

Faculty and Student Perceptions on Student Engagement

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) is designed to provide instructor-related feedback on many of the concepts measured by the complementary National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The most recent survey was administered at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as a requirement of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's Quality Assurance Funding program. Faculty, instructors and GTAs who taught undergraduate courses during the Spring 2017 semester were invited to participate and twenty-four percent of those responded to the survey.

NSSE and FSSE provide participating institutions with a report that compares faculty responses against similar questions asked of students. The following analysis looks at UTK faculty expectations of students (from responses from the Spring 2017 semester FSSE administration) compared against UTK student reported experiences from the Spring 2016 semester administration of NSSE. NSSE groups items according to *engagement indicators* which "provide valuable information about a distinct aspect of student engagement by summarizing students' (and faculty, for the FSSE) responses to a set of related survey questions." (<http://fsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm>)

There are eleven engagement indicators that NSSE/FSSE examines, and faculty expectations and student experiences line up similarly in many of them. This means that the level of emphasis on a concept reported by instructors comes close to the level of experience with that concept as reported by students. After reviewing the engagement indicators where instructors and students are somewhat like-minded, we will dig a little deeper into the engagement indicators where instructor expectations and student experience are much farther apart. (Note: there may be individual items within the engagement indicators that stand out, and those will be examined in more detail with additional analysis.) Instructor responses are broken out between those who teach primarily lower division courses (represented by the top bar in dark blue), and those who teach upper division courses (shown below the lower division courses in bright blue). Student responses are reported by class with freshmen represented by the top bar in orange, and senior responses shown below in gray.¹ (NSSE only surveys freshmen and seniors.) There are some interesting findings on how faculty and students view "educational practices that are empirically linked with high levels of learning and development."

¹ For the 2016 administration of NSSE, there were 534 freshmen respondents (12% response rate) and 445 senior respondents (9% response rate). For the 2017 administration of FSSE there were 704 total respondents (24% response rate). The faculty number includes tenure/tenure-track faculty, instructors and graduate teaching assistants.

Academic Challenge - Where Instructors and Students Agree

Higher Order Learning refers to the process of using complicated processes to arrive at a conclusion. It attempts to go beyond memorizing facts and restating those facts as part of an assignment.

Higher Order Learning			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %	NSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %
<i>Faculty responses to: In your selected course section, how much does the coursework emphasize the following?</i>		<i>Student responses to: During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following?</i>	
Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations	79 85	Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations	79 79
Analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts	70 81	Analyzing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts	73 73
Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source	56 66	Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source	66 65
Forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information	71 75	Forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information	66 70













In the area of Higher Order Learning, it appears that faculty expectations and student experiences are similar.

Reflective and Integrative Learning looks at how students consider their own experiences as they learn the subject matter in their courses. How does new information impact what they already knew? Are they able to integrate other perspectives when looking at a subject?

Reflective and Integrative Learning			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Important + Important %	NSSE Item	Very Often + Often %
Faculty responses to: <i>In your selected course section, how important is it to you that the typical student do the following?</i>		Student responses to: <i>During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?</i>	
Combine ideas from different courses when completing assignments	61 84	Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments	54 70
Connect their learning to societal problems or issues	66 74	Connected your learning to societal problems or issues	50 63
Include diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments	59 65	Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments	46 48
Examine the strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic or issue	76 78	Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	60 66
Try to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective	69 71	Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective	65 67
Learn something that changes the way they understand an issue or concept	86 91	Learned something that changes the way you understand an issue or concept	60 68
Connect ideas from your course to their prior experiences and knowledge	92 93	Connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge	76 85

Faculty expectations are a bit higher than student experiences, but this may be due to increased awareness of instructors for desired outcomes in reflective and integrative learning practices.

The Learning Strategies engagement indicator examines methods that allow students to actively engage with course material.

Learning Strategies			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %	NSSE Item	Very Often + Often %
Faculty responses to: In your selected course section, how much do you encourage students to do the following?		Student responses to: During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?	
Identify key information from reading assignments	64  67 	Identified key information from reading assignments	77  79 
Review notes after class	55  54 	Reviewed your notes after class	69  58 
Summarize what has been learned from class or from course materials	57  64 	Summarized what you learned in class or from course materials	63  61 

Student experiences differ a bit from faculty expectations in the area of learning strategies, but the explanation may be the same as with reflective and integrative learning practices. Because the questions focus on what students do, they are more conscious about the practices they engage in outside of class (which is the focus of these three items) than instructors would be.

















Because of the increased use of and reliance on data, Quantitative Reasoning has become a skill receiving much more attention as a higher education outcome. Many institutions are beginning to focus on students' ability to use statistical evidence to support or challenge claims.

Quantitative Reasoning			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Important + Important %	NSSE Item	Very Often + Often %
Faculty responses to: In your selected course section, how important is it to you that the typical student do the following?		Student responses to: During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?	
Reach conclusions based on their own analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)	67 71	Reached conclusions based on your own analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)	60 55
Use numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)	49 61	Used numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)	41 43
Evaluate what others have concluded from numerical information	56 65	Evaluated what others have concluded from numerical information	42 48

Faculty expectations are slightly higher than student reported experience, but the difference may narrow over time as students become more competent in quantitative literacy.

Learning With Peers - Where Instructors and Students Start to Differ

Collaborative Learning refers to opportunities for students to work through complicated situations with their peers.

Collaborative Learning			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %	NSSE Item	Very Often + Often%
Faculty responses to: In your selected course section, how much do you encourage the following?		Student responses to: During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?	
Ask other students for help understanding course material	68  63 	Asked another student to help you understand course material	61  47 
Explain course material to other students	65  59 	Explained course material to one or more students	68  64 
Prepare for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students	67  62 	Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students	53  52 
Work with other students on course projects or assignments	61  65 	Worked with other students on course projects or assignments	58  65 

In this area, faculty are encouraging collaborative learning practices and students are participating in them. Students from UTK leave the university with the ability to work well with others.

The gap between faculty expectation and student experience widens considerably when it comes to Discussions with Diverse Others. These discussions allow students to interact with people from different backgrounds and experiences.

Discussion with Diverse Others			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %	NSSE Item	Very Often + Often%
Faculty responses to: In your selected course section, how much opportunity do students have to engage in discussions with people from the following groups?		Student responses to: During the current school year, about how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups?	
People of a race or ethnicity other than their own	35 31	People of a race or ethnicity other than your own	72 73
People from an economic background other than their own	42 34	People from an economic background other than your own	75 73
People with religious beliefs other than their own	30 25	People with religious beliefs other than your own	73 74
People with political views other than their own	42 31	People with political views other than your own	75 77

There is a very large disparity between how much of an opportunity students have to engage in discussions with people different than themselves and students' own reported engagement with people different than themselves. Students report that many of them *are* having these conversations. Faculty may have higher expectations than students, or these conversations are taking place somewhere other than the classroom. We can speculate about the reasons, but digging deeper into questions about discussions with diverse others presents a rich opportunity to learn more about both instructors and students on the topic of diversity.

Experiences with Faculty – Are Preconceptions of Both Instructors and Students Important?

There is some disparity between student reported experiences with Student-Faculty Interaction and how faculty perceive those encounters.

Student-Faculty Interaction			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Often + Often %	NSSE Item	Very Often + Often%
Faculty responses to: During the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following with the undergraduate students you teach or advise?		Student responses to: During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?	
Talked about their career plans	42 69	Talked about career plans with a faculty member	33 38
Worked on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)	17 40	Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)	16 25
Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts outside of class	45 54	Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class	22 29
Discussed their academic performance	60 52	Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member	26 24

This discrepancy may be explained by the number of students an instructor encounters versus the number of instructors a student encounters, particularly in undergraduate courses. For example, if an instructor discusses career plans with a couple of students, those encounters satisfy the question FSSE asks. Students will have a much more limited number of instructors to interact with in their time as undergraduates, so the opportunity to discuss career plans may be less likely to present itself.

Instructors' use of Effective Teaching Practices can significantly impact student learning. Do instructors offer organized instruction, clear explanations and illustrative examples? Do they provide effective feedback to their students? Faculty at UTK report that they do engage in these teaching practices, but the student perception of their instructors' practices is a bit lower.

Effective Teaching Practices			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %	NSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %
Faculty responses to: In your undergraduate courses, to what extent do you do the following?		Student responses to: To what extent have your instructors done the following during the current school year?	
Clearly explain course goals and requirements	95 95	Clearly explained course goals and requirements	78 80
Teach course sessions in an organized way	96 97	Taught course sessions in an organized way	80 80
Use examples or illustrations to explain difficult points	97 97	Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points	78 81
Provide feedback to students on drafts or works in progress	63 67	Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress	61 54
Provide prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments	91 88	Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments.	53 59

It is possible that while instructors are implementing effective teaching practices, students may be slower to recognize them. Or, faculty may be employing these practices, but perhaps not as successfully as they think they are.

Campus Environment – Do Faculty and Students See Eye To Eye?

Another area where there is a significant gap between instructor and student perceptions is that of Quality of Interactions. NSSE hypothesizes that the more positive the interaction between a student and others at the institution (other students, faculty, administrators), the more engaged and successful the student will be. Interestingly, UTK FSSE respondents rated their perception of the quality of student interactions with others at the institution far lower than student respondents did.

Quality of Interactions			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	High Ratings%	NSSE Item	High Ratings %
Faculty responses to: Indicate your perception of the quality of student interactions with the following people at your institution.		Student responses to: Indicate the quality of your interactions with the following people at your institution.	
Other students	29 38	Students	55 59
Academic advisors	10 22	Academic advisors	54 48
Faculty	18 25	Faculty	49 54
Student services staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.)	9 15	Student services staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.)	43 37
Other administrative staff and offices (registrar, financial aid, etc.)	9 14	Other administrative staff and offices (registrar, financial aid, etc.)	36 36

**Note: Response options for faculty and student Quality of Interactions items ranged from 1=Poor to 7=Excellent; High ratings (6 or 7).*

There are many possible explanations for this difference. Perhaps students only relay the negative interactions in discussions with their instructors, or their own experiences with students, faculty and administrators may have influenced their responses. As with the topic of Discussions with Diverse Others, this area provides an interesting opportunity to better understand how those who teach view those they are teaching.

Taking specific steps to foster a Supportive Environment on campus positively impacts student engagement and satisfaction. This set of NSSE-FSSE questions is a bit misleading because the student version of the survey asks *how much does* the institution emphasize a variety of efforts, while the faculty version asks *how important is it that the institution increase* its emphasis on those efforts. The FSSE wording does not encourage respondents to evaluate efforts in their current state, while the NSSE wording does. There is a big difference between “How are we doing?” and “How can we improve?”

Supportive Environment			
Faculty Responses		Student Responses (from NSSE 2016)	
FSSE Item	Very Important + Important %	NSSE Item	Very Much + Quite a Bit %
Faculty responses to: How important is it to you that your institution increases its emphasis on each of the following?		Student responses to: How much does your institution emphasize the following?	
Providing support to help students succeed academically	85 87	Providing support to help students succeed academically	80 63
Students using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center)	78 78	Using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center)	80 57
Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)	85 82	Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)	65 44
Providing opportunities for students to be involved socially	55 59	Providing opportunities to be involved socially	74 64
Providing support for students' overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.)	83 82	Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.)	73 52
Helping students manage their non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	60 62	Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	36 15
Students attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events, etc.)	42 49	Attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events, etc.)	78 69

Students attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues	<p>59 63</p>	Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues	<p>54 40</p>
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Faculty and students agree on the importance of and emphasis on efforts related to academic success. Faculty recognize the need for institutional efforts directed at the overall well-being of those on campus, while upper level students, in particular, report less satisfaction with those efforts. Respondents to the FSSE place less importance on non-academic initiatives related to social involvement and campus activities, although students report satisfaction with the emphasis on these initiatives.

Conclusion – Where Do We Go From Here?

It is encouraging that instructors and students basically agree on most of the questions related to academic issues, because those items look at what happens as part of the institutional experience between the two. And when there are differences between the groups, it may be due to how they operate on campus, such as students being more aware of what they do outside the classroom to prepare for class, or instructors knowing more about which learning strategies they employ.

As noted before, the engagement indicator that offers an interesting opportunity to delve deeper is in Discussions with Diverse Others. We know from prior NSSE surveys that students at the UTK have historically scored lower than students from peer institutions on these items, and feedback from FSSE respondents reinforces the idea that there is an opportunity to learn more about how students interact with people who are different from them. Focus groups for both students and faculty could provide valuable insight that goes beyond what can be gleaned from traditional surveys.