

The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success (ISES) uses evidence from educationally effective institutions to help campuses gain a better understanding of their work with students. Campuses of varying sizes, with diverse missions, are using ISES to solve problems and improve educational practices.

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ASSESSING CONDITIONS TO ENHANCE STUDENT SUCCESS

How Six Campuses Got Started

EVERY COLLEGE and university has the potential to improve the quality of its undergraduate education. Turning this potential into reality requires cultivating an ethic of positive restlessness that takes the form of an institutional commitment to continual innovation and improvement focused on student success. Positive restlessness was one of the characteristics of the twenty very different four-year colleges and universities profiled in our book *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. Despite being different in many ways, all of these schools had higher graduation rates and scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) than would be expected, given their student and institutional characteristics such as resources and selectivity. Institutions marked by an ethos of improvement are constantly adjusting what they do by talking about what works well and what needs to be fixed, experimenting with homegrown approaches for improving teaching, appropriately adapting promising practices from other institutions, monitoring campus information systems, and maintaining momentum toward positive

change. In addition, they use data to inform decision making. Anecdotes and personal experiences are combined with systematically collected information about student and institutional performance to gauge how effectively the college or university is meeting its mission and goals.

While all the strong-performing institutions described in *Student Success in College* embodied these elements of continuous improvement, they did so in different ways in order to serve different missions and different types of students. In each case, too, the institutional ethos of improvement required tenacity and commitment to do what was necessary—including change—to achieve desired aims. For example, leaders of the University of Texas at El Paso responded to the changing demographics of its region by recasting the institutional mission from a goal of being “Harvard on the border” to one of expanding educational access to students in and around El Paso. If these very different colleges and universities can implement successful improvement initiatives, so can many others.

Our commitment and that of our colleagues to encourage more institutions to use data to inform change inspired the publication *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success* (ISES). ISES provides a template for assessing the extent to which an institution's policies, practices, and learning environments are educationally effective. As a companion volume to *Student Success in College*, ISES is intended to discover the extent to which the conditions for student success found at high-performing institutions exist on a campus and to facilitate development of an ethos of institutional improvement. Thus, using ISES is one approach campus leaders can take to assess and shape the conditions for student success at their own institution.

Student Success in College illustrates the policies, practices, and cultural features that work well together to promote student engagement and success in different types of institutional settings. A thorough understanding of the content of that book is necessary to use ISES effectively. In addition, these effective policies, programs, and practices must be translated and adapted for use on other campuses. Indeed, one of the overarching conditions for promoting student success is a clear understanding of and respect for institutional and student characteristics; at high-performing colleges, strategies for improvement and change were grounded firmly in that understanding.

This article describes ISES and illustrates how its diagnostic queries can be used to inform and support institutional improvement efforts. We offer examples of how several campuses adapted ISES to assess the conditions for student success and to inform institutional change initiatives. We conclude with some lessons about using ISES that were learned from these examples.

WHAT IS ISES?

THE INVENTORY FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS is a self-guided framework for conducting a comprehensive, systematic analysis of the properties and conditions for student success that are present at an institution. It can be used to assess an entire institution; units within an institution, such as a school or department or an academic or student affairs division; or particular groups of students on campus. ISES can also be used to frame accreditation self-studies and program reviews or to organize staff development, strategic planning, or faculty or governing board retreats.

The ISES process is similar to an institutional self-study in that it brings together representatives of the administration, faculty, student body, and other constituencies to review data about the institution and its

educational programs, to identify institutional strengths and issues requiring action, and to define strategies to ensure that institutional strengths are maintained and any shortcomings are addressed. ISES makes use of information about students' experiences and institutional performance, such as results of outcomes assessments, student and faculty surveys, and unit or campus self-studies. ISES also can assist institutions in identifying and obtaining additional information relevant to students and their success.

Queries About Educational Practices. The core of ISES is a series of diagnostic queries designed to discover how well the institution is using its resources to create conditions that foster student success. One set of questions focuses on the five clusters of effective educational practices that NSSE measures:

- ◆ Level of academic challenge
- ◆ Active and collaborative learning
- ◆ Student-faculty interaction
- ◆ Supportive campus environment
- ◆ Enriching educational experiences

These probes focus on the practices and policies that make up these dimensions of student engagement on campus. For example, the active and collaborative learning benchmark represents a measure of the frequency with which students ask questions in class and contribute to class discussions; make class presentations and work with other students on class projects inside or outside of class;

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and so forth. If NSSE scores are not at the desired levels, the following ISES prompts might help pinpoint pathways to higher levels of active and collaborative learning and point to opportunities for intervention.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ In what ways and to what extent do physical facilities and curricular arrangements promote group study and other forms of collaboration?
- ◆ Do cocurricular activities and organizations expect and encourage students to use and practice out of class what they are learning in class?
- ◆ Are engaging pedagogies consistently used, when appropriate, in classes of different sizes and in lower- and upper-division courses and across major fields?

Queries About Institutional Conditions. The second set of questions is based on the institutional conditions described in *Student Success in College*. The following section includes examples of ISES questions that inquire about these conditions. Answers to each query should be followed with the question “How do we know?”

A “Living” Mission and “Lived” Educational Philosophy. The term *mission* refers to the overarching purposes of the institution—what it is and what it stands for, as well as what it aspires to be. An institution’s philosophy is composed of tacit understandings about how institutional values guide policy and decision making.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ What is the *espoused* institutional mission? That is, what does the college or university assert its educational purposes to be?
- ◆ What is the institution’s *enacted* institutional mission? That is, to what do people devote their time and energies? What is valued and rewarded?
- ◆ What are the guiding beliefs about how learning occurs most effectively and the

related assumptions about teaching and learning?

- ◆ How do the enacted values and operating philosophy affect student learning and success?

Unshakable Focus on Student Learning. At high-performing institutions, student learning is the *raison d’être* for institutional policies, programs, and practices and the rationale for daily activities as well as broad institutional directions.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ Do students receive timely, frequent feedback about the quality of their performance?
- ◆ To what extent is commitment to student learning a criterion for selecting, retaining, and rewarding administrators, faculty, and staff?
- ◆ To what extent and in what ways are students expected and prepared to teach and learn from one another in and out of class?
- ◆ To what extent and in what ways are faculty and student affairs staff expected to make time for students and rewarded for doing so?
- ◆ To what extent are learning experiences inside and outside of classrooms tailored to the needs, experiences, and learning styles of different groups of students?

Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment. Learning environments include all the physical and psychological spaces in which students, faculty, and staff live, work, and play.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ To what extent are the physical settings and structures of the campus adapted for teaching and learning?
- ◆ Are facilities accessible to students and available at convenient times? Who uses

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them, when, and for what purposes? Who does not?

- ◆ How do various groups of students describe the campus climate, and how does the climate influence student learning and success?
- ◆ Do all students have equal access to learning and other institutional resources? If some do not, why is this so?
- ◆ In what ways and to what extent does the institution use the educational resources of the surrounding community?

Clearly Marked Pathways to Student Success. To encourage students to devote time and energy to activities that foster student learning and success, educationally effective institutions (1) teach students about institutional values and how to take advantage of institutional resources for learning and (2) make sure their resources are available to all their students.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ What symbols and actions communicate to newcomers the importance of students and their learning and success?
- ◆ To what extent are resources front-loaded to foster students' academic and social success?
- ◆ Is the amount of challenge and support consistent with the needs of students and with the institution's educational priorities? Do students who need extra support receive it?
- ◆ What policies and practices identify students at risk? To what extent are they used, in what ways, and by whom?

Improvement-Oriented Ethos. Strong-performing colleges strive to be better; they monitor where

they are, what they are doing, and whether they are making progress toward desired goals and objectives.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ To what extent does your school value and foster innovation, experimentation, and risk taking?
- ◆ What data related to student success and effective educational practice are collected, for what purposes, and by whom? How are they used?
- ◆ In what ways are budget priorities and allocations consistent with the educational mission, institutional values, and efforts to facilitate student success?

Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success. At educationally effective campuses, student learning is accepted as everyone's responsibility.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ To what extent are students, their learning, and their success priorities for formal and informal institutional leaders?
- ◆ In what ways do academic affairs staff, student affairs staff, faculty, librarians, and instructional technology professionals reflect and support the educational mission of the institution?
- ◆ How do academic and student affairs offices, programs, and personnel collaborate to facilitate student success?
- ◆ To what extent and in what ways do students take responsibility for the quality of their peers' learning and success?

"Ultimately, It's About the Culture." Student success is in part a function of a set of complicated, inextricably intertwined institutional factors and conditions,

including educational mission, operating philosophies, resources, programs, and practices. The institution's culture holds these elements together.

EXAMPLES OF ISES DIAGNOSTIC QUERIES

- ◆ In what ways do the institutional and student cultures or the dominant subcultures of the institution promote or inhibit student learning and success?
- ◆ In what ways does the language that administrators, faculty, and others use communicate the relative importance of students and their learning?
- ◆ What opportunities exist to celebrate students and their learning, institutional values, and the campus community?

APPLYING ISES

ALTHOUGH any institution can gain valuable insights from using the probing queries in ISES, the process yields the most useful results on campuses where students and their learning are high institutional priorities and where enough people are ready to evaluate the status quo. A campus with NSSE data might focus the probes to delve deeper into the practices, policies, and programs reflected in the clusters of effective educational practice that warrant attention. Another campus might want to explore unacceptably low first-to-second year persistence rates by adapting the diagnostic questions related to an unshakable focus on student learning and clearly marked pathways to student success.

Because ISES provides a structure for discussions about institutional performance, it can provide an instructive complement to strategic planning. The student life staff at Luther College in Iowa is using ISES to examine a central strategic planning initiative: cocurricular learning experiences that support student engagement, discovery, community, leadership, and service. Inventory questions are used to explore the extent to which learning outside the classroom occurs and identify the programs

and practices that foster student engagement most effectively. Of particular interest are the quality of service learning, internships, and study abroad experiences and setting targets for increasing student participation in these high-impact practices.

Another specific use for ISES is in developing self-study reports for regional accreditation. Regional accreditors welcome institutional self-studies that address an institution's mission and focus on student learning outcomes. For example, Grinnell College in Iowa, as part of its special emphasis self-study for reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, plans to use ISES questions on an institution's "living mission" to examine the extent to which students are preparing for public service and leadership, consistent with the college's espoused mission. Grinnell uses ISES to determine the effectiveness of advising and mentoring in helping students to see the connections among liberal education, the changes they hope to make in the world, and the ways in which they want to serve others and exercise leadership.

In the following sections, we elaborate on the ways in which four different types of colleges and universities have used ISES, note their progress, and reflect on their next steps.

North Georgia College and State University: Establishing the Early Intervention System. North Georgia College and State University (NGCSU) was prompted to conduct a thorough evaluation of its programs and policies by growing concerns about student use of academic enrichment services coupled with an impending reaccreditation visit from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and a mandate from the University of Georgia System to produce a new institutional strategic plan that would focus on improving retention and graduation rates. Student use of learning support services declined after the institution stopped giving midterm grades in 1994, and results from the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory revealed that most students received very little feedback on their academic performance during their first

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semester. In addition, a consultant's report revealed some institutional challenges in regard to students' first-to-second-year persistence rates.

To delve more deeply into these matters, NGCSU examined how NSSE results on the quality of advising and timely feedback for first-year students related to performance patterns for such subgroups as the U.S. Army Corps of Cadets, women living on campus, and commuter students. The campus's retention task force used ISES questions and the principles in Chapter Five of *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success* to stimulate broader campus discussions about policies, practices, procedures, and processes that create barriers to student success. Discussions included questions such as the following:

- ◆ To what extent are resources front-loaded to foster students' academic and social success? Are these experiences integrated with or tangential to the curriculum? How might they be integrated more effectively?
- ◆ Do all students have equal access to learning and other institutional resources? If some perceive that they do not, why is this so?
- ◆ Do certain groups of students use the institution's resources differently? In what ways do these differences influence learning?
- ◆ To what extent and in what ways are safety nets in the form of resources, programs, policies, practices, and structures for students in difficulty available and used?

The findings confirmed a lack of timely feedback for first-year students; inefficiencies in connecting students to academic support resources; and a perception that communication and coordination between student affairs and academic affairs were rare and that collaboration and shared responsibility for student success had never been emphasized or expected. The data also pointed to academic advising as a potential barrier to student success. To gather more data, the following ISES prompts related to advising were used.

- ◆ To what extent is advising viewed by students, faculty, and others as effective and supportive?
- ◆ Are advising networks coordinated to respond effectively to the academic needs of students?

The results revealed that students viewed advising primarily as an "enrollment, course matching" process that had no relationship to academic support services. Taken together, the findings from ISES helped provide a rationale for NGCSU's Early Intervention System, which was designed to enhance student engagement in existing academic enrichment services that were intended to promote student success. The system, implemented in 2006, identifies at-risk students early and provides them with appropriate assistance so that they can achieve their academic goals. Formal feedback loops are being implemented, and the efficacy of the interventions are assessed on an ongoing basis.

Oregon State University: Assessing the Impact of the Bridge to Encourage Scholars in Transition (BEST) Program. Although the needs of student athletes traditionally are met by staff members in the athletic department, Oregon State University (OSU) wished to instill an institution-wide commitment to helping student athletes succeed. A working group convened by the vice provost for student affairs reviewed the conditions described in *Student Success in College* and determined that an unshakable focus on student learning requires that department missions be aligned with the academic mission of the university and that faculty and staff view student learning as a priority. The mission of OSU's athletic department was all but silent on the issue of student success. As a result, no one at the university was perceived as having ownership of the academic success of athletes; there was ownership only of the intent to provide athletes with academic support. Therefore, pathways to academic success were not made clear to student athletes; when they arrived on campus, their first role was as an athlete, and academic orientation and experiences came later. These discoveries prompted the establishment of the Student Athlete Success Council and helped launch

To delve more deeply, North Georgia College and State University examined how NSSE results related to performance patterns for specific subgroups of students.

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the pilot of the Bridge to Encourage Scholars in Transition (BEST) program in 2006.

The purpose of BEST is to enhance the academic performance of student athletes by fostering early academic success, which is a foundation for the rest of their career as a student athlete and beyond. The goals of the program are (1) to connect support for student athletes to the university's educational mission and student success agenda; (2) to establish a comprehensive array of programs and services that meets the educational and developmental needs of at-risk student athletes; (3) to create structures for university-wide partnerships to support student athletes; (4) to identify key leaders for major student support initiatives; (5) to ensure that student athletes get connected with programs and services that meet their needs; and (6) to strengthen institutional accountability for responding to the needs of student athletes. Initiated in 2006 with football and men's basketball players, BEST offers intensive, highly structured four- and eight-week courses to strengthen students' performance in academic core areas. The courses also emphasize academic skills, sociocultural adaptation and integration, psychological and spiritual well-being, successful transitions, goal- and career-directedness, lifestyle challenges, and financial management.

To determine how well the program was meeting its goals, OSU used ISES queries in a comprehensive review of the BEST program. The following probes from ISES associated with two important conditions for educational effectiveness—(1) shared responsibility for educational quality and student success and (2) clearly marked pathways to student success—framed the BEST evaluation.

- ◆ To what extent are pathways to and expectations for student success clear to new student athletes?
- ◆ What structures, events, and processes introduce new student athletes to academic and other community expectations?

- ◆ To what extent and in what ways do academic and student affairs offices, programs, and personnel collaborate to facilitate the success of student athletes? What barriers exist to this collaboration? What factors facilitate collaboration?

Student athletes, coaches, student affairs educators, and faculty members provided instructive responses to these and other questions. Initial results indicated success at several levels; all BEST participants were in good academic standing at the end of the first semester and at the end of the academic year, and their academic performance was dramatically better than that of previous entering cohorts of student athletes. In addition, faculty, coaches, and residence hall staff praised the leadership, confidence, and teamwork of the students and attributed these qualities to their involvement in the BEST program. The program was expanded in 2007 to include student athletes in other sports.

The University of Texas–Pan American: Focusing on Student Affairs Staff Development. To improve student success rates at the University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA), the dean of students formed an ad hoc think tank of campus unit directors to identify strategic directions for the Office of the Dean of Students, using *Student Success in College* and ISES as primary resources. After reviewing the materials, the group determined that they wanted to study the promising practices featured in these resources and their application to UTPA on an ongoing basis and decided to conduct a series of professional staff development activities, including seminars and retreats. Their first step was to assess staff perspectives related to the six conditions of effectiveness identified in *Student Success in College* by creating a survey of twenty-one items based on the ISES statements and queries deemed pertinent to the goals of the Office of the Dean of Students (DOS). Full-time staff (including support staff) were asked to use a four-point scale (“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) to indicate the extent to which they believed that the statements

described office programs and services. The results from the survey were shared among the DOS staff members, and items that were valued by the staff were used as the basis for discussion at the DOS staff retreat. Items discussed included the following:

- ◆ Newcomers feel welcome and have an understanding of how we do things here.
- ◆ The campus's non-academic facilities encourage positive informal and spontaneous interaction among students.
- ◆ DOS policies, practices, and programs emphasize students' academic achievement and intellectual curiosity.
- ◆ DOS staff uses systematic evidence such as outcomes assessment, program evaluations, and current research on educational effectiveness to review and determine our policies, practices, and programs.
- ◆ Academic faculty and staff, DOS staff, and students hold similar values and assumptions about students and their learning.

The next step in the professional development plan was to conduct a daylong, officewide retreat on the six conditions for success, in order to (1) familiarize staff with the six conditions as concepts, (2) help staff recognize the relevance of the conditions to their work, (3) assess the extent to which the unit's activities and culture were consistent with the conditions, and (4) identify staff development needs and concerns. A post-retreat evaluation and results from the survey on DOS were analyzed to identify areas in student affairs practice that the staff believed were consistent with the six conditions and areas in which they were falling short. This analysis led to the creation of a four-part staff development series for spring 2007 with specific topics organized according to the four conditions of greatest interest to the staff:

- ◆ Clear pathways to student success: Understanding students' financial processes (February)

- ◆ Improvement-oriented ethos: Using data to guide decision making (March)
- ◆ Unshakable focus on student learning: Examining the latest developments in higher education (April)
- ◆ Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success: Effective collaboration with academic affairs (May)

Evaluations of the programs and events in the series were so positive that *Student Success in College* and ISES became the basis for a yearlong staff development series at UTPA in 2007–08.

Washington College (Maryland): Establishing a Foundation to Increase the Effectiveness of Student Affairs. The arrival of a new vice president created an opportunity for the student affairs staff at Washington College to develop a strategic plan focused on fostering student success. The plan was supported by research on effective practices, institutional data about student experiences, and increased collaboration with other campus units. Student affairs leaders chose *Student Success in College* and ISES as resources to help them focus on better understanding the institutional context and mission in order to, in turn, encourage staff members to look systematically beyond what they believed they knew about Washington and its students. In the spirit of positive restlessness, student affairs deans and directors discussed relevant chapters in staff meetings throughout the fall of 2006 and in a one-day planning retreat in December. In January 2007, detailed and summary results of the college's most recent NSSE administration were distributed for discussion during the strategic planning process for spring semester.

The emphasis on collaboration to support student success reinforced the importance of developing or strengthening relationships in and beyond student affairs. A joint retreat for student affairs and academic affairs staff was planned in order to discuss the following key questions from ISES and thus to examine the strength of campus partnerships to support first-year student success.

Student Success in College and ISES became the basis for a yearlong staff development series at the University of Texas-Pan American.

ISES can provide a structure for forming partnerships across units and divisions.

- ◆ To what extent and in what ways do academic and student affairs offices, programs, and personnel collaborate to facilitate the success of new students? What barriers exist to this collaboration? What factors facilitate collaboration?
- ◆ To what extent and in what ways do academic affairs, student affairs, faculty, staff, administrators, and students share values and assumptions about first-year students and their learning? To what extent and in what ways do their values and assumptions about first-year students differ? What impact, if any, do these differences have on student success?
- ◆ Do academic and student affairs leaders have shared understandings of the institutional mission?
- ◆ To what extent do the activities, practices, and policies of academic affairs and student affairs reinforce and support one another? To what extent are they contradictory?

The prompts were used to guide conversations about the quality of first-year experiences at the college and how academic affairs and student affairs units can work together to enhance those experiences.

LESSONS TO DRAW FROM THESE CASES

A NUMBER OF LESSONS can be drawn from the preceding examples:

- ◆ *Seize opportunities for self-examination.* For Luther College, Grinnell College, Oregon State University, and Washington College, campus-specific events or activities—such as an impending accreditation review, new leadership, or a problem affecting a particular population of students—were catalysts for systematic reflection and assessment. North Georgia College and State University and The University of Texas–Pan American used ISES to stimulate assessment and improvement. In each case, someone—or some group—saw in the situation a propitious opportunity to take stock of institutional conditions for student success.

- ◆ *Fostering students' success should be the purpose for launching ISES.* Although some campuses used ISES in professional staff development initiatives, the common thread across the projects is that a desire to improve student success was the stimulus for using ISES. Students whose academic performance is lower than expected and concerns about premature departure of first-generation students and other at-risk students are compelling reasons to learn more about the nature of students' experiences and what an institution can do to improve the learning environment for all students. Quantitative data about the quality of students' experiences, drawn from NSSE and other surveys, can be used to help pinpoint the needs of specific populations of students.

- ◆ *ISES encourages collaboration across divisions and units.* Most of the examples featured collaboration between people or units that had not worked together to foster student success. The queries posed by ISES demand holistic answers; therefore, it is important to think broadly about who needs to be at the table in order to provide a complete response to the diagnostic probes. Through this process, ISES can provide a structure for forming partnerships across units and divisions.

- ◆ *Start small if you must, but start.* As these examples demonstrate, the use of ISES as a tool for self-examination and understanding does not require an institution-level focus to be effective. Waiting for all the elements of data-driven institutional processes to be in place, for the perfect opportunity, or for the perfect alignment of administrative interests may result in doing nothing. The key considerations are what problems, situations, or opportunities call for assessment and who is interested in responding to those opportunities by using ISES. Start there.

- ◆ *Use quantitative assessments of the undergraduate experience as a catalyst.* Quantitative data often provide a good overview of circumstances but might not yield a comprehensive, nuanced account of students' experiences. ISES provides an opportunity for institutions to integrate quantitative and qualitative information to develop richer understandings of their campus culture and the conditions that foster student success.

CONCLUSION

THE SIX INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES described here highlight a range of applications and approaches to using the Inventory for Student Engagement and

A commitment to improve is an essential condition for student success.

Success. Regardless of its particular focus, each campus employed an intentional approach involving a variety of stakeholders to undertake its ISES-guided initiatives. Whatever the rationale for using ISES, support for the ISES process from key institutional leaders and a commitment to acting on the results of the process were necessary. Most important, these six examples demonstrate that a commitment to improve is an essential condition for student success. We hope that the work that these institutions are doing will inspire others to adapt the diagnostic queries in ISES to inform similar efforts on their campus.

More information about ISES, NSSE, and the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice can be found at www.nsse.iub.edu.

NOTES

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