

## Customizing Your NSSE Institutional Report: A Guide to Selecting Your Comparison Groups

A key benefit of your NSSE Institutional Report is the ability to customize up to three comparison groups. NSSE enables you to identify the most relevant, appropriate institutions from the available pool of current-year NSSE participants. This document provides some guidelines to keep in mind as you make your selections.

### Selecting NSSE Comparison Groups

NSSE reports display results for each institution alongside the results of three comparison groups. To customize any of your comparison groups, you have four options: (1) identify specific institutions from a list of all current-year NSSE participants, (2) select institutions using criteria from IPEDS, Barron's, and the Carnegie Classification, (3) begin with the institutional criteria, then add or remove specific institutions to refine your group, or (4) accept default groups (see box below) provided by NSSE which provide relevant comparisons for most institutions.

#### **Default Comparison Groups**

*Default Group 1* – For institutions not participating in a NSSE consortium, this group contains all current-year NSSE institutions in the same geographic region (New England, Mid East, Great Lakes, Plains, Southeast, Southwest, Rocky Mountains, Far West, Outlying Areas, US Service Schools) and sector (private/public). For consortium institutions, this column contains results for the other consortium members and *is not customizable*.

*Default Group 2* – All current-year NSSE institutions sharing your institution's Basic Carnegie Classification (Doc RU-VH, Doc RU-H, Doc DRU, Masters-L, Masters-M, Masters-S, Bac-AS, Bac-Diverse).

*Default Group 3* – All current-year U.S. NSSE institutions (Canadian universities receive all Canadian and U.S. institutions).

## **Approaches to Building Comparison Groups**

A variety of goals drives comparison group selection. Four common approaches to building comparison groups include:

*Peer groups* – The most common approach is to identify a group of institutions most similar to your own, based on characteristics such as Carnegie classification, enrollment size, type of educational offerings, and other defining criteria. This can provide a good basis for evaluating institutional performance.

*Aspirational groups* – Institutions may assess themselves relative to institutions they view as exemplars on some important dimensions.

*Overlap groups* – This comparison is with institutions that are viewed as overlapping for students, faculty, and/or other resources. For example, institutions may be interested in how they compare to institutions within their admissions overlap group.

*Pre-existing groups* – Institutions may want to be compared with members of a pre-existing group, especially those sharing common missions and goals. Examples of existing groups could include athletic conferences, special missions (e.g., religious affiliation, HBCU), university systems, consortia, and so on.

## **Other Factors to Consider in Building Comparison Groups**

*Keep it simple* – NSSE offers a wide variety of selection criteria for use in selecting comparison institutions. Selecting one or two dimensions such as size, region or educational offering is often better than basing group selection on a wide variety of criteria. Keeping selection criteria simple will ease eventual interpretations of results.

*Comparison group size* – NSSE recommends that institutions consider the various sizes of their comparison groups. Groups with fewer institutions may offer more specific criteria for comparability, while larger groups may be more stable, especially across multiple NSSE administrations. Thus, a mix of both small and large groups may be most beneficial.

*Involve stakeholders* – You may also want to solicit input from various campus stakeholders regarding the selection of comparison groups. Involving

administrators, faculty and others with an interest in the results of relevant peer comparisons will improve the utility and impact of your NSSE reports.

*Comparison group stability* – While NSSE encourages institutions to periodically evaluate their comparison groups to determine whether they are still appropriate, using similar comparison groups over time will be valuable in evaluating change. In most cases, using as many of the same comparison group institutions as possible across consecutive NSSE administrations can be most useful.

### **Lessons Learned: How NSSE 2007 Institutions Selected Comparison Groups**

NSSE 2007 institutions were invited to select their comparison groups by use of an online form. Those who did not complete the form receive the default comparison groups listed on page 1.

Overall, 28% (N= 171) of NSSE 2007 institutions did not complete the online form, and received all three default comparison groups as a result. Because e-mail invitations and reminders described the default comparison groups, it is possible many of the non-responders were satisfied with the defaults.

The remainder of this section describes how 439 NSSE 2007 institutions that completed the online form identified their comparison groups. Lessons learned include:

*Most of the institutions chose to use the NSSE default groups, although many customized at least one comparison group.* Of the 439 institutions who submitted comparison groups, 43% selected the default group for all three comparison groups yet 57% customized at least one comparison group.

*Among the default comparison groups, the second (Basic Carnegie Classification) and third (all current-year NSSE institutions) defaults were most popular.* The Basic Carnegie comparison was retained by 72% of respondents and the all current-year NSSE comparison was retained by 83%. By contrast, 57% of those eligible to customize the region and sector comparison (non-consortium participants) did so.

*Institutions that customized a comparison group most often did so by selecting specific institutions from a list of current-year participants.* Across all three groups, 79% of the customization was done through picking schools from a list, 21% by using criteria.

*The average size of comparison groups selected from a list was nine institutions.* To ensure the confidentiality of each institution's results, NSSE requires that a comparison group contains at least six institutions. There is no upper limit on comparison group size, but NSSE does verify large groups with institutional contacts to be sure no mistakes were made.

*The most common criteria used to build comparison groups were Carnegie classification and sector (private/public).* Of 74 cases where a comparison group was constructed using criteria, 44 used the Basic Carnegie Classification and 44 used sector (alone or in combination with other criteria). Other commonly used criteria included: Advanced Carnegie classifications (23), undergraduate enrollment (23), and geographic region (21).

*Where criteria were used, institutions elected to keep things simple.* Most of the institutions used only one (28%) or two (30%) criteria to define their comparison group. Few institutions (14%) used more than four criteria to identify a comparison group.

## **Summary**

Relevant, appropriate comparison groups are a vital component of your NSSE reports. The ability to customize these groups to suit your analytic needs is an important way to ensure the usefulness of your NSSE reports. Identifying three comparison groups from all current-year participants can be overwhelming, but it is extremely important to maximizing the value of your NSSE participation. Although the NSSE default groups may be appropriate in many cases, NSSE encourages you to consider tailoring at least one comparison group.