Using BCSSE Data

It is more important than ever for institutions to create the conditions that foster student success. Toward this end, many institutions seek to better understand their incoming first-year students. The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) annually collects data about students’ high school experiences and their expectations for the first college year from tens of thousands of first-time college students prior to their enrollment at a four-year institution in the U.S. and Canada. The most powerful and effective use of BCSSE data is when it can be combined with data from its companion survey, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Institutions participating in both surveys receive the BCSSE-NSSE Combined Report that provides an in-depth cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis of their first-year student’s experiences.

There are many possible uses of BCSSE data. They can be used to enhance the first-year student experience by aiding the design of pre-college orientation programs, student service initiatives, and other programmatic efforts. BCSSE results, especially when linked with NSSE, can be used to shape initiatives that align the first-year experience of students with recognized effective educational practices.

BCSSE-NSSE results can be used in many ways, including:

• Academic advising
• Accreditation and self-studies
• Assessment and improvement
• Curricular reform
• Faculty development
• First-year program evaluation
• Recruitment
• Retention efforts

More specifically, pre-college student engagement and expectations data can be profitably used in these ways:

• Understanding students’ backgrounds, experiences, and expectations so that institutions can minimize unmet expectations and maximize student engagement, learning, satisfaction, and persistence
• Providing important data for the development of strategic plans for implementing effective teaching and learning practices
• Designing and evaluating first-year programs to more effectively align them with student background characteristics, dispositions, and expectations
• Helping faculty better understand who their students are to inform the design of curriculum materials and teaching practices
• Informing advisors about students’ prior academic and extracurricular experiences, academic preparation, attitudes, and expectations
• Merging with other data sources to provide a richer understanding of the first-year experience
There are many examples of how institutions use BCSSE data. The examples below illustrate possible uses of BCSSE data.¹

**High School Experiences**

Exploring BCSSE-NSSE results helped Case Western Reserve University better understand the experiences of incoming students and the effect high school experiences had on student engagement in college. When looking at BCSSE data, the institution found that incoming students were highly involved during high school. The more extra-curricular activities students participated in during high school, the higher they scored on numerous items on the NSSE survey. Specifically, the more involved a student was in high school the more likely they were to talk with faculty about career plans, discuss ideas with faculty outside of class, and work with faculty outside of class on activities other than coursework during their first year of college. These results provide faculty with helpful information about the student population and could speak to a need for faculty at Case Western to be more intentional in reaching out to students who may not have been very involved during high school.

**Institutional Improvement**

Norfolk State University (NSU) has effectively used entering student data and engagement results to study gaps between students’ high school experiences and expectations for college and their actual patterns of engagement during the first year. NSU also integrated BCSSE results into its accreditation quality improvement plan for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. NSU developed a comprehensive approach to assessment with a focus on improving advising, developing a more meaningful partnership between student and academic affairs, and tailoring academic and social support initiatives to advance student persistence and success.

**Faculty Development**

Knowing who your students are, particularly their expectations and misconceptions about educational activities, is part of good teaching (Bain, 2004). At Southern Connecticut State University, faculty were surprised (and concerned) by some of the “disconnects” between students’ expectations revealed by BCSSE and their actual first-year experience reported in NSSE. During faculty development events, BCSSE and NSSE results were reported and discussed with faculty to provide more insight into the high school experiences and college expectations of their first-year students. A panel of upper-class students who attended the discussion was asked to comment on some of the findings, resulting in an-depth discussion between students and faculty. Faculty commented that they thought they knew their students, but seeing the data provided them with new insight into students’ experiences and presented provocative challenges for pedagogy.

**Outreach Programs**

The University of Wisconsin–Green Bay (UWGB) plans to use BCSSE data to support their award-winning outreach program for school-age youth in Northeast Wisconsin called Phuture Phoenix (uwgb.edu/phuturephoenix/). The program relies on UWGB peer mentors to develop college awareness and increase educational aspirations in Northeast Wisconsin. The data from the survey will be used comparatively for students entering UWGB and analyzed regarding pre-college programming for their college and career plans. This information will be utilized by the program as well as shared with local K-12 districts to improve academic programming related to college and career goals. The mentoring program can target these attitudes and behaviors identified in BCSSE. Program leaders will also use summaries of BCSSE results in the training of student mentors around engagement-related themes, such as, “What does it mean to be a college student?” (with information about time use and important behaviors), and “How is college different from high school?”

In addition, BCSSE serves as a valuable tool to help assess the effectiveness of the Phuture Phoenix program. UWGB also prepares a report on BCSSE results for the campus on student expectations of college compared to their high school experiences and how they perceive college.

¹ The Southern Connecticut State University example was excerpted from Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie (2009).
Useful Resources

National Survey of Student Engagement

BCSSE was conceived and designed as a complement to NSSE. Therefore, an important place to look for useful information about using BCSSE data is in publications featuring NSSE use examples, including NSSE’s annual Results reports, Using NSSE Data, and Using NSSE to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education: Lessons from the Field.

BCSSE Webinars

In 2008, NSSE began a series of free, live Webinars for faculty, administrators, institutional researchers, and student affairs professionals who want to better use and understand their NSSE, BCSSE, and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) data. Four BCSSE-specific Webinars are archived and one is planned for fall 2010. These include:

- November 2010, “Using BCSSE-NSSE Data to Assess the Effects of Learning Communities on First-Year Experiences”
- March 2010, “Using BCSSE Data for Faculty Development: Do Faculty Really Know Their Students?”
- In March 2009, “Using BCSSE Data: Understanding That Student Expectations Are Important.”
- April 2008, “Introduction to the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement.”

These Webinars provide an in-depth understanding of the BCSSE project, as well as uses of BCSSE and BCSSE-NSSE data. Archived recordings of these and other NSSE Webinars are available on the NSSE Web site.

nsse.iub.edu/webinars/archives.cfm

Presentations and Publications

Presentations and publications related to BCSSE may be downloaded from the BCSSE Web site, in the Publications & Presentations section.

bcsse.iub.edu/pubs.cfm

Two recent presentations include one by Cole and Qi regarding college readiness to be engaged (AIR, 2010) and one by Cole and Kinzie on the topic of linking BCSSE-NSSE data to investigate first year outcomes (FYE, 2010). A recent publication regarding BCSSE and the importance of collecting data regarding pre-college student characteristics is a chapter by Cole, Kennedy, and Ben-Avie (2009) in Using NSSE in Institutional Research. Look for other presentations and papers at upcoming conferences such as the Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), as well as many others.

NSSE Institute

The NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice works with institutions and other organizations to collect and disseminate research on promising practices and to assist schools in using data for institutional improvement and student success initiatives. Among the services offered by the Institute are semi-annual Users Workshops, which bring together institutional users from all over the country to learn about and share information regarding effective use of NSSE, BCSSE, and FSSE data. Information regarding past and upcoming workshops as well as other services can be found on the NSSE Institute Web site.

nsse.iub.edu/institute/index.cfm

BCSSE Web Site

In addition to the Web sites listed above, BCSSE Web site offers a range of information and resources for BCSSE users.

bcsse.iub.edu

References
