

Using NSSE Data to Understand First Year Student Retention

The University has been administering the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) on an annual basis since spring 2013. An unpublished manuscript three years ago reported that this survey's results showed that recent increases in enrollment and student-faculty ratio had not negatively impacted UPIKE students' experiences with faculty, or perceptions of teacher effectiveness and the campus environment compared to other AIKCU schools and other private universities nationally (Sidle, 2014). However, first year student fall-to-fall retention at UPIKE has remained basically stable at 56 percent during these four years. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is any difference in the average scores of the ten NSSE engagement indicators between first year students who return to UPIKE and those who do not.

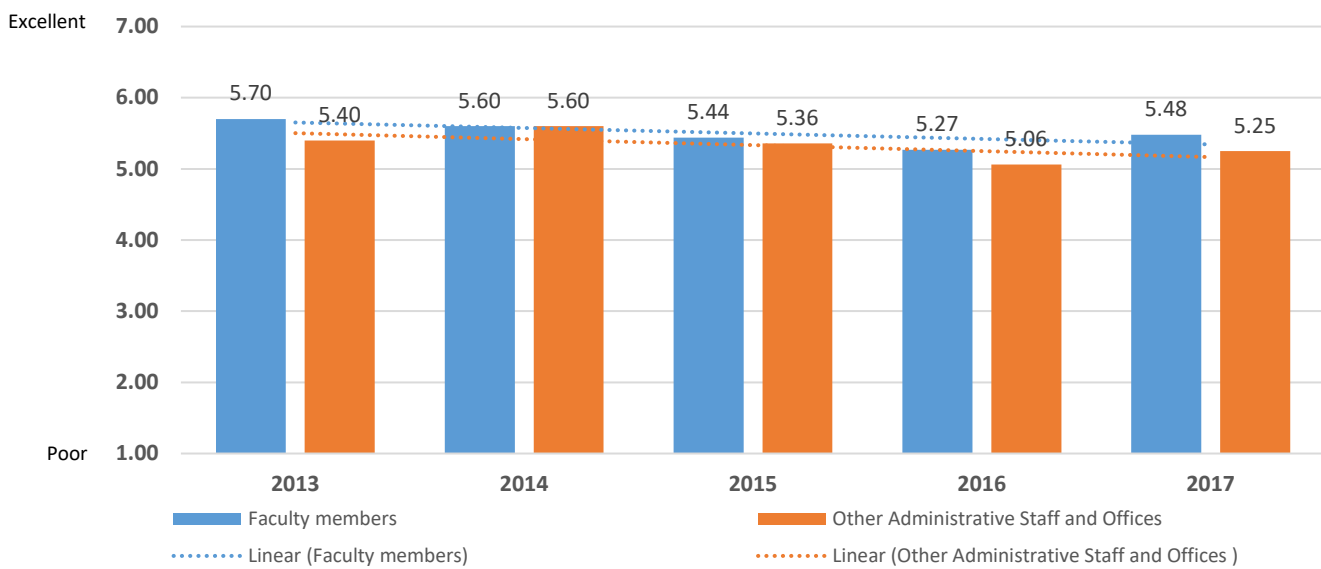
More than 600 first year UPIKE students (n=604) have completed the NSSE during the spring 2013-2017 testing administrations (44% response rate). There is a significant difference in the average scores of the quality of interactions engagement indicator between students who returned to UPIKE (M=45.28) and those who did not (M=40.92). (d=.32, small) (p=.002) In addition, there is a significant difference in the average scores of the effective teaching practices engagement indicator between students who returned to UPIKE (M=43.01) and those who did not (M=38.46). (d=.32, small) (p=.003)

But what does this mean for those who are trying to increase first year student retention?

Quality of Interactions

The NSSE asks students about interactions with other students, academic advisors, faculty, student services staff, and other administrators. On a 7-point scale (1="poor" to 7="excellent"), students who returned to UPIKE reported having significantly higher average quality of interactions with faculty members (M=5.60) than students who did not return (M=5.05). (d=.35, small) (p=.002) In addition, students who returned to UPIKE reported having significantly higher average quality of interactions with other administrative staff and offices (registrar, financial aid, etc.) (M=5.45) than students who did not return (M=4.91). (d=.31, small) (p=.004) A concern is that the students' rating of the quality of interactions with these two groups has decreased since 2013 (Chart 1)

Chart 1. First Year Students' Interactions, NSSE 2013-2017



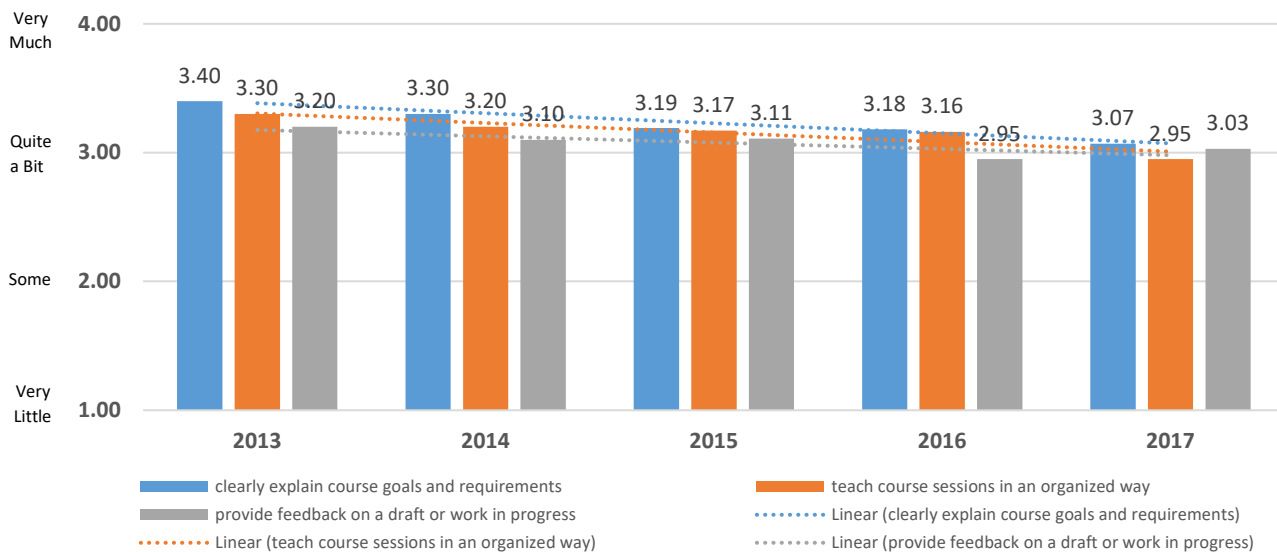
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Sidle, M.W. (2017). *Using NSSE Data to Understand First Year Student Retention*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Pikeville, Kentucky.

Effective Teaching Practices

Students who return to UPIKE described having faculty who deliver course material and providing feedback in student-centered ways. The retention rates (79%) of students who reported having instructors who clearly explained course goals and requirements “very much” were significantly higher than the rates (62%) of students who reported that their instructors did this “some.” ($p=.005$) Students who reported having instructors who taught course sessions in an organized way “quite a bit” and “very much” had significantly higher average annual GPAs ($M=2.93$) than the students who reported that their instructors did this “some.” ($M=2.57$). ($d=.41$, small) ($p=.004$) Also, the retention rates (79%) of students who reported having instructors who provided feedback on a draft or work in progress “quite a bit” and “very much” were significantly higher than the rates (63%) of students who reported that their instructors did this “some.” ($p=.006$) Unfortunately, the frequency that students say they experience these three teaching practices has decreased since 2013 (Chart 2).

Chart 2. Teaching First Year Students, NSSE 2013-2017



Scale: 1=Very little, 2=Some, 3=Quite a bit, 4=Very much

Limitation

The students who completed this survey tended to return at a higher rate (78%) than the average first year students who enrolled at UPIKE (56%) within these cohorts. Part of this phenomenon is due to the fact that the survey is administered in the spring semester of the first year so the students who left at the end of the fall term were not included in the sample population. With most of the responses being returned before spring break (92%), however, we may infer that the students’ encounters of these engagement experiences occurred a lot in the fall.

Conclusion

This study identified which NSSE engagement indicators showed significant differences in first year student retention, namely quality interactions and effective teaching practices. This will help direct the multiple efforts at the University of Pikeville like the five CREDO Modules to specific topics that our students have already described as important in their decisions to return to the Hill.

Sidle, M.W. (2014). *UPIKE: It's [still] about Students!* Unpublished manuscript, University of Pikeville, Kentucky.

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