

Engaging Features of the Upper- and Lower-Division Curriculum at Cal State Northridge: Evidence From Recent Administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an annual inquiry into the extent to which students at four-year colleges and universities engage in an array of good educational practices. It focuses on the course-related activities that foster students' intense involvement with their studies¹ and on two key points in their college careers: shortly after entry and just before graduation. Cal State Northridge has administered the survey several times since its inception in 2000, but until 2007, the response samples were small. With the 2007 administration, the campus switched to the fully online survey mode and oversampled the freshman subgroup. As a result, just over 1,900 students completed the NSSE in that year. Largely the same procedures were used during the 2009 administration, but the response was not as strong (N=1,200), in part because there was no oversampling.

Analysis of both data sets, which are largely representative of the larger groups from which they are drawn, employed similar procedures. Given the large number of transfer students among the CSUN senior respondents, the two subsets are considered separately, with the data provided by the freshman respondents used to examine the types of engagement with learning fostered by CSUN's lower division curriculum and the views of the senior respondents used to gain insight into the types of engagement fostered by the upper division curriculum. Common strands in the two sets of responses serve to highlight engaging features of the curriculum as a whole. Throughout the analysis process, two criteria were used to pinpoint curricular strengths: elements of engagement identified by at least three-quarters of the respondents are considered to be so widely recognized that they are *integral* to the curriculum, while greater reliance on selected practices than is evident at a set of similar comparison institutions (i.e., large, primarily non-residential, four-year institutions) served to identify *distinct(ive)* features of the curriculum. The attached table combines the findings from the 2007 and 2009 NSSE administrations to highlight those features of engagement that display one of these curricular strengths.

¹ The NSSE inquires into an array of teaching and learning activities, including the amount of reading and writing required of students and their interactions with teachers and peers.

The first five sections of the table indicate that the following engaging aspects of the CSUN curriculum are integral to at least one of the two levels:

- an emphasis on spending significant time studying and on academic work.
- abstract thinking skills, which are more thoroughly embedded into the upper- than into the lower division curriculum.
- reliance on electronic media in academic work.
- the acquisition of on-the-job experience, as well as an expectation of community service at the lower division level.
- routine interaction between students and faculty members on matters relating to student performance and career plans.

Writing-intensive practices are the only feature of engagement that are both integral to and a distinctive feature of the CSUN curriculum. Thus, frequent inclusion of ideas from multiple courses in papers or assignments is integral to both curricular levels, while the frequent assignment of long papers (i.e., 20 pages or more) is a distinctive feature of the upper-division curriculum. A second distinctive curricular feature is the routine preparation multiple drafts of papers or assignments prior to their submission. This practice is also integral to the lower-division curriculum, which suggests that most students receive encouragement to practice it.

Although not as thoroughly embedded in the curriculum as integral features, several engaging aspects of the CSUN curriculum are more widely dispersed than is the case at comparable institutions. The last three sections of the table indicate that these distinctive features include:

- an emphasis on the importance of appreciating diversity and opportunities for interacting with students of widely divergent backgrounds.
- a modest reliance on active and collaborative approaches to learning.
- a campus commitment, at the lower-division level, to providing the support students need to thrive socially and meet their non-academic responsibilities.

Taken together, the findings reviewed above suggest that many aspects of the CSUN curriculum serve to effectively engage students in their studies and foster their intense involvement with them.

Distinctive and Integral Features of Cal State Northridge's Upper- and Lower-Division Curriculum That Serve to Engage Students in Their Studies *

Curricular Feature	Lower-Division Curriculum		Upper-Division Curriculum	
	Spring 2007	Spring 2009	Spring 2007	Spring 2009
Rigor of the Curriculum				
Spending significant time studying and on academic work has been substantially emphasized [^] in the current academic year.	integral	integral	integral	integral
During the current school year, my examinations challenged me to do my best work		integral	integral	integral
Abstract Thinking Skills (8 items considered)				
<i>Coursework places substantial emphasis[^] on:</i>				
Analyzing basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory (e.g., examining case/situation in depth & considering components)	integral	integral	integral	integral
Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations			integral	integral
Making judgments about value of information/arguments/methods (e.g., assess soundness of data gathered & interpreted by others)		integral		integral
Synthesizing and organizing ideas/information/experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships			integral	integral
Use of Electronic Media (3 items considered)				
Using computers in academic work has been emphasized quite a bit or very much	integral	integral	integral	integral
Often or very often used e-mail to communicate with instructor or other students during current school year		integral	integral	integral
Enriching Educational Experiences (6 items considered)				
<i>While in college, expect to obtain/have obtained:</i>				
On-the-job experience (e.g., internship, practicum, field/co-op exper.)	integral	integral	integral	integral
Community service or volunteer work	integral	integral		
Faculty-Student Interaction (7 items considered)				
<i>During the current school year, respondents have engaged in the following activities at least sometimes:</i>				
Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor	integral	integral	integral	integral
Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor		integral	integral	integral
Writing Intensive Character of the Curriculum (5 items considered)				
<i>During the current school year, I have often or very often</i>				
Prepared several drafts of a paper/assign. before submitting	integral distinct	integral distinct	distinct	distinct
Integrated ideas from several courses in a paper/project	integral	integral	integral	integral
One or more 20-page papers required in at least one course			distinct	distinct

Distinctive and Integral Curricular Features cont'd.

Curricular Feature	Lower-Division Curriculum		Upper-Division Curriculum	
	Spring 2007	Spring 2009	Spring 2007	Spring 2009
<p>Emphasis on and Opportunities for Interacting with Diverse Student Groups (5 items considered)</p> <p><i>During current academic year, respondents have often or very often</i></p>				
Had serious conversations with students of differing racial or ethnic background	distinct		distinct	distinct
Included diverse perspectives ^{^^} in class discussions or writing assignments	distinct	distinct	distinct	
Contact among students of differing economic, social, & racial/ethnic backgrounds is encouraged quite a bit or very much	distinct	distinct	distinct	
<p>Active and Collaborative Learning (8 items considered)</p> <p><i>During the current school year, respondents have done the following often or very often:</i></p>				
Made a class presentation	distinct		distinct	distinct
Worked with other students on projects during class	distinct	distinct	distinct	distinct
<p>Nature of the Campus Environment</p> <p><i>The following were substantially emphasized[^] at respondents' institutions during the current academic year:</i></p>				
Providing the support students need to succeed academically		integral		
Providing the support students need to thrive socially		distinct		
Providing assistance with non-academic responsibilities (e.g., work, family)	distinct	distinct		

* Integral curricular features are those mentioned by at least three-quarters of the NSSE respondents, while distinct(ive) features are those that are more prevalent at CSUN than at the comparison institutions (i.e., a set of large, primarily non-residential, four-year institutions.)

[^] Substantial emphasis encompasses respondents saying that specific activities or things are emphasized "very much" or "quite a bit" on their campuses.

^{^^} Diverse perspectives are those differing by race, religion, gender, political belief, etc.