

## The NSSE and *USA Today* Introduce College-Assessment Initiative

By Gitanjali Hazarika

Mired in controversy and escalating criticism from college authorities, rankings of institutions of higher education can be unreliable. Students and parents are forced to grope in the dark when it comes to what they pay to and what they receive from colleges. With the aim of providing prospective students, parents, counselors, and others with information on the quality of education at particular institutions, the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#) (NSSE) and *USA Today* have devised a new accountability and transparency movement called the “Initiative to Focus on Meaningful Indicators of Collegiate Quality.”

Both parties have emphatically stressed that the initiative is not another ranking system, adding that institutions will not be ranked in any manner in the final analyses. The aim of the initiative, they state, is to provide prospective students and their parents, as well as others, with some “meaningful indicators” with respect to various colleges. The NSSE has even prepared an FAQ list to answer misgivings that may arise in the minds of administrators at participating schools.

The initiative is aimed at educating people who are interested in collegiate quality. It will inform them of the effectiveness of the education provided by particular institutions based on five NSSE benchmarks: “level of academic challenge,” “active and collaborative learning,” “student-faculty interaction,” “enriching educational experiences,” and “supportive campus environments.” The initiative will also shed light on various educational activities undertaken by different schools around the country. The NSSE and *USA Today* hope to bring to light effective educational practices that have yielded good results and rich learning experiences for students at schools that have been overshadowed by bigger institutions in their regions.

Headquartered at Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning, the NSSE was founded in 1998 and is directed by George D. Kuh. In response to concerns regarding the quality of American undergraduate education and an apparent lack of emphasis on student learning, the NSSE has asked permission from about 1,000 four-year institutions “to release five benchmark scores from the engagement survey’s report for their institutions to *USA Today*, which may place the data online.”

Kuh stressed that the idea of the NSSE benchmark scores is to make people aware of the strengths and weaknesses of institutions and allow them to assess for themselves which institutions might have models they value. Today, with the rising demands for quality, performance, and accountability at educational institutions set by their governing boards, state and federal agencies, and accrediting organizations, the need to improve student retention and student learning is of paramount importance.