

Colleagues,

I recently received the results from our most recent administration of the [National Survey of Student Engagement \(NSSE\)](#). I write to highlight a few findings.

### **Background**

NSSE is the largest ongoing national study of student educational experiences. Since NSSE's inception in 2000, more than 6 million students have participated in the annual surveys, from over 1,600 colleges and universities; in 2017, over 500,000 students from 725 institutions participated.

NSSE collects both first-year and senior student responses to questions about their engagement in certain educational activities associated in the scholarly literature with student learning, retention, and degree completion. As you'll see in some of the examples below, this is not a "satisfaction survey"; the questions are clearly focused on the student academic experience and those curricular and pedagogical practices that are known to support student learning and success.

Schools are not ranked in any way by NSSE results, and institutional results are not shared publicly. Instead, we are provided with reports on our own students' responses (including longitudinal data from previous administrations of NSSE) as well as reports that compare our students' 2017 responses to aggregated results from a) the entire NSSE survey population nationally as well as b) three benchmark groups that we get to define from the list of participating institutions (addressed below).

In addition to the University-wide reports that NSSE provides, we also have access to much of the data disaggregated by college/school and even undergraduate major (although keep in mind that the number of SLU respondents for a given major can be very small).

For the 2017 administration of NSSE, 541 first-year SLU students responded to the survey, along with 572 seniors; our overall response rate was about 34% (which is higher than for each of our benchmark groups). Respondents were also generally representative of our overall undergraduate population in terms of race and gender. NSSE provides extensive details on its methods, including a [full psychometric portfolio](#) addressing validity, reliability, and other indicators of the quality of their data and reporting.

### **SLU's Results**

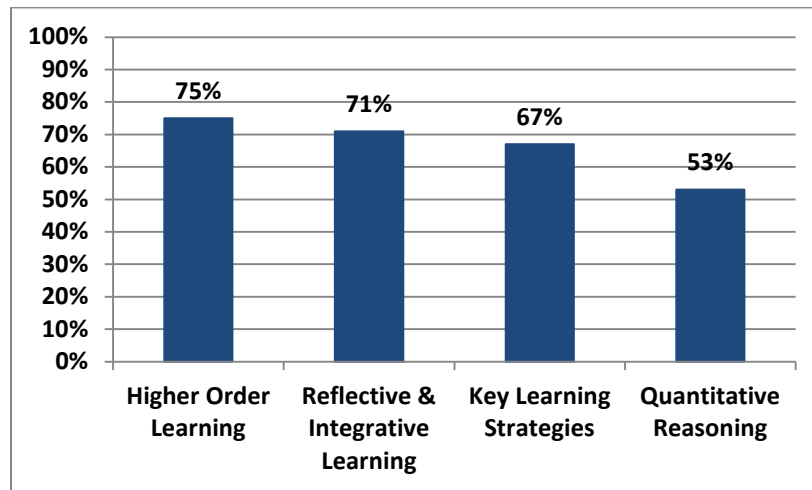
The NSSE study is expansive, and I won't even attempt to summarize the results here. As I note below, there are other ways for faculty, chairs, deans, and others to dig into the details. But there are some highlights and challenges that are worth noting here. For example, since our last administration of NSSE in 2014, more SLU students have been participating in:

- learning communities
- research with faculty
- study abroad
- culminating senior-year experiences

These are demonstrably impactful educational experiences, and I'm proud that both faculty and students are pushing for more of them – and more meaningful versions of them.

Responses from certain thematically-related, individual NSSE questions are aggregated into clusters. The questions comprising each cluster asked students how often they engaged in certain activities

associated with the cluster themes. The graph below shows the percent of senior-level SLU students who responded “Often” and “Very Often” to each clustered set of questions.



For example, this means that in 2017, an average of 75% of responding SLU seniors said they engaged “often” or “very often” to each of the “Higher Order Learning” questions; likewise 53% of seniors responded that they engaged “often” or “very often” in coursework that required “Quantitative Reasoning.”

### SLU Compared to Benchmark Groups

As noted above, NSSE does provide reports that compare SLU data with that from other NSSE participating institutions chosen and grouped by SLU. For 2017, our benchmark groups are as follows:

Similar Private Universities	Smaller Jesuit Institutions	All Private Research Universities
Boston College	Canisius	American U
Loyola-Chicago	Fairfield	Boston College
Marquette	Gonzaga	Boston U
Tulane	Holy Cross	Brigham Young
U of Dayton	John Carroll	Catholic U
U of Denver	Loyola-New Orleans	Florida Institute of Technology
	Seattle	Illinois Institute of Technology
	Spring Hill	Loyola-Chicago
	Scranton	Marquette
	Xavier	The New School
		Nova Southeastern
		Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
		Stevens Institute of Technology
		Texas Christian University
		Tulane
		Tulsa
		U of Dayton
		U of Denver
		Worcester Polytechnic Institute

I've found it helpful to review those questions on which SLU students responded comparatively positively – and negatively – versus students from our comparison groups. For example, the table below shows the five survey questions on which SLU senior-level students scored the highest in comparison with the “Similar Private” benchmark group. The number shown is the percentage point difference between SLU and the benchmark group.

Highest Comparative SLU Performance Areas	SLU vs. “Similar Private” Group
How much does your institution emphasize encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)?	+13
Have you participated in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together?	+11
How much does your institution emphasize using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center, etc.)?	+10
How often have you asked another student to help you understand material?	+9
How much does your institution emphasize attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues?	+8

These data help solidify some things I think we already knew – or at least hoped – while perhaps also telling us a few new things. For example, that SLU is perhaps comparatively more intentional about encouraging interaction among students of different backgrounds should re-assure us that some of our key educational messages are indeed being heard by students. That SLU is more actively encouraging students to use the tutoring, writing, and related support services than at similar institutions might be more of a surprise to many of us.

The table below shows where SLU’s senior-level student responses were comparatively the lowest:

<u>Lowest</u> Comparative SLU Performance Areas	SLU vs. “Similar Private” Group
How often have you connected your learning to societal problems or issues?	-7
Of the time you spend weekly preparing for class this year, have you typically spent more than 10 hours per week on assigned reading?	-7
How much does your institution emphasize attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events, etc.)?	-8
Have you (or do you plan to) participation in an internship, co-op, field experience, student teaching, or clinical placement?	-10
This year, have you been assigned more than 50 pages total of writing (for papers, reports, or other writing tasks)?	-12

An interesting point here is that our students are responding that, compared to students at other similar institutions, they less frequently “connect their learning to societal problems or issues” – despite the fact that, in the previous table, those same students noted that SLU does a comparatively good job of emphasizing attendance at events that “address important social, economic, or political issues.” It makes one wonder how far we, as teachers and mentors, go beyond encouraging attendance? How intentional are we about bringing the issues addressed in campus events back into our classrooms for discussion and deeper, more meaningful reflection?

### **How to Use NSSE Data**

Along with a host of other sources of information about our students’ academic experiences, NSSE data can prompt meaningful reflection and evaluation of how we teach, how we design our courses, how we interact with students, and how we meaningfully guide their interactions with others. A key is not acting on NSSE data in isolation, but rather using NSSE questions and responses to point us in certain directions, and to prompt more comprehensive analysis.

### **Getting Access to – and Help With -- NSSE Data**

Any faculty member, department chair, or dean may have access to the data. Assistant Provost Steve Sanchez can share standard NSSE reports with you, as well as meet with individuals and groups to review the data and foster discussion of their uses and limitations. He also has access to an interactive tool providing college/school and program-level breakdowns of the data upon request. Please contact Steve at x2611 or [steven.sanchez@slu.edu](mailto:steven.sanchez@slu.edu).

Additionally, staff of the Reinert Center are ready to work with individuals and groups of faculty interested in adopting NSSE-focused pedagogies and curriculum design in their own courses and programs. Please contact them at x3944 or [ctl@slu.edu](mailto:ctl@slu.edu).



As noted above, NSSE-informed analysis is just one of numerous ways we can all be more reflective and intentional about our work as teachers. Please let me know how I can best support you and your colleagues in these efforts.

Respectfully,

Nancy Brickhouse, Ph.D.  
Provost