V. LAUNCHING AND MANAGING THE HSSSE-MGSSE: KEY STEPS TO MAKE IT SUCCESSFUL

User's Guide and Toolkit for the Surveys of Student Engagement: The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) and the Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement (MGSSE)

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As you work to implement or strengthen your use of the HSSSE, the MGSSE, or other similar tools, it is important to consider certain issues carefully and make key decisions effectively.

In this section, we'll look at six strategic priorities for launching a successful HSSSE or MGSSE program, seven principles for using assessment results, and six techniques and tactics for effective administration.

Six Strategic Priorities for Successful Programs

1. MISSION ALIGNMENT

The HSSSE or the MGSSE is best introduced, framed, and frequently affirmed as being tightly aligned to the school's vision of educational excellence. Make these connections; don't assume others will see them. For Tyler Thigpen, now a doctoral candidate at Harvard Graduate School of Education and formerly upper school head at Mount Vernon Presbyterian School (Georgia), two of the school's most important education priorities were connecting learning to the outside world and elevating student voice. When Thigpen launched the HSSSE program, he explained to all concerned that it was the best tool to measure these particular qualities.

2. LEADERSHIP INVOLVEMENT

It's best not to delegate assessment initiatives too thoroughly. If the head or division head is not observed by all involved as attending and invested, the program will not be taken seriously. Show that you care! When schools, such as The Lovett School (Georgia), establish HSSSE results as part of the board's institutional "scorecard" or when the head makes HSSSE or MGSSE data part of a faculty presentation at the beginning of the year, it sends a message that the project matters and is worth the time to make it work.

3. RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Put your money — and other precious resources — where your mouth is. Allocate and assign administrative responsibilities and dedicated meeting time to the HSSSE or MGSSE. Feature news of it prominently, and consider whether your team would benefit from consultation or other advice on best practices. All of these commitments will pay significant dividends compared with letting the tool wither out on a distant, unnourished vine.

4. GOAL/INITIATIVE ALIGNMENT

In nearly every school, data collection seems abstract to many participants. "Why are we doing this again?" and "What are we going to do with this information?" are oft-heard questions. Head them off. Explain from the beginning which specific goals the HSSSE or MGSSE will monitor or which initiatives it will inform. Reducing bullying might be one such goal. At The American School in London, where family transience impacted school community, improving the quality of student life via an advisory program and other initiatives was the goal, and the HSSSE was the method used to identify opportunities for improvement and measure progress.

5. QUESTIONS

Begin at the beginning. Data inform judgment and strengthen understanding, but it is up to the leadership and the faculty to determine about what the data should inform. Before announcing the new tool — or perhaps before selecting it — conduct one or more roundtables in which the only task is to generate questions about student life, classroom experience, social dynamics, and students' emotional well-being. Consolidate and prioritize those

questions, and then, before administering the HSSSE or MGSSE, study whether and how the survey might provide at least initial evidence for answering those questions. This puts everyone in the frame of mind to make sense of the data on arrival.

6. COMMUNICATIONS AND TRUST-BUILDING

Leadership should proactively communicate what the HSSSE and MGSSE are, why they support the school's mission, and how they will further the school's improvement. In addition, underscore that they will not be used punitively and that they won't factor into faculty evaluation. Trust, as we all know, is the stitching of school culture and educational improvement. The HSSSE and MGSSE must be deployed to elevate — not depress — trusting communities. Consider how early in the process faculty leaders can be involved in choosing and deploying the HSSSE or MGSSE.

Seven Principles for Using Assessment Results

The HSSSE and MGSSE have a "big sibling," a tool widely used at hundreds of colleges and universities, called the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). HSSSE and MGSSE users can learn a lot from NSSE research and practice. Jillian Kinzie, who administers the NSSE from offices at Indiana University, has collaborated with two colleagues to share strategies for "fostering greater use of assessment results." They lay out Seven Principles, most of which are pertinent to independent schools:

1 "Gauge the value of assessment work by the extent to which results are used." Ask whether the work is embedded in a cyclical process that culminates in action for improvement and measured progress.

2 "Identify the target for use of evidence of student learning …. Identify institution-wide or program-level goals…" and, if so, which one: departmental, divisional, grade-level, etc.

3 "Begin assessment activity with the end use in mind. From the outset of any assessment process, consider the practical questions … of greatest interest to potential partners … and how the results could be used."

4 "Leverage the accreditation process for meaningful campus action to improve student learning."

5 "Connect assessment work to related current national initiatives and projects." Is your school working with others on curricular initiatives such as STEM programming, makerspace development, equity improvement, computer science, independent advanced studies, social/emotional learning, or wellness? Consider how you could collaborate with others in collecting, sharing, and analyzing evidence such as HSSSE or MGSSE data.

6 "Link assessment activity to campus functions that require evidence of student learning...." Does your school have board education committees, external evaluations, departmental reviews, or strategic planning goals? Probably. Consider how the HSSSE or MGSSE can be embedded within these projects.

7 "Work purposefully toward the final stage of the assessment cycle — assessing impact, closing the assessment loop — and remember that the assessment of student learning is a *continuous* process.... [T]aking time to assess the impact of evidence-based change is essential in fostering a culture that supports the meaningful use of assessment results."[1]

Administering the HSSSE and MGSSE: Six Techniques and Tactics

Previous users of the HSSSE report that administering the survey has been simple and hassle-free. Nonetheless, here are a few tips:

1. CONSIDER YOUR SCHEDULE OF ADMINISTRATION CAREFULLY.

First, think about how often you wish to use the survey. If you are participating in a particular research program such as the NAIS HSSSE pilot study, this might be decided for you: every year for three years. But if you have discretion, think about timing it to your accreditation cycle (self-study, interim report, next self-study) or to your strategic plan cycle (identifying priorities, monitoring progress), which would be every two to three years.

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1 Jillian Kinzie, Pat Hutchings, and Natasha Jankowski, "Fostering Greater Use of Assessment Results: Principles for Effective Practice," in *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education* ed. George D. Kuh et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 70–71.

2. NOTE THAT IT MAY NOT BE IDEAL, IN THE LONG RUN, TO ADMINISTER EVERY YEAR TO EVERY STUDENT.

It doesn't cost very much in time and money, but HSSSE and MGSSE data can be labor-intensive to analyze. Also, students may suffer from "survey fatigue" when asked to do a survey again and again, year after year. Seniors may or may not be the best survey respondents. They represent the capstone and completion of your program, yes, but there is a common, and perhaps developmentally necessary, disaffection that often taints the perspective of seniors and might influence overall results. One option to consider is to administer HSSSE every year but just to ninth- and 11th-graders. Another is to administer it every third year to all but seniors.

3. CHECK YOUR BANDWIDTH.

It's worthwhile to do this in advance for this online survey tool, but know that only a few schools have reported any difficulty in this arena.

4. SPEAK TO STUDENTS ABOUT THE PURPOSE AND VALUE OF THE HSSSE AND MGSSE.

Have a school leader take a few moments at a school meeting to explain what the survey is, how it will be used, and why students should care. Erin Duffy, head of the upper school at Seacrest Country Day School (Florida), explains, "I really wanted to make kids feel like part of the process. I spoke to them to explain why it's important; I said it's even more important than the SAT! I also

asked them to promise me that they will be honest so we can better meet their needs."

- **Tell and Show.** Beyond telling students you value their input, show it to them by pointing to specific examples of how you've recently changed programs and policies based on student input, whether or not that input came from the HSSSE.

- **Create Messaging.** At the University of Puget Sound, administrators created an infographic to communicate to students how carefully they attended to student input.

Source: University of Puget Sound, "What did you say?" postcard. Results from the 2013 Beginning of College Survey of Student Engagement; in NSSE, Using Data to Catalyze Change on Campus: Lessons from the Field, Volume 3

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5. ACKNOWLEDGE AND SHOW APPRECIATION FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION.

Doing so won't change any results of the survey already completed, of course, but unless you're only doing it every three or four years, it's never too soon to request student support for a survey. Offer ice-cream sundaes in the cafeteria or a free dress day the following day — something to delight students and show them that you appreciate their assistance and effort.

6. STRIVE FOR — BUT DON'T OBSESS ABOUT — A HIGH PARTICIPATION RATE.

Yes, you want to have a large sample, and, yes, for the open-ended response sections, you certainly want to try to provide every student with the opportunity to contribute. But it's not essential to have *every* student participate. As long as the sample set is reasonably representative of the whole, your report will be solid. Fifteen kids out of 300 out with a stomach bug isn't likely to cause a problem, but if 29 male varsity athletes are on a road trip, their absence will change the demographic makeup of the resulting sample population in ways that could skew results.