

# NSSE 2021 Overview

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “nessie”) collects information from first-year and senior students about the characteristics and quality of their undergraduate experience. Since the inception of the survey, nearly 1,700 bachelor’s-granting colleges and universities in the United States and Canada have used it to measure the extent to which students engage in effective educational practices that are empirically linked with learning, personal development, and other desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, and graduation.

NSSE data are used by faculty, administrators, researchers, and others for institutional improvement, public reporting, and related purposes. Launched in 2000 with the support of a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, NSSE has been fully sustained through institutional participation fees since 2002. This document provides an overview of NSSE 2021, including administration details, response rates, participating institutions, and respondent characteristics.

## The Pandemic Continues

The coronavirus pandemic continued to have a profound impact on higher education and its students this past year, demanding rapid adaptation to unusual circumstances like shifting academic calendars and constantly changing health and safety requirements. NSSE adapted by adding a pandemic-specific question, and introduced two salient modules, Coping with COVID (created specifically for the 2021 administration) and Experiences with Online Learning.

Recognizing these difficult and changing circumstances, NSSE asked students about the extent faculty and staff had done a good job helping them adapt to pandemic-induced changes. Hearteningly, nearly 3 out of 4 respondents (73%) said faculty and staff had helped them substantially (“quite a bit” or “very much”) in this regard. However, some student groups reported slightly less support than their peers, such as those studying mostly online (71%), those at a doctoral degree-granting institution (71%), and Black or African-American students (72%).

In addition, student responses to the NSSE item about course type demonstrates a substantial shift to mostly remote instruction, with over 60% of all students reporting this course modality.

## Survey Data and Methodology

Approximately 890,000 first-year and senior students from 353 institutions (344 in the US, 5 in Canada, and 4 in other countries) were invited to participate in NSSE 2021. Of this population, 211,667 students responded to the survey. First-year and senior students were about equally represented among the respondent population.

NSSE’s sampling methodology calls for either a census of all first-year and senior students or a random selection of an equal number of students from each group, with sample size based on total undergraduate enrollment. Census administration is available only via email recruitment, in which students get a survey invitation and up to four reminders by email. In 2021, all but one participating institution opted for this method rather than the regular mail option, in which sampled students get up to three messages by post and up to two email reminders.

Unless noted otherwise, the results presented below are from 342 institutions—337 in the US and 5 in Canada—that participated in NSSE 2021. Due to nonstandard details of their participation, 11 institutions are not represented. In these summary tables, and in the *Institutional Report 2021,* only data for census-administered and randomly sampled students are included. NSSE 2021 U.S. respondents profiled here include 203,284 first-year (47%) and senior (53%) respondents.

## A student sitting on a stone wall at Mississippi State University

Mississippi State University

## U.S. Participating Institutions

NSSE 2021 participating institutions and students reflect the diversity of bachelor’s-granting colleges and universities in the US with respect to institution type, public or private control, size, region, and locale (Table 1). A searchable list of participating institutions is on the NSSE website: **go.iu.edu/NSSE-participants**

## Institutional Response Rates

The average response rate for U.S. NSSE 2021 institutions was 30%, consistent with last year. The highest response rate among U.S. institutions was 93%, and about three out of five achieved a response rate of 25% or higher. Higher average response rates were observed for smaller institutions and at institutions that offered incentives for survey participation (Table 2).

Sixty-three-percent of institutions chose to offer a survey incentive. On average, these institutions had a 33% institutional response rate, eight percentage points higher than those who did not offer an incentive. Institutions also had the option to use their learning management system or student portal to recruit students. In 2021, 87 U.S. institutions chose this option, and the average share of respondents who accessed the survey this way was 27%.

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| Table 2NSSE 2021 U.S. Participation and Response Rates by Undergraduate Enrollment and Use of Incentives | | |
| **Institution Characteristics** | **Number of Institutions** | **Average Institutional Response Rate (%)** |
| **Undergraduate Enrollment** | | |
| 2,500 or fewer | 149 | 35 |
| 2,501 to 4,999 | 70 | 30 |
| 5,000 to 9,999 | 58 | 24 |
| 10,000 or more | 59 | 21 |
| **Use of Incentives** Some institutions used recruitment incentives, such as small gifts or raffles, to encourage students to complete the survey. | | |
| Offered incentives | 213 | 33 |
| No incentives | 124 | 25 |
| **All Institutions** | 337 | 30 |

## Survey Customization

Participating institutions may append up to two additional question sets in the form of NSSE Topical Modules or consortium questions (for institutions sharing a common interest and participating as a NSSE consortium) (Table 3). Of the ten modules available in 2021, the most widely adopted was Inclusiveness and Engagement with Cultural Diversity (Table 4).

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| Table 1Profile of NSSE 2021 U.S. Institutions and Respondents and Bachelor’s-Granting U.S. Institutions and Their Students | | | | |
|  | **Institutions  (%)** | | **Students  (%)** | |
| **Institution Characteristics** | **NSSE** | **U.S.** | **NSSE** | **U.S.** |
| **Carnegie Basic Classification** |  |  |  |  |
| Doctoral Universities (Very high  research activity) | 8 | 8 | 25 | 31 |
| Doctoral Universities (High research activity) | 12 | 8 | 20 | 16 |
| Doctoral/Professional Universities | 12 | 9 | 11 | 10 |
| Master's Colleges and Universities  (Larger programs) | 24 | 22 | 25 | 26 |
| Master's Colleges and Universities (Medium programs) | 13 | 12 | 7 | 6 |
| Master's Colleges and Universities  (Smaller programs) | 6 | 8 | 3 | 3 |
| Baccalaureate Colleges— Arts & Sciences Focus | 12 | 15 | 4 | 4 |
| Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields | 13 | 17 | 4 | 5 |
| **Control** |  |  |  |  |
| Public | 43 | 35 | 65 | 67 |
| Private | 57 | 65 | 35 | 33 |
| **Undergraduate Enrollment** |  |  |  |  |
| Fewer than 1,000 | 11 | 21 | 2 | 2 |
| 1,000–2,499 | 32 | 32 | 11 | 9 |
| 2,500–4,999 | 22 | 17 | 16 | 10 |
| 5,000–9,999 | 18 | 15 | 19 | 19 |
| 10,000–19,999 | 10 | 8 | 21 | 21 |
| 20,000 or more | 8 | 7 | 30 | 38 |
| **Region** |  |  |  |  |
| New England | 10 | 8 | 8 | 6 |
| Mid East | 13 | 18 | 9 | 16 |
| Great Lakes | 17 | 15 | 16 | 14 |
| Plains | 10 | 10 | 9 | 7 |
| Southeast | 25 | 25 | 24 | 24 |
| Southwest | 10 | 8 | 14 | 12 |
| Rocky Mountains | 3 | 3 | 8 | 6 |
| Far West | 12 | 10 | 12 | 13 |
| Outlying Areas | 1 | 2 | <1 | 1 |
| **Locale** |  |  |  |  |
| City | 45 | 47 | 58 | 62 |
| Suburban | 25 | 25 | 23 | 23 |
| Town | 24 | 22 | 16 | 14 |
| Rural | 6 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Notes: Percentages are unweighted and based on U.S. postsecondary institutions that award baccalaureate degrees and belong to one of the eight Carnegie classifications in the table. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. U.S. percentages are based on the 2019 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics data. For information on the Basic Carnegie Classification, see [**carnegieclassifications.iu.edu**](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/). | | | | |

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| Table 3Summary of NSSE 2021 Participation in Additional Questions Sets | | | |
| **Selection of  Additional Question Sets** | **Number of Institutions** | **Percentage of Institutions** | |
| None | 23 | 7 | |
| One module only | 52 | 15 | |
| Two modules | 216 | 61 | |
| Consortium items only | 4 | 1 | |
| Consortium items plus one module | 58 | 16 | |
| Notes: Includes U.S., Canadian, other international institutions, and institutions with nonstandard population files or administrations. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. | | | |
| Table 4NSSE 2021 Participation in Topical Modules | | | |
| **Topical Module** | **Number of Institutions** | | **Percentage of Institutions** |
| Inclusiveness and Engagement with Cultural Diversity | 115 | | 33 |
| Career and Workforce Preparation | 95 | | 27 |
| Academic Advising | 91 | | 26 |
| Experiences with Online Learning | 61 | | 17 |
| First-Year Experiences & Senior Transitions | 52 | | 15 |
| Coping with COVID | 52 | | 15 |
| Development of Transferable Skills | 26 | | 7 |
| Civic Engagement | 24 | | 7 |
| Experiences with Writing | 15 | | 4 |
| Global Learning | 10 | | 3 |
| Notes: Includes U.S., Canadian, other international institutions, and institutions with nonstandard population files or administrations. Percentages sum to more than 100 because many institutions selected two modules. | | | |

## U.S. Respondent Profile

Table 5 displays selected demographic and enrollment characteristics of NSSE 2021 U.S. respondents alongside all U.S. bachelor’s degree-seeking students for comparison. NSSE reports use weights as appropriate to correct for disproportionate survey response related to institution-reported sex and enrollment status at each institution.

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| Table 5Characteristics of NSSE 2021 U.S. Respondents and Undergraduate Population at All U.S. Bachelor’s  Degree-Granting Institutions | | |
| **Student Characteristics** | **NSSE Respondents (%)** | **U.S. Bachelor's-Granting Population  (%)** |
| **Sex** | | |
| Male | 33 | 44 |
| Female | 67 | 56 |
| **Race/Ethnicity** | | |
| African American/Black | 10 | 12 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 1 | <1 |
| Asian | 6 | 7 |
| Native Hawaiian/other Pac. Isl. | <1 | <1 |
| Caucasian/White | 62 | 54 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 15 | 17 |
| Multiracial/multiethnic | 4 | 4 |
| Foreign/nonresident | 3 | 5 |
| **Enrollment Status** | | |
| Full-time | 89 | 84 |
| Not full-time | 11 | 16 |
| Note: Percentages are unweighted and may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Institution-reported, using categories provided in IPEDS. NSSE percentages do not include students with “another” or “unknown” sex (0.1% of all respondents) or unknown race/ethnicity (11% of all respondents). The NSSE 2021 sampling frame consists of first-year and senior undergraduates. Data were provided by participating institutions. U.S. percentages are based on data from the 2019 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics and Enrollment data. Includes all class years. | | |

## Canadian Respondent Profile

Canadian respondents profiled here include 1,977 students (63% first-year, 37% senior) from 5 institutions in 3 provinces, including 2 institutions in Ontario; 2 in Alberta; and 1 in British Columbia. Female students and full-time students accounted for about 65% and 86% of Canadian respondents, respectively. The average response rate for Canadian NSSE 2021 institutions was 44%, with the highest response rate being 64%. All institutions achieved a response rate of 25% or higher. About 25% of Canadian respondents were at least 24 years old. The majority of students providing ethnocultural information identified as Caucasian or White (60%), while 10% were multiracial, 6% South Asian, 5% Black, 4% Chinese, and less than 4% from each of nine other categories.

## Meet the NSSE Team

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