

dean's notes



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Engagement and Accountability in Undergraduate Education

ARE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS at the University of Michigan academically engaged? As the famous baseball player and manager Yogi Berra once said, “You could look it up.”

Beginning in fall 2007, *USAToday* launched a website reporting the scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is conducted annually and examines student experiences at more than 500 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. It is thought of as the “gold standard” among academic leaders because it considers only one thing: the academic experience of undergraduate students.

The University of Michigan has voluntarily participated in the NSSE survey since 2000 in an effort to better document and measure student education and overall academic success. As *USAToday* noted when introducing the website (with a story that highlighted the University of Michigan), the NSSE survey accomplishes what many other rankings do not. “While many popular college guides focus on things like SAT scores of incoming freshmen, or a college’s party-school reputation,” the article said, “NSSE seeks to gauge the quality of an undergraduate education by looking at how actively involved students are with their studies, professors, and the campus community. Decades of research shows that the more engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn.”

The overall NSSE scores rank UM above the benchmark mean for its peer institutions across four categories. Our students report a higher level of academic challenge, more active and collaborative learning, more intense student-faculty interaction, and more enriching educational experiences.

Because the University receives more NSSE information than is printed in *USAToday*, it is possible to

see behind these general scores, which reveal that LSA students were much less likely than students at peer institutions to simply memorize facts for later repetition and much more likely to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate ideas, theories, and sources of information. LSA students read more and wrote more than their peers and they were much more likely to have performed community service work, worked on a research project with a faculty member, taken foreign language course work, and had an international experience. LSA students also spent much more time studying and on academic work than students at peer institutions.

At a time when the “accountability” of higher education is justifiably on the minds of everyone, from parents and students to members of Congress, we are very pleased by these strong ratings.

We are pleased, but not smug. In fact, over the last two years, hundreds of our faculty, undergraduate staff, and students have met with me in focus groups to discuss improvements to our undergraduate experience. On the table now are a wide range of changes, including more support for and better integration of international and civic outreach education, enrichment of the sophomore year, and more “capstone” opportunities.

After arriving on UM’s campus in 1871, Michigan President James B. Angell declared that the University would stand for the “uncommon education for the common man.” With those words, he put us on a path that, to this day, we are proud to walk.

LEARN MORE > For a NSSE overview visit www.usatoday.com/news/education/2007-11-04-nsse-how-to_N.htm
For the NSSE launch story featuring the University of Michigan visit www.usatoday.com/news/education/2007-11-04-nsse-cover_N.htm