

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



Senior Survey Update - Fall 2011

“I had excellent professors who really cared ...”

Iowa Outcomes Assessment Papers

At the time they file to graduate, undergraduates are asked to complete a 10-question survey on their learning experiences at UI. Around 90% of students typically respond.

This series of occasional papers presents analysis of student responses to particular survey items, along with suggestions for steps that faculty, staff, and students might take to improve UI student learning experiences.

This Senior Survey Update focuses on how well students think their UI education has helped them achieve their educational goals, as well as four undergraduate learning outcomes widely shared by departments throughout the university.

What Graduating Seniors Say About What Helped Them Learn During Their Undergraduate Experience at UI

The UI Senior Exit Survey asks graduating students about their undergraduate experience, including how well they think their time at UI has helped them learn and contributed to the achievement of their educational goals.

The Council on Student Learning (COSL), a faculty-staff committee created by the Office of the Provost, reviewed learning outcomes established by undergraduate programs throughout UI and identified four widely shared outcomes that encompass student learning in and out of the classroom, both within and beyond students' chosen majors. The Senior Exit Survey asks graduating seniors to report on how UI has helped them learn in each of these four areas.

This paper is the first in a series of occasional papers on lessons that can be learned from students' survey responses. Future papers will focus on ways to support student success, and on challenges students reported facing at UI.

“My time at UI has helped me ...”

During Spring 2011, the overwhelming majority of graduating seniors (90% or more) agreed (A) or strongly agreed (SA) that their UI experiences helped them achieve their own educational goals and each of the shared learning outcomes:

(SA)	(A)	My time at UI has helped me ...
42%	52%	Achieve my educational goals.
41%	53%	Build a broad knowledge base in subjects inside and outside my major.
49%	48%	Gain intellectual and practical skills.
54%	40%	Develop social, intellectual, and personal responsibility.
46%	47%	Learn to apply my knowledge and skills in new situations.

Student Comments

It's clear that most students graduate with a strong sense that the university has helped them learn in many ways. When asked what helped them succeed, many students identify faculty, staff, and TAs who challenged and supported them:

"The constant support of the department helped me succeed. Their unfailing confidence and high expectations pushed me to achieve beyond what I believed was possible for me."

"I'm challenged in my coursework every day, all the while knowing that my professors and TAs are on my side, going out of their way to make sure I learn what I need to learn. This has been made apparent throughout my entire time here."

Students also reported benefiting from seeing professors' excitement about what they were teaching and their concern for student success:

"Keep hiring fun and enthusiastic professors. The more the love their research topic the more interested I am in learning about that topic."

"My ability to trust and learn from my professors made me successful at UI, as well as my professors' desire to take me under their wing."

"I had excellent professors who really cared about my education and future goals."

However, not all students reported positive experiences. Approximately 5% disagreed that UI helped them achieve one or more of the shared learning outcomes. Comments from these students on their experiences at UI include:

"Some professors ... don't realize that things that come naturally to them are not so straightforward for the students."

"I could have done better at an institution where standards were higher and faculty had more personal interest in how their students were doing."

"I had no direction and nobody pushing me ... Of course, it starts and ends with me but it could have been changed by someone willing to put the time in to get me back on track."

Initial Observations

Many graduating seniors attribute their success at UI to a blend of challenge and support: faculty and staff who communicate high expectations for learning along with confidence in students' ability, conveying expertise in their field as well as concern for their students' success.

Though they are in the minority, graduating seniors who reported a less successful experience at UI were also more likely to report experiencing only part of the blend – for example, low expectations, or challenge without support.

These student observations of what they experienced at UI (or in a small number of cases, didn't experience) echo the findings of years of higher education research and assessment:

- Students push themselves to meet challenging expectations when
 - (1) they hear confidence that they are up to the challenge, and
 - (2) they know there is support for helping them meet the challenge.
- Students are motivated by seeing that someone is willing to invest in helping them succeed.
- When students can see faculty members' engagement in their field and their interest in introducing students to it, the enthusiasm is contagious.

Further papers in this series will take a closer look at student comments on what helped them learn at UI, as well as their reflections on obstacles they encountered during their undergraduate experience.

"I'm challenged in my course work every day, all the while knowing that my professors and TAs are on my side ..."

