

# **Student Engagement: A Primer**

**Prepared for the Summer Retreat on Student  
Engagement**

**Clayton Smith, Vice-Provost, Students & Registrar**



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# Student Engagement: A Primer

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## **Overview of Student Engagement**

Historically, the primary accountability measure used to assess institutional reputation was the inputs: student characteristics and institutional resources. Student characteristics were mostly focused on prior academic performance, which principally settled on full-time, Year One students' Grade 12 admission average. Institutional resources stressed academic quality measures, such as the number of faculty members with PhD's, the amount and type of library resources, campus infrastructure, and similar measures that could be quantified. The only output measured was the graduation rate for the first-time, full-time entering Year One cohort. These formed the basis of the institutional rankings as measured by Maclean's Magazine, U.S. News & World Report and other news organizations. Increasingly, many of us believed that what happens during the student experience should also be a part of our institutional reputation. This led to the creation of the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and the introduction of student engagement as an additional way of assessing educational outcomes at the post-secondary level.

Within higher education circles, we have long believed that what students bring with them in the way of academic preparation is the best predictor of success in post-secondary education. However, recent research suggests that, at best, this explains only some of why students are successful. We now believe that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pace, 1980). In short, the nature and quality of first year students' experiences in the classroom, with faculty and with peers, are better predictors of desired educational outcomes (Gerken & Volkwein, 2000). Kuh (2007) puts it this way: "Students who find something or someone worthwhile to connect to in the postsecondary environment are more likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities, persist and achieve their educational objectives" (p. 117).

Effective educational practices that connect with student engagement can be grouped into seven categories: student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectation, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering/Gamson, 1987). Two critical features are worth noting. First, the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities strongly impacts student learning (Alexander & Murphy, 1994). Second, how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to help students participate in activities that lead to experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation also impacts student learning (Kuh, 2001).

Other key student engagement literature findings include:

1. Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively associated with grades and persistence (Pascarella/Terenzini, 2005)
2. Though smaller schools generally engage students more effectively, colleges and universities of similar size can vary widely (NSSE, 2005)
3. Student engagement varies more within any given school or institutional type than between schools or institutional types (Pascarella/Terenzini, 2005)
4. Student engagement in effective educational practice is unrelated to selectivity (Kuh/Pascarella, 2004; NSSE, 2003)
5. Some groups of students are somewhat more engaged than others (Kuh, 2003)
6. Some single mission schools confer engagement advantages to their students (Kinzie et al, 2007)

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7. The single best predictor of student satisfaction is the degree to which students perceive the college environment to be supportive of their academic and social needs (Astin, 1993; Pascarella/Terenzini, 2005)
8. Some students—such as first generation students, males, transfer students and those who live off-campus—are generally less engaged than others (Kuh, 2007)

### **National Survey of Student Engagement****National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE)**

NSSE was designed to measure student engagement levels, first in the US and now in Canada, as a way for institutions to assess student learning levels that go beyond course grades and GPA's. The NSSE Web site at Indiana University provides a nice overview, which states that, NSSE:

...obtains, on an annual basis, information from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities nationwide about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Survey...reflect(s) behaviours by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college.

-<http://www.nsse.iub.edu/>

It is a large, research supported, student survey that is designed to provide information institutions can use to improve the quality of undergraduate education. It measures what first year and senior year students say they do and connects NSSE data over time and across institutions to monitor trends and patterns. In 2006 and 2008, all 19 universities in Ontario participated. In 2008, we were able to choose the usual consortium of Ontario universities, but also a group of nine comprehensive universities (the group we are in Maclean's with). As we go forward, we will participate on an every three year basis.

NSSE uses five benchmarks of effective educational practice. Below is a profile for each benchmark.

Benchmark	Profile
<b>Level of Academic Challenge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Time spent preparing for class</li> <li>➤ Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more</li> <li>➤ Coursework emphasizes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory</li> <li>• Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information or experiences</li> <li>• Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ Campus environment emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work</li> </ul>
<b>Active &amp; Collaborative Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions</li> <li>➤ Made a class presentation</li> <li>➤ Worked with other students on projects</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>during class</li> <li>➤ Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments</li> <li>➤ Tutored or taught other students</li> <li>➤ Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course</li> <li>➤ Discussed ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class</li> </ul>
<b>Student-Faculty Interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor</li> <li>➤ Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor</li> <li>➤ Discussed ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class</li> <li>➤ Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (e.g., committees, orientation, student life activities)</li> <li>➤ Received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on academic performance</li> <li>➤ Worked with a faculty member on a research project</li> </ul>
<b>Supportive Campus Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Campus environment provides support needed to help students succeed academically</li> <li>➤ Campus environment helps students cope with non-academic responsibilities (e.g., work, family)</li> <li>➤ Campus environment provides the support you need to thrive socially</li> <li>➤ Quality of relationships with other students</li> <li>➤ Quality of relationships with faculty members</li> <li>➤ Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices</li> </ul>
<b>Enriching Educational Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Talking with students with different religious beliefs, political opinions or values</li> <li>➤ Talking with students of a different race or ethnicity</li> <li>➤ An institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds</li> <li>➤ Using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments</li> <li>➤ Participating in: internships or field</li> </ul>

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experiences, community service or volunteer work, study abroad, culminating senior experience, co-curricular activities, etc.

## **National Differences in Student Engagement**

Kandiko (2009) compared college and university student engagement between the U.S. and Canada. Results suggest that students in Canada and the U.S. differed in terms of the frequency with which they engage in active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction. It appears that the Canadian classroom experience involves less active participation by students and less individual contact with faculty members. The large size of most Canadian universities and higher student-faculty ratios makes collaborative learning experiences and faculty contact more challenging. However, as documented by Kuh et al. (2005), institutions with a wide variety of characteristics and resources can create highly engaged learning environments.

Further findings by Kandiko suggest that students in Canada participate less in three of the best practices in undergraduate education: active learning, peer collaboration, and student-faculty interaction. Three possible explanations for low faculty engagement with students are 1) as faculty spend more time doing research, there is less time available for students; 2) full-time non-tenure and part-time faculty are often overloaded with classes and unable to devote time and effort towards fully engaging students, and 3) increasing student-faculty ratios leave fewer faculty assigned to larger cohorts of students.

Student engagement in Canada and the U.S. was found to differ by academic major. Students in professional fields, such as finance, management and pre-law had similar responses in both countries; the narrowest gaps occurred in the business and professional fields. In contrast, there was a marked difference between Canadian and U.S. students in arts and humanities, life sciences and social sciences. Canadian students in those majors reported considerably less engagement overall compared to their U.S. peers.

## **Student Engagement – Ontario Universities**

A 2007 Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario workshop on the NSSE experience attended by senior administrators from Ontario universities revealed that:

- Universities have learned about the engagement of students in the learning process through the analysis of NSSE data
- The analysis and interpretation of NSSE data have required those in academic leadership and research support positions to increase their understanding of the theoretical foundation for the study of student engagement
- Universities have increasingly become aware of the limitations of NSSE, since NSSE focuses on student engagement rather than learning
- There are significant differences in NSSE results within institutions
- Universities have learned that this research provides a mechanism for facilitating a new level of discussion about teaching and learning on Ontario campuses

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Some institutions have positioned NSSE as an instrument for institutional analysis. Others have adopted a more comprehensive strategy linked to the central university offices responsible for student development, teaching enhancement and/or initiatives at the level of the faculty or division. A number of universities organized special workshops for academic administrators and faculty to review NSSE findings and encourage local initiative.

Many see NSSE as part of the quality framework for postsecondary education in Ontario, but not as a direct indicator of institutional performance.

### **The University of Windsor 2008 NSSE Report**

NSSE was last administered at the University of Windsor during the spring of 2008 to 5,372 first-year and final year students. Overall 1,192 first-year and 705 senior students completed the survey for a 35% rate of response. The sampling error was 2.3% and 2.9% respectfully for first-year and final year students. Of those who completed the survey, 62% were female, 86% were full-time students, one-quarter lived in residence and 52% indicated that neither parent had a university degree. A complete report is available through the Office of Institutional Analysis Web site.

### **Key Findings:**

- Neither first-year nor senior respondents reported as favourable an image of the university as their counterparts in the comprehensive or the Ontario university groups
- 80% felt that the University places a substantial emphasis on studying and spending time on academic work (similar to compare groups)
- 60% of first-year students say they rarely receive prompt feedback from faculty on their academic performance (similar to compare groups); including 20% who said “never”. Improves slightly for senior students (50%)
- 28% of first-year students claimed to frequently ask questions or contribute to class discussions (significantly less than compare groups). Once in the senior year, half were actively participating in class (similar to compare groups)
- Half of first-year students say they had never discussed ideas from readings or classes with faculty outside of class. Only 22% of final year students had such contact with faculty
- 75% of first-year students had positive relationships with other students. Only half thought administrative personnel and offices were helpful, considerate and flexible (similar to compare groups)

A statistical comparison of the benchmarks suggests that on average final year students are experiencing the same levels of engagement as their peers in both comparison groups. However, academic challenge faced by first-year students continues to be below that of the compare groups and first-year students significantly scored higher on the student faculty interaction benchmark. In particular, Windsor had significantly higher scores for student-faculty outcomes for first year students in three areas: “discussing ideas from readings with faculty members outside of class”, “working with faculty members on activities other than coursework”, and “talking about career plans with a faculty member or an advisor”. Windsor final year students also reported significantly higher scores for “more likely to put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions”. Graphs displaying benchmark comparison data is in the appendix.

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## **Using NSSE Findings to Impact Change**

The main reason to participate in NSSE is to find out how we are doing in the whole area of student engagement and then determine if there are areas we want to improve.

Here is an approach we may want to follow to make enhancements in the student experience at the University of Windsor.

1. Identify an issue
2. Choose specific NSSE questions that relate to the issue
3. Bring together individuals or units that are interested in the issue to review NSSE findings
4. Identify best practices both on and off-campus
5. Identify strategies
6. Implement Changes
7. Review the next NSSE implementation scores to assess performance

An example of how one institution used NSSE results to improve the student experience is provided by the University of Calgary (Tierney & Johnston, 2008).

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## Resources

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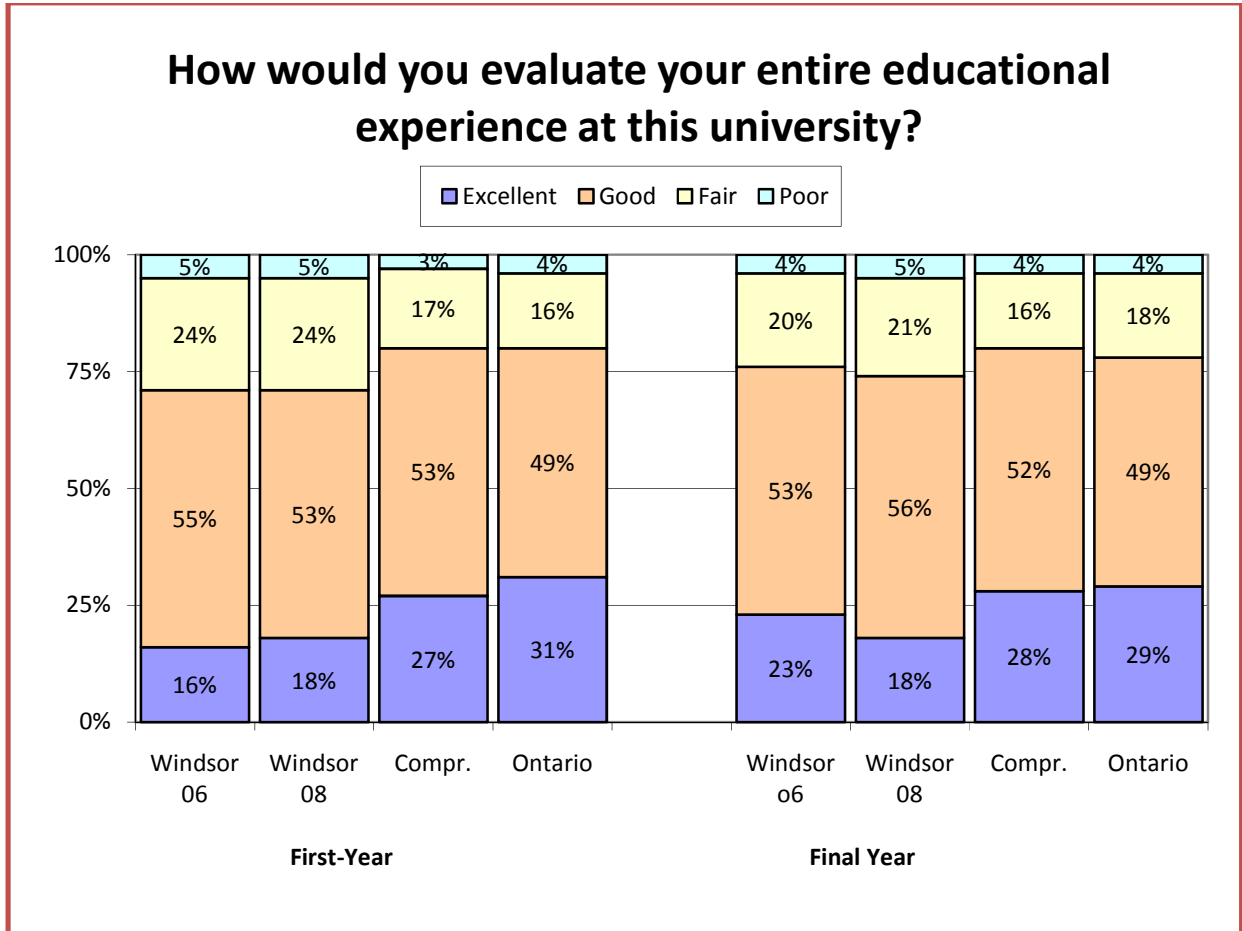
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## **APPENDIX:**

### **COMPARISON OF SELECTED NSSE RESULTS**

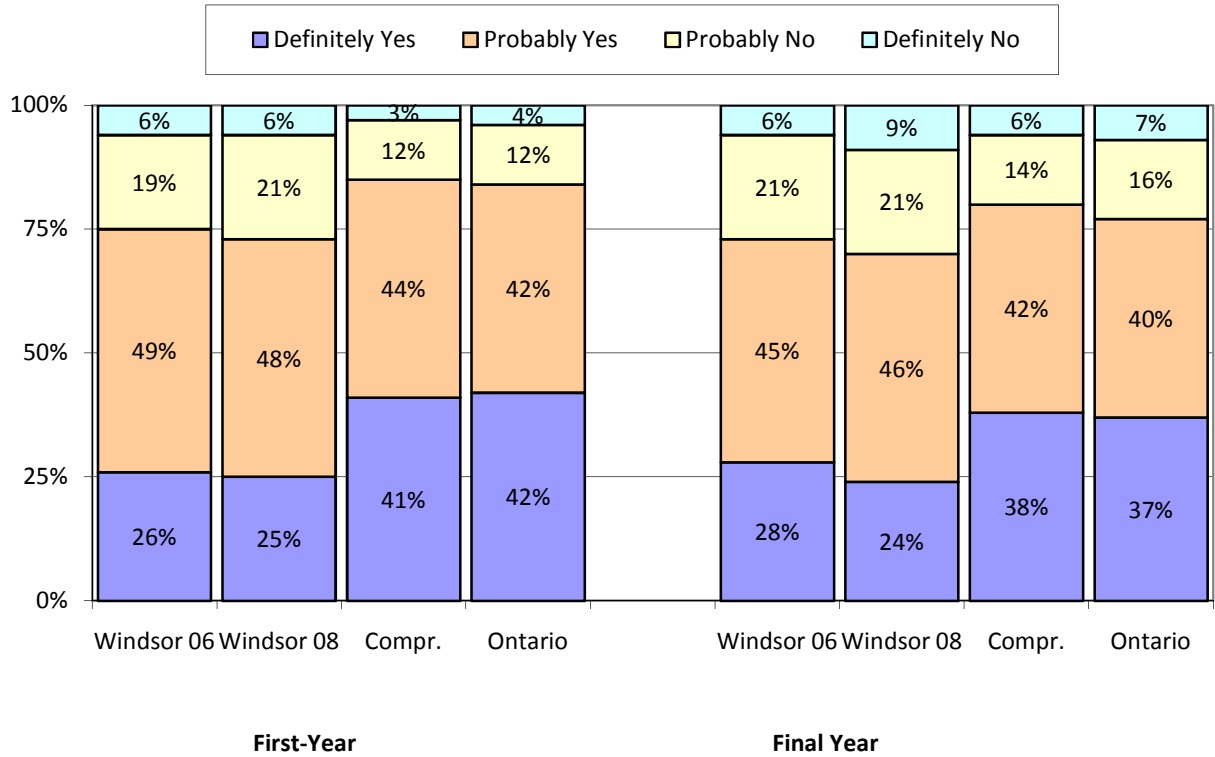
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### Student Satisfaction:



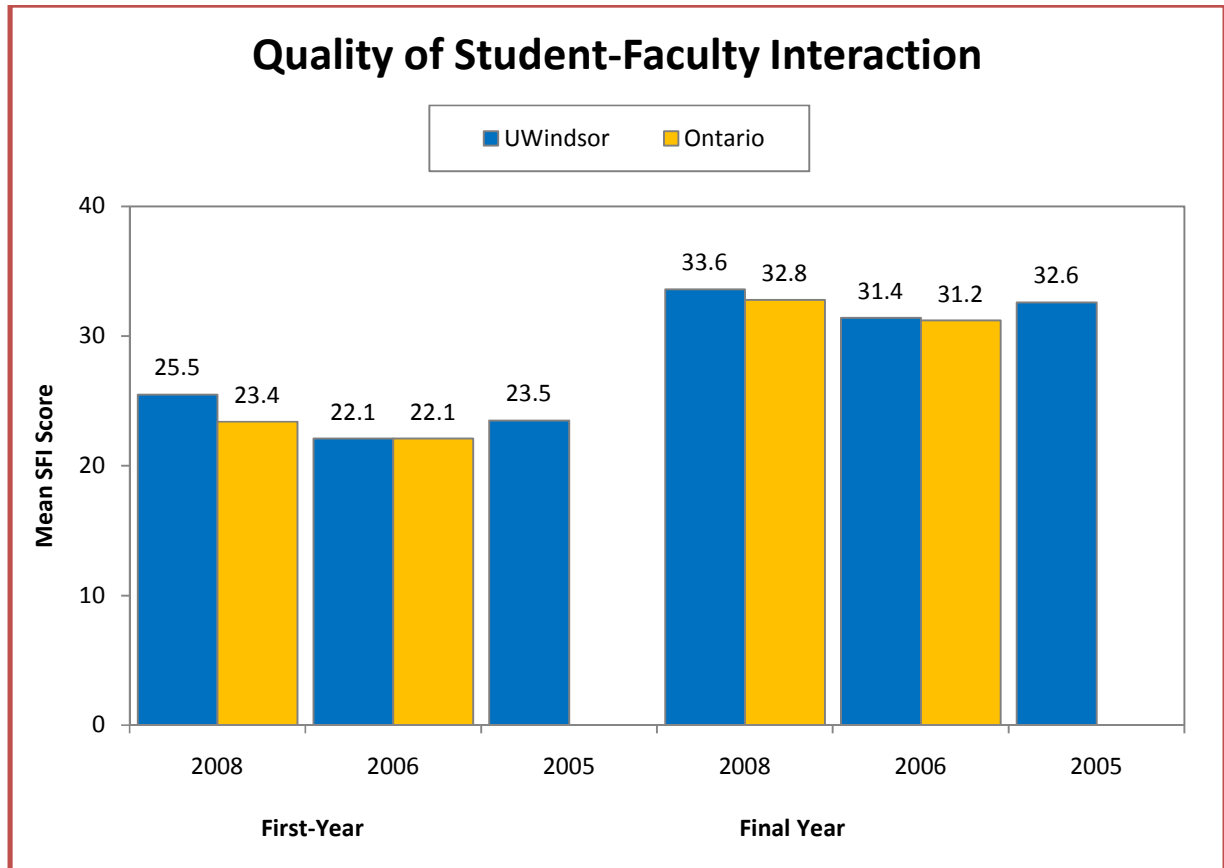
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**If you could start over again, would you go to the same university you are now attending?**

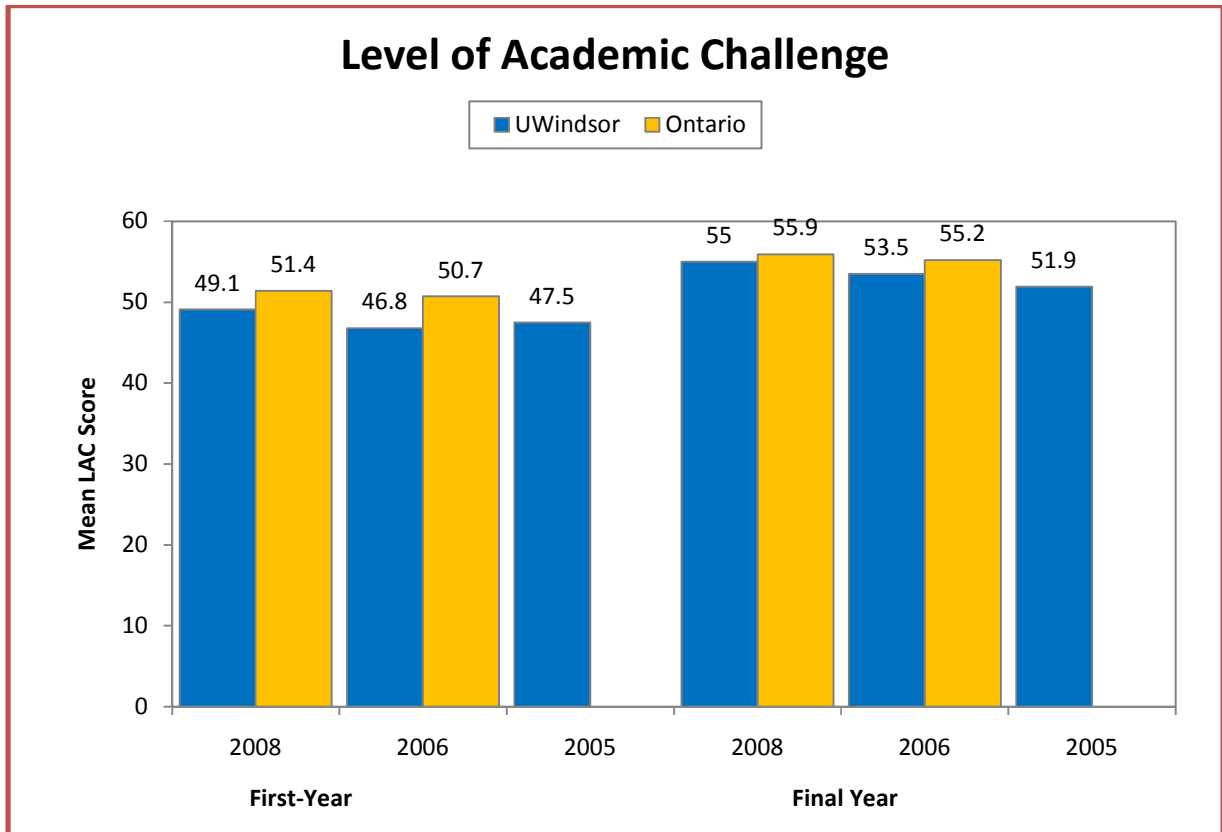


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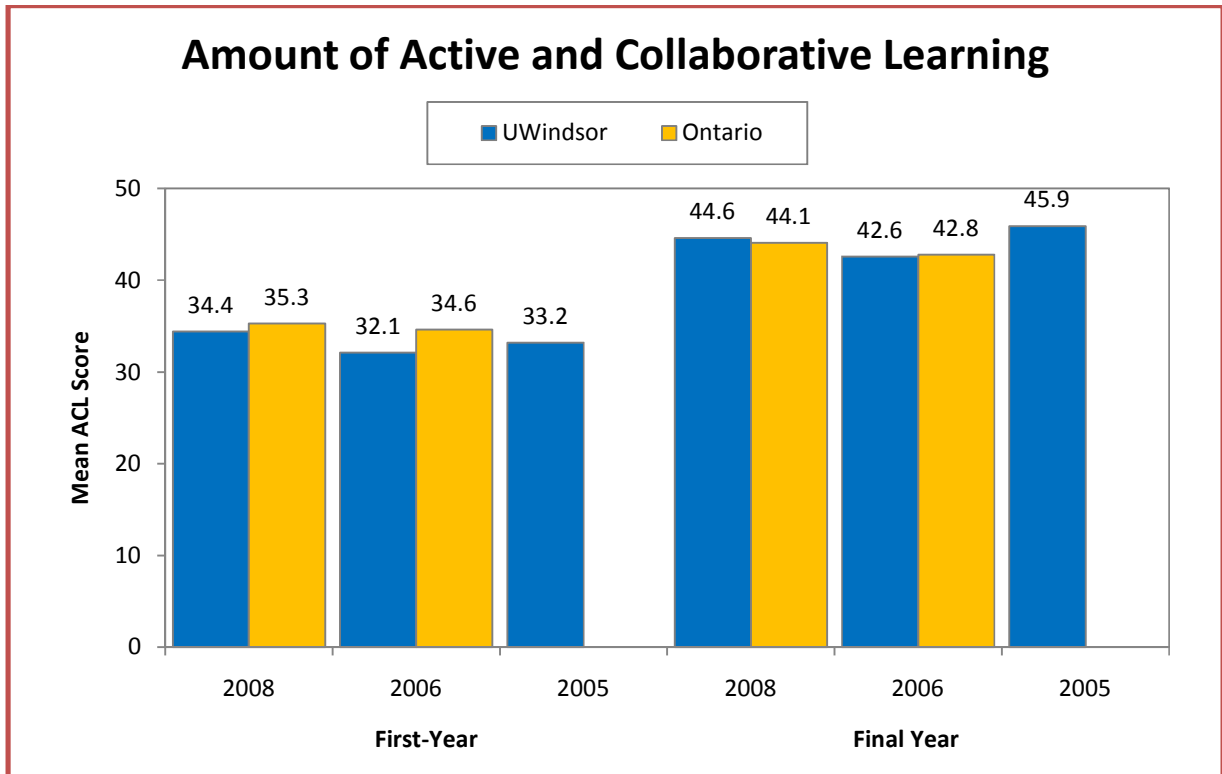
### The NSSE Benchmarks:



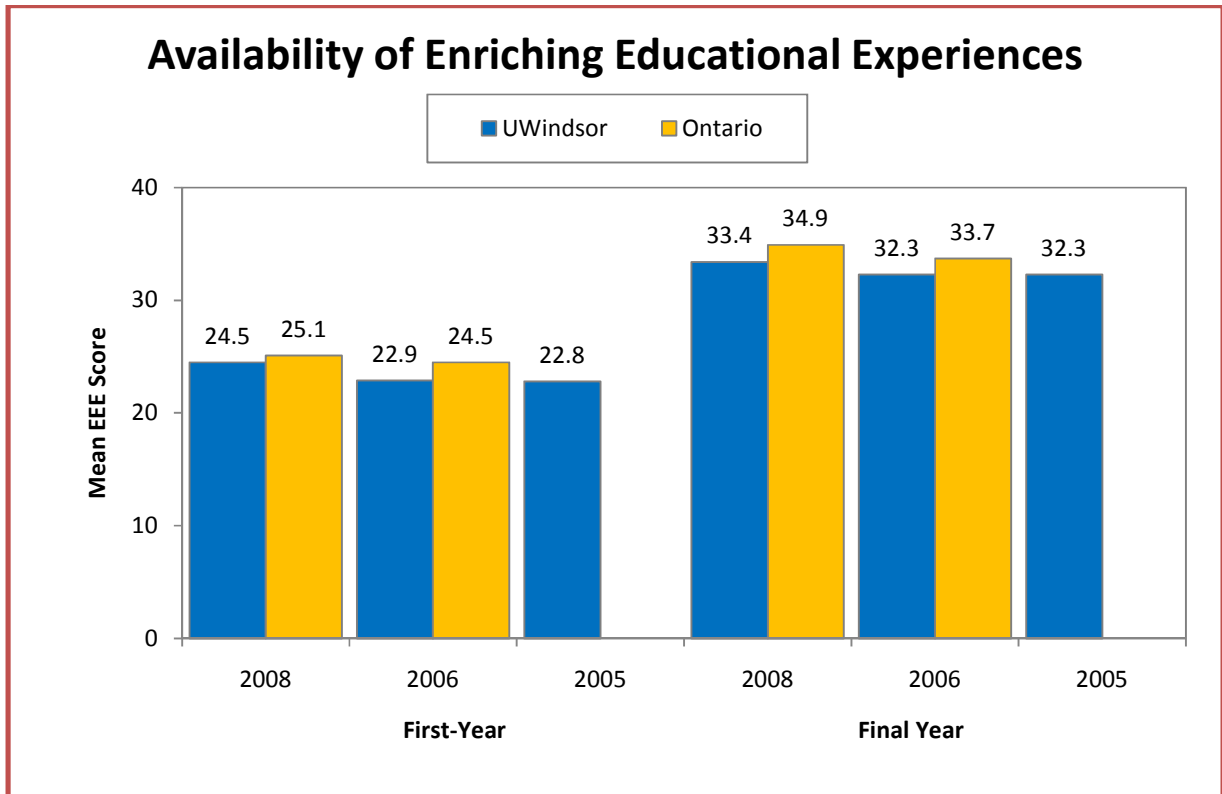
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