Introduction

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 itself. 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 them.

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. In this fifth and last in the series of NSSE Notes, we summarize results from both the Survey and the Summit as they pertain to “Active and Collaborative Learning” and, we hope, point us in the direction of making Spring Hill College an even stronger institution than we currently are.
# Active & Collaborative Learning

## Overall Benchmark Results

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and asked to think about what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students for messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active and Collaborative Learning</th>
<th>Spring Hill College</th>
<th>Master's Category</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>First Year</th>
<th>Senior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions.</td>
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<td>Made a class presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course</td>
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<tr>
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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 any school received on the "Active and Collaborative Learning Index" was 51.0, while the lowest was 20.5.
These results show that Spring Hill’s Active & Collaborative Learning index score is slightly higher for first-year students than for seniors. Does the Freshman Seminar program help explain this difference, or perhaps the nature of core curriculum courses at Spring Hill? Even for seniors, the scores place Spring Hill College among the top 20% of colleges taking part in the survey.
### Active and Collaborative Learning

#### 2002 NSSE Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>First-year students</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Scale</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spring Hill College</td>
<td>Master's Institutions</td>
<td>National Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Index Score</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made a class presentation</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with other students on projects during class</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a community-based project as a part of a regular course</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, coworkers, etc.)</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.74</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1=never  
2=sometimes  
3=often  
4=very often

- **significantly better than at least one reference group:**  
- **significantly worse than at least one reference group:**
**Active and Collaborative Learning**

**Student Reflections from the “NSSE Summit”**

Which, if any, of these results surprise you and why?

--I am surprised that less seniors tutored or taught outside of class than freshman because seniors would seem to be more knowledgeable on subject matter than freshman. I am also surprised to see that Freshmen averaged a 2.98, almost stating “often” as a participation level in class.

--I thought some of the results would be higher (i.e., worked with other students during class)

--I thought they would be higher - especially working with other students outside of class

--Worked with classmates out of class- First yr and senior thought it would be higher. Also- “discussed ideas”- thought it would be higher.

--First year: “Questions in class”- professors always encourage questions. Both: “Presentations”- should be higher.

--Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments - thought it should be higher. Seniors don’t study together as much.

--No in class projects.

--“Worked with others”- I thought it would be higher. Many people work with others.

--None.

--Many freshmen involved in tutoring, but not as many seniors. Usually it would seem that older students would be more likely tutors.

Can you think of any situations you have experienced that demonstrate how/why the results on any individual items are higher or lower?

--Perhaps freshmen results of tutoring are higher, significantly because freshmen have more available time outside of class and are often encouraged to volunteer as 1st year students. Equally, as a Jesuit university all students are encouraged to be aware of the community around us and our relationship with it.

--Many teachers either require or give some form of credit for community based service projects.

--I often work with other students outside of class for tests, quizzes, group projects or just discussing the material we learned.

--Not all classes have presentations as part of class. Not all classes include group work.

--Group Projects during class- difficult in intro-level (first year) courses.

--Tutored - SAS set up people always willing to help. Don’t work on Projects during class. Teacher support. Senior - major area projects.

--“Tutored/ or taught”- I feel we scored higher on this section due to services provided by the Foley Center and tutoring provided to students by S.A.S.

--Project questions- professors that do give projects never seem to do “group” work or projects are rarely given “in class” time. That is why they are lower. Tutor Question - always seemed like people are willing to help whether paid/ or not. That is why they are higher.

--I have never had the opportunity to work on projects during class, much less with a group project.

--Working with other students on projects may be lower with freshmen because many entry level courses don’t have as many project opportunities. Most projects I have worked with others on have been in upper level courses.

--Participating in a community based project may be higher due to professors, such as Dr. Landi, who put a grade on involvement in a community service project.

Can your group agree on one item that faculty and students should focus on for further discussion and improvement?

--Class engagement, as far as the relationship between student feedback and professor discussion.

--Balance of discussion/ lecture.

--Flexibility of approach by teachers.

--Needs of students. Some flexibility. Attendance policy. Student evaluation of faculty- but option more questions on evaluation forms.

--More flexibility among faculty to meet the needs of students. Ex. Eres, more approachable, e-mail, etc.

--Be more flexible, students can express needs, students needs can be met.
--To get teachers to be more flexible and use all tools available in order to engage students.
--Encourage flexibility, approachability among faculty.
--Faculty being approachable and flexible in regard to helping students learn.
Active and Collaborative Learning

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

Which, if any, of these results surprise you and why? Can you think of situations you have experienced that demonstrate how/why the results on any individual items are higher or lower?

-- Work with other students in class surprisingly low . . . Philosophy, English classes do a lot of in-class small exercises.
-- Interpretation of “in-class” an issue . . .
-- American Literature—students teach the class . . .
-- Small class sizes facilitate interaction
-- Exercises in Labor Relations class . . .
-- Professors give extra credit for community-based projects.
-- Many professors encourage community projects . . .
-- Group projects difficult in freshmen classes . . .
-- Different majors require different levels of group activities . . .
-- Works with other students—think would be higher:
-- Seniors—not as convenient due to where we live vs. Freshmen
-- Freshmen less focused
-- Freshmen more involved in tutoring—seems it should be seniors!
-- Get to know student in class—someone always willing to help
-- Psychology and Education classes use groups
-- Teacher sees how student is thinking and can help
-- Peer interaction—peers can sometimes explain better
-- Seniors higher in projects—do more! (To be expected)

In the classes in which you feel “engaged,” what’s happening? What are you doing? What is the faculty member doing?

-- Teacher not lecturing;
-- Engaged in collaborative experience.
-- Teacher relates to events outside of class.
-- If teachers are enthusiastic . . . the students get engaged
-- Theatre classes—classes with Harmless—small class size really helps.
-- Students are asked to formulate opinions in your own words . . .
-- Smaller classes leads to engagement . . .
-- Divided into groups, groups answered question, presented to class . . .
-- When engaged, learning is easy, comes from each other, don’t realize we’re learning—but we are!
-- Irish Drama Class—Fr. Williams makes us be prepared. Keeps us on our toes . . . brought in videos, music, pictures from Ireland . . .
-- Teacher’s enthusiasm is infectious.
-- Ethics and Environmental Ethics: formulation of personal philosophy given class material . . .
-- Professors who don’t criticize responses elicit more engagement.
-- Hall/Sociology—allowed students to work out issue; he was facilitator
-- Hager/Developmental and Experimental Psychology—do small groups—walks around and will ask questions as facilitator
-- Kobelja./Logic—small groups; Students not afraid to put wrong answer
-- Need respect from teacher
-- Creative—in-class discussions
-- Real life examples
-- When professors aren’t intimidating
-- Instructor gives points, then opens the class for discussion

How can faculty help you to become more engaged in your learning?

-- Force students to speak out!
-- Ask questions . . .
- Participation points...
- Let students rank each other on participation.
- Balance between lecture, discussion.
- Use case studies instead of asking questions.
- Relate to real world.
- Let discussion emerge among & between students.
- Relate subject to student/student level.
- Need flowing lectures (don’t jump from one thing to another).
- Use ERes more/outlines (use to help study).
- Use e/mail more (teacher does not always put on syllabus).
- Give in/class assignments—see how student is following along.
- Extra credit as method of improvement, although don’t give too much—balance.

Can your group agree on one item that faculty and students should focus on for further discussion and improvement?
- Balance between lecture, discussion.
- Use case studies instead of asking questions.
- Relate to real world.
- Let discussion emerge among & between students.
- Faculty more approachable, more flexible to meet student needs (i.e. ERes): therefore: student learns/faculty learns.