

NSSE 2009 BENCHMARK REPORT

Participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement is intended to help institutions determine the extent to which their students are being exposed to those conditions deemed essential for success in college. NSSE calls these essential ingredients of success “benchmarks,” and they include: 1) Level of Academic Challenge, 2) Active and Collaborative Learning, 3) Student-Faculty Interaction, 4) Enriching Educational Experiences, and 5) Supportive Campus Environment.

The degree to which students are exposed to these positive factors in the learning environment is measured by a benchmark score. A benchmark score is the weighted average of the sum of individual scores across all questions selected for inclusion in the benchmark. From six to 12 questions are included in each of NSSE’s five benchmarks. Benchmark rankings are determined by comparing an institution’s scores with those of its peers.

2009 Benchmark Scores

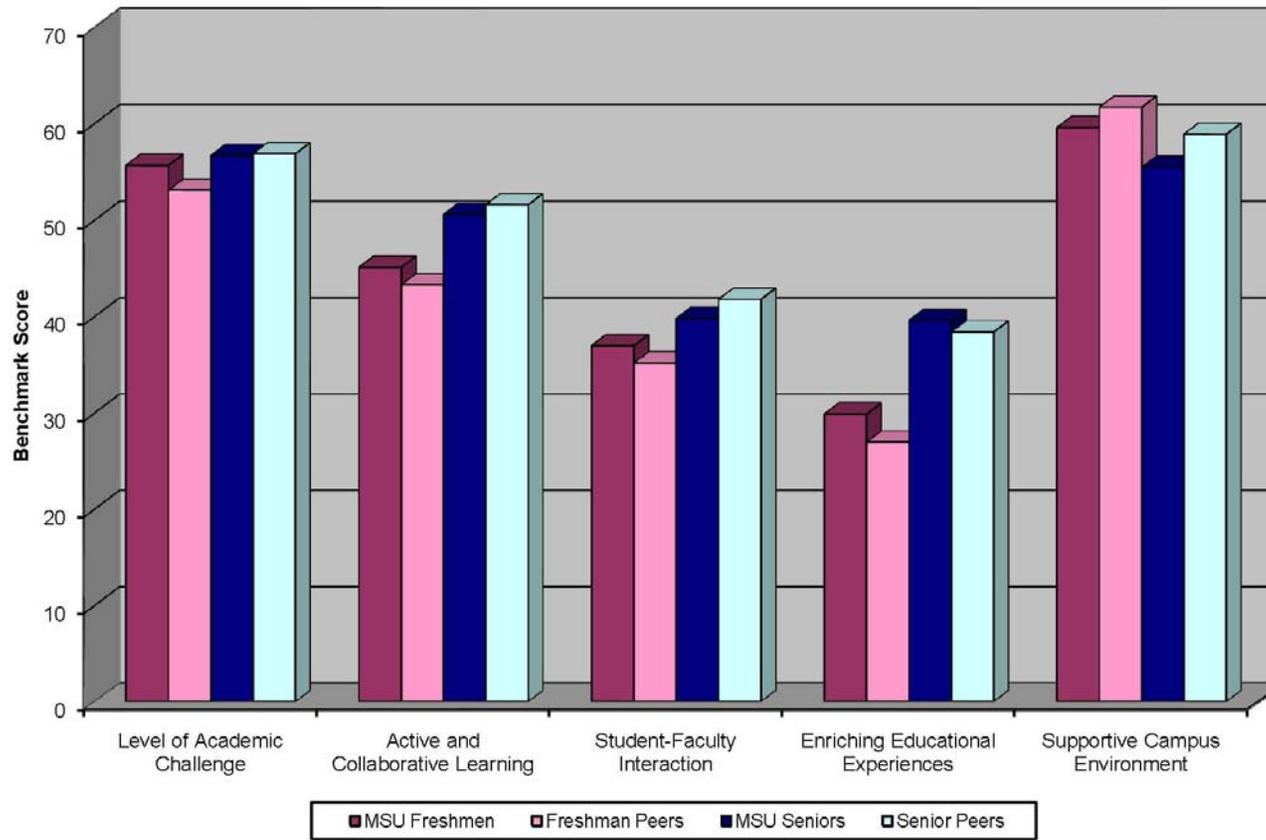
Table 1 shows Montclair State University’s spring 2009 NSSE benchmark scores for both freshmen and seniors, with comparisons made to freshmen and seniors attending peer institutions within our Carnegie classification. These data reveal that benchmark scores for MSU’s seniors exceeded those of the University’s freshmen on four out of five measures. Seniors described higher levels of academic challenge, more active and collaborative learning experiences, greater student-faculty interaction, and more enriching educational experiences. MSU freshmen, on the other hand, described a more supportive campus environment. The following chart depicts these differences.

Compared to freshmen attending other institutions within our Carnegie classification, benchmark scores for MSU’s freshmen exceeded those of their peers in four out of five areas. MSU freshmen had higher benchmark scores on level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences. Their benchmark score was lower for supportive campus environment. Differences across all five freshmen benchmarks were statistically significant.

Benchmark scores for MSU’s seniors exceeded those of seniors at our peer institutions in one area (enriching educational experiences), but this difference was not statistically significant. MSU seniors scored below their peers on the other four benchmarks, but only two of these differences (student-faculty interaction and supportive campus environment) were statistically significant.

It should be noted that MSU seniors had the highest mean score related to enriching education experiences, but also the lowest mean benchmark score related to supportive campus environment. No MSU freshman benchmark scores were highest or lowest among the groups. The chart on the following page depicts these rankings.

BENCHMARK COMPARISONS WITH CARNEGIE PEERS, 2009



Disaggregated Benchmark Scores

Table 2 shows mean comparisons for each of the 11 questions that are used to generate the benchmark score for Level of Academic Challenge. Scores for MSU freshmen exceeded those of their peers on 10 of 11 measures, while seniors scores were higher on five measures.

Compared to their peers, MSU freshmen spent more time on class preparation, they were assigned more reading, they wrote more, their coursework involved more use of higher-order skills, and they worked harder than they thought they could. MSU freshmen were less likely to say that the campus environments emphasized spending significant amounts of time studying or on academic work.

MSU seniors said they wrote more long papers than their peers, and more of their coursework involved analysis and synthesis. More MSU seniors also said they worked harder than they thought they could. Seniors at peer institutions said they studied more, had more work assigned, wrote more short papers, and took courses that emphasized making judgments and applying theories. They also said that studying was emphasized more at their campuses.

With respect to Active and Collaborative Learning, interesting behavioral similarities appear among both MSU freshmen and seniors compared to their peers (see Table 3). Both freshmen and seniors at MSU were more likely than their peers to ask questions in class, participate in class discussions, and make class presentations. At the same time, they were less likely than their peers to work collaboratively with other students either in or out of class, and they were less likely to discuss ideas from their classes or readings with others outside of class. These findings suggest that our students may be more engaged in individualized than group learning activities. There is clearly involvement in learning and engagement in the classroom, but not of a form that promotes interpersonal interaction and a sense of learning community.

Table 4 includes mean comparisons of those questions relating to Student-Faculty Interaction. MSU freshmen were more likely than their peers to interact with faculty in all areas except for career plans. In contrast, MSU seniors were less likely than their peers to interact with faculty in all areas.

MSU freshmen and seniors both had higher overall scores than their peers on the benchmark associated with enriching educational experiences (see Table 5). MSU students (both freshmen and seniors) scored particularly high on all measures related to diversity, and they participated more in foreign language studies and learning communities. MSU seniors were also more likely than their peers to have participated in co-ops, internships, and/or field experiences, though the difference was not statistically significant.

Both freshmen and seniors attending MSU were less likely than their peers to describe the campus environment as supportive (see Table 6). The differences were statistically significant with respect to perceived support they received for academic success, and the quality of their relationships with faculty and administrative personnel.

Comparisons with Highly Engaged Institutions

Table 7 compares the NSSE benchmark scores of MSU freshmen and seniors to the scores of students attending the year's "most highly engaged institutions." Highly engaged institutions are those whose mean scores on a given benchmark measure are in the top 10% or 50% of all participating colleges and universities. To a greater or lesser extent, benchmark scores of MSU freshmen and seniors fall short of the mean scores of students attending these highly engaged universities.

MSU freshmen compare most favorably to first-year students at highly engaged campuses on measures of academic challenge and enriching educational experiences. The gap is widest between MSU's freshmen and freshmen at highly engaged institutions with respect to the levels of campus support they report receiving.

Similarly, MSU's seniors compare most favorably to seniors at highly engaged institutions with respect to academic challenge. Where they differ most from seniors at highly engaged institutions, however, is on the benchmark related to student-faculty interaction. The chart on the following page depicts these rankings.

Trends

In 2002, MSU freshmen scored higher than freshmen attending peer institutions on only two of five benchmarks: level of academic challenge and enriching educational experiences (see Table 8). By 2005, MSU freshman scores were higher on all five benchmarks, and the same held true in 2006. Results from 2009 revealed a slight "give-back," with MSU freshmen scores topping those of their peers on four of five benchmarks.

Between 2002 and 2005, the scores of MSU seniors were lower than those of seniors attending peer institutions on all five benchmarks. Improvement came in 2006, when MSU seniors scored higher than seniors attending peer institutions on two of five benchmarks. However, as was the case with our freshmen, results from 2009 revealed a slight "give-back," with MSU senior scores topping those of their peers on only one of five benchmarks.

BENCHMARK COMPARISONS WITH TOP 10% OF HIGHLY ENGAGED INSTITUTIONS, 2009

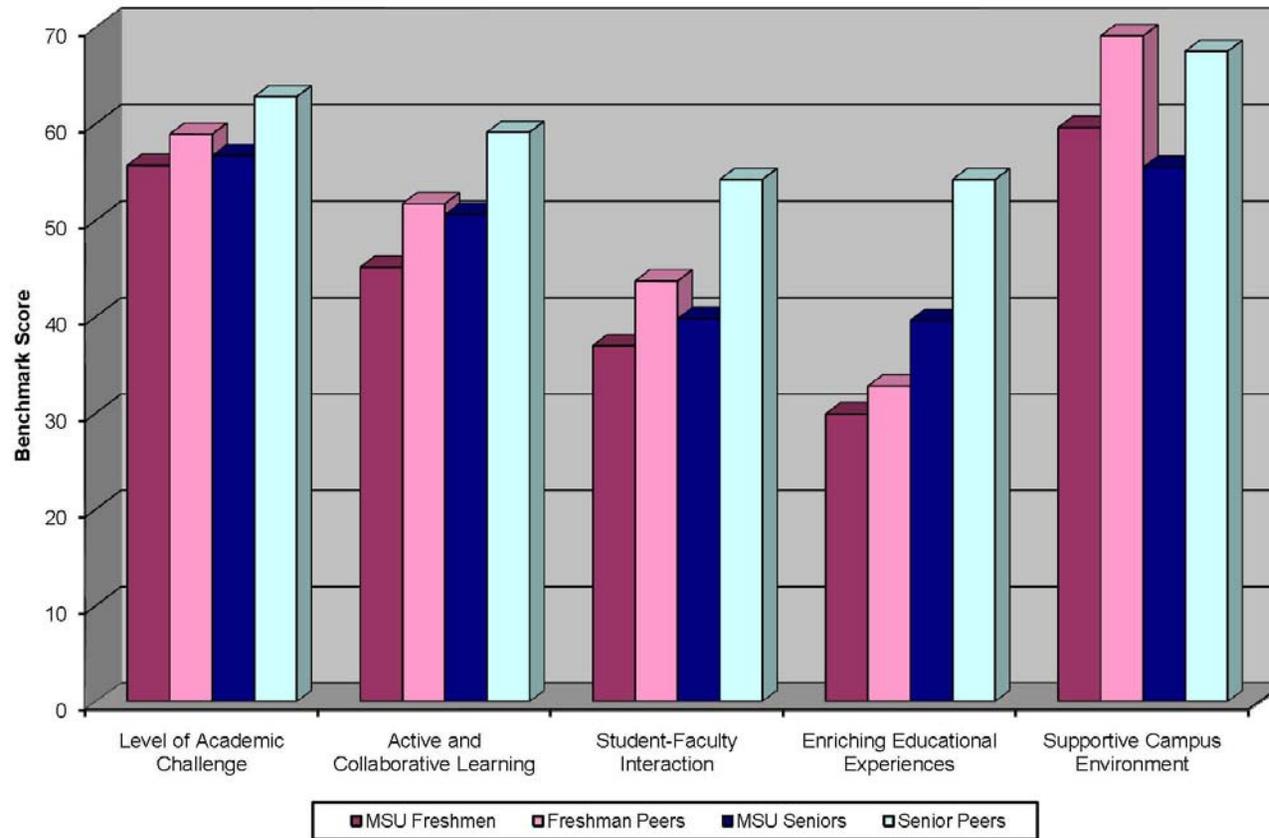
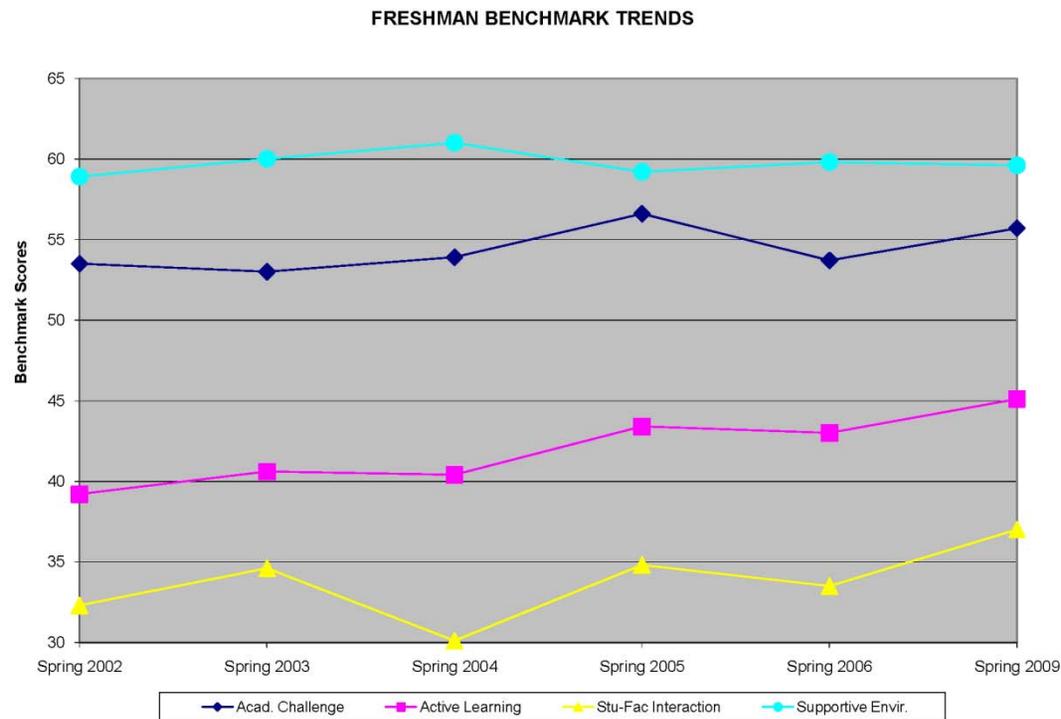
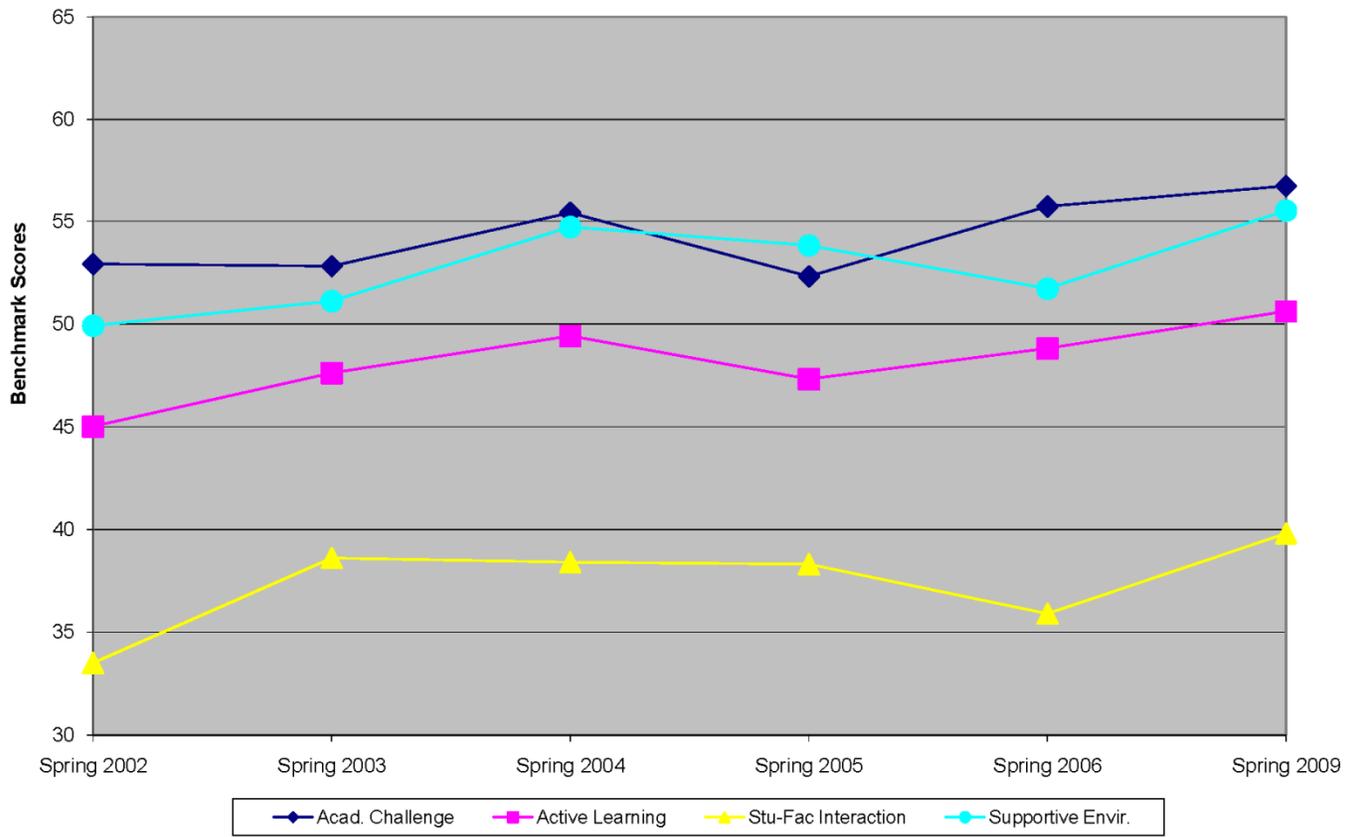


Table 9 shows MSU freshmen and senior trends less the comparative data. This table shows clear improvement between 2002 and 2009 on four benchmarks for both freshmen and seniors. The greatest improvement occurred for freshman with respect to active and collaborative .learning and student-faculty interaction. For seniors, significant improvement occurred on three measures (active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment). The charts below and on the following page depict these changes in benchmark scores over time for freshmen and seniors, respectively.



SENIOR BENCHMARK TRENDS



Summary

In 2009, the scores of Montclair State University's freshmen exceeded those of freshmen at peer institutions in nearly every benchmark category. Clearly, MSU freshmen find the campus environment academically challenging, fully engaging with high levels of interaction, and rich with opportunity.

Compared to MSU freshmen, the University's seniors find the campus environment even more academically challenging, engaging, and enriching, though perhaps less supportive. However, when compared to seniors at peer institutions, the benchmark scores of MSU's seniors fall a little short. In particular, MSU seniors are less likely to be active and collaborative learners, and they interact with faculty less. MSU seniors also find the campus environment less supportive than do seniors at peer institutions.

Despite these apparent weaknesses at the senior level, since 2002 the benchmark scores of both MSU freshmen and seniors have improved in relative and absolute terms. In 2002, MSU's freshman benchmark scores exceeded those of their peers in only two of five areas. Now, MSU freshman scores are significantly higher in four areas. Seniors have also improved relative to their peers, and now find their environment more enriching than do seniors at other institutions in our Carnegie peer group. Clearly, MSU is moving in the right direction.

However, more might be done to sustain throughout a student's career the clear successes seen at the freshman level. In particular, strategies could be developed to strengthen the support network for seniors at MSU. Opportunities for interpersonal interaction and collaborative learning could be expanded for seniors that might promote a greater sense of community. Learning communities, now limited to the freshman year, might be extended to the senior year. For example, some colleges have introduced interdisciplinary senior seminars (i.e., a capstone general education experience) to compliment senior seminars in the major. This has enhanced seniors' interactions with faculty across the University, and promoted collaborative learning.