National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

The purpose of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is to assess the extent to which undergraduates are engaged in educational practices that have been linked to high levels of learning and development.

Austin College participated in the NSSE in 2003, 2006 and 2009. Each administration involves second semester freshmen (first years) and seniors. The fact that we can compare Austin College students to peers across the country also contributes to our confidence in the “value added” by an Austin College education.

Each time we have offered the NSSE, more than 60% of first years and seniors have participated. The three-year cycle means that we can examine students in the class of 2009 who completed the NSSE both in their first spring here, in 2006 and this spring. The difference between the reported engagement in the senior year and that in the first year is believed to reflect the longitudinal “value added” by the institutional experience.

In 2009, more than 460,000 first years and 474,000 seniors from 643 colleges and universities participated. We can compare our students – 200 first years (65% of the class) and 185 seniors (68% of the class) with peers (more than 24,000 first years and 20,000 seniors from 94 liberal arts colleges emphasizing the arts and sciences (our Carnegie classification). This second kind of “value added” presupposes that the difference between first years and seniors in 2009 is a consequence of their different amounts of experience here.

One means of examining NSSE findings is through what are called “benchmarks” – groups of items that may reflect a larger measure of engagement. In 2009 Austin College students scored significantly higher than the national means in four of the five areas for both first year (FY) and senior (SY) students. In the results below, “NSSE” refers to the entire sample, while “Carnegie” refers to the peers from our Carnegie classification. Note that the figures represent the difference between the means for first years and seniors in 2009, while the text also speaks to some of the longitudinal differences.

[NB: Each benchmark and the last “other” links to a new page.]

Level of Academic Challenge
Active and Collaborative Learning
Student-Faculty Interactions
Enriching Educational Experiences
Supportive Campus Environment
Other Significant Findings
While Austin College students have means significantly higher than the national means, a more recent scale on the NSSE captures “Deep and Integrative Learning.” The items ask students about the extent to which they have done the following:

1. Integrated ideas or information from various sources
2. Included diverse perspectives in class discussions/writing
3. Put together ideas from different courses
4. Discussed ideas with faculty outside of class
5. Discussed ideas with others outside of class
6. Analyzed the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory
7. Synthesized & organized ideas, information, or experiences
8. Made judgments about the value of information
9. Applied theories to practical problems or in new situations
10. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own view
11. Tried to better understand someone else’s views
12. Learned something that changed how you understand an issue

When we examine how our class of 2009 did on this measure of learning, Austin College students had higher means than both the national NSSE sample and our Carnegie peers on all twelve items. Even in the first year, between arriving at college and mid-spring, Austin College students report more engagement with higher order thinking skills.
Although these data may seem disappointing, we understand why our means fall where they do. Our students spend less time in class working with other students, but they spend much more time outside of class doing so. Our first year students report much more often asking questions in class or participating in class discussion and they more often make class presentations. Our seniors are much more likely to tutor others and to discuss readings from classes with other (students, family, co-workers, etc.) outside of class.
One of the areas of greatest value added for our students is discussing ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class. The mean difference between first year and senior year for the class of 2009 is over twice as high for Austin College students as it is for peers from the other two samples. In 2009 our seniors far more often report working with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities, etc.), working on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements, and talking with a faculty member about career plans.

On this benchmark, Austin College seniors have a mean significantly higher than each peer group. Austin College seniors report far more often completing internships or field experiences, doing community service or volunteer work, taking foreign language courses, studying abroad, and having a culminating senior experience. Both first year and senior students more often report participating in co-curricular activities, having serious conversations with students of different religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values, as well as serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity. Furthermore, both first year and senior students more open report perceiving a campus environment encouraging contact among students with different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds. Austin College students of the class of 2009, when compared to peers, show huge “value added” in exposure to diverse perspectives – in class, in contact with peers, and in their perceptions of how much their perspectives have changed as a result of being at Austin College.
Note that while the growth from first year to senior year for Austin College students is small, it is in a positive direction, whereas for both Carnegie peers and the national sample, the perception of campus support declines between first year and senior year. Austin College seniors have significantly higher means for perceptions that the campus environment provides the support they need to thrive academically and socially as well as helping them cope with non-academic responsibilities. The Austin College students of the class of 2009 have higher means on all of these items both as first years and as seniors. They also report more positive relationships to peers, faculty and administrative offices and personnel both as first years and seniors.

**Other Significant Findings**

Citizenship and civic engagement are important features of an Austin College experience. When we examine the changes for the class of 2009 between their first year (spring of 2006) and senior year, Austin College students perceive much more growth their belief that their experience here has contributed to their behaviors, skills and personal development in voting (in local, state, and national elections), solving complex real world problems, developing a personal code of values and ethics and contributing to the welfare of their communities.