

National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2005: The UW Educational Experience

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INTRODUCTION

The 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) surveyed 235,000 first-year and senior students at 528 four-year postsecondary institutions nation-wide. The stated aim of the NSSE was two-fold: to identify areas in postsecondary education that warrant particular attention and improvement; as well as to inform decision making and intervention strategies in these areas.

Accordingly, items on which UW students awarded significantly higher or lower ratings as compared to those given by students at peer institutions were intentionally selected for analysis. The purpose of this report is to shed light on areas that may invite, if not demand, our sustained attention.

Methodology

At the University of Washington, the 2005 NSSE was administered entirely via the Web. In the spring of 2005, an introductory e-mail containing an internet address for the [questionnaire](#) was sent out to a random sample of 1,917 freshman and 4,251 seniors who were enrolled full-time at the UW Seattle campus during Fall quarter 2004 and Winter/Spring quarter 2005. A total of 1,989 questionnaires were completed, yielding a response rate among freshman of 33% and among seniors of 32%.¹ Further analysis of these responses revealed that female respondents were slightly over-represented as compared with the original sample of the UW student population (59.9% vs. 50.6%, respectively). Moreover, White seniors were over-represented among respondents relative to their proportion in the student population (57.0% vs. 52.6%, respectively), whereas senior respondents identifying as Black were under-represented (1.7% vs. 2.4%, respectively).

The 2005 NSSE questionnaire was comprised of 29 items organized according to five themes: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty engagement, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment.² Most of the items were presented in fixed-choice format and some contained multiple subquestions. UW students also were administered [20 fixed-choice items](#) created by the Association of American Universities Data Exchange (AAUDE) consortium of institutions.³ These items solicited student feedback on course availability, quality and accessibility of academic advising and other resources, academic quality of their institution and/or department or program, as well as post-baccalaureate plans.⁴ This report compares responses of UW students to those from other participating AAUDE institutions.

¹ These rates are adjusted for non-deliverable e-mail addresses.

² See http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/NCS%20proof%2011_30_04.pdf.

³ Participating AAUDE members: Indiana University-Bloomington, Iowa State University, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, The University of Texas at Austin, University of California-Davis, University of Maryland-College Park, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of Virginia.

⁴ See <http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/AAUDE.pdf>.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Responses of UW students were compared to those of students from AAUDE consortium institutions on 30 items. In selecting these items for analysis primacy was awarded

- items on which significant differences were detected between responses by UW students and those of peers at consortium institutions;
- items on which the distribution of responses warranted further attention in relation to internal benchmarking; as well as
- items that pertain directly to student feedback on academic advising or student satisfaction with their educational experiences.

The first 20 items presented in this report represent three of the five major topic areas structuring the NSSE questionnaire, namely: level of academic challenge, student-faculty engagement, and supportive campus environment. Towards the end of the report, an additional set of five items centering on students' satisfaction with their educational experiences as well as five items on academic advising are provided.

While UW was rated significantly higher than other consortium schools on some items relating to *level of academic challenge*, it received significantly lower ratings in nearly all other areas. Specific comparisons are detailed on the following pages and summarized below.

Level of academic challenge

UW students reported a significantly higher quantity of assigned work than did consortium students, but the groups did not differ in the type of intellectual skills required. The majority of students from UW as well as consortium schools reported that their coursework emphasized analysis, synthesis, and application of course content either *Quite a bit* or *Very much*.

Student-faculty engagement

Very few UW or consortium students reported working with a faculty member on activities other than coursework or talking about career plans with a faculty member, and UW students were significantly less likely to have talked about career plans. They also reported a significantly lower level of prompt feedback from faculty on their academic performance, and UW seniors were less likely than consortium seniors to have discussed grades or assignments with an instructor.

Supportive campus environment

UW students gave significantly lower ratings to nearly all items relating to a supportive institutional environment than did consortium students. Students in both groups reported the least amount of help from their institutions in meeting their non-academic responsibilities or in thriving socially; the most emphasis was placed on supporting academic success. UW respondents also rated their fellow students as less friendly than did students from consortium schools, and a similar difference was found in ratings by seniors of faculty members.

Student satisfaction with their university experience

Although most UW students rated their entire educational experience positively, their ratings were nevertheless significantly lower than those given to consortium schools. Additionally, UW seniors gave significantly lower ratings to overall academic quality and quality of instruction, while UW freshmen rated this institution as less responsive to student academic problems.

Academic advising

The most frequently reported primary sources of academic advising among UW freshman were “advisors in colleges or departments,” “friends or family,” and “online registration and degree tracking systems.” UW seniors predominantly chose “advisors in colleges or departments” in addition to “online registration and degree tracking systems” as their primary sources of academic advising.

Whereas a majority of UW freshman and seniors evaluated the quality of the departmental and college-level advising they had received as either *Good* or *Excellent*, about one-third described their experience as *Poor* or *Fair*. A similar pattern was identified on evaluative ratings by UW students in relation to their entire academic advising experience at the University.

Most UW freshman and nearly all seniors reported agreement with the statements “the advisor(s) in your college or department is (are) available when you need to see her/him (them)” and “the information you’ve received from academic advisors has been accurate and up to date,” suggesting a generally high level of satisfaction with the accessibility and accuracy of academic advising within UW departments and colleges.

Level of Academic Challenge

The Level of Academic Challenge was gauged in a series of questions centered on the general emphasis of student coursework as well as the number of assigned textbooks, written papers, and problem sets completed by students. The quantity of assigned readings was generally high among UW students, with most freshman (86%) and seniors (83%) reporting having read five or more textbooks or book-length packs of course readings during the 2004-05 school year (i.e. a time period of six months). In terms of writing, a majority of freshman (67%) and seniors (59%) reported writing between one and ten papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages within that same time period. Last of all, seniors – as compared with their peers at consortium institutions – reported having completed a significantly higher number of assigned text books (3.50 vs. 3.32) and shorter writing assignments (3.16 vs. 2.94).

Table 1. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Assigned Work Items

During the current school year: ⁵		UW					UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		None	1-4	5-10	11-20	More than 20		
Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings	FY	0%	14%	40%	34%	12%	3.45	3.47
	SR	1%	17%	32%	33%	18%	3.50	3.32
Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages	FY	4%	31%	36%	21%	8%	2.99	3.05
	SR	5%	27%	32%	21%	15%	3.16	2.94

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

In a related vein, UW seniors, as compared with seniors at consortium schools, reported a significantly higher number of weekly problem sets that took *more* than an hour to complete (2.54 vs. 2.31) as well as problem sets that took *less* than an hour to complete (2.12 vs. 1.95). More generally, a majority of freshman (63%) and seniors (58%) reported completing between one and four long problem sets per week. The weekly number of short problem sets was generally lower, with a majority of freshman (65%) and seniors (71%) reporting less than three of these per week.

Table 2. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Problem Sets Items

In a typical week:		UW					UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		None	1-2	3-4	5-6	More than 6		
Number of problem sets that take you <i>more</i> than an hour to complete	FY	15%	34%	29%	10%	13%	2.73	2.59
	SR	23%	32%	26%	7%	12%	2.54	2.31
Number of problem sets that take you <i>less</i> than an hour to complete	FY	22%	43%	19%	7%	9%	2.37	2.48
	SR	38%	33%	14%	7%	8%	2.12	1.95

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

⁵ At the time of the survey administration (i.e. spring quarter 2005), “the current school year” would be a reference period of eight months or less.

In commenting on the emphases of their current coursework, most UW freshman and seniors (ranging between 65% and 85%) reported *Quite a bit* or *Very much* emphasis on each of the items: “analyzing basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory;” “synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new more complex interpretations and relationships;” as well as “applying theories or concepts to practical problems and new situations.” In contrast, a majority of UW freshman (71%) and seniors (68%) reported *Some* or *Quite a bit* of emphasis on “making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions.” On these items, no significant differences were detected between the responses by UW students and their peers at consortium institution.

Table 3. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Coursework Items

Coursework emphasizes:		UW				UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Very Little	Some	Quite a bit	Very much		
Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components	FY	2%	19%	45%	33%	3.09	3.12
	SR	2%	13%	46%	39%	3.23	3.24
Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships	FY	4%	31%	43%	22%	2.83	2.90
	SR	3%	22%	42%	33%	3.05	3.01
Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions	FY	7%	35%	36%	22%	2.73	2.76
	SR	7%	28%	40%	26%	2.85	2.91
Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations	FY	5%	23%	41%	32%	2.99	3.00
	SR	3%	21%	37%	39%	3.11	3.13

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

Student-Faculty Engagement

UW students – as compared with peers at consortium colleges – reported significantly fewer occasions during which they “talked about career plans with a faculty member” and “received prompt feedback from a faculty on [their] academic performance.” In fact, nearly half of the freshman (44%) and about one-fourth of the seniors (24%) reported *Never* having had a conversation about their career plans with a faculty member. In comparison to seniors at consortium schools, UW Seniors also reported significantly fewer occasions during which they “discussed grades or assignments with an instructor.” Finally, a notable proportion of freshman (74%) and seniors (53%) reported *Never* having “worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework.” However, these latter ratings were not significantly lower than those of students at consortium colleges.

In summary, there appears to be a relatively high proportion of UW students – freshman as well as seniors – who rarely, if ever, talk to faculty about non-coursework related topics and/or engage with faculty members in any non-coursework oriented activities. Additionally, more than half of UW freshmen and seniors rarely receive prompt feedback from, or discuss grades and assignments with, faculty members.

Table 4. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Student-Faculty Engagement Items

		UW				UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Never	Some-times	Often	Very often		
Talked about career plans with a faculty member	FY	44%	40%	12%	4%	1.76	1.99
	SR	24%	49%	18%	10%	2.14	2.29
Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral)	FY	9%	44%	39%	9%	2.47	2.63
	SR	6%	42%	41%	11%	2.57	2.76
Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	FY	74%	17%	7%	1%	1.35	1.46
	SR	53%	30%	11%	5%	1.68	1.78
Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor	FY	14%	49%	26%	11%	2.35	2.38
	SR	8%	50%	27%	15%	2.49	2.65

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

Supportive Campus Environment

In comparison to students at consortium colleges, UW students awarded significantly lower ratings on the extent to which the University is “encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds,” “facilitating campus events and activities,” and more generally “providing the support needed to thrive socially.” In a related vein, UW students also gave comparatively lower ratings on the extent to which UW is “helping them cope with non-academic responsibilities.” Indeed, more than one-third of freshman (40%) and more than half of the seniors (54%) reported receiving *Very little* help in that area. Finally, UW seniors awarded significantly lower ratings, as compared with their peers at consortium colleges, on the extent to which the University “provided the support needed to succeed academically,” with close to half (46%) of these seniors reporting having received *Very little* or *Some* academic support.

Taken together, these ratings could suggest an unmet need among students for increased access to, availability of, and/or information on, academic as well as social resources and activities. Specifically, events and activities emphasizing contact among diverse groups of students, students and faculty, as well as students and academic advisers, seem called for.

Table 5. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Institutional Environment Items

		UW				UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Very little	Some	Quite a bit	Very much		
Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically	FY	5%	26%	47%	22%	2.86	2.97
	SR	8%	38%	41%	13%	2.59	2.75
Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds	FY	16%	35%	34%	15%	2.47	2.71
	SR	26%	39%	24%	10%	2.18	2.41
Helping you cope with you non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	FY	40%	36%	20%	5%	1.90	2.06
	SR	54%	34%	10%	3%	1.61	1.84
Providing the support you need to thrive socially	FY	27%	39%	27%	7%	2.14	2.43
	SR	35%	46%	16%	4%	1.89	2.19
Attending campus events and activities (special speakers, cultural performances, athletic events, etc.)	FY	12%	34%	38%	16%	2.59	2.88
	SR	15%	42%	32%	12%	2.40	2.73

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

Overall, students at UW, as compared with peers at consortium schools, gave significantly lower, albeit generally positive, ratings when evaluating the quality of their relations with other students.

Furthermore, whereas UW seniors generally awarded positive ratings in evaluating their relationship with faculty, their ratings were still significantly lower than those of seniors at consortium colleges. No differences were identified between the ratings by UW students and their peers at consortium colleges when evaluating their relations with administrative personnel. It bears mention, however, that about one-fourth (24%) of the freshman and about one-third (35%) of seniors describe the quality of their relationship with administrative personnel as *Unfriendly*.

Collectively, these ratings indicate that most UW freshman and seniors feel positive about the quality of their relationships with other students and with faculty members, and to a certain extent their relations with UW administrative personnel; though, a relatively high percentage of the students described their relationship to UW staff as *Unfriendly*.

Table 6. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Quality of Relationships Items

Relationships with ...		UW							UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Unfriendly			Friendly					
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
... other students	FY	1%	3%	6%	19%	28%	28%	14%	5.12	5.56
	SR	1%	4%	8%	17%	26%	26%	17%	5.10	5.51
... faculty members	FY	0%	4%	11%	27%	29%	21%	9%	4.79	4.90
	SR	2%	4%	12%	19%	28%	24%	12%	4.84	5.08
... administrative personnel and offices	FY	3%	8%	13%	35%	21%	13%	7%	4.31	4.46
	SR	8%	11%	16%	24%	20%	13%	9%	4.13	4.36

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

Student Satisfaction

A strong majority of UW students evaluated their entire educational experience positively, with 88% of freshman and 85% of seniors describing their experience as *Good* or *Excellent*. That being said, the overall ratings among UW students were still significantly lower than those of their peers at the consortium colleges (3.16 and 3.14 vs. 3.28 and 3.30, respectively). Student ratings of the academic quality of UW – although comparatively lower among UW seniors as compared with seniors at consortium colleges – were generally positive, with 93% of the freshman and 88% of the seniors describing the academic quality at UW as either *Good* or even *Excellent*. Likewise, UW Seniors also awarded comparatively lower ratings on the “quality of instruction in lower-division courses” (2.44 vs. 2.56, respectively). However, the student evaluations of the “quality of instruction in upper-division courses” were generally positive, with 89% of the seniors describing the academic quality as either *Good* or *Excellent*. In evaluating the “University’s responsiveness to student academic problems,” freshman gave significantly lower ratings as compared with their peers at consortium colleges (2.59 vs. 2.75, respectively). In fact, ratings on this item were generally low, with about one-third (33%) of the UW freshman and nearly half of the UW seniors (49%) describing the University’s responsiveness to academic problems as *Poor* or *Fair*.

Overall, UW students gave positive ratings on both the academic quality and their educational experience at the University, despite the fact that their ratings on these items tended to be lower than those of students at consortium colleges. Moreover, although most UW students – freshman as well as seniors – evaluated the quality of instruction in lower-division courses as either *Fair* or *Good*, the quality of instruction in upper-division courses was more often than not rated *Good* or even *Excellent*. The lowest ratings were awarded the University’s responsiveness to student academic problems.

Table 7. Frequency and Mean of student responses on the Student Satisfaction Items

		UW					UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	N/A		
How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?	FY	2%	10%	58%	30%	-	3.16	3.28
	SR	3%	13%	52%	33%	-	3.14	3.30
How would you rate the quality of instruction in lower-division courses?	FY	5%	28%	53%	12%	2%	2.73	2.84
	SR	10%	40%	40%	7%	4%	2.44	2.56
How would you rate the quality of instruction in upper-division courses?	FY	1%	11%	41%	24%	22%	3.14	3.12
	SR	2%	10%	50%	39%	0%	3.26	3.25
How would you rate this university's responsiveness to student academic problems?	FY	8%	25%	42%	7%	-	2.59	2.75
	SR	15%	33%	30%	9%	-	2.37	2.49
How would you rate the academic quality of this university in general?	FY	1%	7%	51%	42%	-	3.34	3.38
	SR	1%	11%	57%	31%	-	3.17	3.29

Mean comparisons highlighted in bold indicate a probability of less than 0.1 percent that the observed differences between UW students and those of the consortium schools occurred by chance ($p < .001$).

Academic Advising

In selecting – from a predetermined list – the source from which they received most of their academic advising, UW freshman most frequently cited “advisors in colleges or departments” (31%), “friends or family” (28%), and “online registration and degree tracking systems” (20%). The most frequently cited category among UW seniors was “advisors in colleges or departments” (52%), followed by “online registration and degree tracking systems” (23%). A small, yet notable, proportion of UW seniors also selected “Instructors or staff members not formally assigned as an advisor” (11%).

Table 8. Frequency counts and percentages of student responses on Source of Advising Item

	Freshman		Senior	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Advisors in your college or department	164	31%	617	52%
Instructors or staff members not formally assigned as an advisor	43	8%	137	11%
Online registration and degree tracking system	103	20%	276	23%
Undergraduate catalog or other publications	33	6%	28	2%
Friends or family	148	28%	109	9%
Not applicable	37	7%	29	2%
Total	528	100%	1,196	100%

The student ratings of the quality of academic advising they received in colleges and departments were generally positive, with most UW freshman (52%) and seniors (60%) describing their department or college advising as *Good* or *Excellent*. Note, however, that a relatively large proportion of UW freshman (18%) replied *Not applicable* in response to this item. In line with these positive ratings, most UW freshman (68%) and seniors (61%) described the quality of academic advising at the University as either *Good* or *Excellent*.

Table 9. Frequency and Mean of student responses on Quality of Advising Items

:		UW					UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Not applicable		
How would you rate the quality of academic advising you have received from your college or department at this university?	FY	7%	24%	39%	13%	18%	2.71	2.76
	SR	12%	26%	36%	24%	1%	2.74	2.62
Overall, how would you rate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution?	FY	6%	26%	48%	20%	--	2.81	2.88
	SR	11%	28%	41%	20%	--	2.70	2.69

Most UW freshman (68%) and seniors (86%) reported some level of agreement with the statement “the advisor(s) in your college or department is (are) available when you need to see her/him (them).” Likewise, a strong majority of UW freshman (69%) and seniors (82%) either *Agreed* or *Strongly agreed* with the statement “the information you’ve received from academic advisors has been accurate and up to date.” Taken together, these findings suggest a generally high level of satisfaction with accessibility of academic advising within UW departments and colleges as well as with the accuracy of the advising-related information provided by these. Please note, however, that between 21% and 24% of the freshman felt that the two questions did not apply to them and that no significant differences between responses by UW students and those of students at consortium schools were detected on these items.

Table 10. Frequency and Mean of student responses on Availability and Accuracy of Advising Items

:		UW					UW Mean	Consortium Colleges Mean
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not applicable		
The advisor(s) in your college or department is(are) available when you need to see her/him(them)	FY	3%	9%	55%	13%	21%	2.98	3.05
	SR	4%	9%	59%	27%	2%	3.10	3.05
The information you've received from academic advisors has been accurate and up to date.	FY	1%	6%	54%	15%	24%	3.10	3.10
	SR	5%	11%	55%	27%	2%	3.07	2.99