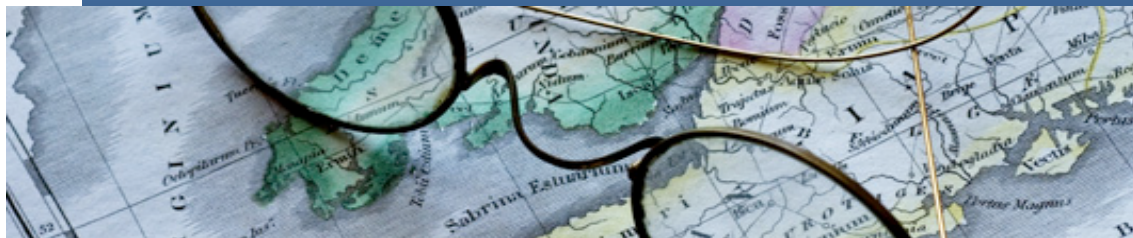# What are students learning at The University of Iowa?

### Senior Survey Update - Summer 2012

## "I always felt challenged and encouraged to do my best"

At the time they file to graduate, undergraduates are asked to complete a brief 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 student responses to the survey's final open-ended question.

### Faculty and Staff Analysis of Student Responses to Open-Ended Senior Exit Survey Questions

The UI Senior Exit Survey asks graduating seniors about their overall undergraduate experience at UI. As noted in previous Updates, the overwhelming majority of students agree or strongly agree that their UI experiences have helped them achieve their educational goals and four widely shared UI undergraduate learning outcomes.

Students are also invited to respond to one open-ended question about their experiences at UI. Of the 90% of graduating seniors who respond to the survey, about two-thirds take time to respond to the open-ended reflection question.

This paper presents themes that stood out to 120 UI faculty and staff members who participated in crowd-sourcing meetings on campus during 2011/12, at which we worked together to review and categorize thousands of open-ended responses.

**The majority of students are graduating with a strong sense of accomplishment, community, and appreciation for their time at the university.**

Many faculty and staff members who reviewed student responses indicated that they regularly meet with individual students who seek out their help, but they rarely have opportunities to see a bigger picture of how students perceive their overall experience at UI. These faculty and staff were pleased to see the positive tone evident in student responses. Examples of student comments include,

"I think I was successful because of the people I surrounded myself with. Not only my friends, but the faculty at UI as well, really strived to remind us why we are all here. The professors did everything in their power to help me succeed."

"Beyond all of the resources that the University has to offer, my friends, teachers, and co-workers have all contributed to my success here through endless support and positive criticism which have allowed me to become not only a better student, but a better person in general."

"Meeting interesting people that had new ideas and ideals about how to shape our future, pushed me to learn more and achieve a higher standard for myself."

**When asked what helped them succeed, or what got in the way of their success, students are as likely to refer to themselves as to the institution, faculty, or staff.**

A quick tally by faculty and staff reviewers revealed that the most frequently occurring student comments (about 30%) were reflections on the student's own actions that helped or hindered the student's success:

> "I believe that I was most successful because I took great interest in the classes I was taking, and what I was learning about."

> "It took me a while to learn that I had to complete work on my own without someone telling me to do so. Halfway through freshman year, after I had better adjusted to college life, I was able to get better grades."

> "Hard work, focus, and not being afraid to ask questions whenever needed."

Next most frequent (just over 25%) were comments on institutional resources that affected them, and almost as many (just under 25%) referred to contributions by faculty or staff members.

**Students express great appreciation for faculty and for being intellectually challenged, especially if they know support is there for them when they need it.**

Faculty and staff reviewers noted that when students referred to being challenged in their classes, it was typically in positive terms, with appreciation for those who helped them meet the challenges:

> "The instructors at the University of Iowa are passionate about their subject area and are so willing to help every student succeed. I always felt challenged and encouraged to do my best and push my limits. I also met life-long friends in my field who helped me get through the tough courses."

> "I really did not face any significant difficulty during my time at the University of Iowa besides the challenges I was purposely given to acquire the knowledge and the skills during my coursework."

> "The thing that helped me the most at UI was the personal attention that not only the TAs were willing to give you, but the professors as well. They are almost always willing to help you with a problem regardless of what time of day it is."

**We tend to think of the university in terms of programs we provide, but students often describe their university experience in terms of people they interact with.**

Across all responses, faculty and staff reviewers observed the pattern that students often describe their experiences in terms of a person they worked with, rather than the office of program where that person worked. When students describe learning, it is often accompanied by a reference to the professor or TA that they learned from.

Faculty and staff reviewers saw this pattern as both an encouragement and a challenge: Their day-to-day interactions with students can have a lasting, memorable effect on students' experience at the university.

After reviewing a number of student comments, one reviewer said, "I have these kinds of interactions with students every day. For me, they're routine. I don't usually think of them having a potentially significant impact on the student."

Another noted, "We need to be reminded of the importance of trying to personally connect with students." A third commented, "We need to get the word out … Clearly one-on-one interactions matter."

Iowa
Outcomes
Assessment