

# CU Boulder NSSE 2006 - Highlights

The [National Survey of Student Engagement \(NSSE\)](#) is designed to provide data that colleges and universities can use to improve undergraduate education. It gathers, via a [questionnaire](#), information from freshmen and seniors about college experiences, skills acquired during college, and students' academic and non-academic activities. A Web-based version of NSSE was administered to samples of nearly 2000 each of CU Boulder freshmen and seniors in spring 2006. Seniors responded at a higher rate (n = 846 or 43% of the sample) than did freshmen (n = 650 or 35%). The following sections describe highlights of the results for CU Boulder.

## CU Boulder campus overall

- Students are satisfied with CU Boulder. At least three-quarters of freshmen and seniors reported they would attend CU Boulder if they were starting college again, and rated their education as positive.
- Students are actively engaged in the learning environment. Nearly all seniors, and most freshmen, reported that they ask questions in class, make class presentations, and work on group projects during class. Nearly all students reported that they discuss grades or assignments with faculty. Many seniors indicated that they participated in such activities as internships and volunteer work, and over half reported that they will complete a senior thesis or similar culminating project.
- Students believe that CU Boulder contributes to their academic knowledge and skills. Large percentages (75%-83%) of freshmen and seniors reported that CU Boulder enhances their critical thinking and analysis skills and contributes toward acquiring a broad general education. Moreover, more than half (59%-82%) of all freshmen and seniors reported that their coursework substantially emphasizes synthesizing and organizing ideas; applying theories or concepts to practical problems; and analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory.

## CU Boulder vs. AAU public peers

Overall, CU Boulder freshmen and seniors provided ratings at or very near the average for AAU public universities on 14 summary scales assessing student experience, perceptions, and satisfaction. There are a few exceptions to this general pattern:

- CU Boulder students provided ratings noticeably below the AAU average on the measure of satisfaction with upper- and lower-division class size.
- CU Boulder seniors (but not freshmen) also provided ratings noticeably below the AAU average on the measures of perceptions about the quality and availability of academic advising. CU Boulder seniors have the second-lowest average scores (among 16 universities) on all four component items of the academic advising scale.
- CU Boulder seniors provided ratings somewhat above the AAU average on the measure of practical academics (such as engaging in in-class group projects and in community-based projects).
- Relatively large percentages of CU Boulder freshmen plan to study abroad, compared with peers at other AAU institutions.

## CU Boulder colleges

- Engineering seniors and architecture & planning seniors gave somewhat higher ratings on computing/IT and course availability and lower ratings on general education and diversity, compared with seniors in other colleges.
- Music seniors provided higher ratings on academic advising, faculty engagement, and satisfaction with class size, especially in comparison with business seniors.
- Journalism seniors provided higher ratings on general education, outdistancing other seniors in their positive assessment of the extent to which their education has contributed to their writing and speaking skills.
- Business seniors and engineering seniors gave higher ratings on practical academics, especially with respect to carrying out a senior project, working with others outside of class, and assessment of the university's contribution to enhancing ability to work well with others.

## CU Boulder majors

- Students are generally satisfied with the academic quality of CU Boulder, regardless of major. Students are also generally satisfied with the academic quality of their majors, the quality of instruction in upper-division courses, and the quality of their relationships with faculty and other students. In addition, students typically reported that they likely would attend the university again if they were starting college over.
- Students displayed considerable variability in their responses to a question on the overall quality of academic advising. On average, film studies majors gave very low ratings of academic advising quality, whereas philosophy majors gave very high ratings for this item. In addition, philosophy majors indicated high levels of satisfaction, relative to other majors, with both the availability of their advisors, and with the accuracy of information that advisors provide.
- Computer science majors gave low ratings, relative to other majors in the College of Engineering, when questioned about how often they were challenged to do their best, the extent to which CU Boulder emphasizes studying, and how often they had to work harder than they thought possible in order to meet instructor expectations. Among majors in the School of Business, marketing majors gave consistently high ratings on each of these items.

## CU Boulder 2006 vs. 2002

- For the campus overall, the 2006 results generally are similar to those observed when NSSE was last administered here, in 2002. From 2002 to 2006, several relatively large changes in ratings, all of which are positive in direction, occurred for freshmen (but not for seniors). Larger percentages of freshmen reported in 2006 that experiences at CU Boulder contributed to 1) voting in local, state, or national elections; 2) quantitative skills; and 3) writing and speaking clearly and effectively. Relatively large negative change occurred for both freshmen and seniors on an item pertaining to the extent to which CU Boulder contributed to "understanding yourself."
- Several relatively large positive changes over time were observed for seniors majoring in electrical and computing engineering. These students, on average, rated both the quality of instruction in upper division courses and the academic quality of their major higher in 2006 than they did in 2002. In addition, they gave higher average ratings in 2006 on

items that asked about the extent to which the university contributes to their voting in elections, and the frequency of discussion of classroom ideas with others. Seniors in accounting similarly rated the academic quality of their major considerably higher in 2006 than in 2002. Virtually all of the few relatively large negative changes occurring over time in seniors' ratings pertained to majors in departments that had experienced some type of important change in departmental characteristics (e.g., personnel changes) between the two administrations of NSSE.

## Conclusion

### Findings of Encouragement

- There are a number of encouraging findings from the 2006 administration of NSSE at CU Boulder that speak well for the academic environment of this campus. Among these are high levels of student satisfaction with CU Boulder, clear evidence of students' reported active engagement in tasks of learning and interaction with faculty members and other students, and their beliefs that CU Boulder contributes to their academic knowledge and skills. Moreover, there is a notable degree of similarity between the survey responses of CU Boulder students and those of students at other AAU public universities, suggesting that students on this campus are as actively engaged academically as are their peers at these other universities.
- There have been noticeable changes in students' ratings on some NSSE items since the 2002 administration of this survey at CU Boulder. Specifically, freshmen reported higher average ratings in 2006 on items concerning the extent to which the university contributes to their voting in elections, to their quantitative skills, and to their clear and effective writing and speaking. The campus has invested in writing programs, and it appears from these findings that this approach is somewhat successful.
- The 2006 NSSE results indicate that students' perceptions of their academic majors can change positively over time, as evidenced by the increases in average ratings provided by students in electrical and computing engineering. These students typically rated both the quality of instruction in upper-division courses and the academic quality of their major higher in 2006 than they did in 2002. In addition, they gave higher average ratings in 2006 on items that asked about the extent to which their experience at the university contributed to their voting in elections, and the frequency of discussion of classroom ideas with others.

### Findings To Be Mindful Of

Although many of the findings from the 2006 NSSE administration are encouraging, there are other, somewhat concerning findings that the university community might want to consider when planning for the long-term improvement of CU Boulder:

- Ratings on the measure of satisfaction with upper- and lower-division class size are noticeably lower than those provided by students at other AAU public universities.
- In general, there was little change in students' opinions of the academic quality of their majors from 2002 to 2006 (but note the exceptions described in the "encouraging findings" section above).

- There is ample room for improvement in the extent to which CU Boulder coursework emphasizes such cognitive skills as synthesizing and organizing ideas and applying theories or concepts to practical problems, because there is a noteworthy proportion (approximately one-third) of students who reported that their coursework emphasizes these skills either only "very little" or "some."
- Despite a campus commitment to diversity goals and programs, there has been essentially no change from 2002 to 2006 in 1) how often CU Boulder freshmen included diverse perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments, 2) how often they had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity other than their own, and 3) the extent to which their experience at CU Boulder contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. There has, however, been a small-to-medium increase over time in freshman students' perspectives of the extent to which CU Boulder emphasizes encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.
- The campus is also committed to making changes in academic advising. However, CU Boulder seniors' ratings on the perceived quality and availability of academic advising are markedly lower than those of their peers at other AAU public universities. This fortunately is not the case for freshmen.

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June 2007

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