

Monday, November 10, 2008



College students 'get away with' poor preparation

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

Nearly one in five college seniors and 25% of freshmen say they frequently come to class without completing readings or assignments, a national survey shows. And many of those students say they mostly still get A's.

The survey doesn't address whether those students are lazy, busy, intimidated, bored or geniuses. But it supports other studies that suggest a gap between what college professors expect from students and what students actually do.



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"College learning is a two-way street," says Indiana University associate professor Alexander McCormick, director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, which conducted the study. "The purpose here is not to dump on faculty, but when a substantial chunk of students come to class unprepared, it suggests that they can get away with it."

The findings, out today, are based on surveys this spring of nearly 380,000 randomly selected freshmen

and seniors at 722 four-year colleges. Participating schools generally reflect the diversity of U.S. higher education.

Colleges use the survey to help evaluate the quality of their undergraduate education. Among findings:

► Students report spending about 3½ hours a week preparing for each class. That's about half what instructors expect from a typical student.

► 59% of seniors and 55% of freshmen said they frequently worked harder than they thought they could to meet an instructor's standards.

► Of those who frequently didn't do homework, 29% of freshmen and 36% of seniors got mostly A's.

Those findings echo observations of Northern Arizona University anthropology professor Cathy Small, who spent a year living in a dorm and attending classes alongside freshmen as part of research for a 2005 book.

Many students cut corners as a way of managing the demands of student life, when "there were no consequences and no rewards for doing or not doing" homework, she says.

Small has since cut back on required reading and ties homework directly to discussions, quizzes or exams. "Part of accountability meant you created readings that were realistic in terms of the goals of the class."

Writing leads to deeper learning, study finds

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

It's pretty hard to get through college without ever having to compose a paper. Now, the National Survey of Student Engagement puts a number on just how much students write:

► 92 pages on average for first-year students

► 146 pages on average for seniors.

► 114 for seniors studying the physical sciences.

► 172 for seniors studying the social sciences.

But enough about quantity. The real story is that good writing assignments are definitely a good thing. When courses provide extensive,

intellectually challenging writing activities, the NSSE report found, students engage in a variety of positive activities. They are more likely to analyze, synthesize and integrate ideas from various sources. They grapple more with course ideas both in and out of the classroom. And they report greater personal, social, practical and academic development.

Those findings provide "solid evidence that writing in college is associated with the kinds of learning that professors and higher-education institutions say they believe is most significant," says Chuck Paine, a University of New Mexico English

professor and member of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The council worked with NSSE to develop a report on writing released today.

The report draws from three studies: NSSE's national survey conducted this spring of more than 380,000 first-year and senior students on 722 four-year campuses, a more detailed NSSE survey of 23,000 students on 82 of those campuses, and a survey of about 23,000 faculty on 160 campuses that asks questions related to the student surveys.

Among findings:

► Faculty who encourage writing

multiple drafts are also likely to emphasize approaches to learning that call on students to think critically and reflect on their learning.

► The most common writing tasks were to analyze something or argue a position. Writing about numerical data was less common.

More than half of faculty assigned more than 25 pages of writing in their senior course sections. But individual assignments for freshmen and seniors tend to be shorter in length.

These articles can be found at

- http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-11-10-nsse_students_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip,
- http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-11-10-NSSE-writing_N.htm.

NSSE: Assessing the undergraduate experience

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

This year, 386 four-year colleges and universities in 46 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico are participating in an ongoing collaboration between USA TODAY and the National Survey of Student Engagement to provide new tools and information to help college-bound students assess the quality of the undergraduate experience at schools they're considering.

The long-term research initiative, known as NSSE (pronounced "Nes-sie"), is grounded in studies that show that the more engaged students are on their campuses, the more likely they are to learn.

In addition to stories in print and online describing how many schools are using the survey's findings, USA TODAY and NSSE have created an interactive database on USA TODAY's website, which shows participating schools' average scores in five key areas, and compares those scores with national averages for similar types of institutions.

High averages are desirable, obviously. But they can be deceiving, masking the wide variations among students within a single school.

"College-wide averages contain meaningful information ... (but) prospective students and their parents need to understand that a high (score) is no guarantee of high quality throughout the undergraduate experience," says NSSE director Alex McCormick. Even schools with high scores have an "appreciable share of students" whose undergraduate experience is average at best, he says.

This year's 82-question survey of 380,000 randomly selected first-year and senior students at 722 four-year colleges and universities, for example, found several cases of what McCormick calls "pockets of disengagement. Some examples:

► Seniors who transferred to their current institutions talked less frequently with faculty about their future plans, were less likely than their peers to work with their class-

mates on assignments outside of class, and were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities.

► 48% of engineering students reported receiving prompt feedback from faculty, compared with 60% in other fields.

► Among students whose parents did not go to college, about half of first-year students and seniors were not involved in any extracurricular activities such as campus clubs or student government.

This year's survey results also identify promising findings. Those include:

► Nearly two-thirds of first-year students and three-fourths of seniors at least sometimes discussed ideas from their readings or classes with faculty members outside of class.

► 56% of first-year students who expected to frequently discuss grades or assignments with an instructor reported doing so.

► 57% of first-year students and half of seniors receive substantial

encouragement from their institutions to interact with students of different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds.

► More than 40% of first-year students and 60% of seniors report having done community service or volunteer work.

► Writing more in college is positively related to student gains in learning and to student-faculty interaction.

► Courses delivered primarily online seem to stimulate students' level of intellectual challenge and educational gains. A larger share of online learners reported very often participating in intellectually challenging course activities.

"Those who teach classes online may be making special efforts to engage their students. It may also be the case that online classes appeal to students who are more academically motivated and self-directed," McCormick says.