

## 6 Featured Institutional Use

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outcomes. The student survey self-reports involve using three instruments: NSSE, Higher Education Research Institute's *Your First College Year* survey, and the *College Senior Survey*. Survey results are to be reported in six areas:

1. Communication skills
2. Critical thinking skills
3. Integrative thinking skills
4. Academic engagement/challenge
5. Experiences with diversity
6. Overall satisfaction with education experience

Findings will be published on the Allegheny Web site for current students, prospective students, parents, and faculty. The new reporting plan will standardize the process of using survey data and allow academic and administrative departments to make better use of NSSE results.

### Improving Writing across Disciplines

#### **AUBURN UNIVERSITY**

Auburn University has participated in eight NSSE administrations since 2002. While it reviews NSSE results at the institution level to provide a general view of the student experience, Auburn also drills down to specific department data. When comparing its students' scores to those of students at peer institutions, Auburn identified areas of concern with student writing skills. Coupled with similar results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the institution targeted writing for improvement and launched an initiative that established an Office of University Writing and a formal University Writing Committee. The new committee and newly hired Director of University Writing outlined specific practices to help departments improve the writing skills of their students. These included common program-level practices, such as identifying competencies expected of graduates in the

department, and common course-level practices, which provided students with the opportunity to revise their writing after receiving feedback from peers and the instructor.

To further assist departments, the committee and the director facilitated workshops and discussions with faculty on how to better incorporate writing into the curriculum. The workshops covered various topics including strategies for providing effective feedback and developing an assessment plan. Faculty who participated in the 2010–11 workshops explained how they had revised course assignments to include writing, revision opportunities, and rubrics to evaluate writing in disciplinary courses. Faculty members agreed that including writing in their courses reinforced the learning experience they wanted for their students. "Writing promotes 'deep learning'—the kind of learning that demands both remembering and understanding of relationships, causes, effects, and implications for new or different situations," said a graduate student in the Department of Kinesiology. A professor of electrical and computer engineering agreed. "I wouldn't have thought to do some of these things if I hadn't attended the symposium." The faculty member developed a writing assignment that asked students to create a written tutorial on information that they got wrong on an exam. His poster included data from a survey he gave students at the end of the term in which they strongly agreed that the writing assignment had helped them learn the material and improved their writing skills.

Additionally, Auburn created a writing-in-the-majors policy, which requires each department to develop its own plan to meet certain standards of writing in the curriculum. Although plans vary based on the department, all plans are required to: (1) provide more than one opportunity for students to practice writing; (2) provide opportunities for students to produce more than one kind of writing; (3) provide opportunities for students to write for different purposes and audiences; (4) provide opportunities for students to revise their

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written work based on feedback from peers and instructors; and (5) include an assessment plan that uses gathered assessment data to improve writing experiences. One program that significantly revised its writing plan was civil engineering. Although the program has always emphasized writing, the new writing initiative provided an opportunity to further departmental efforts to become more intentional in developing the writing skills of students. In their plan, the department details seven different kinds of writing, five different purposes of writing, and four forms of feedback it includes in its courses. Every required course, specialty elective, technical elective, and senior design project is reviewed to detail what kind of writing in each course, the purpose of the writing, whether or not the writing is assessed, and what type of feedback is provided to students. Civil engineering's plan and all other approved plans are posted on the Office of University Writing Web site to assist other departments as they work on developing and revising their plans (see Appendix A, Auburn University).

Auburn University monitors progress on the student writing plans through their participation in NSSE and the NSSE Consortium for the Study of Writing in College. By reviewing results on the consortium items and surveying faculty to gain a better understanding of how faculty approach writing in the classroom, Auburn continues to assess and foster improvement in the writing skills of its students. In addition, the University Writing Committee is charged with regularly reviewing the plans developed by programs and the Office of University Writing supports faculty as they make decisions about how to continue to improve student writing and writing instruction provided in the majors. The Office of University Writing has also launched a longitudinal study of faculty conceptions of writing and their practices in teaching writing in upper level courses. The study includes analysis of teaching documents, interviews with faculty, classroom observations of writing instruction, and focus groups with students in those classes.

## Focusing on Engagement at the Department Level

### **BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY**

Brigham Young University (BYU) participates in NSSE annually to gain a better understanding of student engagement across various departments and the extent to which BYU's educational goals are being realized. Survey items align closely with the *Aims of a BYU Education*: (1) spiritual strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service. When an academic department comes up for review, the Office of Institutional Assessment and Analysis prepares custom reports focused on engagement at the academic unit/degree level for each department when sample size permits along with comparisons to the scores of other students at BYU and at peer institutions. This allows each department to assess their progress on associated learning outcomes in relation to student engagement.

Many departments share their custom reports during retreats where they discuss what the results reveal about their students, curriculum, and associated learning goals. For example, upon reflecting on the data, one academic unit felt its students' use of technology was lower than desired. To address this finding, the department placed greater emphasis on integrating technology into the courses it offered and the area degree requirements. Many units have made good use of NSSE data specific to critical thinking, writing, communication skills (written and oral), technology use, and satisfaction. Additionally, items specific to student interactions with faculty (specifically, working with a faculty member doing research) have been examined.

Annual participation in NSSE has allowed BYU to effectively identify emerging trends in the data over time. Additionally, multi-year participation makes possible the mapping of NSSE data to the university's annual senior survey and alumni questionnaire on