Among the harder tasks in assessing the success of a college or university are separating reputation from action, and untangling the quality of the students coming in from the quality of the students going out. Even if this can be done, there remains the not-so-simple task of knowing if the college in question is doing poorly, average, or well compared to other institutions. Finally, there is the need of colleges to take action to improve. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an effort to deal with all of these issues. By concentrating on student engagement, the survey seeks to untangle reputation from quality. It seeks to ask what a college does, not how good the students are. The results are then broadly benchmarked to allow comparison to similar institutions. Finally, the creators of NSSE emphasize that the intent is to improve colleges, not just measure what they do.

Spring Hill College participated in NSSE in 2002. The survey, done near the end of the spring semester, asked a series of questions of first-year students and students about to graduate. The results have been aggregated into five main benchmarks of “effective educational practices:”

- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student-faculty interaction
- Enriching educational experiences
- Supportive campus environment

To explore the results more fully, the College conducted a “NSSE Summit” during the beginning of the Spring 2003 semester. At this gathering, a cross-section of 63 students discussed the results with 13 faculty facilitators. This series of NSSE Notes will summarize results from both the Survey and the Summit and, we hope, point us in the direction of making Spring Hill College an even stronger institution than we currently are.
LEVEL OF ACADEMIC CHALLENGE

Overall Benchmark Results

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Academic Challenge</th>
<th>Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, researching, related to academic programs).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more. No. of written reports or papers of between 5 and 19 pages; and No. of written reports or papers of fewer than 5 pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework emphasizing analysis of basic elements of an idea, experience or theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework emphasizing synthesis and organizing of ideas, information or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework emphasizes: Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods. Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Campus environment emphasizes studying and academic work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers in the chart represent index numbers that can hypothetically range from zero to 100. An institution would receive a ranking 100 if 100% of survey participants answered each question in the index with the most favorable possible response. Actual values do not vary by the fullest possible extent. For example, for first-year students at master’s institutions, the highest score of any school was 62.6, while the lowest was 42.4.
These results show that Spring Hill’s academic challenge index score for first-year students ranks higher than the academic challenge score of more than 75% of the participating schools nationwide, and higher than the index score for first-year students at more than 85% of the master’s institutions in the study. For seniors, our results were even stronger; our score exceeds that of over 80% of those nationally, and over 90% of the master’s institutions. Alternatively, these results rank us in the top 10% to 25% of all schools surveyed.
## Level of Academic Challenge

### 2002 NSSE Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Spring Hill College</th>
<th>Master's Institutions</th>
<th>National Results</th>
<th>Spring Hill College</th>
<th>Master's Institutions</th>
<th>National Results</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Index Score</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>0 to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to your academic program)</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>hrs/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent coursework emphasizing analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent coursework emphasizing synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent coursework emphasizing 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</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent coursework emphasizing applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations.</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent campus environment emphasized spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>number/year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

significantly better than at least one reference group:  

significantly worse than at least one reference group:
Level of Academic Challenge
Student Reflections from the “NSSE Summit”

Which, if any, of these results surprise you and why?
--The only thing that surprised me was the fact that other institutions were significantly lower in the categories of working to meet instructors’ standards and emphasis on studying.
--I do not find any of the results surprising and agree with almost every one of the question’s results.
--What surprised me the most was the amount of students who thought they wouldn’t have to work as hard.
--It didn’t really surprise me, but I was impressed that freshmen had a “significantly better” response on the question about “working harder than you thought you could.”
--I do not find any of the results surprising.
--None.
--That the campus environment emphasized spending significant amounts of times studying.
--The two results that surprised me the most were that freshmen at SHC had a drastically higher percentage of classes that synthesized ideas and methods than at other schools and that SHC’s environment promotes a wonderful academic environment. It was nice to see these results.
--If any, possibly “Campus environment emphasizes studying and academic work” because the campus life seems to focus more on social life rather than academics.
--I can’t say the results surprise me—Spring Hill has always been an academically challenging setting.
--The result that emphasized spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work, because coming into college you know you have to work harder to get decent grades.

Can you think of situations you have experienced that demonstrate how/why the results on any individual items are higher or lower?
--The item concerning campus environment emphasizing study time has been emphasized in most all of my classes, beginning with Freshman Seminar. Most teachers make it clear that good grades only come through studying.
--We get the option of writing long papers or many short papers (Senior Seminarà exception)
--As a Jesuit School professors & students know quality work is expected; because of this I think our school ranked higher on some of the questions.
--I can certainly see why the question about the campus emphasizing significant amounts of time studying is so high—I think SHC definitely does that—it is necessary to do well in the courses.
--I think that the number of written papers are right because this school focuses a lot on writing.
--I have yet to write a 5 page or longer paper, and I don’t think education is a really high priority at SHC.
--I think that SHC does promote a strong learning environment because the student/faculty relationship is a top priority and students realize this when they see faculty being an active part of campus life.
--Most assignments I have received agree with the results.
--I think SHC is higher than the national average because—especially at the freshman level—it demands more writing and production of work. Less tests and more essays.
--Certain classes are exceptions for the better and for worse. Course evaluation forms help weed out certain classes.
--I’ve had to work harder than I thought I would to meet my instructor’s standards.

Can your group agree on one item that faculty and students should focus on for further discussion and improvement?
--Beef up the core—We know we need to take it and it’s stressed so much; make it desirable, not just required courses.
Level of Academic Challenge

Faculty Notes (of student responses) from the “NSSE Summit”

(Asterisks indicate repeat responses)

Which, if any, of these results surprise you and why?
Not too much to be surprised about***;
that others scored so low**;
amount of books per class; working harder than you thought you could;
extent campus environment emphasized study;
that everyone writes so much.

Can you think of situations you have experienced that demonstrate how/why the results on any individual items are higher or lower?
Heavy reading expectations;
length of papers allow options for choice;
students told from beginning about high expectations;
faith based spirituality contributes;
because we write so much;
teachers & administration emphasize studying—it is absolutely necessary.

In the classes in which you feel “engaged,” what’s happening? What are you doing? What is the faculty member doing?
To be “engaged,” keep an open mind;
personable faculty;
conversation takes place between teacher/student; teacher encourages and supports;
professor is excited about the subject;
most profs want students to do well;
office hours and support from faculty;
discussion form in classes—almost a free for all;
happens more in major courses rather than core;
small classes help;
students collaborate in small groups;
classes that stay on track;
when profs push you to form your own ideas;
not when you just take notes and take tests;
prof’s find new ways to present material (e.g. Dr. Wilson uses music; Dr. Kaffer breaks into song and dance);
it helps you see how learning works in real world;
makes you want to go to school longer;
keep a positive attitude;
maybe take a class you aren’t really interested in;
be willing to work harder;
pick paper topics that really interest you;
appreciate that you can learn from any course;
drop the class if you need to;
get involved in the discussion;
explore subject out of class.

How can faculty help you to become more engaged in your learning?
Present meaningful assignments
Try to be enthusiastic about course content and students
Stay on subject most of the time
Give assignments that make students think/not make work
Encourage more independent thought
Challenge students with demanding assignments.
Mix lecture and discussion

Can your group agree on one item that faculty and students should focus on for further discussion and improvement?
- Coherence among core courses and connected to major;
- how to make core more appealing;
- more flexible core;
- more choices in class offerings;
- have more coherence within core.