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# A Portrait of Change: Student Engagement at Western Michigan University

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# A Portrait of Change: Student Engagement at Western Michigan University

Suzan F. Ayers, PhD



Health, Physical Education & Recreation

## Background

The NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) is a national survey that asks first-year (FY) and senior (SR) students about their college experience, how much time they spend studying, and the types of interactions they have with faculty. The results are used in a variety of ways, including assessment, institutional improvement, and prompting discussion on teaching and learning initiatives

The NSSE was initiated in response to a growing interest in understanding how to best measure and improve the quality of undergraduate education. The NSSE was developed to:

- (1) Include items known to empirically relate to important college outcomes,
- (2) Be used at private and public four-year institutions,
- (3) Include first-year and senior students,
- (4) Adequately sample participating institutions,
- (5) Be flexible, and
- (6) Be administered by a credible third-party organization.

The connection between student engagement and institutional effectiveness has been established based on the direct connection between student behaviors and desired outcomes of enrollment at an institution of higher education.

As defined by Kuh (2003), "Student engagement represents both the *time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities* and the *effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices.*"

The FSSE (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement) is the faculty companion used for comparative purposes. The intended purpose of the FSSE is to identify areas of strength at an institution, as well as aspects of the undergraduate experience that may warrant attention.

The NSSE was piloted in 1999 and has been administered at over 1,200 four-year degree-granting universities. The FSSE was piloted in 2003 and is typically administered in parallel to the NSSE. Both assessment projects are administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

## The WMU NSSE/FSSE Project

The 2008-09 ATIS Faculty Development Academic Leadership Academy included the opportunity to complete a leadership project to put theory into practice. I selected the 2008 NSSE/FSSE project as my opportunity to become more involved in WMU campus life as a leader.

## NSSE

The NSSE is comprised of 85 unique items as well as a series of demographic items. Five benchmarks serve to organize NSSE results:

- (1) **LAC**: Level of Academic Challenge
- (2) **ACL**: Active and Collaborative Learning
- (3) **SFI**: Student/Faculty Interactions
- (4) **EEE**: Enriching Educational Experiences
- (5) **SCE**: Supportive Campus Environment

The 2008 WMU NSSE was completed by 1,500 students (30% response rate). Students are asked to complete the survey in reference to the current school year, as the WMU administration occurred during the Spring, 2008 semester.



## FSSE

In addition to many of the same items included on the NSSE, faculty are asked about how they spend their time related to professional activities and the types of learning experiences emphasized at their institutions. The survey is comprised of 92 items in addition to a demographic section.

The 2008 WMU FSSE was completed by 684 faculty (34% response rate). The sample was gender-balanced (49% female) and included 64% full-time employees. The official "Instructor of Record" variable was used to identify "faculty" so graduate teaching assistants, instructors, lecturers and 'others' comprised 51% of the 2008 WMU sample. This was in response to the 2006 sample which did not include representative proportions of instructors in lower division courses.

Faculty are asked to complete the survey in reference to a specific course section. If that section consists primarily of first-year students and sophomores, the faculty are asked to indicate the "lower-division" (LD) category. If the selected section consists primarily of juniors and seniors, faculty are asked to indicate the "upper-division" (UD) category. Approximately 39% of respondents referenced lower-division and 47% upper-division courses.

## 2008 NSSE Findings

Comparable to selected and Carnegie peers

SCE has improved notably for both FY and SR students

Advising improved from 2006; importance of 1-on-1 relationships

80%(FY)-71%(SR) would choose WMU again (up from 2006)

Multi-year trends stable/improving since 2002

36% FY compared to 25% SR participate in faculty-led research

## 2008 FSSE Findings

UD students more engaged than LD students

41-55% faculty report working with students only during class

1/3 faculty spend 50% class time in instructor-led lecture

Faculty spend 1-8 hrs/wk on:  
research activities: ~40%\*  
UG teaching: ~65%

\*59%(LD) – 49%(UD) faculty report 0 hours working with undergraduates on out-of-class research

Faculty spend 0-4 hrs/wk on:  
advising: ~83%  
service: ~76%

## Faculty versus Student Findings

Prompt feedback, value of tutoring others (disagree)

Exams less challenging than 2006 (agree)

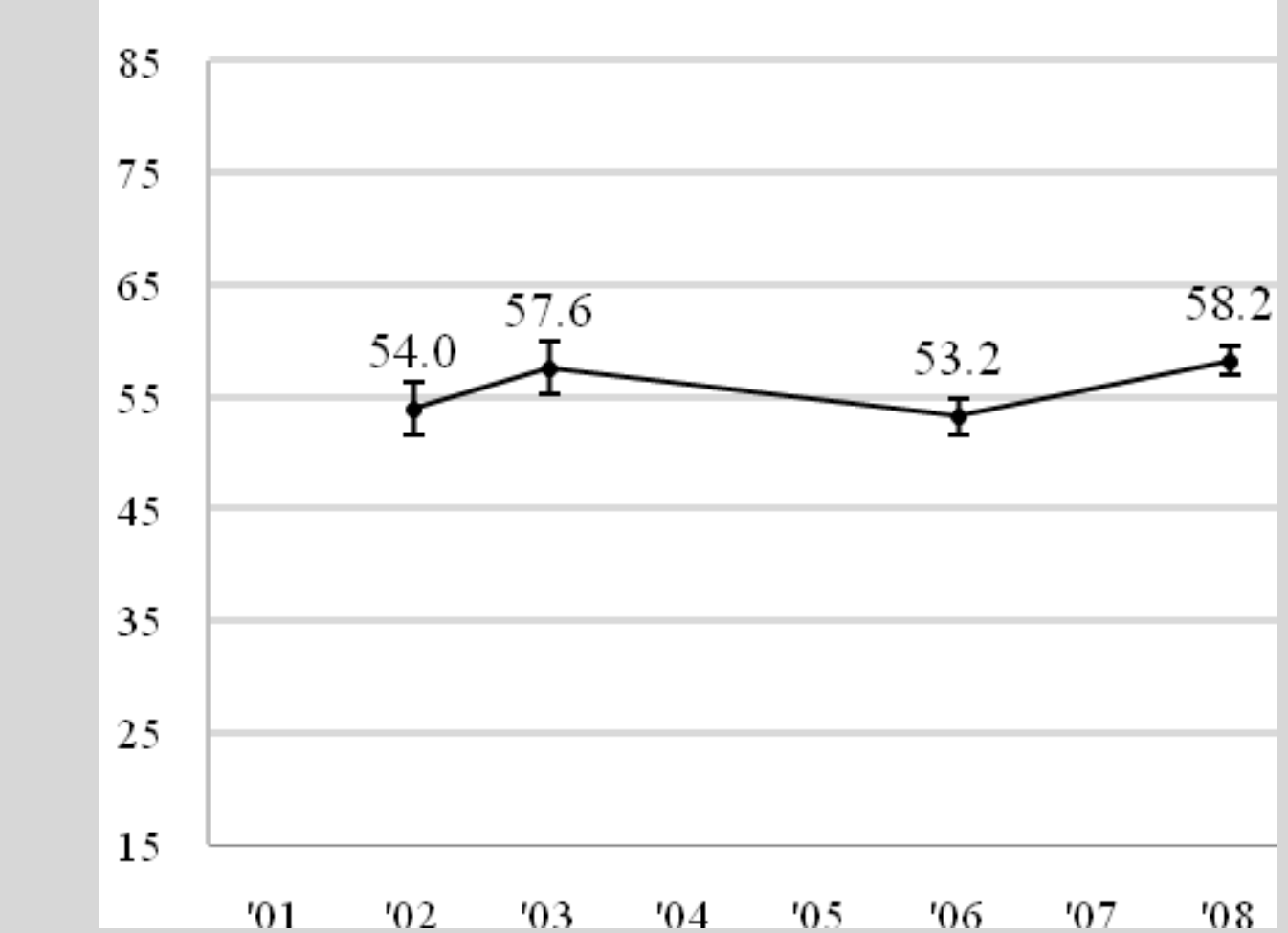
Students report working harder than faculty perceive

Students report getting along with administrators better than previous administrations of the NSSE and better than faculty perceive

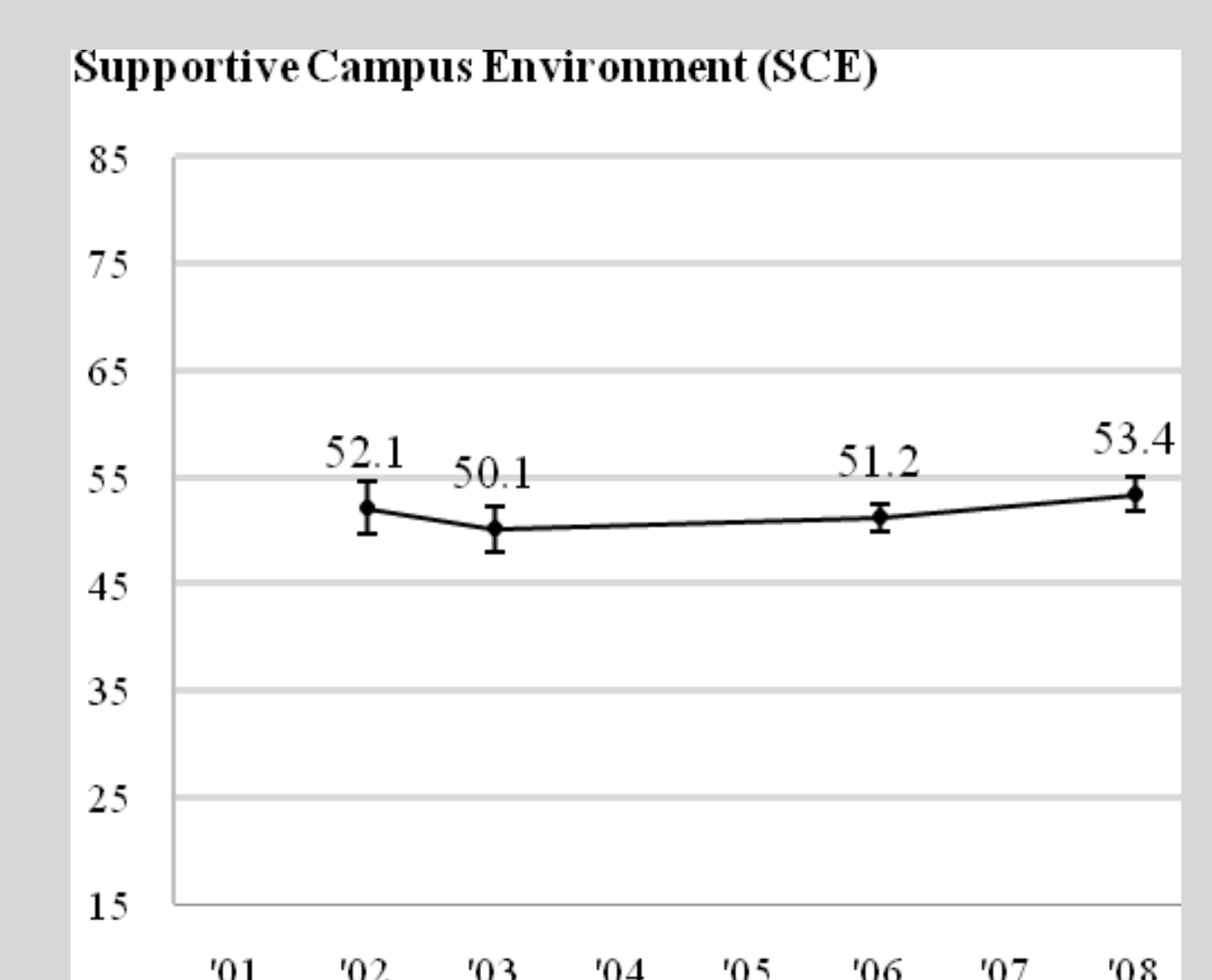
## Multi-Year Trends

This section addresses the five NSSE benchmarks across all four WMU administrations for both first-year and senior students. As seen in the charts below, the general trends for WMU students on all five benchmarks are generally in the desired direction, particularly from the 2006 to 2008 administrations.

First-Year Students since 2002:  
Supportive Campus Environment (SCE)



Seniors since 2002:  
Supportive Campus Environment (SCE)



## Future Steps

Link outcomes to goal setting processes

Increase academic challenge in coursework

Increase student/faculty collaborative research opportunities

## Contact information

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