locations such as the student center or other academic building. Others commented on both sides of the distance issue with some complaining that events around campus are “too far away” while still others noted that the “campus is not very big” and walking across it posed no significant challenge. Participants did mention that the beginning of the academic year offered many events within the residence hall but opportunities for engagement dwindled as the year progressed.
A key component related to the level of activities in the residence hall is the residential leader role. Some participants discussed the fact that their residential leader planned programs for the hall and at times participated in discussion. This role lends itself to being a vital facilitator regarding creating conditions which all residents experience discussions on these important diversity topics. A participant said, “My RL tells me, like she’ll write stuff on her board, outside her room” while another said, “They are pretty good about telling us stuff around campus.” Not only do residential leaders hold a leadership position among their peers, they have the proximity to students to build trust and a safe space for vulnerable discussions to take place. The potential influence this position holds is immense.

Limitations, Future Study, and Conclusion

The current study looked at first-year students’ perspectives of the NSSE on the “diversity” block of questions. Researchers conducted focus groups of students who volunteered to participate. Sharing one’s views in front of peers is an iterative experience in any focus group. This could have increased, decreased, or otherwise modified the participants’ willingness to share their thoughts.

Future studies could examine student perceptions on more than one “block” of NSSE questions. While the participants of the focus groups in this study proportionally represent the university (76% identified as White, 12% as Black, 8% as Hispanic, and 4% did not report race/ethnicity demographics), it would be beneficial if focus groups included a more racially diverse cross-section of participants for their interpretation of the diversity and other blocks of questions. Larger institutions and institutions from other parts of the country can add depth to the NSSE qualitative exploration. Additionally, an analysis for seniors concluding their entire
collegiate experience, not just first-year students, may provide a better exploration of identified campus activities or may lend additional weight to how students perceive and interpret the NSSE questions. Clearly, participant perspectives of the “diversity block” of NSSE questions showed a wide range of interpretation of the questions from first-year college students.
References


