

Trends

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NSSE 2007 Benchmarks: Overviewing what matters for students

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, or “Nessie”) is a nationally prominent measure of *institutional quality* that is *more authentic* than traditional methods that focus on relatively tangential and indirect criteria pertaining to resources and reputation (e.g., those employed by publications such as *U.S. News and World Report*). Guided by *decades of empirical research on college student outcomes*, the NSSE focuses on aspects of the undergraduate experience that “make a difference” relative to student success. More specifically, the NSSE measures:

1. The extent to which students engage in educationally purposeful activities that are known to be associated with a wide range of desired learning and developmental outcomes including persistence and graduation, and
2. Institutional conditions that are conducive to such engagement.

CSB/SJU students participated in the NSSE in Spring 2007. Surveys were completed by 930 students in *two class levels: 553 first year students and 377 seniors*. Nationally, a total of 610 four-year institutions participated in NSSE 2007. CSB/SJU also participated in NSSE 2004.

Broad indicators of institutional effectiveness: The five NSSE Benchmarks

This report describes CSB/SJU’s standing in Spring 2007 on the five *NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice*. The benchmarks are five broad factors that collectively summarize the most important general aspects of undergraduate education, as evidenced by the vast research literature on college student outcomes. The benchmarks, each distilled from a distinct set of six to eleven NSSE survey items, are: Level of Academic Challenge (LAC), Active and Collaborative Learning (ACL), Student-Faculty Interaction (SFI), Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE), and Supportive Campus Environment (SCE).

Charts 1 through 5 below show CSB/SJU’s average benchmark scores relative to those of *four external comparison groups*:

1. The *National Group* of all 610 four-year institutions that participated in NSSE 2007.
2. All 112 participating institutions in our *Carnegie Group* (i.e., Baccalaureate Colleges - Arts & Sciences).
3. Participating institutions that scored in the *Top 10%* nationally on that particular benchmark.
4. Participating institutions that scored in the *Top 50%* nationally on that particular benchmark.

The five *NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice* are distinct, empirically-derived factors that collectively summarize the most important aspects of undergraduate education with respect to student outcomes.

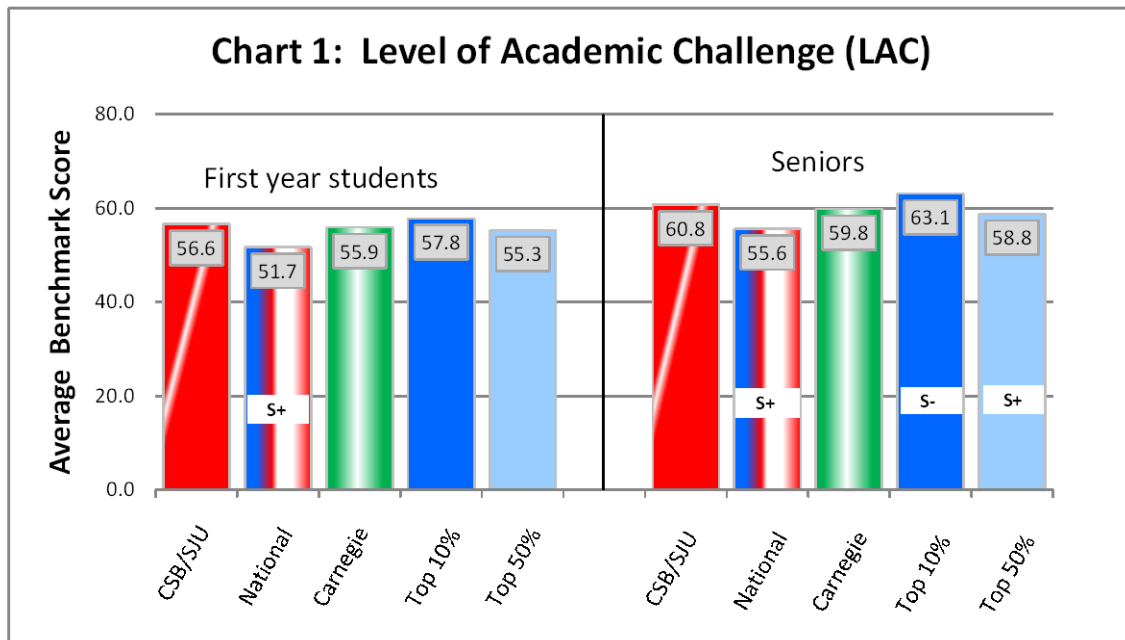
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Practical importance of benchmark score differences are shown by effect sizes. The *meaningful effect sizes*¹ reported in Charts 1 through 5 below identify comparison group benchmark scores that differ enough from CSB/SJU's so that the contrast is very likely important *in practical terms*. That is, meaningful effect sizes identify what are likely to be *real differences in students' experiences*. Patterns of effect sizes should drive institutional improvement conversations. *Meaningful effect sizes* are shown with an S, M, or L (for small, moderate, or large) in Charts 1 through 5 below. Additionally, each letter is followed either by a positive sign (favorable comparison for CSB/SJU), or by a negative sign (unfavorable comparison). The absence of an S, M, or L indicates a negligible effect size.



Conceptual description of “Level of Academic Challenge” (LAC) Benchmark: Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.

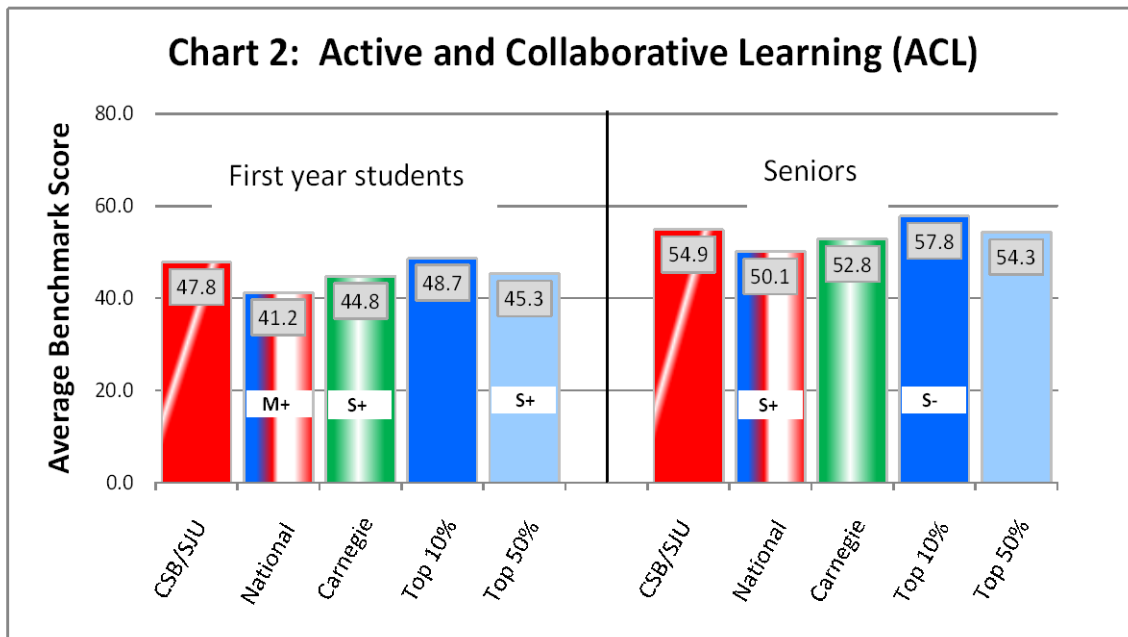
Student activities and institutional conditions measured by the survey items that comprise this benchmark:

- Time spent preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other academic activities)
- Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor’s standards or expectations
- Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings
- Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
- Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages
- Number of written papers or reports fewer than 5 pages
- Coursework emphasizes: Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory
- Coursework emphasizes: Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences
- Coursework emphasizes: Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods
- Coursework emphasizes: Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
- Campus environment emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work

Meaningful effect sizes of comparisons of CSB/SJU with external groups of institutions on LAC Benchmark:

- For first year students, a *small advantage* (or better score) relative to the *National Group*.
- For seniors, *small advantages* relative to the *National Group* and to the *Top 50%* institutions, and a *small disadvantage* (or worse score) relative to the *Top 10%* institutions.

¹ Effect sizes are calculated by dividing the difference in average benchmark scores by the standard deviation of the external comparison group. They place each of CSB/SJU’s average benchmark scores at a particular percentile rank within each comparison group.



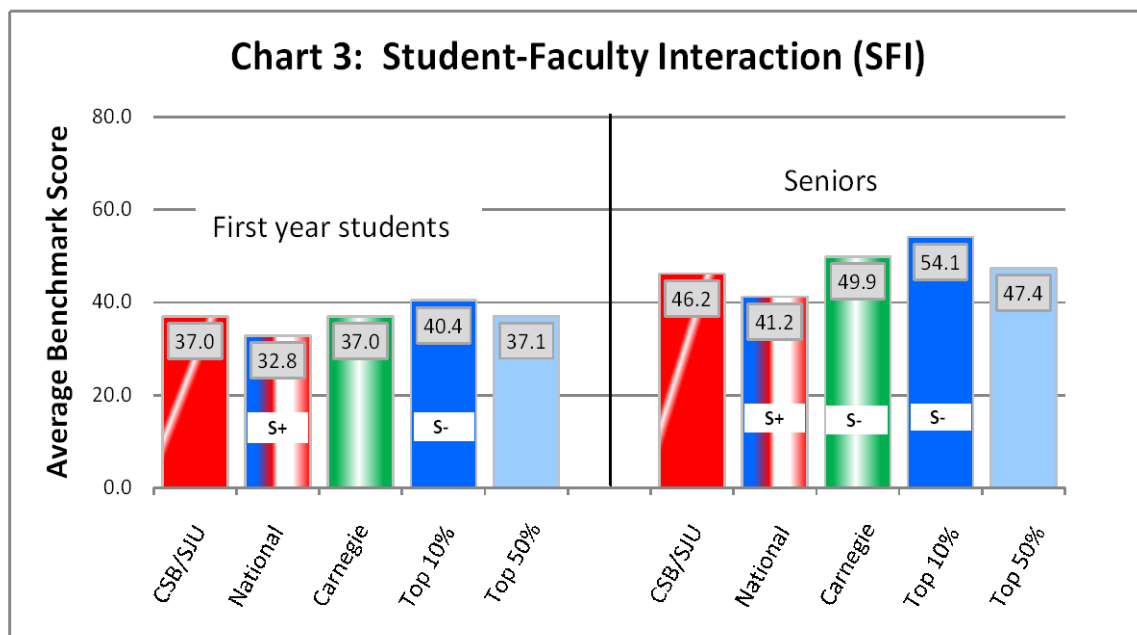
Conceptual description of “Active and Collaborative Learning” (ACL) Benchmark: Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college.

Student activities measured by the survey items that comprise this benchmark:

- Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
- Made a class presentation
- Worked with other students on projects during class
- Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- Tutored or taught other students
- Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)

Meaningful effect sizes of comparisons of CSB/SJU with external groups of institutions on ACL Benchmark:

- For first year students, a *moderate advantage* (or better score) relative to the *National Group*, and *small advantages* relative both to our *Carnegie Group* and to the *Top 50%* institutions.
- For seniors, a *small advantage* relative to the *National Group*, and a *small disadvantage* (or worse score) relative to the *Top 10%* institutions.



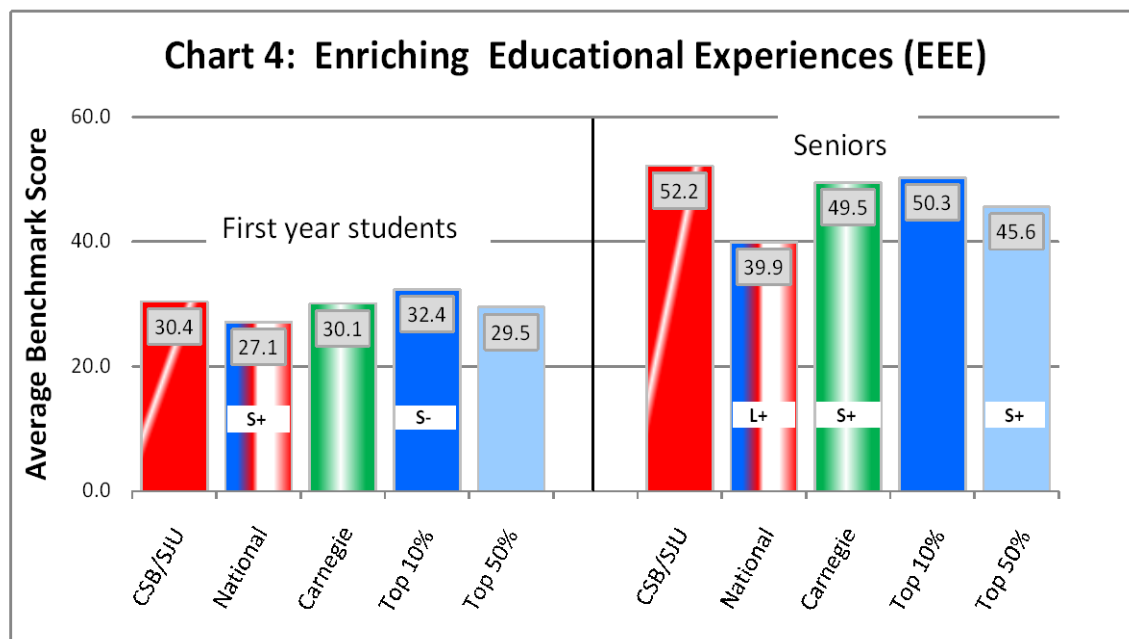
Conceptual description of “Student-Faculty Interaction” (SFI) Benchmark: Students see first-hand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. As a result, their teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning.

Student activities measured by the survey items that comprise this benchmark:

- Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
- Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)
- Received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on your academic performance
- Worked with a faculty member on a research project

Meaningful effect sizes of comparisons of CSB/SJU with external groups of institutions on SFI Benchmark:

- *Small advantages* (or better scores) relative to the *National Group* for both first year students and seniors.
- *Small disadvantages* (or worse scores) relative to the *Top 10%* institutions for both first year students and seniors.
- *A small disadvantage* relative to our *Carnegie Group* for seniors.



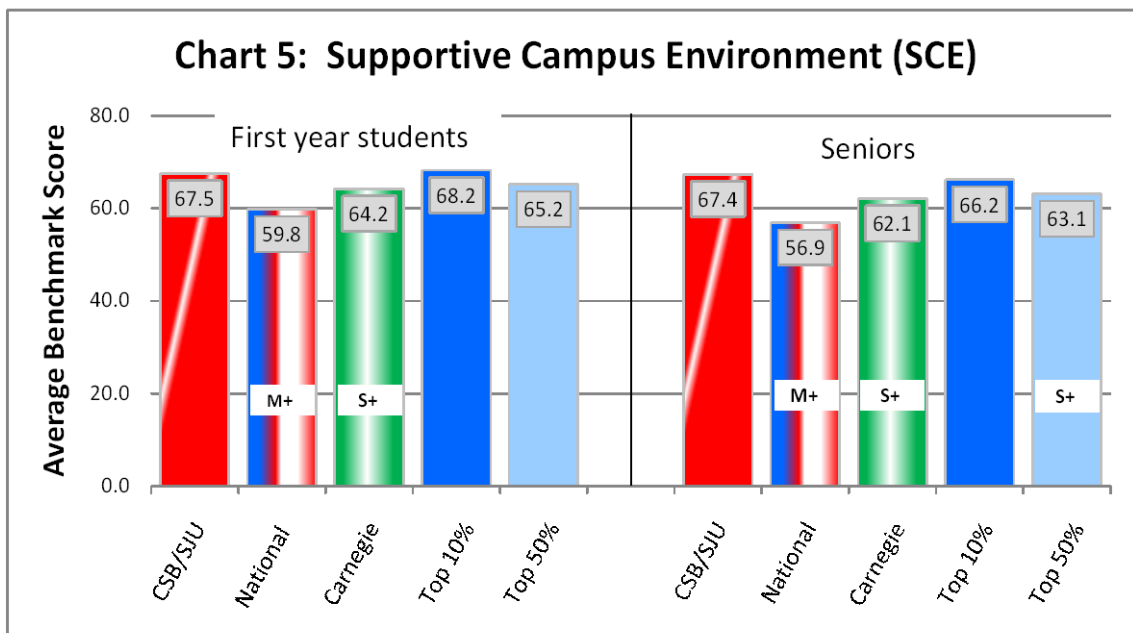
Conceptual description of “Enriching Educational Experiences” (EEE) Benchmark: Complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment the academic program. Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and other cultures. Used appropriately, technology facilitates learning and promotes collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide students with opportunities to synthesize, integrate, and apply their knowledge. Such experiences make learning more meaningful and, ultimately, more useful because what students know becomes a part of who they are.

Student activities and institutional conditions measured by the survey items that comprise this benchmark:

- Talking with students with different religious beliefs, political opinions, or values
- Talking with students of a different race or ethnicity
- An institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds
- Using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments
- Participating in:
 - Internships or field experiences
 - Community service or volunteer work
 - Foreign language coursework
 - Study abroad
 - Independent study or self-assigned major
- Culminating senior experience
- Co-curricular activities
- Learning communities

Meaningful effect sizes of comparisons of CSB/SJU with external groups of institutions on EEE Benchmark:

- For first year students, a *small advantage* (or better score) relative to the *National Group*, and a *small disadvantage* (or worse score) relative to the *Top 10%* institutions.
- For seniors, a *large advantage* relative to the *National Group*, and *small advantages* relative both to our *Carnegie Group* and to the *Top 50%* institutions.



Conceptual description of “Supportive Campus Environment” (SCE) Benchmark: 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.

Institutional conditions measured by the survey items that comprise this benchmark:

- Campus environment provides support you need to help you succeed academically
- Campus environment helps you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
- Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially
- Quality of relationships with other students
- Quality of relationships with faculty members
- Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices

Meaningful effect sizes of comparisons of CSB/SJU with external groups of institutions on SCE Benchmark:

- For first year students, a *moderate advantage* (or better score) relative to the *National Group*, and a *small advantage* relative to our *Carnegie Group*.
- For seniors, a *moderate advantage* relative to the *National Group*, and *small advantages* relative both to our *Carnegie Group* and to the *Top 50%* institutions.

Summary across all five Benchmarks

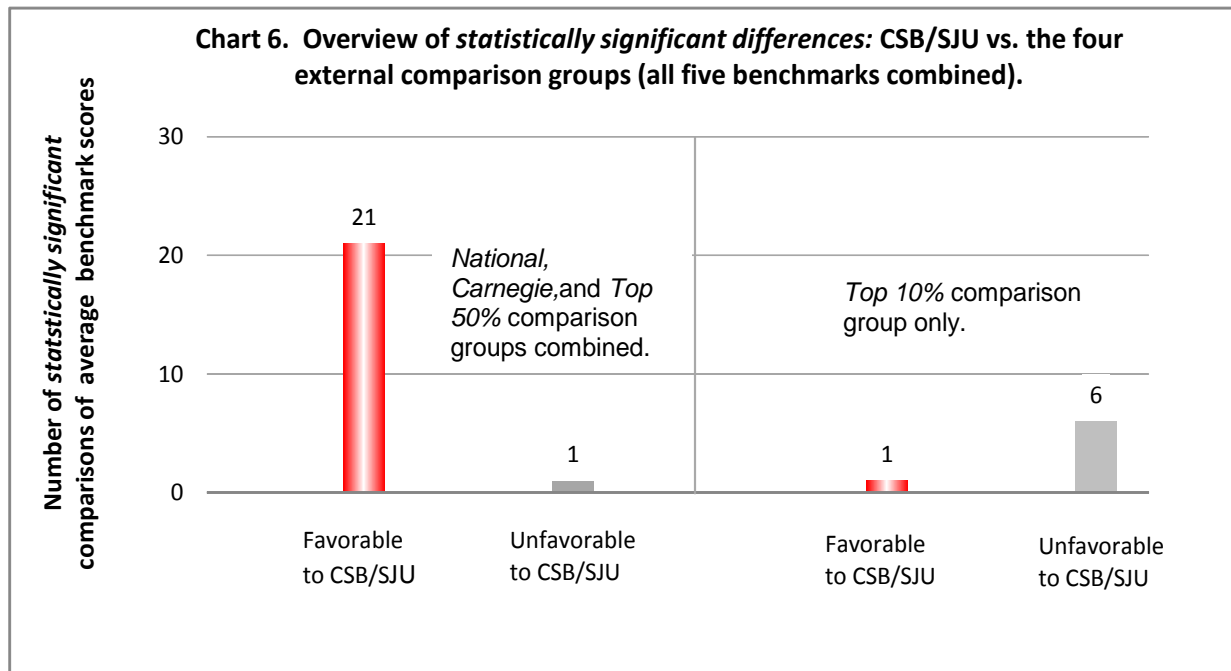
The total numbers of favorable and unfavorable *statistically significant differences*² in average benchmark scores between CSB/SJU and the four external comparison groups are presented on Chart 6 below. That chart reflects our excellent overall standing on the NSSE Benchmarks. Of the 40 comparisons (i.e., five benchmarks times four external comparison groups times two classes), the 29 that were *statistically significant*³ are shown on Chart 6.

² The *statistically significant differences* shown on Chart 6 are sufficiently large that they are very unlikely to have occurred by chance. Those are distinct from the *meaningful effect sizes* shown elsewhere in this report that indicate differences that are large enough to be important in practical terms.

³ A report showing each statistically significant difference in average benchmark scores between CSB/SJU and each of the four external comparison groups is available from the Office of Institutional Planning and Research (IPR).

CSB/SJU fared very well relative to the *National*, *Carnegie*, and *Top 50%* comparison groups, with 21 favorable and only one unfavorable statistically significant comparison.

Though CSB/SJU had only one favorable statistically significant difference vis-à-vis the *Top 10%* institutions, the overall pattern shows that we are in a strong position of looking to the eminent standard set by those top-performing institutions on each benchmark to identify opportunities for institutional improvement. That is, in order to achieve even greater levels of student engagement, we can aspire to those of the highest-performing institutions nationally.



Future analyses

Reports for each NSSE item individually will be made available in Spring 2008. Those will feature comparisons with four groups of institutions that participated in NSSE 2007: the National Group (all 610 four-year institutions), the other 112 participating institutions in the Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences Carnegie Classification, and locally selected peer and aspirant groups. Those item-by-item reports will be useful in conjunction with our benchmark results because they will allow us to look at each particular survey item that contributes to each benchmark in order to more narrowly focus our improvement efforts.

Future analyses will feature intra-institutional comparisons on the NSSE benchmarks across groups of students at CSB and SJU. As higher education research has found much greater variation of student engagement within particular institutions than between institutions, so too can we expect to find meaningful differences across groups of students on our campuses.

For additional information about the National Survey of Student Engagement, please contact Kim Oren at 320-363-5932 or koren@csbsju.edu.

Past issues of the *Trends* research newsletter are available at <http://www.csbsju.edu/institutionalresearch/trends/>.