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Promoting Student Engagement by Engaging Staff: implementing a survey of student engagement

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Introduction

The authors of this chapter have considerable experience in fostering the development of teaching evaluation processes in their respective Schools. Yet, in spite of regular evaluations focusing on teachers, modules and programmes of study, the authors were conscious of the lack of systematic evidence about what their students actually do with their time. Given that the literature is fairly clear that certain activities have greater pay off in terms of learning, it was decided to conduct an educational research project 'The Faculty of Health Sciences Survey of Student Engagement' to discover the extent to which undergraduate students were engaging in these activities (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2003; Pascerella and Terenzini, 2005).

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part commences with a short review of the literature on student engagement and the origins of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) before outlining the current status of the Irish National Student Survey (Institutes of Technology Ireland, 2012). Part One concludes with a discussion of the educational research project 'The Faculty of Health Sciences Survey of Student Engagement' conducted by the authors in Trinity College, Dublin. The discussion highlights key stages and decisions in the project implementation process including applications of project data. Given the purpose of this chapter, however, and the data access rules agreed with the project stakeholders, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to present the project results in detail. In Part Two, the authors draw on their experience of implementing a modified version of the NSSE to examine a range of issues which readers may wish to consider when implementing this type of survey. The chapter concludes with the authors' reflections on the value and possible applications of the NSSE.

Part One: Implementing a Survey of Student Engagement in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin.

Student Engagement and the Development of the NSSE

Student engagement is an internationally recognised concept in 21st century higher education (HE). Powerful factors in the widespread adoption of the concept in HE discourse have been: the growing body of empirical evidence reporting a range of

positive educational outcomes related to high level student engagement (Trowler, 2010); the increasing focus on institutional assessment and accountability by governments and policy makers; and the applicability of student engagement as an indicator of institutional quality in relation to teaching, learning and the student experience (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2008; Salmi, 2009; Shah et al., 2011).

Although there is no single generally agreed definition of student engagement, most definitions tend to stress one of two primary components (Trowler, 2010). The first, focuses on 'the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success', while the focus of the second category is 'the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities' (Kuh et al. 2005: 9).

Readers interested in the development of the concept of student engagement should consult Kuh (2009). He points out that the basic idea can be found in literature dating back at least seventy years, although some might argue that even earlier discussions of student motivation might be true precursors. Kuh notes the influence of a number of key writers who have developed the concept since the 1930s. They include Tyler (1942, 1949) and Pace (1941) in the early years and, more recently, Astin (1984, 1993), Chickering and Gamson (1987), Tinto (2000), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and, finally, Kuh himself with colleagues. Trowler (2010) offers a more international perspective on the development of the student engagement concept while still acknowledging the major contribution of North American researchers.

In the late 1990s, Newell and colleagues developed a survey of student engagement to provide authentic evidence of student learning and effective educational practices as a challenge to the prevailing North American system of institutional quality ranking by 'resources and reputation' (Kuh, 2009: 7). The resulting National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was the first of its type although many items had been used in earlier surveys such as the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace, 1884; Kuh et al., 1997). Administered originally in 2000 to undergraduate students in 275 higher education institutions across North America, the survey has been used in over 1,500 higher education institutions. Internationally, the NSSE has been adopted or adapted for use in the Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African higher education systems with a pilot study underway in China (ACER, 2012; Strydom and Metz, 2012; Hennock, 2010).

The Irish National Context

In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* has recommended that 'a national student survey system should be put in place and the results published.' (DES, 2011:17). To facilitate implementation of an Irish National Student Survey a steering group representing the universities, institutes of technology, students and relevant agencies is conducting a pilot online survey across the sector in spring 2013 using a modified version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), (NAIRTL, 2012).

Whether the Irish Republic follows the lead of countries with similar higher education systems such as Australia and New Zealand, and continues to use a modified version of the NSSE which was originally developed for the North American higher education system, or chooses to develop a unique survey, the resulting data should serve a variety of purposes related to quality assurance and improvement. Survey data, for example, may be used for benchmarking and ranking but just as importantly it should also have potential to engage higher education communities in evidence-based discussions about

a wide range of teaching and learning related issues which could and should lead to improvements in current practices. Slowey and Kozina's 2011 study, *The Voice of Irish Academics: towards a Professional Development Strategy,* has already contributed to such discussions by providing a substantive evidence-base of RoI academics' views on teaching and learning issues including their perspectives on current and previous students' levels of engagement.

The Faculty of Health Sciences Survey of Student Engagement

In 2010, ethical approval was granted for a study with the aim of determining the level of student engagement in five of the undergraduate degree programmes offered by a range of disciplines in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin. The Faculty consists of four Schools, namely: Dental Science; Medicine; Nursing and Midwifery; and Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. The School of Medicine includes the disciplines of Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Radiation Therapy.

The study objectives were to:

- identify the levels of student engagement in each of five undergraduate programmes offered in the Faculty of Health Sciences;
- compare the levels of student engagement between programmes;
- compare the levels of student engagement in each programme against international benchmarks;
- identify aspects of the undergraduate experience that may be improved through sharing of good practices and expertise between programmes;
- identify aspects of the student experience that may be improved by changing policies and practices at school, faculty and institutional levels.

Factors Supporting Project Implementation

There were several factors which supported the project from the beginning:

- The Faculty Executive Committee was committed to excellence in professional education and was prepared to commit Faculty resources to the project including the cost of purchasing the rights to use the survey.
- All Schools place a high value on their educational mission, with Nursing and Midwifery and Medicine employing dedicated professional staff whose role is to support and facilitate effective educational practices within their schools.
- There is a history of innovation in undergraduate programmes in the Faculty: Dentistry and Occupational Therapy, for example, pioneered problem based learning in health sciences education in Ireland.
- There are well established internal evaluation cultures in at least two Schools where student feedback is accepted as an integral part of the evaluation of teaching, modules and programmes. One of the primary purposes of evaluation, namely improving teaching and programmes is well understood by staff, most of whom would have first-hand experience of using student feedback to improve their own teaching as well as of membership of various school committees which use student feedback as part of their deliberations on matters relating to quality assurance and improvement of taught programmes and curriculum development.
- Finally, there was a willingness to broaden the scope of evaluation across the Faculty from predominantly teaching and subject focused efforts to seek feedback from students about their learning.

Formative or Summative Evaluation

Given the project aim and objectives there was no doubt that the focus would be formative rather than summative; that is, the primary purpose was to extend our knowledge of undergraduate student engagement in order, ultimately, to improve student learning. It was very important to the success of the project that colleagues who taught on undergraduate programmes and Heads of Schools were confident that any data from the project would not be used to make summative decisions such as those relating to personnel or funding.

Method

The authors' search of the literature on student engagement led them to the NSSE website http://nsse.iub.edu/ with a questionnaire and an accessible and extensive body of associated research data including published results, summary and comparative statistics and scholarly studies.

The NSSE questionnaire consists of approximately 90 questions (depending on the version) with survey users given the option of including up to 20 additional questions to address their specific interests and concerns. The questionnaire collects information under the following five main categories:

1. Student behaviours e.g. student participation in purposeful activities such as time spent studying and reading;
2. Institutional actions and requirements e.g. the amount of reading and writing required of students and the nature of coursework and examinations;
3. Student reactions to college e.g. student perceptions of the features of the college environment associated with achievement, satisfaction and persistence such as the academic supports offered and relationships with staff;
4. Student background information e.g. demographic data that is useful to determine relationships between levels of engagement and educational outcomes for various student groups;
5. Student learning and personal development e.g. students estimate their own growth and development since commencing college in a range of areas including intellectual skills, communication skills, ethical and social development. (Kuh, 2009)

Given the relatively large number of survey questions, interpretation of NSSE data may appear daunting. Many of the questions, however, are subsumed into a framework of five scales or benchmarks of effective educational practice which provide a 'common language ... for discussing and reporting student engagement and institutional performance' (Kuh, 2009:13). These benchmarks and associated activities and conditions are summarised in Table 1 below.

Benchmark 1. Level of Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work and high expectations are central to student learning and institutional quality.

Activities and Conditions:

- Time spent preparing for class (e.g. studying, reading, writing, rehearsing).

- Working hard to meet a lecturer's standards or expectations.
- Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book length packs of course readings.
- Number of written papers or reports.
- Coursework that emphasizes:
  - Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory;
  - Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences;
  - Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods;
  - Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations.
- Campus environment that emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work.

Benchmark 2. Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings.

Activities:

- Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions.
- Made a class presentation.
- Worked with other students on projects during class.
- Worked with students outside of class to prepare class assignments.
- Tutored or taught other students.
- Participated in a community-based project as part of a module.
- Discussed ideas from their readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.).

Benchmark 3. Student-Faculty Interaction

Students see first hand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with lecturers inside and outside the classroom. Lecturers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning.

Activities:

- Discussed grades or assignments with lecturers.
- Talked about career plans with a lecturer, clinical academics or careers advisor.
- Discussed ideas from their readings or classes with lecturers outside of class.
- Worked with lecturers on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.).
- Received prompt written or oral feedback from lecturers on their academic performance.
- Worked with a lecturer on a research project.

Benchmark 4. Supportive Campus Environment

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

Conditions:

- Campus environment:
  - provides support you need to help you succeed academically;
  - helps students cope with their non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.);
  - provides the support they need to thrive socially.
- Quality of relationships with:
  - other students;
  - lecturers;
  - administrative personnel and offices.

Benchmark 5. Enriching Educational Experiences

The academic program is augmented by complementary formal and informal learning experiences.

Activities and Conditions:

- Talking with students with different religious beliefs, political opinions, or values.
- Talking with students of a different ethnicity.
- An institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social or ethnic backgrounds.
- Using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments.
- Participating in:
  - Internships or field experiences;
  - Community service or volunteer work;
  - Foreign language coursework;
  - Study abroad;
  - Independent study or self-assigned major;
  - Culminating senior experience;
  - Co-curricular activities;
  - Learning communities.

Table 1: The five benchmarks and associated activities and conditions (Kuh, 2009:16-18).

In addition to the five benchmarks, there are also a number of scalelets consisting of groups of questions on topics including active learning, writing, higher order thinking skills and deep learning which are useful for examining specific issues or aspects of student engagement (Pike, 2006).

As the NSSE questionnaire has been subject to extensive testing for validity and reliability (Kuh, 2003) and required only minor amendments relating to nomenclature, it was deemed prudent to use the existing survey rather than develop an instrument *de novo*. Consideration was given to other methods of data collection such as focus groups. Factors such as availability outside class time of student volunteers and limited resources for qualitative data analysis reinforced the decision to use a survey.

Another factor influencing the choice of method was the students' familiarity with both online and paper-based/classroom administered surveys. The NSSE is available in both

formats, each having advantages and disadvantages, which needed to be considered. The authors chose the paper-based/classroom option, primarily to maximise the response rates but also because questionnaires could be printed through the College's student survey service at no cost instead of purchasing them from the NSSE. By using the authors to administer the survey they ensured that ethical standards were upheld and that data collection costs were further minimised.

Data Analysis

The completed surveys were scanned (free of charge) by the College's student survey office using SNAP software to produce individual reports for each year of each programme of study. Individual data files were exported into SPSS for statistical analysis which was provided (free of charge) by the School of Nursing Statistical Service. The NSSE website provides SPSS syntax files to assist in the production of the benchmark data for each cohort; this involved amalgamating the mean for a set of scores to produce each benchmark score. (http://nsse.iub.edu/html/analysis_resources.cfm)

Separate reports for each year of each programme consisting of responses to each question as percentages were produced. Data for each of the five benchmarks for each discipline were also produced and compared to NSSE benchmarks for North American research universities with the highest level of research activity as defined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ranking system (Carnegie Foundation, 2012).

Finally, the NSSE also provided specific benchmarks for nursing which were based on the analysis of NSSE data from schools of nursing in North American research universities with similar research profiles to Trinity.

Access to Data from the Study

Data access was one of the first issues raised by the Faculty Executive Committee when considering whether to support the project. The authors' experiences in managing sensitive evaluative data led them to prepare guidelines for data access in preparation for their meeting with the Faculty Executive. Table 2. below is a simplified view of the levels of access granted to individuals across the Faculty.

Heads of School or Discipline received four reports, the first of which was an individual report with answers to all 90 survey questions for their respective programmes; the Head of Nursing, for example, received a report on the BSc (nursing) programme. The second report received by Heads was the Faculty Benchmarks which were made up of data aggregated from all programmes (nursing, dentistry, medicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy) on the five scales or benchmarks: academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; supportive campus environment and enriching educational experiences. Heads were also in receipt of International Institutional Benchmarks based on NSSE data from institutions similar to Trinity College Dublin. Finally, the Heads received International Benchmarks for their respective disciplines which were also based on NSSE data aggregated to the five scales, for example, the Head of Nursing received benchmarks based on NSSE data from similar schools of nursing in North American universities. The Heads of School were responsible for passing on the Individual Program Report and benchmarks to their respective Directors of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning, who were responsible for disseminating them to relevant staff and students.

Faculty Executive members received three reports: a multiple program report summarising the results for each programme on each of the five scales or benchmarks; Faculty Benchmarks showing data aggregated from all programs on the five scales or

benchmarks; and the International Institutional benchmarks based on NSSE data from similar institutions. It should be noted that there was a clear expectation that reports received by Heads of School as members of the Faculty Executive were to remain confidential to that Committee and were not for dissemination within their respective Schools.

Report Type	Individual Program	Multiple Program	Faculty Benchmarks	International Institutional Benchmarks	International Discipline Benchmarks
Data included	Answers to all questions	Summarising results on the 5 scales for each program	Aggregated data from all programs on 5 scales	NSSE data from similar institutions on 5 scales *	NSSE data from similar disciplines on 5 scales *
Access					
Head of Discipline or School	**x**		**x**	**x**	**x**
Faculty Executive Committee		**x**	**x**	**x**	

Table 2: A simplified view of the levels of access to survey data granted to individuals across the Faculty.

** The Carnegie Foundation framework for the classification of institutions of higher education is used by the NSSE to produce a range of institutional and discipline benchmarks which reflect the diversity of goals and resources found in higher education systems and allow for more accurate comparisons between institutions and disciplines* (Carnegie Foundation, 2012).

Research Results and Applications

As noted previously, given the purpose of this publication and our own rules on data access, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to present the project results in detail. What is offered instead is a broad-brush description of what the various stakeholder groups found most useful and interesting from the data.

The Faculty Executive Committee was primarily interested in comparing the Faculty performance with that of similar institutions: hence, their focus on the institutional benchmarks for each of the five main NSSE benchmarks. There was some concern that the benchmarks would have been more useful for comparative purposes if they had been developed only from faculties of health sciences in research universities with very high research activity instead of from all faculties in such institutions.

Identification of trends signifying good practice across programmes, as well as areas for improvement were also of interest to the Faculty Executive. To a lesser extent, programmes which scored particularly well on any of the five benchmarks were acknowledged with a view to identifying distinguishing features.

Discussion of detailed programme reports occurred in the relevant schools or disciplines through a variety of channels. The report on the nursing programme for example, was a standing item on the agenda of the Curriculum Committee for two terms during which time responses under each of the five scales were considered in detail as part of a process of continuous programme improvement. The Nursing Curriculum Committee was not particularly interested in relating nursing results to those of other programmes in the Faculty or indeed with the institutional benchmarks. They were, however, very keen to make international discipline specific comparisons by benchmarking against schools of

nursing in similar research intensive universities. The NSSE made these figures available at an additional cost. Aspects of the report were also useful in deliberations at School level on topics as diverse as alumni relations, marketing and staff/student relations.

Table 3. below gives a flavour of the range of developments proposed and underway from the analysis of NSSE data. The developments are organised by level (Programme, School or Faculty) and focus (academic, curriculum or organisation). The Faculty-level academic development project 'Encouraging active learning in classrooms' for example, will take the form of a series of workshops for academic staff across the Faculty who wish to embed strategies for active student learning in the classroom into their courses. 'Engaging undergraduate students in the research community' involved a review of approaches to teaching research in an undergraduate program in order to ensure a more coherent developmental approach linking the School's research projects with students' developing research skills and interests. Assessment, in particular feedback quality and timeliness, proved to be an issue for students in most programs. In response, the authors have proposed a Faculty-level review of assessment policy and procedures. The NSSE data on student engagement in educationally beneficial activities outside the classroom was particularly valuable in identifying areas requiring additional resources or development including study abroad programmes and joint social activities for staff and students.

	Programme -level	School- level	Faculty -level
Academic Development			Encouraging active learning in classrooms
Curriculum Development	Engaging undergraduate students in the research community		Review of assessment policy and procedures
	Review of students' approaches to learning using NSSE data		
Organisation Development	Fostering study abroad	Development of student supports Fostering staff / student social activities	Fostering civic engagement

Table 3: A summary of some developments based on analysis NSSE data.

Part Two: Some Guidelines for Implementing a Survey of Student Engagement

Identify a need

Surveys of student engagement require careful planning and the expenditure of scarce financial and other resources. It is essential that such planning begin with clear ideas about why you want to undertake the project. Motivation may range from a simple desire to rate the levels of your students' engagement against international benchmarks to developing systematic ways of improving student engagement across the department, faculty or institution. Alternatively, you may be under pressure from the institution, professional body or even the government to demonstrate high quality teaching and

learning for which purpose, surveys of student engagement may provide useful but only partial evidence.

Set clear objectives

These ideas will direct planning and help to avoid the pitfalls associated with surveys which deal with sensitive matters but they need to be translated into clear written objectives to be understood and accepted by participating staff and students.

There has been much written about the nature of objectives in education and of the differences between aims and objectives. We do not wish to enter that debate but merely point out that your objectives should be clear to all stakeholders, specific and achievable within the time frame of the project.

Is the research to be formative or summative or both?

The response to this question will depend of course on your objectives for the project. Formative research, where the primary aim is to use student feedback to improve teaching and learning, is relatively straightforward. A simple focus group with a few students can provide much useful information. Summative research, which can lead to personnel decision making (e.g. promotion) or unit reward or penalty, is rather less so. Quality assurance surveys demanded by external bodies are summative. Stakeholders will rightly demand that the methods used be both valid and reliable. It is very easy to generate resentment if procedures are seen to be vague and/or unfair.

Although the distinction between formative and summative research is clear in principle, it can become blurred in practice. Thus, the results of a survey demanded by say, a professional body as part of a re-accreditation process could and should be used to provide feedback for improvement purposes. A candidate for promotion might use a survey designed for formative use as evidence for promotion.

In general, therefore, good practice suggests that rigorous standards be applied whatever the theoretical purpose of the research (Huntley-Moore & Panter, 2006).

Get buy-in from students, departments, faculties and the institution

The most basic research into student engagement might involve the students of one department or even of one single module. Gaining support from the students might consist only of a discussion with them about the objectives of the project, confidentiality rules and what will be done with the research results. The success of such discussions will depend on the degree of trust which exists between the student and the researcher and teacher(s).

Gaining the confidence of fellow staff members may be more difficult if there are many of them involved and particularly if there is no tradition of student evaluative surveys in the department. Department wide surveys will need the formal agreement of the Head or of a committee with delegated powers.

It is very tempting to conclude that if trust levels are low and fellow staff uncooperative, then the project should not proceed until these matters are rectified. Such a decision, however, might be counter-productive, in that systematic evidence of low student engagement may be just what is needed for the department to address related issues. Generally, though, where there is no or little departmental experience of student surveys, researcher/teachers should consider commencing with their own students before extending the work further.

When research involving student surveys is extended to faculty or institutional levels, emergent issues relating to validity and reliability, and concerns about institutional

league tables, for example, may become apparent. Such issues and concerns need to be addressed and researchers should make themselves familiar with the relevant literature. A good starting point is Benton and Cashin (2012) who provide a comprehensive review of reliability and validity of student surveys of teaching. Colleagues may also be reassured that students completing NSSE are not asked to rate individual teachers.

Fortunately, student surveys are becoming more common in HE and the use to which they are put, more sophisticated. Nevertheless, we would argue that where such a tradition is non-existent or in its infancy, researchers should think very carefully before undertaking this kind of project on a wide scale.

Where the research is at faculty or institutional level, considerable time needs to be spent on publicity and stakeholders must have the opportunity to discuss objectives, methods and the uses to which the research will be put. This work can probably best be undertaken at the department level.

Resourcing is another important aspect of buy-in, particularly for projects at faculty or institutional level. Careful costing of data analysis, as well as survey administration, is vital in order to secure adequate resources to see the project through to conclusion in a timely fashion. Where the time gap between data collection and analysis is wide, the impetus to translate project findings into educational practice may be lost.

Agree access rules

An essential ingredient in the planning process is the determination of access rules and the agreement of most stakeholders. Access rules should state clearly who can receive specified data. In the best of worlds, all stakeholders should have access to all data but this is rarely possible in large scale research. In the simplest possible situation, where two teachers conduct research into student engagement in their own class, they both should have access to all the data, as should the students who took part in the research.

At faculty or institutional levels, data access is much less clear cut. Each situation is different, and it is impossible to set out strict guidelines. Generally, however, comparisons between departments in a faculty should only be seen by senior staff (e.g., the Faculty Executive Committee) but comparisons between individual departmental results and international benchmarks should be seen by all members of that department (including relevant administrators). In certain faculties, there may be a teaching and learning committee which should also have access to cross department comparisons. Students should be provided with as much information as is politically acceptable.

Even these simple guidelines can be tricky to implement. In our own case, for example, Heads of Schools were invited to share with their staff the material they had received as *Heads* but were prohibited from revealing the detailed information about other programmes they received as *members* of the Faculty Executive Committee.

If you intend to publish the results of your research into student engagement, be careful not to identify individual departments or faculties unless you have obtained approval and the broad agreement of stakeholders. Failure to take this precaution could mean the end of such research in your institution.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval procedures vary from institution to institution and readers are urged to enquire about their local rules before embarking on any research into student engagement. Where an individual seeks information from students within his/her own classes for the sole purpose of obtaining feedback, ethical approval is *probably* not necessary. But there is always the danger that something really interesting emerges from

the research which you might want to share, which would be difficult, if not impossible, without formal ethical approval.

Methods

Where only one or two classes are involved in the research, the most appropriate method might be focus groups, provided that the facilitators of the groups are trained and experienced. At the faculty or institutional levels, however, the time, effort and resources required are almost certainly beyond reach and recourse will have to be made to some kind of survey.

We recommend the use of the NSSE where possible because it has been tested widely in several countries and because it supplies useful benchmarks (albeit American). Generally, some minor modifications will need to be made; to take a simple and well known example, 'faculty' to Americans means 'academic staff' while to most of the rest us it means an academic unit. Such modifications can easily be made within the NSSE framework. In general, we do not believe that developing institutional or national surveys of general student engagement is money well spent. This is not to say that small institutional surveys are of no use when information is sought about institution specific matters, although, as noted previously, the NSSE has scope for including such questions.

Should the surveys be administered online or in the classroom? Both systems are available for the NSSE and both have their advantages and disadvantages. Where appropriate infrastructure exists and where students are accustomed to online surveys, their administration and data collection are extremely efficient. The down side is that response rates may be lower than desirable. Low response rates are usually considered to be a particular problem if non-respondents have a different experience to respondents which is not captured by the survey. In 2001 the Indiana University Center for Survey Research interviewed 553 students who had chosen not to respond to the NSSE and invited them to complete an abridged version of the survey. Overall 'non-respondents' scored slightly higher than respondents on a range of items suggesting, counter-intuitively, that students who do not respond to the NSSE may be slightly more educationally engaged than those who chose to respond (Kuh, 2003).

Paper based systems require additional human resources and those who actually administer the surveys need to be trained to ensure, in as far as possible, uniformity of administration conditions. The institution needs a facility to scan the surveys or this activity can be undertaken by NSSE at extra cost. On the up side, response rates are likely to be high in relation to the number actually attending classes.

In general, readers should consult the NSSE website for services available and for costs which vary according to client needs.

Conduct a pilot

Readers who lack experience in the administration of large scale surveys would be well-advised to conduct a pilot project at departmental level where problems are less complicated and staff and student cooperation are likely to be more easily obtained.

Value, Applications and Conclusions

Data from the NSSE has provided a rich source of information about undergraduate student engagement in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin. In this chapter, the authors have described the processes involved in using the NSSE for research and development purposes at programme, school and faculty levels. Further

investigations using the NSSE data are ongoing, for example, a postgraduate student is currently investigating nursing students' approaches to learning.

The project has enabled, and continues to promote, conversations about teaching and learning which contribute to the sustainability of an effective environment for teaching and learning. It has shifted the focus from individual teachers and their classrooms to an understanding that creating and sustaining effective learning environments is also a responsibility of the school, faculty and the institution.

Finally, benchmarking the quality of teaching and learning, in particular the ability to compare ourselves with peer disciplines and institutions internationally, is becoming increasingly important. The NSSE provides a useful tool for development of a sustainable approach to both quality assurance and improvement of the learning environment.

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Response to

Promoting Student Engagement by Engaging Staff: implementing a survey of student engagement

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Evaluation is a topic of growing importance to higher education institutions around the globe. Done well, evaluation programs can lead to improved curricula and increased student development, engagement, and satisfaction. Using surveys to evaluate skill development and the quality of collegiate experiences is commonplace. Student surveys are conducted on a variety of topics, from student engagement to use of campus resources to faculty evaluations. This chapter provides some clear and insightful guidelines for implementing institutional, student surveys for quality assurance and improvement. Perhaps the most important of these procedures is to achieve buy-in from students, departments, faculty members, and the institution. Without buy-in, results, no matter how enlightening, are unlikely to be applied to the actual improvement of teaching and learning. In addition to presenting how to get the research accomplished, this chapter gives a glimpse into the process for understanding what data each stakeholder will find most useful when disseminating the survey results. Following these guidelines for administration and methods of distribution of results could aid in effective evaluation.

While not the focus of the chapter, the authors also introduce some actions that their institution's stakeholders are taking as a result of the conducted surveys' findings. Some of the developments proposed and underway are activities that could already have been adopted from other institutions, if a better pipeline for such information existed. For example, many institutions in the United States have teaching and learning centers that instruct faculty members on how to incorporate active learning into their courses. Having survey tools, which can be used nationally and across international lines, and understanding the steps to implement them successfully, allows benchmarking and the ability to identify the most effective parts of programs when improving education globally. While context might require different languages or terminology, developing such an international tool and implementation plan would expand the sharing of expertise and good practices from just between programs in a single institution to all programs worldwide. As discussed in the chapter, some steps have already been taken to adopt different survey tools internationally, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in numerous countries. In addition to those national sized projects mentioned in the chapter, NSSE has licensed items to smaller multiple or single institution projects all around the globe, including places like South Korea, Jamaica, and Columbia.

This study reports just one specific example of success at one Irish institution when using the chapter's proposed guidelines for implementing a survey to improve teaching and learning, but their universal application seems reasonable. While using NSSE as the tool for the study, this chapter is applicable to more than just those interested in student engagement. Further research should explore the benefits when these guidelines are applied at other institutions and in other international contexts. In the United States, too often we collect evaluation data to use only to satisfy accreditation procedures, but do not take it further to use the results to improve curriculum or make programmatic changes. This chapter does an excellent job of encouraging everyone to move beyond just collecting data and demonstrates how to take the needed steps to continue the conversation on how to achieve effective teaching and learning.