EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In February and March 2011, The University at Albany participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for the second time, following up on our previous participation in 2008, when all SUNY 4-year colleges and universities participated. NSSE is “designed to assess the extent to which students participate in empirically-derived effective educational practices and what they gain from the college experience.”

A total of 537,605 first-year students and seniors at 751 colleges and Universities in the U.S. and Canada participated in 2011, with a response rate of 33%. At the University at Albany, a total of 843 students participated between February 15th and March 31st 2011 – including 352 first-year students and 493 seniors – with a response rate of 18%.

Peer Comparisons: Student Characteristics

In analyzing NSSE results, we compare UAlbany student characteristics and survey responses to those of students in three peer groups: UAlbany Peer Institutions, Applicant Overlap schools, and Carnegie Peers that do not have medical schools. Additionally, since this is the second NSSE administration at UAlbany, we are also able to examine trends over time.

In comparing UAlbany students to those of the comparison groups, we continue to find several striking differences:

- UAlbany has a higher percentage of historically underrepresented minority students than our peers – 16% compared to 7%. (In 2008 it was 14% for UAlbany compared to 11% in our peers.)
- UAlbany seniors are much more likely to have begun their undergraduate education elsewhere – 44% were admitted as transfer students, compared to an average of 33% at the comparison institutions. (The respective numbers were 46% and 33% in 2008.)
- Albany students are more likely than those at our peer institutions to have parents without college degrees. 53% of UAlbany fathers and 52% of mothers do not have bachelor’s degrees, compared to 42% and 45% respectively among our peers. (In 2008, UAlbany’s numbers were 56% and 57%, compared to 42% and 46% for our peers.)
- UAlbany provides housing for more of our students than do the comparison institutions – 87% of freshmen and 32% of seniors, compared to 79% and 19% respectively. (In 2008 UAlbany numbers were 89% of freshmen and 32% of seniors, compared to 80% and 17% respectively.)

Taken as a whole, these numbers provide compelling evidence that the University at Albany serves a more broadly diverse population, and does better than our peers at fulfilling this aspect of its mission as a public university.

Peer Comparisons: Survey Responses on Academic Engagement

1 “NSSE 2011 Overview,” Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
2 A complete description of peer groups is included in “University at Albany NSSE 2011 Benchmark Comparisons.”
NSSE asks students to describe their educational experiences in a variety of areas, summarized by five benchmark scales shown in the charts below.  

- In all five benchmark areas, UAlbany’s first-year student scores were higher in 2011 than they were in 2008, and substantially so in most benchmarks – an improvement that was not found among any of our peer groups. (See Figure 1, below.)
- No substantively important differences were found among our senior average ratings between 2008 and 2011 in all five areas, although all means were slightly higher in 2011. Senior ratings among our peer institutions were similarly unchanged (Fig. 1 for UAlbany, Fig. 3 for peers).
- In three of the five benchmarks, UAlbany students, like those in the comparison groups, showed marked improvement in their ratings between first year students and seniors. In one benchmark (Level of Academic Challenge) students at both UAlbany and our peer institutions showed modest gains between first-year students and seniors. In the fifth benchmark (Supportive Campus Environment) UAlbany students showed a decline from first-year students to seniors, as do our peers. (See Figure 2, below.)
  o Because of the large improvements in first-year student scores at UAlbany, we did not see the strikingly large improvements between first-year and senior scores in 2011 that were observed in 2008. As Figure 1 makes clear, this is almost entirely explained by the large increases in the first-year student scores.
- Overall, UAlbany’s benchmark scores are slightly below those of the comparison institutions, and many of these differences are statistically significant. However, because of UAlbany’s systematically higher ratings for first-year-students in 2011, the differences for that group are much smaller than they were in 2008.
- The benchmarks in which UAlbany trails the comparison groups by the largest margins are the ones most directly linked to instruction – “Level of Academic Challenge,” “Active and Collaborative Learning,” and “Enriching Educational Experiences.”
  o For the first and third of these benchmarks, differences between UAlbany and the comparison groupings are greater for seniors than first-year students – the opposite of the trend from 2008.
- As mentioned earlier, UAlbany has a higher percentage of transfer students than our peer groups. A breakdown of the difference between seniors admitted as freshmen and seniors admitted as transfer students (Figure 4, below) shows that part of the disparity between UAlbany and our peer groups can be explained by this structural factor.
  o Differences are small for Level of Academic Challenge and Student-Faculty Interaction.
  o Differences are of moderate size (around four points) for Active and Collaborative Learning and Supportive Campus Environment.
  o The difference is very large for the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark, where transfer admits averaged 33 on the scale, compared to 43 for freshman admits.

3 A more complete description of the benchmarks is contained in the “NSSE Benchmark Comparison Report.” NSSE explains how the benchmark scores are calculated as follows: “Each benchmark is an index of responses to several NSSE questions. Because NSSE questions have different response sets, each question’s response set was rescaled from zero to 100, and students’ rescaled responses were then averaged. Thus a benchmark score of zero would mean that every student chose the lowest response option for every item, and 100 would mean every student chose the highest response to every item. Although benchmarks are reported on a 0-100 scale, they are not percentages.” (‘NSSE11 Benchmark Comparisons Report,” August 2011)
Summary and Conclusion

Compared to 2008, UAlbany students in 2011 generally report increased levels of academic engagement. That said, UAlbany’s scores generally remain below those of our peers. It should be noted that responses to individual survey items vary considerably; on some items UAlbany is equal to or better than the comparison institutions, but on most items we are lower, and in some areas the differences are striking. A careful look at the detailed frequency and mean comparison reports provided by NSSE allows investigation of specific areas in and out of the classroom that are believed to be important to providing the highest quality education, services, and overall undergraduate experiences to our students.
**Fig. 1: UAlbany's Progress in NSSE: 2008 and 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>Level of Academic Challenge</th>
<th>Active &amp; Collaborative Learning</th>
<th>Student-Faculty Interaction</th>
<th>Enriching Educational Experiences</th>
<th>Supportive Campus Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 2: 2011 NSSE Benchmark Comparison: UAlbany & Comparison Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>Level of Academic Challenge</th>
<th>Active &amp; Collaborative Learning</th>
<th>Student-Faculty Interaction</th>
<th>Enriching Educational Experiences</th>
<th>Supportive Campus Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UAlbany</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Peer Groups</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**UAlbany, 2011**

**UAlbany, 2008**
Fig. 3: Comparison Group Progress in NSSE: 2008 & 2011

Fig. 4: 2011 NSSE Benchmark Comparison: UAlbany Transfers vs. Freshman Admits