

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 28, 2001

TO: Marilee Bresciani, Director of Assessment

FROM: Roger Callanan, Director of New Student Orientation

SUBJECT: Application of NSSE to New Student Orientation

The items that make up the National Student Survey on Engagement (NSSE) presumably reflect “best practices” in higher education. On behalf of its work with first year and transfer students, New Student Orientation (NSO) includes in its mission statement such terms as, “facilitate transition,” “prepare for educational opportunities,” and “integrate into the institution.” If NC State is committed to holding the NSSE as representative of the standards to which it aspires, then it would be appropriate for the NSO assessment plan to more obviously include elements of the NSSE in order to better reflect how the “flagstones” of the NSO mission contribute to the larger “path” of student engagement. I would welcome your guidance on the specific ideas that follow:

How can I use this data to inform my assessment plan?

NSSE data would be more informative to the NSO assessment plan if item text were common to both. The NSO assessment plan and its related instruments undergo annual review; therefore, instrument format and items could be redesigned to reflect common structure. This would aid future data comparisons.

Revision of current evaluation scales

For example, the scale of responses on the NSO two-day program evaluation is currently on a 5-point “strongly agree” – “strongly disagree” format. This format could be revised to coincide with the NSSE’s 4-point “never” – “very often” or “very little” – “very much” scales for groups of items, making data comparisons between the two instruments more clearly interconnected. (NSO would benefit from guidance in creating a scan-able assessment instrument that would allow for the use of more than a single scale format. The adaptability of the currently employed scantron form is quite limited.)

Revision of current evaluation item text

Also, the wording of specific evaluation items, already similar, might be rewritten to mimic the NSSE language. For example, the NSO items, “I understood the advice of my college academic adviser,” and “My college academic adviser made me feel welcomed to NC State,” could be replaced or supplemented by the NSSE item, “Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received (at Orientation)?”

Do these results point me to anything that I may need to address?

Many of the areas of the NSSE reflect the type and quality of actual classroom experiences that are distinct from anything that may have preceded the students' actual exposure to the classroom environment. However, some NSSE areas could be influenced - at least to some degree - by a student's orientation experience. Of the variables for which NCSU means are lower than NSSE means, a few of the items could be seen as *pointing* to areas in which NSO might consider itself a contributing influence.

Specific lower scoring items that may be Orientation influenced (relative comparison of NCSU to Doctoral/Research Extensive institutions – “DRE”, and NSSE 2001 totals); [NSO related or sponsored programs that may be in a position to influence outcomes]:

- Preparing for class (non-significantly lower rating among DRE; same as NSSE 2001); [*One-day and Two-Day programs; WolfStop; Making College Count*]
- Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (non-significantly lower than both DRE and NSSE 2001); [*OC training; Two-day program; WolfCamp*]
- Developing a personal code of values and ethics (non-significantly lower than both DRE and NSSE 2001); [*OC training; Two-day program; WolfCamp*]
- Contributing to the welfare of your community (non-significantly lower than both DRE and NSSE 2001); [*Volunteer Corps; WolfStop; WolfCamp*]
- Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically (non-significantly higher than DRE, but lower than NSSE 2001); [*One-day and Two-day programs; WolfCamp*]
- Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds (non-significantly lower than both DRE and NSSE 2001); [*OC training; Two-day program; WolfCamp*]
- Providing the support you need to thrive socially (non-significantly lower than both DRE and NSSE 2001); [*OC Training; One-day and Two-day programs; WolfCamp*]
- Relationships with faculty members; (non-significantly higher than DRE, but lower than NSSE 2001); [*One-day and Two-day programs; Making College Count*]
- Relationships with administrative personnel and offices; (non-significantly higher than DRE, but lower than NSSE 2001); [*OC training; One-day and Two-day programs; WolfStop; WolfCamp*]

I suspect that NSO is a relatively small player in its contributions to these results, but a player nonetheless. It would be challenging to directly and convincingly associate NSO's objectives (e.g. providing venue, training student staff, referral to campus resources, etc.) as significant factors in the NSSE outcomes, yet the potential NSO has to influence student engagement is compelling and motivating.

How do I believe my unit's work contributed to these results?

During both traditional and non-traditional programs that make up students' orientation experiences, students do hear messages that could affect their NSSE report on their first year experience – and perhaps even influence their experience through their Senior year. Peers (NSO student staff, panelists, etc.) and college representatives, formally and informally, deliver messages (e.g. advice, stories, response to questions, etc.) during Orientation in such areas as *time usage*, *educational and personal growth*, *institutional emphases*, and the *quality of relationships* (these are area titles from NSSE).

As suggested in response to the first question above, better alignment of NSO's evaluation instruments with the NSSE instrument may provide more than conjecture regarding NSO's contributions to this data. All of the items referenced in the second question above are potential areas in which to focus NSO's influence, however, better assessment is needed in order to depend less on anecdotal evidence. Since there is little data to refute such claims, I will conjecture that Orientation programming was an important player in why NC State was not significantly lower than other institutions that participated in the NSSE. For such a large and technically based academic community as NC State to have been able to compete with smaller, more personable colleges and universities on issues of student engagement is itself evidence that new students do connect with NC State – and New Student Orientation is the “front door.”

RELATED NOTES:

It should also be noted that having a “lower” mean rating on some of the NSSE items could be “good.” For example:

- “Working for pay on/off campus” (lower than DRE and NSSE 2001) may indicate awareness that academic focus is the priority.
- “Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same form” (lower than DRE and NSSE 2001) may indicate that inquiry guided instruction and interactive pedagogy are valued over rote memorization.

Summary of action steps that grow from the above observations:

1. Explore and identify software tools for designing an NSO Opscan assessment instrument that allows for easy revision of items and machine/computer scoring and data reporting.
2. Revise current NSO assessment instruments so that specific items better reflect NSSE (and other, e.g. SACS?) criteria using common language and response scales.
3. Through the use of Trac-Dat, specify intended, mission-related outcomes from each of NSO's component programs (one-day program, two-day program, OC training, WolfStop, Volunteer Corps, Making College Count, WolfCamp).

c: Jo Allen
Roxanna McGraw