It does exist! Hunting for meaning in the NSSE

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NSSE Civic Engagement Module

- The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) assesses first-year and senior participation in programs and activities that institutions provide to encourage learning and personal development.
- NSSE is administered every 3 years to JMU first-years and seniors who volunteer to complete the instrument.
- Two additional modules are administered along with the core survey for each administration; at JMU, the Civic Engagement module was administered in 2014.
- This module asks students to assess their conflict resolution skills. It also examines perceptions of support for activism and how often students have engaged with campus, local, state, national, or global issues. The module includes questions about service-learning, community service or volunteer work, and becoming an informed and active citizen (NSSE Topical Modules, 2018).

Method

Participants
- In 2014, students were recruited through bulk email, bus ads, table tents, and visual advertisements. Prizes were offered as an incentive to participate.
- 1,603 JMU students responded; 405 answered the open-ended item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Academic year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>115 Males</td>
<td>180 First-years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>290 Females</td>
<td>225 Seniors</td>
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Purpose of Study

- The focus of our study is on the Civic Engagement module, which contains one open-ended question.
- NSSE provides the open-ended responses to institutions after administration, but there is no categorization or analysis of responses to the open-ended item on the Civic Engagement module.
- We implemented an organization system in order to evaluate what experiences students were having that they consider meaningful.

Results

Word cloud presenting the most commonly used words in student responses.

"Think about the experiences you may have had with local, campus, state, national, or global issues. What about these experiences has been most meaningful to you?"

Examples:
- “Learning about the minimum wage in microeconomics class.” (Political and Social Issues-Economics)
- “My most meaningful experiences have been with my swim team! It has created a family and together we have done so many memorable things.” (Campus Engagement)
- “I never realized how so many people have different views. It very important to be open to everyone and never ‘judge a book by its cover.’ I learned that college enables students to be surrounded by so much diversity and no one should take that for granted.” (Diversity)
- “Spreading awareness to the issue and getting others involved is one of the best things I have done while at this university.” (Communication)
- “I have not had any experiences with local, campus, state, national, or global issues. I have not been involved in that way around campus.” (Nothing-High Effort)
- “It helps to give me a different perspective on life and realize how fortunate I truly am. It helps me to appreciate and want to make others appreciate. It makes me want to make a difference.” (Personal Growth)

Implications

- Able to get JMU student body “pulse” when it comes to civic engagement. Showed where JMU is lacking or is strong in terms of students becoming involved in opportunities to enhance their civic engagement.
- By using these codes or implementing a similar process, institutions will be able to summarize and report the kinds of experiences that their students are highlighting in their responses.
- This system can be used by other institutions for future categorization of open-ended responses from the NSSE to better gauge the kind of civic engagement experiences students are having.