UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY | Institutional Report

NSSE 2023: Summary of the Qualitative Comments in the National Survey of Student Engagement

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Prepared by members of NSSE Qualitative Data Team:

Garrett Parry (Research Assistant)
Dr. Kim Grant (Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning)
Dr. Patti Dyjur (Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning)
Dr. Natasha Kenny (Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning)
Jacqueline Lambert (Office of Institutional Analysis)
Robin Arseneault (Teaching and Learning)

Introduction

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) collects information from students studying in undergraduate and four-year degree-granting colleges and universities in North America to assess their levels of engagement and their post-secondary experience. The survey is fully administered by the Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University, in close collaboration with the University of Calgary (UCalgary). The NSSE survey is targeted to first year and senior year students. NSSE results are used for institutional improvement, public reporting, and ultimately to enhance students' learning experiences.

NSSE Survey Distribution

At UCalgary, the survey is distributed on a 3-year cycle, with the latest reporting year being 2023, where 5,694 first year and 4,550 senior-year undergraduate students were invited to participate. First year students are generally defined as those who are in four-year direct-entry undergraduate degrees, while senior-year students are considered those who are in their final year of four-year undergraduate degree programs, including some upper-year entry programs. Approximately 35% of first year students and 34% of senior-year students completed the 2023 survey at UCalgary. In this cycle, NSSE experienced administration issues with Microsoft-based email servers that impacted the response rates for some institutions across North America, including UCalgary. However, UCalgary response rates remained consistently higher than Top 5 and U15 comparator groups.

The 2023 NSSE survey opened to participating UCalgary students on March 1, 2023, and closed on May 14, 2023.

Qualitative Data Analysis

NSSE reports on ten (10) engagement indicators calculated from 47 core NSSE items. Indicators are grouped within four (4) theme areas: academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and campus environment. In addition to the main survey for 2023, UCalgary added a set of consortium questions of the U15 institutions (outside Ontario).

There was one open-response question within the 2023 NSSE survey: "What could UCalgary do to help you prepare for your future career or education?" The 2023 open-response question was intentionally framed to explore gaps and potential areas of improvement in UCalgary's student experience. This question concluded the core survey questions with 1,817 total valid responses (816 [40%] first-year, 849 [52%] senior-year and 152 [40%] oversample respondents).

Student responses to this question were qualitatively analyzed using the NVivo 12 software, which is a program for qualitative data analysis. The NVivo software helped organize the raw data and texts into codes/themes and adjoining subthemes. An inductive approach was used for developing the themes and identifying the patterns of meaning within the data. Repeated and detailed reading of the raw data (text) and coding queries was implemented, with themes clarified by multiple members of the NSSE Steering Committee.

Relationship to the 2023 NSSE Quantitative Data Report

This report focuses directly on the qualitative responses to the one open-ended question described above. Although these qualitative responses do not directly correspond to the quantitative data (i.e., the 47 core NSSE items), the information summarized in this report provides valuable insights into student perceptions of their experiences and engagement at UCalgary.

For some context related to the UCalgary's quantitative NSSE data (NSSE 2023 Snapshot), the majority of UCalgary's average Engagement Indicator (EI) scores for both first- and senior-year respondents exceeded or were similar to average scores among U15 and Top 5 comparator groups. When considering UCalgary's results over time, the strongest increases in average EI scores were within Learning Strategies among first-year respondents, and within Higher-Order Learning and Reflective & Integrative Learning among senior-year respondents. Learning Strategies scores for both first- and senior-year respondents exceeded the U15 average for 2023, and 2023 averages exceeded UCalgary's scores in previous years (2020, 2017). Average scores for Discussions with Diverse Others for first- and senior-year students were higher than our comparator groups in 2023 and were consistent with UCalgary's 2020 and 2017 averages.

Senior-year students reported significant increases in participation in Experiential Learning (referred to as High Impact Practices, which includes Service-Learning, Learning Community, Research with Faculty, Internship, Study Abroad, and Culminating Senior Experiences) (NSSE 2023 Snapshot). Senior-year students reported their top three areas of perceived gains in skills and knowledge included: thinking critically and analytically, writing clearly and effectively, and working effectively with others.

EIs with average scores below our comparator groups were predominantly found among first-year respondents, with EIs related to Campus Environment, Academic Challenge, and Experiences with Faculty forming a cluster of results that warrant further exploration of our first-year student experience. While average Collaborative Learning scores were above U15 and Top 5 comparators, they declined for both first- and senior-year respondents since 2017 related to our own historical results. These measured the extent to which students worked together to understand course material or complete assessments.

Overview of the 2023 Qualitative Findings

This section provides an overall summary of the qualitative comments. The table below includes main themes alongside representative quotes. The comments from the 2023 NSSE survey were summarized and coded to best capture the experiences and sentiments of the respondents.

Several student comments included statements relevant to multiple themes and/or subthemes. These comments were coded under each theme/subtheme where appropriate. Therefore, frequency counts represent the number of mentions of a particular theme and not the number of comments referencing a particular theme. Frequency counts should be taken as an indication

of how many times a particular topic is mentioned, rather than an indicator of comparative importance.

The open-ended question for the 2023 NSSE survey was: "**What could UCalgary do to help you prepare for your future career or education?**" As mentioned earlier, this question explicitly looked for gaps and room for improvement.

We identified five main themes during the qualitative analysis. They were: *Meaningful Learning Experiences, Preparing for Next Steps, Navigating the University, Impact of Affordability, and Supporting Wellness* (Table 1).

Table 1: The five most frequent themes from the NSSE 2023 Survey (Sorted by Frequency)

TOP 5 THEMES BY FREQUENCY	SAMPLE QUOTES
1. Meaningful Learning Experiences (768 references) Description: **The most frequent theme from the analysis referred to a desire for high-quality Learning Experiences. Three main subthemes emerged: Experiential Learning, Classroom Experience, and Instructor Engagement. Students expressed a desire for applied, industry-relevant material as well as more opportunities for experiential programs like co-ops, research opportunities, and internships. Within the classroom, students expressed a desire for a more-organized and clear trajectory for their courses and programs as well as up-to-date curriculum and more in-class explanations. Finally, students wanted more personal connection with instructors and to feel that instructors were connected to their work in the classroom.**	Experiential Learning "Have more of a practical component within courses to gain experience that is an asset in the work industry" "I personally would like to see more connection between class content and how it is currently being applied in the industry." "Provide more real-life experience. I noticed a lot of research and internships start from 2nd year and later, but if I want some experience from my first year, there are only a handful." Classroom Experience "Put less pressure on midterms by breaking up the curriculum into smaller, more organized tests." "Use less exams and more qualitative means of teaching like papers or presentations, I learn better with real world examples not pressure and exams" "I also wish some classes had a more organized layout and that the teaching followed consistent learning plans so that I'm never left wondering 'what am I even learning today and why?'" Instructor Engagement "High quality professors who are enthusiastic, engaging and enjoy teaching class content."

"I have hardly spoken a word to most of my professors, which disengaged me from classes and uninspired me to do quality work."

2. Preparing for Next Steps (538 references) Description: **Students wanted to be fully prepared for their futures, whether in industry or academia. Career Preparation was a major concern for students who wanted to see more program-specific career advising and workshops on how to get a career with their specific degree. Networking activities with potential employers were popular activities that students wanted to continue to see. Students who expressed interest in graduate school wanted to be more aware of that path early in their degree.**	**Career Preparation** "Provide lots of information about further career options and things required for that pathway." "Start talking about specific career opportunities (maybe look at current new graduate job postings) early on in our degree so we could start thinking and planning earlier." "Networking Opportunities with employers are really helpful, and encouraging students to attend even if they are not graduating soon." "What a lot of students want are more workshops about resumes and interviews." "Hold more workshops that inform us about different potential careers." **Graduate School Preparation** "Talk about Master's programs at the beginning of our degrees, making it easier to plan ahead." "Create easier to access degree plans for routes to take for grad school."
3. Navigating the University (464 References) Description: Students expressed that university can be a challenging time for them. They saw a need for more workshops on how to succeed at the University and more opportunities to become aware of on-campus support resources. More social events, clubs, and study groups were highlighted as possible ways to improve the campus community. In terms of academics, students expressed difficulty accessing Academic Advising services either because of the queuing system or modality. Some students also found it difficult to signup due to enrolment availability, program or GPA restrictions, or conflicting academic scheduling.	**Academic Advising** "A better queuing system for academic counselling." "Provide clearer outlines and requirements for my program." "Be better at disseminating information about course and degree requirements." **Course Availability** "Help me get [into] classes I need for my degree. People with minors or double majors should have a lower priority over my single major." "Make classes more accessible, more seats/lectures to accompanies classes in high demand especially in first and second year." "Provide more opportunities for students to take elective classes outside of their major."

Social Connections
"More social activities or events for students to socialize within their major."

"Also encouraging students to take part more in school clubs and extracurricular activities to help us develop more relationships with students that we don't know from before university or from our classes."

Supporting High School to University Transition
"I think UCalgary could put a bit more support for those transitioning directly from high school into university as I felt left behind in my learning due to the expectation that we should be writing at college/university level without any prior experience."

University Skill Workshops
"Resources that help students with time management."

Awareness of Opportunities and Programs
"'Telling students where to look for opportunities to be more involved with community on campus."

"'I love this school, I just wish some of the opportunities were more well known."

4.	Impact of Affordability (188 references) Description: Comments confirmed that students were concerned with financial pressures. Students expressed a desire to decrease or at least maintain the current cost of tuition. Assistance with tuition, in the form of grants, scholarships, and bursaries, was also noted in the students' comments. The currently high cost of living was a barrier to student engagement for students who needed to work while in school and struggled to balance work and school demands.	**Tuition** "Lower tuition and mandatory fees." "They can help me out by decreasing the tuition and living cost on campus." **Scholarships** "Provide more scholarships, grants, and bursaries for students facing financial difficulty." "Scholarships would really go a long way right now." **Work-Study Balance** "Lowering tuition would allow for more students to focus more on their academic work at hand instead of worrying about paying [a] large amount of money they do not have." "More opportunities to work on campus jobs to relieve financial burden."

"Make it more affordable so I don't have to work night shifts and then turn around and take 8:00am classes/exams."

5. **Supporting Wellness** (185 references) <u>Description:</u> Students expressed more focus on their holistic wellness across the university. Students want to feel valued and appreciated by the wider University community. They also expressed a need for increased support for their mental health, and improved access to facilities to improve their physical health and wellbeing. Some students pointed not just to a desire for greater resources, but to a reduction in campus practices that contribute to poor health, such as high workloads and financial stress.	<u>Valuing and Listening to Students</u> "This 'pouring' of assignments [workload] feels so dehumanising." "Have a respect for the students and listen to their concerns." "Continue providing surveys so that students can keep voicing their problems." <u>Mental Health Support</u> "Provide more emotional support, advocate for mental health." "The lack of mental health resources is the most crippling issue. Students are seriously struggling mentally and not just because of class but because of the system, because of covid legacies, because we have no community and lost out social skills and cannot get back to normal." <u>Balancing Life and Workload</u> "Relieve the burdens on students so that they are not drowning in schoolwork all the time. This way students can invest their time in extra-curricular activities or with friends because these are the things that actually matter in life." <u>Financial Stress</u> "Lower tuition so I'm not constantly stressing about how to make ends meet." <u>Physical Health Support</u> "Improve health care facilities"

Discussion

Five major themes from this year's NSSE report (Table 1) were **Meaningful Learning Experiences**, **Preparing for Next Steps**, **Navigating the University**, **Impact of Affordability**, and **Supporting Wellness**. These themes provide insights for strengthening student engagement for UCalgary undergraduate students. NSSE is one source of data to help direct our future work and amplify the initiatives we already do in support of the undergraduate experience at UCalgary. Many of our findings link to key initiatives within the new Academic Innovation Plan. Some of the most visible institutional connection points for student engagement are listed below, whereas

individual faculties and units may see other areas of focus within their own NSSE qualitative and quantitative data sets.

The Academic Innovation Plan highlights four areas (Transformative Student Experience, Innovative Academic Programs, Leading in Teaching and Learning, and Inclusive, Caring and Sustainable Campus Culture) that will help guide UCalgary to educate transformative leaders by increasing access to excellent future-focused education. The plan commits to providing greater support for first-in-family students both financially and through advising supports. The increased cost of living was a major theme in the 2023 NSSE qualitative data with students wishing for greater funding and scholarship opportunities. Additionally, students mentioned that the transition between high school and university can be challenging, especially for first-in-family students (O'Shea et al., 2024). Students would like to see more institutional support to navigate the transition between high school and university through advisors and workshops. Beyond first-in-family students, many other students also highlighted how much they would benefit from such supports, an idea that is supported in the literature (Dunn et al., 2022; Kezar & Kitchen, 2019).

Through the academic innovation plan, UCalgary has also committed to providing student communication content hubs and steering committees to coordinate student support services and programs. As seen through student feedback in the 2023 NSSE qualitative data, an expressed lack of awareness from students about campus resources, events, and programs is a barrier for inclusion in the campus community. Coordinating student support initiatives could improve the visibility, and therefore use, of many of our programs and improve a sense of belonging on campus. Holcombe and Kezar's (2019) research aligns with the assertion that having a coordinated approach to campus supports, policies and practices can foster a campus community with a sense of belonging. It is important to note that students expressed a need for holistic supports and resources. They want to have awareness of academic-, career-, institution-, wellness, and social-focused programs, which is also aligned with recommendations from literature (Karp et al., 2021).

Student comments also reflected their desire for a clear path forward, whether that be for their future professional or academic careers. Through the academic innovation plan, UCalgary is committed to increasing engagement in signature learning experiences grounded in entrepreneurial thinking, research, experiential and work-integrated learning. Academic advising and career preparation were also strong themes in the 2023 NSSE qualitative data. Students expressed concern about whether they were taking the right courses for their degree, and how that degree would lead to a desired career. Many students were also unsure of what career outcomes were possible or struggled to understand the connection between their courses and future career or academic pathways. Students also felt a lack of structure in academic courses

and unclear program requirements left them feeling unsure of their next steps both inside the university and beyond.

Key initiatives in the academic innovation plan focus on improving transdisciplinary learning through improved flexibility in registering for major-restricted courses. Our analysis found that many students wanted an improved course selection process. They expressed a need for more seat availability (i.e., enrolment capacity) in classes and to have more flexibility in taking interesting courses outside of their chosen major. Students were interested and engaged in transdisciplinary learning but found barriers in the form of program restrictions.

The academic innovation plan recommends innovative and authentic approaches to the assessment of student learning in academic programs. Some students voiced that they found traditional exams and tests challenging and this form of assessment did not accurately measure their knowledge–they desired the ability to express what they had learned in alternative ways. Authentic assessment is one way in which students can be prompted to demonstrate their learning in other ways than exams and tests. Such assessments are closer to real tasks and incorporate diverse assessments (Fernandes et al., 2023).

UCalgary has committed to increasing investment into research opportunities and experiential learning (EL), which were themes present in the 2023 NSSE qualitative data. Students said they were eager to apply their learning outside the classroom and wanted to be involved with the research happening on campus but struggled to find these opportunities. Initiatives in the academic innovation plan highlight the need to update and increase the number of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) courses, industry-focused internships, and research that happen both within and outside the classroom. Students often reflected a need for more applied, practical learning through academic experiences such as fieldwork, internships, work placements, laboratories, professional learning opportunities and classroom demonstrations. Many of these experiences that students commented on, are what we define as EL and WIL and directly align with the call to expand these opportunities for our students.

UCalgary students noted that struggles with mental health and a lack of holistic supports on campus made it difficult for them to feel engaged. This is consistent with the literature, which points to increased student stress since the start of the pandemic (Keyserlingk et al., 2022). Within the academic innovation plan, UCalgary makes a commitment to promoting awareness and understanding of mental health and well-being across campus, including meaningful support and referral. Students pointed to improved practices related to equity, diversity and inclusion, improved tuition assistance, greater mental health supports, and workshops on stress management and general life skills as all potential opportunities to improve their university

experience. The literature supports the concept of increasing engagement through a holistic student support model (Picton & Kahu, 2022). While students' comments reflected their desire to be part of an engaged campus community, they expressed the challenges of juggling other responsibilities beyond the classroom (Hanretty, 2023). Feedback from students acknowledged that work and family responsibilities could put strain on their ability to participate fully in their academic courses.

UCalgary's academic innovation plan aligns with many of the student comments from the 2023 NSSE data. NSSE is one source of data that helps make sense of undergraduate student experiences. Individual academic units may see different themes in their NSSE data, especially as it relates to their local teaching and learning context. It will be important for the institution and academic units to continue to gather feedback and evaluate progress towards strengthening student engagement, as it relates to other strategic commitments and priorities.

Overview and Next Steps

The University of Calgary NSSE 2023 qualitative results gave us rich data to consider as an institution. The survey, with the added U15 consortium questions, contained one long-answer question for first and senior-year students asking them how UCalgary could have better prepared them for their future goals. A qualitative analysis team grouped responses to this question into five top themes: Meaningful Learning Experiences, Preparing for Next Steps, Navigating the University, Impact of Affordability, and Supporting Wellness.

These themes reiterate the importance of academic experiences that provide opportunities for active and intentional learning, meaningful assessment, experiential and work-integrated learning, undergraduate research, and career preparation. The findings also highlight the importance of access to holistic advising supports, developing further awareness of supports and opportunities available to students, addressing challenges related to affordability, and fostering a strong sense of wellness, community and belonging. The themes are meant to help guide the University to understand how to enhance student supports moving forward.

For a more holistic institutional analysis, this qualitative data report can be paired with the NSSE 2023 Snapshot and detailed engagement indicator analysis of the quantitative data. While there are acknowledged limitations of either data set, together these data give a high-level overview of undergraduate experiences at the University of Calgary that encourages us to dive deeper into what is currently effective as well as how to continue to strengthen student engagement.

'Making sense' of this data also involves bringing it into teaching and learning conversations with other diverse data sources, recognizing that NSSE is only one piece of the puzzle to explore

student engagement. Reviewing the data from an academic unit perspective is also a critical piece to implementing change based on our NSSE results. More detailed qualitative data has been distributed to each participating academic unit. As UCalgary begins to implement a new academic innovation plan, teams across campus can contextualize and use student NSSE responses to strengthen student engagement and experiences in diverse and meaningful ways.

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