

**COMPARING STUDENT  
AND FACULTY ENGAGEMENT:  
UGA RESPONSES TO NSSE AND FSSE**

**2008**



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AS PART OF THE HONORS FACULTY MENTOR NETWORK**

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## 1. NSSE AND FSSE: BRIEF OVERVIEW

**The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)**, pronounced *nessie*) surveys freshmen and senior students and includes questions about their academic experiences. NSSE was developed by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and has been in use since 2000. It provides comparative standards for assessing effective educational practices in higher education. The University of Georgia first administered NSSE in 2003. In the spring of 2008, UGA sent invitations to participate in NSSE to approximately 4,000 freshmen and 4,000 seniors. In all, 1,984 UGA students (991 first-year students and 993 seniors) participated (a 25% response rate for both first-year and seniors).

**The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)** is a related project. The same team that administers NSSE offers a survey of faculty that allows a university to see what a school's faculty thinks about students and their work. Many questions on FSSE and NSSE are closely related, allowing UGA faculty responses to be compared with UGA student responses. In 2008, UGA surveyed 699 faculty and graduate teaching/lab assistants using the course-based version of the FSSE survey. Responses came from 410 faculty and graduate teaching assistants (a 59% response rate), who reflected the broader population by rank and tenure status.

NSSE and FSSE data have proven over time to be quite useful for UGA and many other institutions that want to understand how students and faculty perceive the educational experience at an institution. NSSE and FSSE results are, however, like snapshots: they give the perceptions of singular groups of students and faculty at a singular moment. Thus, the results should be considered with this caveat in mind and validated through additional campus discussion and research.



STUDENTS ON NORTH CAMPUS

## 2. MAJOR THEMES FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

This report follows the four major themes that emerged from the analysis of UGA's NSSE and FSSE results: academic expectations, learning experiences, campus connections, and educational gains (NSSE and UGA 2008, p. 2). We shall use the themes both to highlight our success and to generate discussion and action that will improve the learning environment. For FSSE, faculty respondents were asked to select either an upper division or lower division course upon which to provide an response; consequently, several items below will make reference to upper-division or lower-division courses and to faculty teaching at those levels. Lower-division refers to courses taught as part of general education, most often in the first two years of college. Upper-division courses are generally part of the major.

### ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

The Academic Expectations theme refers to student and faculty perceptions regarding academic workload and preparation for class.

The NSSE and UGA 2008 report noted that “[a]pproximately three-fourths of UGA first-year students replied that they often or very often prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in.” From FSSE, however, we learn that a smaller percentage of lower-division faculty (56%) feel such effort to be important or very important. This difference can probably be related directly to the recent adoption in the English Department's First-Year Composition Program of a portfolio-based pedagogy that emphasizes revision and affects most first-year students. One might hope to see these percentages increase with class standing, but fewer upper-division faculty (49%) find the preparation of two or more revisions important or very important, and only 39% of senior students report having done such revision often or very often; yet 64% of faculty report structuring their courses to develop “writing clearly and effectively.”

Four-fifths of upper-division faculty find it important or very important that their students “work on a paper or project that requires integrating ideas or information from various sources,” but only a fifth of senior respondents report having done so often or very often. On the other hand, over three-quarters of senior respondents report having put together ideas or concepts from different courses for an assignment or discussion in the current school year, while fewer than two-thirds of upper-division faculty report that as important or very important.

UGA students and faculty agree strongly that courses challenge students to do their best work. But while NSSE relates that “56% of both UGA first-year and senior students stated that they frequently worked harder than they thought they could to meet faculty expectations,” only a third of their instructors share that perception, according to FSSE. Similarly, while most first-year and senior UGA students feel that “their institution” emphasizes spending “significant amounts” of time studying and on academic work, only 58% of UGA faculty agree (fewer than peer faculty who report such emphasis at their research-intensive institutions).

### *Time Spent on Academics*

What constitutes a “significant amount” of time devoted to academic work and whether (and if so how) it might be increased are topics that deserve wider discussion. While 89% of UGA first-year students report spending *6 or more hours* preparing for class *per week* (specified comprehensively as “studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, or other academic activities”), obviously the lower limit could be seen as “significant” by some first-year students. Most faculty, however, would contest the notion that six hours of study a week, given a five-course load—or even two or three hours per course *per week*—represent a significant amount of effort. Interestingly, 40% of UGA first-years spent *10 or fewer hours per week* preparing for class.

This result correlates strongly with nearly half of the faculty who estimate that their lower-division students spend two hours or less preparing for each course (i.e., *10 or fewer hours per week* overall, given a five-course load). Almost all faculty expect more preparation, and 21% overall (16% lower-division, 23% upper-division) feel that half or more of their students “frequently come to class without completing readings or assignments.” In response to a similar question on NSSE, 23% of first-years and 30% of seniors report coming to class often or very often without completing readings or assignments.

More than half of the faculty feel that UGA emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying or on academic work. Interestingly, significantly more upper-division faculty (39%) than lower-division faculty (26%) felt that half or more of the students in their classes frequently worked harder than usual to meet the faculty member’s course standards. The general concern here is also suggested by the recent *Princeton Review*’s ranking of UGA as third among colleges where “Students Study the Least,” based on responses to its question, “How many out-of-class hours do you spend studying each day?” Perhaps faculty should be encouraged to state study expectations on course syllabi.



**STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE CHAPEL**

## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Student learning takes place inside and outside of the classroom. Students need to have a variety of learning opportunities, both to address different learning styles and to provide intellectual breadth and depth. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a large number of professional associations and agencies issued reports stressing the importance of student engagement and active learning to build higher level cognitive skills and to improve student learning outcomes. In the 1984 report, *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, the National Institute of Education stressed active learning as the leading priority in U.S. undergraduate education. Subsequent reports, national and campus-based, emphasized reinvigorating the undergraduate curriculum with intensified emphases on active student learning, engaging classrooms, higher expectations, and co-curricular activities to make learning meaningful.

Accordingly, both the NSSE and FSSE pose a range of questions about in-class and out-of-class learning experiences and expectations.

### *Curricular and Co-curricular Activities*

One question on the FSSE asked, *How important is it to you that undergraduates at your institution do the following?* Faculty were then asked to rate the importance of eight student activities. Four activities were considered “very important or important” by two-thirds of the UGA faculty respondents. Those activities included practicums and other field experiences, culminating student experiences (e.g., capstone courses, senior projects, comprehensive exams), foreign language coursework, and study abroad. For each of the activities, UGA FSSE respondents had equal or higher expectations for involvement in the four activities than did the respondents at similar peer institutions.

In keeping with faculty expectations, UGA’s student respondents on the NSSE reported participating (or planning to participate) in practicums, internships, and other field or clinical assignments in high percentages. And, 72% of the student respondents reported foreign language coursework. The response on study abroad, however, showed more first-year students (75%) planning to participate than seniors (44%) indicating participation. Interestingly, while nearly three-fourths of faculty felt a culminating senior experience (e.g., senior project, comprehensive exam) is important, only 48% of senior respondents reported engaging in a “culminating senior experience.”

Student interest in and faculty endorsement of study abroad reflects UGA’s commitment to study in a foreign language and global understanding as a student learning outcome. Currently, the University of Georgia offers over 90 study abroad and exchange programs. And, in 2007, more than 2000 UGA students took courses in foreign countries. Nearly 30 percent of UGA students now study abroad, the third highest rate among universities that graduate more than 5,000 students a year, according to UGA’s Office of International Education

### ***Experiential Learning***

The student respondents overwhelmingly reported high interest in or participation in “community service or volunteer work, while less than one-half of UGA faculty respondents rated this item as “important” or “very important.” Similarly, only 8% of UGA faculty reported including a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a course, and less than 20% of students reported “participation in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course.” It is plausible that the “community service” that the students rated as highly important is considered by the faculty as “practicums, internships, field experiences, co-op experiences, and clinical assignments,” which they regarded as very important. A clarification of terms could lead to a better understanding of this area of experiential learning and community engagement (credit-bearing and noncredit).

The Office of the Vice President for Instruction supports curricular and co-curricular student academic experiences with several programs and special initiatives such as the French and Spanish Language Communities that provide an immersion environment through which students examine the richness and variety of French-speaking and Spanish-speaking cultures. Additionally, the recently established Office of Service Learning, a collaboration between the Vice Presidents of Instruction and Public Service and Outreach, is designed to support interested faculty and increase service learning opportunities for all students.

### ***Shifts in Pedagogies***

FSSE respondents reported a movement away from lecture as the dominant mode of instruction (55% of UGA faculty respondents reported using less than 50% of in-class time in lecture). Fully one-third of the UGA lower-division faculty respondents said they spent less than 20% of in-class time in lecture. Other more active forms of teaching used by the UGA faculty, in varying degrees, included teacher-led discussions and small group activities. We would note, however, that one-fifth of the UGA faculty respondents were replying based on a course with more than 100 students, a format that favors lecture. Additionally, more than half of first-years and seniors stated that they very often or often asked questions in class or contributed to class, yet only one-fourth of faculty perceived such high student participation in class.

### ***Using Computing and Information Technology***

Computer literacy is a widely shared learning objective for undergraduate students in general, and most students (90%) reported that UGA emphasized “using computers in academic work” and most (89%) faculty agreed that this emphasis is important. More than three-fourths of UGA students thought that the college experience had contributed to their abilities in computing and information technology, yet only one-third of faculty said that their “typical” course contributed to building this expertise. Clearly, exposure in some courses led a high percentage of students to report that they had gained computer skills during their UGA experience.

The use of technology is so ubiquitous among 18 to 22 year old students that it is likely that these skills were acquired in multiple curricular and co-curricular activities. An emphasis on computing and information technology is part of UGA's strategic plan, specifically goal 1, Building the New Learning Environment. The extensive wireless networks at UGA and the technology-enriched Miller Student Learning Center represent UGA's commitment to computer access, usage, and competencies in the student population.



**STUDENT GETS HELP IN COMPUTER LAB**

## **CAMPUS CONNECTIONS**

Research in student affairs and higher education suggests that when students have substantive interaction with faculty and staff, specifically when students talk or conduct research together with faculty and staff, those interactions have a direct and positive impact on student learning. These interactions also positively affect student perceptions of the scholarly-intellectual environment at the institution. Another aspect of this theme is diversity, for variety is richness. Students benefit when they meet a variety of ideas and people. Finally, students who feel that their institution provides support for them to succeed both academically and in life, and who feel connected to and engaged with their institution, are more likely to succeed.

When we compare UGA student and faculty perceptions of campus connections, several areas are noteworthy either for the strong agreement between the two or the disconnected response.

### ***Shared Perceptions***

When asked about relationships, a large majority of UGA senior and first-year NSSE respondents reported positive relationships with other students (86% and 81%, respectively) and with faculty (79% and 65%, respectively). Faculty perceptions of student-to-student and student-to-faculty relationships were in close alignment with the NSSE responses. When asked about the quality of their relationships with administrative personnel and offices, only 45% of first-year students and 50% of seniors felt positive about those relationships. In line with the NSSE data, faculty perceived student relationships with administrative personnel to be less optimal, with fewer than one-half of the FSSE respondents believing positive relationships existed between students and administrative personnel. It is important for the University to understand how it falls short in student expectations of relationships with the large number of administrative staff and offices on campus.

Approximately three-quarters of students reported that during the current school year, they had “tried to better understand someone else’s views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective.” Faculty members agreed that this ability is important or very important for students.

### ***Disconnected Perceptions***

Students reported that they often or very often discuss ideas from readings or class with faculty members outside of class at a rate of 17% for first-year students and 28% for seniors. Very few faculty member respondents, however, perceive that more than half of the students from their courses discuss readings or classes with them outside of class at least once during the term. In addition, 50% of first-year students and 60% of seniors reported often or very often discussing grades or assignments with instructors, but only one-fourth of faculty respondents perceive that more than half of the students from their courses discuss grades or assignments with them.

Only one-third of UGA first-year and senior students reported that they have worked (or are planning to do so) on research projects with faculty members outside of course/program requirements. In contrast, more than half of the faculty member respondents perceive that it is important or very important that students do so. The University could explore strategies to encourage more students to consider requesting to work on a research project with a faculty member. The UGA Center for Undergraduate Research, located in the Honors Program, provides opportunities for honors students and other academically talented undergraduates to engage in research with leading faculty members. While this program has grown over time and has received commendations for its work, room for expansion exists both among faculty who think this opportunity is highly important and among students who have not yet had a chance to engage in research with a faculty member.

Faculty tended to underestimate student use of electronic communication to accomplish course objectives. For example, while 41% of faculty members estimated that half or more of their students occasionally use email to communicate with them, twice that percentage of students report using email often or very often to communicate with faculty members. And, while 49% of faculty reported that students often or very often use an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, Internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment, more than two-thirds of students reported such use often or very often. Clearly, students are using electronic information and communication more often and more widely than perceived by the faculty.

Almost 90% of faculty respondents thought they provided “prompt written or oral feedback” on students’ academic performance, while the assessment of faculty “promptness” was not nearly so favorable among students. Only 57% of first-year and 66% of seniors reported receiving prompt written or oral feedback from faculty “often or very often.” Providing students with a guideline for when feedback on work may be available might serve to diminish the disagreement in this item.

NSSE results show that today’s students feel more strongly than those of a few years ago that UGA encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds. Faculty member respondents did not perceive as strongly that UGA encourages such contact. Nearly two-thirds of first-year students and seniors reported that they often or very often had serious conversations with students of different religions, political or personal beliefs, and over half had serious conversations—often or very often—with those of a different race or ethnicity. Only one-third of faculty respondents viewed these conversations as happening often or very often in their courses.



**STUDENTS INTERACTING**

## EDUCATIONAL GAINS

Survey questions that address the outcomes of the learning experience were grouped as “Educational Gains.” Students were asked by NSSE to indicate gains in skills, knowledge and personal development as part of their “general education.” The FSSE asked a comparable set of questions on the extent faculty structured their courses to help students achieve these outcomes. Student and faculty assessments of educational gains provide a powerful tool for identifying learning outcomes and perceived learning discrepancies.

Students (89% first-year and 91% senior) felt strongly that UGA had given them a broad general education. This outcome is likely related to recent faculty efforts to revise, strengthen, and better articulate UGA’s general education curriculum. Only 68% of lower division faculty and 57% of upper division faculty reported structuring their course to give students a “broad general education.” Differences in perceived gains in general education might be explained by the context in which general education is used. While students at a comprehensive university may receive a broad education as reported by students, faculty may apply a stricter meaning of general education with specific learning outcomes in mind.

Other learning outcomes receiving high scores from students included “thinking critically and analytically” and “learning effectively on your own.” Importantly, a high percentage of faculty reported structuring their courses to achieve these two outcomes. Students also gave high marks to “working effectively with others,” and “using computing and information technology.” Many fewer FSSE respondents, however, reported structuring a course around these learning objectives. Overall, faculty appear to have communicated and emphasized the importance of critical thinking, problem solving, and independent learning in their course syllabi and content.

In the last decade, numerous professional associations, accrediting bodies, and blue ribbon committees have stressed building critical thinking across undergraduate education. It is important to see that UGA fares well with its faculty and students on this important student learning outcome.

The greatest disconnects between students and faculty were found in using computing and information technology (discussed previously on pp. 6-7), in working effectively with others, and in understanding yourself. Differences in perceptions about computing and information technology may be attributable to student-faculty differences in the range of acceptable learning technologies. Finally, student-faculty differences in how they perceive that students work with others and understand themselves may be attributed to the lack of faculty opportunities to know students outside the formal classroom. Perhaps large lower-division classes and the limited advising by faculty give UGA faculty limited exposure to the personal and interpersonal development of students.

With regard to expectations for learning methods in the classroom, FSSE and NSSE responses show strikingly uniform agreement on the significance accorded four processes: “analyzing,” “synthesizing,” “making judgments,” and “applying theories or concepts.” Only with regard to “memorizing” do faculty and students differ substantially: more than two-thirds of student respondents think that it is emphasized, while only one-third of faculty would agree. UGA

should be pleased with such correlation between faculty and students on the role of higher cognitive processes emphasized in the classroom.

In summary, educational gains are critical components of the NSSE and the FSSE. In general, UGA students felt strongly that the undergraduate experience contributed to defined educational gains. These findings suggest that UGA graduates acquire meaningful learning outcomes that support them after graduation. FSSE results indicate that faculty should be further encouraged to structure their courses intentionally around such outcomes. Recent surveys in the *2009 Princeton Review Best Value*, *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Best Value*, and *Smart Money Magazine* that show UGA as providing **high-value and low-cost education** and **high returns to educational investments** lend credibility to the educational gains from the undergraduate experience and the value of the UGA degree.



**LUSTRAT HOUSE IN SPRING**

### 3. WHAT FSSE TELLS US

Over the last decade, the faculty and staff of the University of Georgia, through various committees and task force reports, have worked especially hard to strengthen and enrich the undergraduate experience at the University of Georgia. These deliberate efforts have yielded many positive outcomes as reported by students on the NSSE and by faculty on the FSSE.

Noteworthy areas of faculty and student agreement included the following:

- Both students and faculty reported an intensified emphasis on writing and the ability of students to think critically.
- Students and faculty were in high agreement that coursework predominantly emphasized higher-order learning outcomes of analysis, synthesis, making judgments, and applying theories.
- Study abroad and study in a foreign language were viewed as important activities by both faculty and students.
- Students and faculty agreed on the importance of computing and information technology and UGA's emphasis in this area, and students reported gaining skills in this area during their undergraduate experience.
- Practicums, internships, and other field experiences were highly valued by faculty members and students alike.
- Students overwhelmingly reported that UGA provided a broad general education, and faculty, reporting on a lower-division course, agreed but at a lower rate.

Areas of disconnect in perception and practice included the following:

- Students reported much higher levels of memorization than estimated by faculty, even though there was consensus that higher-level outcomes are used extensively in coursework.
- UGA faculty believe students should spend more time on academics. The faculty respondents felt that UGA students need in general to study more and work harder. The NSSE data support the faculty assertion that, on average, students spend less time outside of the class studying than is optimal.
- Overwhelmingly, the faculty believe that a culminating senior experience is very important, yet less than one-half of seniors report engaging in this activity.
- A notable disconnect is in interest in community service or volunteer work, where more than 90% of incoming students were interested in this opportunity, and fewer than 1 in 10 faculty report a community-based project as part of the course used for completing the FSSE. This finding, however, deserves additional consideration, as faculty and students alike believe that practicums and other field experiences are very important. Clarity is needed on exactly what was in mind as students and faculty rated items of experiential learning and service.
- More than half of faculty respondents believe that student undergraduate research is highly important, yet less than a third of students have participated in a research project with a faculty member.
- Students are making extensive use of electronic communication with other students and faculty, although this use was not acknowledged as widely by faculty.

FSSE and NSSE provide a snapshot into faculty and student assessment of undergraduate education. Additional data analysis and campus discussions will yield new insights about and interpretations of the data, as well as the initial summary offered in this report. Initial discussions could focus on the following:

- Faculty expectations and student academic workload: Are faculty challenging students academically?
- Senior culminating experience: What is being done and could be done?
- Community service and community-based projects: How can we clarify interests and terminology?
- Faculty engagement in undergraduate research opportunities: What are the limits of faculty capacity? How can we generate greater student interest?
- Building connections: How can we make better connections between UGA's administrative personnel and offices and the undergraduate student?



**THE ARCH AT NIGHT**

## 4. REFERENCES

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Photographs from the University of Georgia Website, [www.uga.edu/GIFS](http://www.uga.edu/GIFS).