Learning from the NSSE 2007

Audiences:

- Cabinet
- Deans/faculty/AVP Undergraduate Educ/CRTE
- Students (SGA reps; Stu Affairs Advisory Committee)?
- Student Affairs AVPs and Directors
- Advisors, tutors, mentors, counselors, TAs?

What is the intended value of NSSE?

- NSSE measures **good educational practices** that, validated by years of research, can be viewed as proxies for (indirect measures of) high-quality learning.
- Research has shown that students learn most when they find their academic work challenging, actively collaborate on learning activities, and interact with faculty members and diverse peers inside and outside the classroom. Working with others in solving problems or mastering difficult materials prepares students to deal with "the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, during and after college" (NSSE brochure)
- What can the campus do to increase student engagement and success? We can make it possible for every student to **participate in high-impact activities**. These are activities that "essentially demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters" (NSSE Executive Snapshot 2007). For first-year students, high-impact activities include first-year seminars, learning communities, and service learning. In later years of college, they would include research with faculty, study abroad, internships, and a culminating senior experience (such as capstone courses, senior project or thesis, or a comprehensive exam). NSSE allows us to compare our students' participation rates in these high-impact activities to other NSSE participating colleges, especially those with similar missions to ours (Carnegie Peers: research-extensive institutions).

Caveats regarding findings from UC Merced 2007 NSSE data

- Because of UC Merced's newness (the campus opened its doors to its first undergraduates in Fall 2005), the senior data for UC Merced is limited in terms of usefulness and reliability, especially when trying to compare to other institutions. In order to be seniors at UC Merced, these students would have had to transfer significant amounts of work from other colleges. Only 31 seniors responded to the survey. By contrast, 44% of the seniors at the Carnegie Peers had not attended any other post-secondary institutions before their senior year. Therefore, the remainder of these analyses is restricted to the responses of First-Year Students.
- UC Merced's First-Year respondents are substantially different from those of the Carnegie Peers in terms of gender, ethnicity, distribution of grades received during their first year, parents' educational level, and distribution of majors.

Compared to the Carnegie Peers, UC Merced had a higher ratio of males to females (52%/48% compared to 48%/52%), higher percentages of minorities (only 21% White compared to 69% on average at the Carnegie Peers), higher percentages of students who received grades of B or lower, higher percentages of first-generation college students, a much larger percentage of biological sciences majors. [NSSE 2007 Background Item Frequency Distributions, pgs. 33-35; weighted by gender, enrollment status, and institutional size.]

How do UC Merced first-year students compare on the high-impact activities?

High Impact Activity	UC Merced	Carnegie Peers
Participated in Service Learning as part of regular course (at least sometimes)	44%	33%
Participated in a practicum, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignments		
Done	9%	7%
Plan to do	66%	78%
Participated in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together		
Done	11%	20%
Plan to do	34%	19%
Worked on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements		
Done	9%	5%
Plan to do	48%	33%
Study Abroad		
Done	0%	2%
Plan to do	45%	47%
Culminating senior experience (capstone, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, etc.)		
Plan to do	51%	41%

Compared to other campuses with a similar research mission, UC Merced freshmen overall match or exceed their peers in their plans or actual experience in many of the high impact activities. Because this is their first year in college, not surprisingly, most of the freshmen (from Merced and the peer institutions) say they expect to participate in a

practicum or work on a research project, study abroad, or culminating senior experience, rather than they already have had these experiences. Merced freshmen, however, already participated in service learning and worked on research projects with faculty at higher rates than their Carnegie peers.

How do UC Merced first-year students compare on other student engagement measures?

Measure	UC Merced	Carnegie Peers
Worked for pay on campus (1 or more hours per week)	27%	19%
Worked for pay off campus (0 hours per week)	83%	74%
Participated in co-curricular activities/ organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate sports, etc.) (1 or more hours per week)	71%	68%
Prepared for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, & other academic activities)		
>10 hours/week	61%	62%
>20 hours/week	21%	21%

While similar proportions of UC Merced freshmen and their counterparts at other research campuses spent their time on academic activities (over 60% spent more than 10 hours per week and over 20% spent more than 20 hours per week), Merced freshmen were more likely to spend time working for pay either on or off campus. Perhaps most surprising, given the newness of UC Merced (only 2 years old at the time of the survey), the involvement of freshmen in co-curricular activities was high and similar to freshmen at the other research universities.

How well does the campus support the first-year students' educational experience?

Measure	UC Merced	Carnegie Peers
Spending significant amount of time studying & on academic work		
% Very Much	43%	33%
Providing support you need to help you succeed academically		
% Very Much	36%	27%
Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds		
% Very Much	30%	22%
Helping you cope with your nonacademic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)		
% Very Much	15%	7%
Providing the support you need to thrive socially		
% Very Much	18%	12%
Attending campus events and activities (special speakers, cultural performances, athletic events, etc.)		
% Very Much	32%	26%
Using computers in academic work		
% Very Much	57%	53%

Without exception, the UC Merced freshmen were much more likely than their counterparts to rate their campus' support of the educational experience. The highest areas for both groups were the use of computers in academic work and the amount of time studying. The lowest were the help provided with nonacademic responsibilities and the support for them to thrive socially, but still Merced freshmen were more likely than their peers to rate the campus highly in these areas.

A truer test of how well UC Merced students compare to other campuses in terms of academic and co-curricular engagement (and high impact activities) will be better revealed in Spring 2009 when the NSSE results will include Merced seniors from the very first freshman cohort.