Introduction

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was introduced to higher education in 2000. The instrument was developed seeking an assessment tool built on Chickering’s seven principles for good practice in education (1987). These practices describe a learning environment in which students are actively involved in the process of learning (student-faculty interaction, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning). Quoting the NSSE 2001 Report best summarizes the rationale for the development of NSSE:

> What students gain from their college experience depends on a variety of factors and conditions. Among the most important of these is a concept we call student engagement. Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning.

> Among the activities that are traditionally associated with learning are reading and writing, preparing for class, and interacting with instructors about various matters. Engagement also encompasses some other activities that are more recently recognized as being important, such as collaborating with peers on projects, problem-solving tasks, and community service. Being engaged in these activities is valuable in and of itself. It’s also an indicator of educational effectiveness.

Specifically, NSSE focuses on five clusters of activities related to student learning in college. Five “benchmark scores” are statistically derived from survey items providing comparative standards between an institution and national norms. These benchmarks are: (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student interactions with faculty members, (4) enriching educational experiences, and (5) supportive campus environment.

This is the fourth administration at Westmont, with prior test administrations in 2001, 2004 and 2007.

Method

The NSSE survey was administered to all first-year students and seniors at Westmont during the spring 2010 semester. The Westmont NSSE sample size was 569. The Westmont response rate was a 65% (369 students) with 67% of the first-year class responding and 62% of the senior class completing the survey.

Normative data and benchmark scores are available for three different comparison groups of interest to Westmont: (1) 4224 respondents from ten private California colleges and universities (Harvey Mudd, Hope International, Loyola Marymount, Mills, Notre Dame de Namur, Pepperdine, Pitzer, Santa Clara, La Verne and Vanguard; (2) 40,176 respondents from 102
Carnegie baccalaureate-liberal arts colleges and universities; and (3) 361,098 respondents from all 2010 participating institutions (595 schools).

Three types of summary statistics are presented:

1. **Benchmark scores.** Using factor analysis, patterns of responses summarized from multiple survey items have been derived and then contrasted to comparison groups. This provides a powerful method of comparing Westmont with normative data.
2. **Statistical t-tests.** Statistical comparisons between means are presented contrasting Westmont responses with the other three comparison groups. Large sample sizes (as found in NSSE) tend to produce more statistically significant results, even when the difference between the compared means may be small. For this reason, the developers of NSSE believe it is valuable to consider the “effect size.”
3. **Effect size.** This method of comparing means indicates the “practical significance” of the magnitude of the mean difference. (It is calculated by dividing the mean difference by the standard deviation of the group with which Westmont is being compared.) An effect size of 0.2 is considered small, 0.5 is moderate, and greater than 0.8 is considered large.

**Results**

The presentation of results is organized as follows:

I. Comparison of Westmont benchmark scores with the following three groups: California 4-year private colleges, Carnegie baccalaureate liberal arts schools and all schools administering the NSSE. The benchmark scales are (1) level of academic challenge; (2) active and collaborative learning; (3) student-faculty interaction; (4) enriching educational experiences; and (5) supportive campus environment.


(Individual NSSE survey item mean comparisons are available by request or at [http://www.westmont.edu/ _offices/institutional_portfolio/Surveys.html](http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/Surveys.html). Individual NSSE survey item frequency distributions are available by request or at [http://www.westmont.edu/ _offices/institutional_portfolio/Surveys.html](http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/Surveys.html).)

**I. Benchmark Scores and Comparison Groups**

**1. Level of Academic Challenge**

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Specific survey items contributing to this benchmark score were:

- Hours spent preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, etc.)
- Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings
- Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more, between 5 and 19 pages, and fewer than 5 pages
Coursework emphasizes: Analysis of the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory
Coursework emphasizes: Synthesis and organizing of ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships
Coursework emphasizes: Making of judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods
Coursework emphasizes: Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
Working harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations
Campus environment emphasizes: Spending significant amount of time studying and on academic work

Seniors rated the academic challenge at Westmont higher than seniors in the other comparison groups. Differences among the first-year groups were not as great as observed with seniors.
Response patterns to individual survey items are available but can’t be summarized in a report of this modest length. Here are a few examples of Westmont students’ responses to Academic Challenge survey items.

- **To what degree is studying and spending time on academic work emphasized?** 91% of FY students and 93% of seniors feel that Westmont places substantial emphasis on academics.
- **Do faculty hold students to high standards?** 58% of FY students frequently work harder than they thought they could to meet faculty expectations.
- **How much time do students spend on homework each week?** 53% of FY students spend more than 15 hours per week preparing for class. 4% spend 5 hours or less and 5% report studying more than 30 hours/week.
- **How much writing is expected?** 6% of FY students write more than 10 papers between 5 and 19 pages and 9% have written a paper more than 20 pages in length.
- **How much reading is expected during the school year?** 59% of FY students read more than 10 assigned books and packs of course readings. 8% read fewer than 5.
- **Do exams require students to do their best work?** 69% of FY students report that their exams strongly challenge them to do their best work.

### 2. Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are involved in their education and asked to think about what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students for the problems they will encounter daily during and after college. Specific survey items contributing to this benchmark score were:

- Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
- Made a class presentation
- Worked with other students on projects during class
- Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)
- Participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers)

Westmont seniors scored relatively high on the active and collaborative learning benchmark, only scoring lower than the California private colleges’ group. Westmont first-year students scored the lowest among the comparison groups on this benchmark.

![Active & Collaborative Learning - Sp 2010](image)

### Benchmark Comparisons: Active and Collaborative Learning - Sp 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First-Year</th>
<th>Senior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westmont</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calif 4-Yr Priv</td>
<td>48.1***</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carn.Bacc</td>
<td>45.8***</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All NSSE</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>51.4*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Westmont - Calif 4-Yr Priv (Effect Size) -0.38 -0.15
Westmont - Carn.Bacc (Effect Size) -0.23 0.05
Westmont - All NSSE (Effect Size) -0.10 0.16

Statistical differences (means): *p<0.05  Effect Size: 0.2 (small)
**p<0.01  0.5 (moderate)
***p<0.001  0.8 (large)
Here are a few examples of Westmont students’ responses to Active and Collaborative Learning survey items.

- **How often are topics from class discussed outside of the classroom?** 73% of FY students frequently discuss readings or ideas from coursework outside of class.
- **Do students work together on projects – inside and outside of class?** 23% of FY students frequently work with other students on projects in class, 61% work with peers on assignments outside of class.
- **How often do students make class presentations?** 14% of FY students report that they make frequent presentations in class. In contrast, 68% of seniors responded similarly.
- **How many students participate in community-based projects in regular courses?** 9% of FY students frequently participate in service-learning or community-based projects during a given year. 72% never took part in such activities.
- **How many students apply their classroom learning to real life through internships or off-campus field experiences?** By their senior year, 73% of students have participated in some form of practicum, internship, field experience, co-op, or clinical assignment.

3. **Student - Faculty Interaction**

Students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning. Specific survey items contributing to this benchmark score were:

- Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
- Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities
- Received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on your academic performance
- Worked on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements

As with the active and collaborative learning score, Westmont first-year student responses produced low results on the student-faculty interaction variable. Conversely, responses from Westmont seniors generated a benchmark score similar to the California private colleges and Carnegie baccalaureate-liberal arts colleges and higher than the all NSSE institution group.
Here are a few examples of Westmont students’ responses to Student-Faculty Interaction survey items.

- **Are faculty members accessible and supportive?** 66% of FY students and 74% of seniors say their faculty are available, helpful and sympathetic.

- **How many students work on research projects with faculty?** By their senior year, 19% of students have done research with a faculty member.

- **Do students receive prompt feedback on academic performance?** 59% of FY students indicate that they frequently get prompt verbal or written feedback from faculty members.
• **How often do students talk with advisors or faculty members about their career plans?**

92% of seniors at least occasionally discuss career plans with faculty. 8% never talk with faculty members about career plans.

• **Do students and faculty members work together on committees and projects outside of course work?** 47% of FY students at least occasionally spend time with faculty members on activities other than coursework

### 4. Enriching Educational Experiences

A variety of learning opportunities can enhance the traditional academic programs. Diversity experiences teach students valuable things about themselves and others. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge. Specific survey items contributing to this benchmark score were:

- Hours spent participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student govt.
- Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment
- Community service or volunteer work
- Foreign language coursework and study abroad
- Independent study or self-designed major
- Culminating senior experience (capstone course, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, etc.)
- Serious conversations with students of different religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values
- Serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own
- Using electronic medium to discuss or complete an assignment
- Campus environment encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
- Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together

Given the nature of the survey items, it is not surprising seniors at all institutions score higher on the enriching educational experiences survey items than first year students. First year students have simply had less opportunity to become involved in co-curricular activities, study abroad or enroll in an internship. Westmont first-year students score lower on this measure than students at California private colleges and Carnegie baccalaureate-liberal arts colleges. In contrast, this is another measure in which Westmont seniors report higher scores the other comparison groups.
Here are a few examples of Westmont students’ responses to Enriching Educational Experiences survey items.

- **What types of honors courses, learning communities, and other distinctive programs are offered?** During their first year, 9% of students participate in a learning community. By their senior year, 11% of students have taken an independent study class.
- **How often do students interact with peers with different social, political, or religious views?**
• 57% of FY students say they frequently have serious conversations with students who are different from themselves in terms of their religious, political, or personal beliefs.
• **How often do students interact with peers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds?** 62% of FY students frequently have serious conversations with those of a different race.
• **How many students study in other countries?** By their senior year, 61% of students have studied abroad.
• **Do students participate in activities that enhance their spirituality?** 84% of FY students frequently engage in spiritually enhancing activities such as worship, meditation, or prayer.
• **What percentage of students participate in community service?** By the time they are seniors, 80% of students have participated in community service or volunteer work.

5. **Supportive Campus Environment**

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations on campus. Specific survey items contributing to this benchmark score were:
- Campus environment provides the support you need to help you succeed academically
- Campus environment helps you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family)
- Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially
- Quality of relationships with other students
- Quality of relationships with faculty members
- Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices
Scores for both Westmont first-year students and seniors were higher on the supportive campus environment benchmark than all other comparison groups. This is similar to results obtained in 2001, 2004 and 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark Comparisons: Supportive Campus Environment - Sp 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calif 4-Yr Priv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carn.Bacc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All NSSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont - Calif 4-Yr Priv (Effect Size)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont - Carn.Bacc (Effect Size)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont - All NSSE (Effect Size)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical differences (means):
- *p<0.05 Effect Size: 0.2 (small)
- **p<0.01 Effect Size: 0.5 (moderate)
- ***p<0.001 Effect Size: 0.8 (large)

Here are a few examples of Westmont students’ responses to Supportive Campus Environment survey items.

- **How well do students get along with other students?** 82% of FY students report that their peers are friendly, supportive, and help them feel as if they belong.
- **Are students satisfied with their overall educational experience?** 97% of FY students report a favorable image of this institution; 91% of seniors would choose this school again if they could start their college career over.
- **How much time do students devote to co-curricular activities?** 8% of FY students and 20% of seniors spend more than 15 hours a week participating in co-curricular activities.
- **How well do students get along with administrators and staff?** 50% of FY students find the administrative personnel and offices helpful, considerate, and flexible.
- **To what extent does the school help students deal with their academic and social needs?** 91% of FY students feel that this institution has a substantial commitment to their academic success. 71% feel well-supported by the institution regarding their social needs.

Benchmark scores for Westmont first-year students have changed little over the past ten years. As we have just seen, it was only on the supportive campus environment measure that the 2010 first-year student scores were uniformly higher than the comparison group benchmark scores. With the other four measures, Westmont first-year students were either not much different than the norms or were lower. Therefore, given the rather flat lines shown below, it is not surprising Westmont first-year student benchmark scores were average to low compared to the norms in 2001, 2004 and 2007 also.

Change in benchmark scores derived from Westmont seniors demonstrate a different pattern. Following the decline in scores between 2001 and 2004, benchmark scores for seniors have been consistently rising. As already noted, 2010 benchmark scores for seniors were similar to or higher than the comparison groups on every measure. This was not the case in previous years. The positive slopped trend lines from 2004 to 2010 have resulted in a favorable outcome on these benchmarks.
Although Westmont may not be performing on all benchmarks at the level we would like, the results from the 2010 NSSE survey are generally positive and encouraging. The greatest increases in benchmark scores have occurred with seniors. It is interesting to speculate why this might be the case. There are certainly features of the “new” general education program that may be contributing to these changes. Specifically, many of the elements found in the Competent and Compassionate Action requirements represent active learning experiences (internships, research, productions, study abroad, etc.) that are related to a number of NSSE survey items. Also, the greater focus on certain types of learning found in the Common Skills requirements might positively impact NSSE results also.

What accounts for the lower benchmark scores obtained for first-year students? A review of the data from specific survey items that contribute to the benchmark computations, it was found that Westmont first-year students describe their experience differently than students in the comparison groups in a number of ways including: less frequently asking questions in class; made fewer class presentations; less group activity during class time; less likely to have participated in a community-based project for a class; wrote fewer long (>20 pages) and short (<5 pages) papers; less likely to have participated in a learning community; discussed grades and assignments with faculty less frequently and were less likely to discuss ideas from readings with faculty outside of class. These survey items all are components of the active/collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction and enriching educational experiences benchmarks. The value of the NSSE is not to establish what learning practices Westmont faculty should value but if some or all of these items are considered valuable, then NSSE has identified areas of the academic program that should be targeted for change.

Conclusions
Results from two “satisfaction” items are worth highlighting. When asked, “How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at Westmont?” 98% of first-year students and 97% of seniors responded “good” or “excellent.” When asked, “If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?” 91% of first-year students and 91% of seniors said “probably yes” or “definitely yes.” These results are all significantly different in a positive direction from the three comparison groups. Overall, Westmont students, first-year students and seniors, are making a strong statement endorsing their overall Westmont educational experience.