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Students

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Colleges' Prestige Doesn't Guarantee a Top-Flight Learning Experience

By Dan Berrett

Fayetteville State University rarely crops up in the national conversation about educational quality.

Described as a second-tier regional university by *U.S. News & World Report*, the institution accepts nearly two-thirds of its applicants and struggles to graduate most of them in six years.

But the historically black college is also doing something right in the classroom, according to this year's National Survey of Student Engagement, which was [released today](#).

Researchers for Nessie, as the survey is known, took a stab at identifying educational quality on the institutional level, an attribute that is as important to higher education as it is hard to define. The survey collected data from 355,000 freshmen and seniors from 622 institutions in the spring.

Nessie researchers, who are based at Indiana University at Bloomington, created two indicators for quality. One, student-faculty interaction, asked students how often they talked with faculty members about career plans, course topics, or other ideas outside class, among other questions. The other measure, effective teaching practices, distilled student perceptions of how often their instructors clearly explained course goals and requirements, taught in an organized way, used examples to illustrate difficult points, or provided feedback.

The results were surprising, especially when they were grouped based on how selective a college is.

Past Nessie reports have averaged the responses for disparate

colleges, or organized them according to categories like their Carnegie classification. This year, however, researchers analyzed the measures of interaction and teaching according to selectivity, as defined by *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*.

The average student, the researchers found, experienced widely different degrees of educational quality in different colleges within the same category of prestige. And, in all but a few cases, the categories of selectivity had no meaningful relationship to the indicators of teaching and interaction.

Fayetteville State, for example, belonged to a broad category of "competitive" institutions that accept as many as three-quarters of their applicants, many of whom had B minus averages in high school. The university had higher scores on the measures of teaching and interaction than many "most selective" institutions, which routinely turn away at least two-thirds of those who apply. Fayetteville State's freshmen scored their student-faculty interactions at 32 on a 60-point scale. Among the most-selective institutions, a category including places like Bryn Mawr and Harvey Mudd Colleges, the average score was 23.

"Conventional wisdom says that the more selective an institution is, the better it is going to be," Alexander C. McCormick, director of Nessie, said in an interview. "That's not systematically true with these two measures."

But Mr. McCormick, who is an associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Bloomington, cautioned against concluding that selectivity doesn't matter. And he emphasized that the level of variability of responses within colleges tended to be far greater than between them.

Quality Teaching and Campus Prestige

The National Survey of Student Engagement asks students how often their professors do things like clearly explain materials, teach in an organized way, and give prompt and detailed feedback on assignments. Results are translated to a 60-point scale and sorted by colleges' level of selectivity, as determined by *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*.

Effective teaching, by selectivity level	Freshman responses
Noncompetitive	40.8
Less Competitive	40.5
Competitive	40.5
Very Competitive	41.2
Highly Competitive	40.6
Most Competitive	43.4

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Source: National Survey of Student Engagement, [Get the data](#)

The results this year, though, do help achieve one of the goals behind Nessie's founding in 2000—to shift the conversation about college quality away from assumptions about status, reputation, and wealth. By focusing on the sorts of activities that research suggests lead to robust learning, said Mr. McCormick, Nessie reflects something closer to what educational quality really is.

The Right Concept

Nessie's findings support a contention often made by faculty members at less-prestigious institutions, that a college off the beaten path can still provide an excellent education.

The emphasis on the interaction between students and faculty also aligns with recent studies and scholarship, including a Gallup-Purdue Index survey released earlier this year. It found that graduates were three times as likely to [report thriving](#) in their sense of well-being if they connected with a professor during college. Similarly, Daniel F. Chambliss, a Hamilton sociologist, [wrote in](#) *How College Works* that students who took courses with just one or two faculty members whom they considered to be exceptional judged their entire undergraduate education to be excellent.

Even one of the [most vocal critics](#) of Nessie agrees that the two measures it identifies as indicating quality do have value.

But there is a much larger problem, said Stephen R. Porter, a

professor in the department of leadership, policy, and adult and higher education at North Carolina State University. Nessie isn't really measuring what it purports to, he said.

Students don't have a common frame of reference to answer, for instance, how often they've learned something that changed their understanding of an issue over the past year, and few of them agree about what terms like "very much" or "quite a bit" mean. And then, he added, there are the questions themselves. Can students really judge whether their instructors are teaching in an organized way?

The range in the results among different levels of prestige, he said, is probably not evidence of the variability of experiences at the institutions; it's statistical noise.

It struck Mr. Porter as bizarre to argue that attending a deep-pocketed college with renowned faculty and a rich array of educational programs would be equal to going to an underfunded college where most students commute. "This does not seem at all plausible," he said, "given what we know about wealth and selectivity in higher education."

Quality Control

Mr. McCormick disputed Mr. Porter's critique. If the students' answers didn't truly reflect their experiences, he said, the patterns Nessie found wouldn't be seen on an institutional level.

The Nessie researchers' emphasis on organized and clear teaching as indicators of educational quality also reflects recent findings from other scholarship. The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education revealed [a relationship](#) between students' feedback on these facets of teaching and their growth on a standardized test of critical thinking.

For some colleges, like the University of Pikeville, an open-access institution in Appalachian Kentucky, the Nessie data can help quantify a squirrelly concept like educational quality. Meg Wright Sidle, director of institutional research and effectiveness there, said Pikeville uses the results to evaluate and retool programs and to make sure the university is achieving its goals.

On Nessie's 60-point scale, student-faculty interactions at Pikeville were 25.6 for freshmen and 32.8 for seniors, better than scores at even the most-competitive institutions. But it is also a very small institution, with a student-faculty ratio of 17-to-1.

Exceptional results on such measures probably won't allow Pikeville to start poaching students from better known institutions in the state like Centre College or Transylvania University, Ms. Sidle said. "We're still third tier on *U.S. News*." But the numbers are valuable nonetheless. "We can say we're meeting our mission."

At Fayetteville State, John I. Brooks III, dean of the University College, said Nessie data offer another piece of evidence, along with scores on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, to help officials gauge quality.

While such data might help persuade students, parents, and policy makers that a Fayetteville State education is better than conventional measures and narratives might suggest, Mr. Brooks also struck a realistic note. Reshaping notions of an institution's prestige or reputation take time.

"It's harder," he said, "to tell stories about quality than about quantity."

Clarification (11/20/2014, 10:45 a.m.): This article has been updated to more accurately describe the lack of statistically meaningful differences in indicators of teaching and interactions among categories of selectivity.

The 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement: a Snapshot

The National Survey of Student Engagement asks students each year to answer a raft of questions: about their conversations with other students, how supported they feel by their campus, how often they engage in higher-order thinking, or how many of them study abroad. Here are some of this year's most interesting results.

Advising matters, but is not always successful. The more often

that freshmen met with their academic advisers, the more supportive they thought the institutional culture was. But about a third of freshmen either never met with their advisers or did so only once. While the vast majority of faculty advisers thought it was "important" or "very important" that they listen closely to student concerns, make themselves available to students, and help fix academic problems, students said their advisers did so far less often. For example, 94 percent of faculty thought it was important to discuss career interests and postgraduate plans, but only half of students said their advisers actually did so.

Demography is not destiny. Minority students generally reported having lower-quality interactions with advisers, faculty, staff, and their peers. But there were important exceptions; black students at over 40 percent of the highest-performing institutions in this category reported interactions that were equal to or better than those of their white peers.

Time spent improving teaching means less lecturing. Instructors who dedicated more time to bettering their teaching were also more likely to use discussions, small-group activities, student performances and presentations, and experiential-learning opportunities.

Social media divert many students' attention. While social media helped connect many students to extracurricular groups, about 40 percent of freshmen and a third of seniors said such tools "substantially distracted" them from course work.

22 Comments

The Chronicle of Higher Education

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Richard Sherry · 10 hours ago

In the downloadable report, a number of for-profit systems or campuses are listed as participating in NSSE over the years: Capella, some DeVry campuses, several University of Phoenix campuses as well as their online programs. Grand Canyon, the only evangelical for-profit, also participated. It seems a shame that the report highlights a breakout of data by degree level and institutional control, but only differentiates "public" and "private," and does not break out "for-profit" and "not-for-profit." This would be an opportunity to investigate some of the claims about poor instruction and engagement in the for-profit sector.

for prompt...
3 ^ | v • Reply • Share

 **mbelvadi** • 9 hours ago

Students at "most selective" institutions, on average, probably don't need to be having conversations with their faculty about careers and such, because they have college-educated parents at home. At places like Fayetteville, likely a much higher proportion of the student body is first-generation college goers, and needs the greater support from the faculty and other staff because no one at home can give them good advice on how to achieve their middle class professional goals. (Note that I'm talking statistically here - obviously there are first-gen students even at Harvard, and 3rd+-gen students at Fayetteville.)

5 ^ | v • Reply • Share

 **wclibrary** • 8 hours ago

And we all agree on how to define a top-flight learning experience.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share

 **tlward49** • 8 hours ago

To those of us on the high school side, NSSE is an anomaly, or more accurately, an enigma. If this is supposed to help students determine the quality of experience at colleges, why are the results not published? We are overwhelmed with superficial rankings of all sorts. It sure would be nice to take a look at one that at least attempts to be more qualitative, more substantive. This is like "Consumer Reports" rating a car and refusing to tell the subscribers what the findings are. The aggregate findings that seem to be the only NSSE data easily available tell us very little.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share



Scott → tlward49 • 7 hours ago

A lot of schools post their NSSE data or similar outcomes measures either as part of the College Portrait many schools post under the admissions page. <http://www.collegeportraits.or...>

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TerribleEddie → tlward49 • 6 hours ago

Low-quality data produced by EdDs--why would you want more of that?

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amccormick → tlward49 • an hour ago

NSSE doesn't publish results for participating schools because a key focus of the project is to inform institutional improvement. That would quickly get undermined if we made it easy to rank schools and declare winners and losers--it would seriously alter the cost-benefit decision about participation. Also, students would have a stake in the outcome and know this as they fill out the survey. So instead NSSE urges students to ask about these important elements of the student experience when choosing colleges. See NSSE's "Pocket Guide to Choosing a College," <http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pocke...>. Participating schools also receive a report that shows how their students answered the questions in the pocket guide. And as Scott notes, lots of schools post their NSSE results online.

Alex McCormick

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quepasso • 6 hours ago

i do not think this is surprising at all. what drives rankings that classify colleges as elite (and hence draw students which then leads to lower acceptance rates)? as far as i know it is not educational quality. it's grant money, publications, acceptance rate, student grades/sat scores, etc. i guess somewhere in there is faculty to student ratio but that is a very crude measure

somewhere in there is faculty to student ratio but that is a very crude measure at best. so why would a high ranking, elite institution provide a better learning experience? and who cares about rankings and 'elite' status when it comes to quality instruction and learning - it evidently factors in very little. i am not trying to diss the 'elites' but it just does not factor much in the rankings. we need to stop focusing so much on these rankings by USNW (who cares what they think) and just work on providing high quality education for our students. in the (admittedly quite) long run that will give us (HE as a whole) much more prestige than any ranking ever could.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern · 5 hours ago

Funny, I was just reading an economics study out of Vanderbilt that determined that prestigious undergraduate colleges bestow substantial wage premiums over nonelite undergrad colleges - even when students from both types of institutions go to an elite grad school.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



khaliqaa01 ➔ **Unemployed_Northeastern** · 5 hours ago

Please share the study.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern ➔ **khaliqaa01** · 5 hours ago

Coverage of the study and a link to its ssrn page can be found here: <http://news.vanderbilt.edu/201...>

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khaliqaa01 ➔ **Unemployed_Northeastern** · 5 hours ago

Consider this. A report of the 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index suggest higher education is about "great lives not great jobs".

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Unemployed_Northeastern ➔ **khaliqaa01** · 3 hours ago

Ah, yes - the Gallup-Purdue project that was organized and funded by Lumina, that giant higher ed policy foundation that was cofounded and solely funded by Sallie Mae. The organization whose mission statement is to increase the % of Americans with college degrees to an entirely impossible and disastrous 60% by 2025, up from the mid 30's today - a goal that would decimate the college wage premium but provide decades of enhanced revenue for Sallie.

It does not surprise me to see that Lumina would be veering away from the "great jobs" line to the "great experiences" line. After all, even with their \$1.5 billion war chest from which they fund endless, usually specious studies about the college premium and similar, there is now enough mainstream coverage of the student loan crisis and flat-to-declining real wages for college grads over time that Lumina's traditional message no longer

see more

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



TerribleEddie ➔ **Unemployed_Northeastern** · 2 hours ago

Thanks. Your comment is better reporting than CHE has ever done on this issue.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



quepasso ➔ **Unemployed_Northeastern** · 5 hours ago

i do not think those things go together. going to an elito institution will

I DO NOT THINK THESE THINGS GO TOGETHER. GOING TO AN ELITE INSTITUTION WILL GET YOU BETTER CONTACTS. SINCE THE WORDS 'IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW IT'S WHO YOU KNOW' ARE ABOUT AS TRUE AS IT COMES IN MY EXPERIENCE IT MAKES SENSE THAT MAKING BUDDIES AT AN ELITE INSTITUTION WILL POSITIVELY CHANGE YOUR EARNING POTENTIAL. AND THAT IS MUCH EASIER DONE IN UNDERGRAD. NONE OF THAT HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH LEARNING OR INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern → quepasso · 5 hours ago

As college in the US costs several magnitudes more than any other country in the world, the expected ROI must be considered as important, if not more so, than quality of instruction. Employers do not hire based on how much students have learned, and one cannot pay Sallie Mae or the Department of Education with enlightenment.

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quepasso → Unemployed_Northeastern · 5 hours ago

I think we are talking about slightly different points. It is up to colleges to give quality instruction for a reasonable price - whoever pays it (state, feds, individuals). So the ROI has to be positive. However, quality instruction is mostly independent of rankings and elite status. ROI is higher at elite institutions (these days) because with equally good (or rather not so good) instructions (since people focus on rankings) ROI is higher at 'elites' because a) they get to pick the best students and b) because of the networks, neither of which can be replicated in another institution without taking it away from the ones that currently have it. There can always only be a few 'elite' places. High instructional quality can and should be achieved in most places.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern → quepasso · 2 hours ago

I entirely agree that quality instruction can be found anywhere, and will add that many elite colleges are rife with easy-pass classes, outrageous grade inflation, and hundreds-strong entry-level classes primarily taught by grad students and graded by Scantrons. But unfortunately, we aren't in Finland or Germany. College will be the first or second-most expensive thing this generation ~~buys~~ borrows for in their lives (depending on whether they buy a house or not, and where that house is). And sadly, employers tend to look for education-as-vocational training or simple prestige, neither of which goes hand in hand with excellent instruction. The result is that more and more people are getting left in the lurch regardless of the quality of their education.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



quepasso → Unemployed_Northeastern · 2 hours ago

Agreed. But the point the article makes is that instructional quality/quality learning is not necessarily better at elite institutions. And somehow that is surprising to the authors (i.e. against 'conventional wisdom'). You're point on overcharging students for an educational experience not worth that cost is well taken. I just fear that most colleges draw the wrong conclusion and try to emulate HYP instead of looking inward. And that will not help HE as a whole. It is a zero sum game if one is just trying to be more competitive, rise in rankings or be elite.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



khaliqaa01 • 5 hours ago

Thanks for reminding us that quality educational experiences are not the domain of the selective few.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



manoflamancha • 4 hours ago

There is some truth to this study, and I encourage the authors to expand their research. I am sure many anecdotal stories will come forth, and I have one to tell. The very worst teaching I observed in graduate STEM courses were at a very highly selective Ivy league school, while the best teaching were graduate night school courses at a state college near my work. Eventually, I authored a textbook on the subject, inspired more by the small state college than the giant Ivy. One of the very worst teachers at the Ivy was a Nobel winner.

And this is my point in writing. Notwithstanding the old saw about the intimate connectedness between research and teaching, my experience suggests the opposite is true. In this age of Grantsmanship, even potentially good teachers in the top schools have little time to prepare brilliant lectures, and teaching itself mainly is of secondary importance. It is the curse of top ranked schools to attract top class money grubbers. Such people are busy writing grants, and Supervising Research (not actually doing it!) Students, they have no time or interest in teaching classes. Let this be a warning to parents. It should also be a topic to study by McCormick and colleagues in future.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



kimbruce • 2 hours ago

Interestingly most of the top-ranked (according to USNews) liberal arts colleges and universities didn't seem to participate in this survey. I think that limits the usefulness of the report. It would be interesting to see how their inclusion would change the results.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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