Mission-Specific Indicator: Student Engagement

Keene State College participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). The COPLAC institutions participate in NSSE as a consortium, so they can learn how their own first-year and senior students are connecting with their campuses and academic learning environments, and evaluate their student outcomes within the context of the consortium benchmarks. Keene State and other COPLAC institutions are collecting data in spring 2012, with results to be returned to the campuses in fall.

The results of the most recent NSSE survey (2009) confirmed that the Integrative Studies approach to teaching and learning had fulfilled its expectations of providing first-year students with engaging learning opportunities that are crucial to the first year of their college life. The Integrative Studies program, which was implemented in fall 2007, emphasizes purposeful, intentional, and transparent teaching and learning. The integrative process approaches teaching and learning in intentionally connected ways and asks students to connect knowledge and skills from multiple sources, apply knowledge and skills in varied settings, make judgments, synthesize information, utilize diverse points of view, and understand issues contextually.

Keene State College’s freshman responses to the 2009 and 2006 NSSE and the freshman responses of participating members of COPLAC in 2009 and 2006 provide the lens for assessing how the first-year student experience has changed since the implementation of the Integrative Studies curriculum. These responses also provide an affirmation for the ongoing campus focus on diversity.

The efficacy of the Integrative Studies process can be gauged by studying the results on four key “benchmark” scores that combine students’ responses on questions related to level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and the supportiveness of the campus environment. Prior to 2006, Keene State’s freshman scores were lower on these four key engagement measures than were those of the COPLAC students. By 2006, KSC first-year students had closed the gap between themselves and their COPLAC peers. In 2009, KSC first-year students surpassed the 2006 KSC students and were on a par with the 2009 COPLAC students on these same measures.

The 2009 NSSE also confirmed Keene State College’s commitment to providing a challenging education to a wide range of diverse learners. Students have increased their engagement in opportunities that require them to apply diverse perspective and experiences, develop disciplinary arguments, and recognize how differences shape personal and cultural identity, knowledge, and power. The 2009 freshman NSSE results were compared to the 2006 results on a set of measures related to learning experiences that challenge students to use diverse points of view in their course work, and to describe their interactions with persons who are different from themselves. On both of these sets of measures, Keene State College students showed an increase in the frequency in which they engaged in these experiences between 2006 and 2009, and closed the gap between themselves and their COPLAC peers in 2009.

Level of Academic Challenge

Challenging and creative intellectual work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. The integrative learning experience asks students to connect knowledge and skills from multiple sources and experiences and make meaning out of abstract concepts by thinking critically and creatively, synthesizing and analyzing theories and concepts, weighing the validity of information, and applying theories to practical problems in new situations. After the implementation of the Integrative Studies curriculum in fall 2007, KSC’s 2009 first-year students reported engaging in these activities at a significantly higher rate \( (p < .001) \) than the KSC students who completed the NSSE in 2006. Keene State’s 2009 students also reported higher engagement rates than the COPLAC cohorts in 2006 and 2009.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and when they are asked to think about what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students for the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college. Keene State’s 2009 first-year students reported collaborating with others in solving problems and mastering difficult material at a much higher rate (statistically significant at \( p < .01 \)) than the 2006 cohort, and at a rate that was on a par with the 2006 and 2009 COPLAC cohorts.
Mission-Specific Indicator: Student Engagement, continued

Student-Faculty Interaction

Students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. Through this interaction, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous lifelong learning. KSC’s 2009 first-year students reported discussing grades, career plans, and ideas from their classes, and working on activities that go beyond coursework with faculty members more frequently than the KSC 2006 first-year students (the difference was statistically significant at $p < .01$) and the 2006 COPLAC first-year students.

Supportive Campus Environment

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus. Keene State’s 2009 first-year students reported greater appreciation of their college’s efforts to provide them with the support they need to thrive academically socially, and to help them cope with their nonacademic responsibilities (the difference in the KSC 2009 and 2006 cohorts was statistically significant at $p < .01$).

Diversity

The Integrative Studies curriculum offers students opportunities to recognize how differences shape approaches to identity, knowledge, and power, and to apply diverse perspectives and experiences to develop disciplinary arguments. Students are asked to develop knowledge and understanding of a diverse world and to integrate, apply, and transfer knowledge to differing contexts. Keene State’s 2009 first-year students reported higher rates of engagement than the KSC 2006 first-year students on NSSE items related to these activities.

Keene State College first-year students have reported that they have had fewer occasions to converse with persons who are different from themselves when compared to their COPLAC peers. As the enrollment of students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds continues to grow at Keene State, so too will the opportunities for students to engage in these developmentally challenging conversations.