

How Effective are the NSSE Benchmarks in Predicting Important Educational Outcomes?

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One of the long-standing conversations in postsecondary education over the last three decades has focused on the need to hold colleges and universities accountable for the quality of undergraduate education. Although focused on K-12 education, “A Nation at Risk” launched this concern in earnest. In the same year as “A Nation at Risk” was published, the *U.S. News and World Report* began its annual rankings – substantially influencing the public’s perception of college quality. The release of the 2006 Spellings Commission Report and its clear emphasis on student learning provided a new sense of urgency for defining a quality undergraduate education in terms of student cognitive and personal development. Starting with a conversation held among a concerned group of higher education stakeholders, the scope enlarged to engage, not only higher education faculty and administrators, but also parents, employers, and the general public. Put simply, beyond simply knowing the characteristics of entering students and graduation statistics, a growing segment of the population has become interested in knowing what students actually learn in college.

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), a project sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) was created for the purpose of helping postsecondary institutions demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public by measuring educational outcomes, identifying effective educational practices, and assembling information in an accessible, understandable,

and comparable manner. Through the College Portrait, participating institutions provide information on student and campus characteristics, cost, success and progress rates, as well as student educational experiences on campus using one of four student engagement surveys, and student learning outcomes on one of three instruments measuring broad cognitive skills. With 70% of four-year college students attending one of AAC&U or NASULGC's member institutions, the VSA has the potential to reach an extensive audience and create a market in which information about student experiences and learning inform students' and parents' college decisions.

Other college experience surveys are acceptable for institutions' completion of the "Student Experiences and Perceptions" portion of the College Portrait. None, however, reach the number of students as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is clearly one of the most widely used annual surveys of undergraduates in the country. According to the NSSE 2007 Annual Report ("Experiences That Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success," 2008), the NSSE survey has been completed by nearly 1.5 million students at nearly 1,200 different colleges and universities in the last decade. In 2008 alone, 774 different colleges and universities are participating in the annual spring administration of the 15-20 minute survey. The NSSE is specifically designed to measure the extent to which college students are engaged in empirically-vetted good practices in undergraduate education. Indeed, one of the major assumptions of the NSSE is that in measuring such good practices, one is essentially measuring experiences which yield

desired student cognitive and personal development during college. Thus, other things being equal, the greater one's engagement in, or exposure to these good practices the more developmentally influential one's undergraduate education—or so the logic goes.

Over time, NSSE has developed various scales or indexes underlying the individual items in the survey instrument. The most prominent and frequently reported are the five NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice (hereafter referred to as benchmarks). These are: *Level of Academic Challenge*, *Active and Collaborative Learning*, *Student-Faculty Interaction*, *Enriching Educational Experiences*, and *Supportive Campus Environment* (The College Student Report, 2006 Codebook). *Level of Academic Challenge* is an eleven-item scale that measures time spent preparing for class, amount of reading and writing, deep learning, and institutional expectations for academic performance. *Active and Collaborative Learning* is a seven-item scale that measures extent of class participation, working collaboratively with other students inside and outside of class, tutoring and involvement with a community-based project. The *Student-Faculty Interaction* scale consists of six items and measures extent of interaction with faculty members and advisors, discussing ideas from classes with faculty members outside of class, getting prompt feedback on academic performance, and working with faculty on a research project. *Enriching Educational Experiences* is a scale with twelve items that measures extent of interaction with students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds or with different values or political opinions, using information

technology, and participating in activities such as internships, community service, study abroad, and co-curricular activities. Finally, *Supportive Campus Environment* is a six-item scale measuring the extent to which students perceive the campus helps them succeed academically and socially, assists them in coping with nonacademic responsibilities, and promotes supportive relations among students and their peers, faculty members, and administrative personnel and offices. [The above descriptions of the five benchmark scales were taken from the College Student Report, 2006 Codebook (2006) developed by NSSE.]

Despite their broad-based national, and even international, use it seems reasonable to ask if good practices in undergraduate education as measured by the rather brief NSSE benchmarks actually do predict important educational outcomes. With some narrowly focused exceptions (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; LaNasa, Olson, & Alleman, 2007), however, nearly all the predictive validity evidence in this regard is based on studies that link the various NSSE measures of good practices to student self-reported gains in intellectual and personal development that are assessed by a set of 16 items near the end of the NSSE instrument itself. [For a review of these studies see Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich (2008), *Validation of the NSSE benchmarks and deep approaches to learning against liberal arts outcomes*; available from <http://www.education.uiowa.edu/crue/publications/index.htm>.]

Although such self-reported gains can be formed into psychometrically reliable scales, serious problems exist with the internal validity of any findings in which self-

reported gains are employed as an outcome or criterion measure for the effects of the NSSE benchmark scales. In a 2001 article in the *Journal of College Student Development* Pascarella (2001) notes that the key problem lies in the cross-sectional nature of the data collection. Students complete the self-reported gains part of the NSSE only once—at the same time they complete the items of the benchmarks. When researchers do not have a precollege measure of an individual student’s receptiveness to educational experiences, it is difficult—if not impossible—to distinguish how much of that student’s self-reported “gain” on some outcome is due to the added value of college from how much is simply due to his or her disproportionate openness and receptivity to the college experience. Two students having the same educational experience could report substantially different gains because they enter college differentially open or receptive to the effects of postsecondary education. Absent a precollege measure of the students’ response propensities on self-reported gains items (e.g., self-reported gains during high school), it is nearly impossible to take this differential receptiveness to educational experiences into account. Thus, using the NSSE self-reported gains in college as a criterion for good practices runs a high risk of confounding the effects of exposure to good practices as measured by the NSSE benchmarks with the particular individual characteristics of the students an institution attracts and admits (Astin & Lee, 2003; Pascarella, 2001). Furthermore, recent evidence reported by Bowman (2009) indicates little or no overlap between self-reported gains and longitudinal (pretest-posttest) gains made on standardized, more

objectively-measured instruments. Such evidence would seemingly raise a reasonable question about what self-reported gains are actually measuring.

The bottom line is that we have, at present, very little internally valid evidence with respect to the actual predictive validity of the NSSE. This is a serious concern if participating postsecondary institutions are asked to consider the NSSE benchmark scales as a proxy for institutional practices in undergraduate education that facilitate student growth in important educational outcomes. Consequently, pursuant to a subcontract from the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, the Center for Research on Undergraduate Education at The University of Iowa analyzed institutional-level data from the first year of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (hereafter WNSLAE) to estimate the validity of the NSSE benchmarks in predicting seven standardized traits and skills thought to be the outcomes of a general liberal arts education. In addition to measuring outcomes other than self-reported gains, our study addresses the limitations of past research on the NSSE by using a longitudinal, pretest-posttest approach. No other investigation of which we are aware is configured to conduct such a comprehensive validation of the benchmark scales with institutions as the focus.

The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education

The WNSLAE is a longitudinal investigation of the institutional experiences that enhance growth in important educational outcomes. Using a pretest-posttest design, it measured first-year student change on a range of dimensions derived from a

model of college outcomes historically associated with a liberal arts education developed by King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, and VanHecke (2007). The five liberal arts outcome dimensions addressed in our analyses were as follows. 1) *Effective Reasoning and Problem Solving*: To tap this dimension we used the 32-item Critical Thinking Test of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), which is one of the learning outcome measures recommended by the VSA. The Critical Thinking Test was developed by the American College Testing Program and measures a student's ability to clarify, analyze, evaluate, and extend arguments. 2) *Moral Character*: This was measured by the N2 score of the Defining Issues Test (DIT). The N2 score measures the extent to which a student uses high order (principled/post-conventional) moral reasoning in resolving moral issues. It also reflects the extent to which one rejects ideas because they are biased or simplistic. 3) *Inclination to Inquire and Lifelong Learning*: This dimension was measured by the 18-item Need for Cognition Scale and the 6-item Positive Attitude Toward Literacy Scale. The Need for Cognition Scale measures a student's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity, while the Positive Attitude Toward Literacy Scale assesses one's enjoyment of such literacy-oriented activities as reading poetry and literature, reading scientific and historical material, and expressing ideas in writing. 4) *Intercultural Effectiveness*: This dimension was tapped by the total score of the 15-item Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale and the 7-item Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale. The Miville-Guzman measures an attitude of awareness and acceptance of both similarities and

differences among people, while the Openness to Diversity Scale measures a student's openness to cultural and racial diversity as well as the extent to which one enjoys being challenged by different perspectives, values, and ideas. 5) *Personal Well-Being*: This was measured by the total score of the 54-item Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB). The SPWB is a theoretically grounded instrument that assesses six dimensions of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery and autonomy, from which we created a total scale. The reliabilities of the seven measures ranged from .71 to .91 and averaged .82. [Detailed descriptions of the reliability and predictive validity of each measure, as well as an extensive technical description of the conduct of the WNSLAE can be found in Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich (2008), *Validation of the NSSE benchmarks and deep approaches to learning against liberal arts outcomes*; available from <http://www.education.uiowa.edu/crue>.]

Nineteen institutions from eleven different states participated in the WNSLAE. The institutions included a mix of liberal arts colleges, regional institutions, research universities, and community colleges. The analyses reported here are based on data from 1,426 first-year students at these 19 institutions who took the Critical Thinking Test, 1,446 different first-year students who took the Defining Issues Test, and 2,861 first-year students (including both previous samples) who completed all other measures.

Data were collected from these first-year students when they entered college in the fall of 2006 and again at the end of their first year of postsecondary education in early spring 2007. As the students entered the 19 participating institutions in the fall of 2006, they completed the 7 liberal arts outcome measures. In the follow-up data collection in spring 2007, these same students first completed the National Survey of Student Engagement on which the five benchmark scales are based, and then subsequently they once again completed the posttests of the seven liberal arts outcome measures.

Analysis of the WNSLAE Data

Since the NSSE benchmarks are designed to provide an institutional-level assessment of exposure to good practices, institutions were our unit of analysis. Therefore, we aggregated the responses of the sample at each institution to obtain an average institution-level score. This provided each institution's average assessed score on each of the seven liberal arts outcomes (assessed in fall 2006 and spring 2007), and each institution's average score on each of the five NSSE benchmark scales. With a sample of only 19 institutions, we were somewhat limited, not only in terms of statistical power to uncover significant findings, but also with respect to the sophistication of our analytic approach. However, the longitudinal nature of the WNSLAE data did permit us to estimate the associations between the average NSSE benchmarks and the average of each liberal arts outcome in spring 2007 while taking into account arguably the most important confounding influence—the average

institutional-level score of the entering students in fall 2006 on each liberal arts outcome measure. Thus, with average institution-level scores as the unit of analysis, we estimated the partial correlation between each NSSE benchmark and each posttest liberal arts outcome measured in spring 2007, while statistically controlling for the pretest score on the corresponding instrument measured in fall 2006.

What We Found

Our analyses led us to compute 35 partial correlations (five NSSE benchmarks × seven liberal arts outcomes) with average institution scores as the unit of analysis. The first thing we did was to treat these 35 partial correlations as a distribution and determine if the average partial correlation in the distribution was statistically significant. The partial correlation distribution ranged from .02 to .73 with a mean of .34 and a standard deviation of .15. The 99.9% confidence band around the mean partial correlation of .34 ranged from .26 to .42. Since the confidence band did not include zero, the mean partial correlation of the distribution was statistically significant at $p < .001$ (t-test degrees of freedom = 33). This suggests that institutional-level NSSE benchmark scores have an overall positive association with the seven end of first-year liberal arts outcomes that is independent of differences across the 19 institutions in the average score of their entering student population on each liberal arts outcome. Therefore, any individually significant partial correlations uncovered between specific benchmarks and specific outcomes would not appear to

be merely fortuitous individual findings in an overall pattern of chance or non-significant associations.

In Table 1, we show the individual partial correlations between each NSSE benchmark scale and each of the seven liberal arts outcomes. Because average institutional scores ($N = 19$ institutions) were the unit of analysis, we were afforded very limited statistical power to uncover significant associations (t-test degrees of freedom = 16). Consequently, we used a more relaxed level ($p < .10$) to determine statistical significance. Even at this level, an individual partial correlation greater than .40 was required for statistical significance.

As Table 1 indicates, with presence of controls for the average institutional precollege score, at least one of the NSSE benchmarks had a significant partial association with each of the end of first-year liberal arts outcomes except the Need for Cognition Scale. Across all liberal arts outcomes, the most influential NSSE benchmark appeared to be the Enriching Educational Experiences Scale, having significant partial associations with four of the seven outcomes: the Critical Thinking Test of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic proficiency, the N2 score of the Defining Issues Test, the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale, and the Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale. The Supportive Campus Environment benchmark also had significant partial correlations with the Miville-Guzman and Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale, as well as with the total score of the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being. The Level of Academic Challenge benchmark had

significant partial associations with Critical Thinking and the Positive Attitude Toward Literacy Scale, while the Active and Collaborative Learning benchmark had a significant partial correlation with Openness to Diversity/Challenge. Only the Student/Faculty Interaction benchmark failed to have a significant partial correlation with at least one of the seven liberal arts outcomes.

Why the Student/Faculty Interaction benchmark had no significant net associations with any of our six outcomes is not totally clear. One possibility is that the influence of Student/Faculty Interaction is conditional rather than general. That is, rather than having the same effect for all students (i.e., a general effect), it may enhance first-year growth for some students but not others (i.e., a conditional effect). Another possibility is that the Student/Faculty Interaction benchmark essentially measures the frequency of interaction in different contexts (e.g., discussion of grades, assignments, class readings, career, and the like). It does not really tap students' perceptions of the quality or personal importance of those interactions with faculty. As a fairly large body of evidence indicates, it may be that the quality and perceived importance of students' interactions with faculty have more developmental impact than the frequency with which such interactions occur (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Whatever the reason, however, our findings suggest that, in its present form, the Student/Faculty Interaction scale may be the least predictive benchmark and might benefit from additional reworking and analysis by NSSE.

Clearly our institution-level results are limited by the small sample (19 institutions). Although the sample contained a wide variety of institutional types, it certainly cannot be considered a statistically representative national sample of colleges and universities. This small sample, and its attendant limiting effect on statistical power, also limited the sophistication of the analytic procedures we employed and led us to rely on rather straightforward partial correlations. However, the longitudinal nature of the WNSLAE data permitted us to control for institution-level precollege scores on each first-year liberal arts outcome, yielding a more valid estimate of the “value added” by the college experience. Moreover, the WNSLAE allowed us to look at first-year student development on a wide range of liberal arts outcomes that were measured with objective, standardized instruments of vetted reliability and validity. We know of no other data that would permit such a comprehensive institutional-level assessment of the predictive validity of the NSSE benchmark scales.

Implications for Policy

One cannot make strict causal claims with correlational data, even in the best case scenario (such as the WNSLAE) when the study design is longitudinal. Although we controlled for the average institution precollege score on each outcome, this is certainly not the only possible source of confounding influence. Moreover, our sample cannot be said to be a representative national sample of institutions. Thus, our results need to be considered with caution. That said, our findings nevertheless lend support to the claim that the NSSE benchmarks do in fact measure institutional

practices and student experiences that are precursors to growth in important educational outcomes such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, intercultural effectiveness, personal well-being, and positive orientation toward literacy activities. Even with controls for the average institutional-level precollege score, there were discernible differences among institutions in the average end of first-year educational outcomes specified above that were significantly and positively linked to average institutional scores on the NSSE benchmarks. Thus, our findings suggest that institutions using the NSSE can have reasonable confidence that the benchmark scales do, in fact, measure exposure to experiences that predict student progress on important educational outcomes, independent of the level on these outcomes at which an institution's student body enters college.

Such findings may have non-trivial implications for institutional assessment expenditures. In the present economic climate, the institutional costs incurred in gathering all the measures needed to complete the VSA College Portrait, particularly in terms of the Student Experiences and Perceptions and the Student Learning Outcomes, are considerable. Not all colleges may be able to absorb these costs. For institutions forced to cut costs, our findings suggest that increases on institutional NSSE benchmarks can be considered as reasonable proxies for increases across a range of important educational outcomes. Thus, if an institutional can only afford to focus on the "process" of undergraduate education, as measured by the NSSE

benchmarks, this nevertheless seems likely to have substantial implications for the “product.”

Of additional importance, perhaps, is the fact that these significant partial associations between the NSSE benchmarks and liberal arts outcomes were uncovered in the face of a small sample with very low statistical power and were detectable as early as the first year of postsecondary education. Although institutional use of the NSSE is usually oriented toward a broader sample of students from all undergraduate classes, our findings suggest that the NSSE may also be used to focus on the effectiveness of the first year of college—a period of time in which some multi-institutional evidence suggests that the greatest developmental impact of postsecondary education occurs (Flowers et al., 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). From a somewhat different perspective, it is also possible that our first-year findings underestimate the institutional-level links between the NSSE benchmarks and our various outcome measures. One might reasonably expect good practices in undergraduate education to demonstrate somewhat stronger impacts on student development during the subsequent years of college when such practices have had longer periods of time to exert their influence.

Our findings also provide additional evidence to the ongoing national debate over what constitutes quality in undergraduate education. The *U.S. News and World Report* (USNWR) annual ranking of postsecondary institutions has strongly shaped public notions of a quality undergraduate education in the U.S. These rankings,

however, operationally define “quality” largely in terms of resources, reputation, and, particularly, the academic selectivity of an institution’s undergraduate student body.

Indeed, there is sound evidence to suggest that the USNWR rankings can be essentially reproduced simply by knowing the average ACT/SAT score of each institution’s entering first year class (Pascarella, Cruce, Umbach, Wolniak, Kuh, Carini, Hayek, Gonyea and Zhao, 2006). This means that, insofar as the USNWR rankings shape public understanding of what constitutes a quality undergraduate education, it will be defined by the characteristics students bring to college and not by the actual effectiveness of the academic and non-academic experiences students have after they arrive on campus. The NSSE benchmark scales were designed specifically to measure these effective academic and non-academic experiences, and there is little evidence that such experiences are substantially linked to the academic selectivity of the college one attends (Pascarella et al., 2006). Our findings suggest the dimensions of undergraduate experience measured by the NSSE benchmarks are, in fact, precursors to important educational outcomes and therefore arguably a more valid conception of what truly constitutes a quality undergraduate education than the measures used by USNWR.

Furthermore, the NSSE benchmark scales point to areas of effective academic and non-academic experiences that may be amenable to improvement through purposeful changes in institutional policies and practices. On the other hand, resources and academic selectivity—measures frequently used by USNWR to rank

colleges—may be much harder to change and therefore may form a much more deterministic or stable context in which an institution must learn to function. For example, state legislatures often set the admissions standards, and therefore the selectivity, of many public institutions. To the extent an institution is actually concerned with the quality and effectiveness of the undergraduate education it provides, the existing evidence (bolstered by our findings) suggests that it probably makes more sense to focus on implementing practices and experiences measured by the NSSE benchmarks than on those factors measured by USNWR. A dynamic context, grounded in an institution’s commitment to improvement, may be able to create an institutional culture that continuously strives to engage students in the practices and experiences of the NSSE benchmark scales, thereby increasing the likelihood of improved institutional effectiveness and increased student learning and development.

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Table 1

Partial Correlations^a Among the Five NSSE Benchmarks and Seven End of First-Year Liberal Arts Outcomes (Institutions as the Unit of Analysis – N=19)

Liberal Arts Outcome	NSSE Benchmark Scales				
	Level of Academic Challenge	Active and Collaborative Learning	Student-Faculty Interaction	Enriching Educational Experiences	Supportive Campus Environment
<i>Effective Reasoning and Problem Solving</i>					
CAAP Critical Thinking Test	.43*	.39	.35	.44*	.28
<i>Moral Character</i>					
Defining Issues Test-N2 Score	.39	.10	.30	.44*	.05
<i>Inclination to Inquire and Lifelong Learning</i>					
Need for Cognition Scale	.27	.08	.20	.02	.30
Positive Attitude Toward Literacy Scale	.51**	.33	.17	.30	.39
<i>Intercultural Effectiveness</i>					

Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale	.33	.35	.28	.57**	.48*
Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale	.30	.56**	.36	.41*	.43*

Table 1 (continued)

Liberal Arts Outcome	NSSE Benchmark Scales				
	Level of Academic Challenge	Active and Collaborative Learning	Student-Faculty Interaction	Enriching Educational Experiences	Supportive Campus Environment
<i>Personal Well-Being</i>					
Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Total Score)	.31	.31	.31	.39	.73***

^aControlling for the average score of each institution's entering student population on each liberal arts outcome (t-test degrees of freedom = 16).

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.