

Senior Exit Survey – Observations of 2020/21 Open-Text Responses

The Senior Exit Survey is administered to all undergraduates at the time they file to graduate. Results are compiled annually after Spring semester degree applications have been approved. In 2021, 77% of graduating seniors completed the survey.

The survey concludes with one of four randomly assigned open-text questions which ask students to comment on

- what helped them most
- what they value most about their time at UI
- what advice they would offer future students, or
- what challenges they faced

This summary provides an overview of common themes in student responses to these four open-ended questions.

When students were asked about **what helped them be successful** or **what they valued most** about their UI experience, the most common responses were those that described people.

Many responses singled out faculty:

“During the course of my study at the university of Iowa, I did value and experience the expertise of its faculty members in helping the student to reach their academic goal. They were always ready to answer any concern or helped out with any support needed to be able to reach your academic success. Most importantly, the University of Iowa value of higher learning institutions was passed on us as a student, in order to be able to demonstrated values in our community and surround.”

“What helped me to be successful at UI was the teacher's willingness to help me understand concepts that were not clear and the feedback provided on various assignments.”

“I valued how much my professors cared for students and were approachable for academic concerns and questions, especially during recent semesters when we all had to deal with Covid-19.”

“The faculty has been wonderfully supportive and has made a lasting impression on me. Without them, I don't know if I could have done this. Thank you all!”

Others focused on the importance of relationships with fellow students:

“The memories and camaraderie made with classmates and project partners.”

“What I valued the most about my experience at UI was being able to build a solid network and making lifelong connections. Being at UI really helped me break out of my shell when I first came here, and I am leaving a stronger and more confident person. I also will value all the memories I have made through my classes, living experiences, and extra-curricular activities.”

“Being able to make friends that went through the same courses to be able to learn together. Joining clubs and getting involved.”

Many others reflected broadly on multiple people contributing to their UI experience:

“Throughout my time at the University of Iowa, I valued the lasting relationships that I made with the faculty and my peers. I am grateful that I went to a school where I could be walking from class to class and I would see at least one person that I know. The faculty have been very helpful in enabling me to figure out what path I wanted to take. They offer endless amounts of help in the job search process. Overall, I couldn't have asked for better people to guide me through my college experience”

“I value the relationships I cultivated, whether they be with peers or faculty members.”

“The dedicated and kind individuals that come into and out of your life as you try to navigate the strange waters that is college life. Faculty, staff, other students, co-workers, and other genuine people that help one understand the world around them, as well as themselves.”

The next most frequent type of responses regarding **what helped students** or **what they valued** were those that focused on learning experiences and opportunities, and how students changed as a result of participating in them.

Learning opportunities and experiences:

“So many opportunities, there was a place for anyone's interests and I was able to grow and develop myself into a better person with education.”

“The opportunities to get involved outside of the classroom - I really appreciated how much the instructors wanted to connect with students and provide learning opportunities for us.”

“The opportunities UI provided me. I was allowed this whole new world with clubs and organizations and experiences. I met so many people, tried many new foods and activities, and ultimately grew as a person. Thank you UI. Go Hawks!”

Learning and self-development

“Never in my life have I been challenged the way I have been while at Iowa. Going to the University of Iowa has humbled me and made me push myself in ways I didn't even know I needed to be pushed. Pursuing my education here has made me truly take ownership over my education and I am forever thankful.”

“My time at the UI has made me better at writing and self-reflection of my own work and failings. Thank you for the great time and chance to be better.”

“Learning I've grown tremendously through all the experiences and interactions I've had with other students/ faculty/ residents UI helped me explore all my interests with the abundance of resources and opportunities I've had while calling Iowa City my home.”

When asked **what advice they would offer incoming students**, many commented on the importance of making connections, taking advantage of opportunities, and persisting in the face of challenges.

Making connections

“Be bold! Get to know your professors and other peers in your classes and get help on any questions you have. I felt that was imperative to my success here at Iowa.”

“Take advantage of your professors office hours. Pop in just to get your face and name on their radar and talk with them candidly about your goals. They have tons of advice and knowledge they want to give. Also, it is easier to learn from a professor you like, so always give professors the benefit of the doubt and assume they are great people. It helps to find one thing you like about a professor and always associate them with that.”

“Get a group of friends that are in your major. Having people that you can rely on, be good friends with, and help you when you need help is the best thing you can do.”

“Don't be afraid to make new connections with people every year, most likely you will have classes with the same people year after year so it is beneficial to get to know as many people as possible.”

“Don't be afraid to meet with your teachers and TA's - they are here to help you. They want to see you succeed. Create those relationships and network!! “

Taking advantage of opportunities to explore, grow, get involved

“Take chances and don't settle for what you think will be easy. Challenge yourself to achieve your goals that may be more difficult but more rewarding in the long run.”

“Take a few courses you enjoy, even if they don't pertain to your major, it makes your experience way more enjoyable. Keep an open mind and take a diverse array of courses to get a clearer idea of what you might be interested in, or at least identify fields you know you are not interested in.”

“Don't be afraid to say yes to things you want to try or no to the things that you don't want to prioritize. “

“The most important thing to focus on first in college is to explore your options and find what interests you. Give everything you do enough time and effort to get something meaningful out of it. This can lead you to new and exciting paths you never knew existed. “

“Take advantage of as many resources as possible and don't be afraid to ask things of your professors and faculty members. The people working at the university want to see you succeed. “

Persistence

“Take it day by day. It is not easy starting this new independent life and it may seem so hard at times, but keep going because it gets better, and going to school at Iowa is the greatest.”

“Take it one day at a time. There will be days where your schedule is overwhelming, but when it's all over you will wish you had appreciated each day a little more.”

“The best thing that you can do for yourself is to start off strong. Building that solid foundation will allow you to stand tall during some of the other times where you might be challenged more than you were expecting. Organization is key, curiosity is essential, and just being able to adapt will help you through this step in your academic career.”

“Every challenge you have during undergrad is an opportunity. Finally, have fun do not burn out. GO HAWKS!!”

“Do not sell yourself short. You are capable of so much more than you probably think. Being uncomfortable is also okay. Discomfort is a space in which you can learn.”

When students were asked **what challenges they faced**, the most frequently mentioned challenges were related to the pandemic. Some students identified some challenges that they saw as unavoidable because of pandemic conditions, but others noted challenges that they thought were due to ways that the university administration or faculty members responded to the pandemic.

Virtual instruction challenges

“School online was extremely hard for me and it made my last two semesters at Iowa very difficult, and dropped my GPA significantly. Despite all of this I have acceptances from graduate schools and a full time offer after I graduate. I'm sad for my college career to end like this, but I really loved my time here. I am glad I picked Iowa.

“Fall 2020 was an exceptionally challenging semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I had to transition to virtual learning while cooped up in my apartment. I got very sick at the beginning of the year with COVID-19, but still pushed through and attended virtual classes. Despite a hard semester, I finished with a 4.0. I can honestly say I succeeded because I had support from the incredible faculty.”

“COVID-19 hit at a very interesting point in my educational career. My professors did NOT know how to adjust to virtual learning and it showed. Sifting through hundreds of pages of messily handwritten notes was a daily occurrence once virtual learning hit. I think that professional development in the realm of virtual learning would be productive for many of the teachers. All of my professors were very knowledgeable in their subject matter, but this doesn't mean that they all were good teachers”

“The only challenge that comes to mind at the moment is the transition to online learning. Making that adjustment has been a bit odd, but all of my professors have done a great job at transitioning the course content.”

“Similar to others in my graduating class, I faced challenges related to COVID-19. Virtual classes were hard to deal with at times, especially with all the additional stress I was under. But I do think the University and its faculty did the best they could to help students through this difficult time. Thank you.”

Other challenges brought on by the pandemic

“A global pandemic. The last year of college was extremely mentally and emotionally exhausting. To balance educational goals with the life changes that were taking place was very difficult.”

“Balancing working full-time and being a full-time student, while participating in extracurricular activities. Going through the hard times of the global pandemic and losing family members has been a challenge in achieving my education.”

"Just in the year 2020, I have faced many challenges that impacted my education goals. In the Spring 2020 semester, a massive global pandemic emerged causing all students to leave campus and do school remotely. Not to mention, in the summer prior to returning to campus before the 2020-2021 school year, my hometown experienced a disastrous derecho storm that truly threw a wrench in everything. Not only was I dealing with the aftermath of a horrible storm, my senior year of college was entirely uncertain."

"I faced many degree changes as I discovered who I was as a person and what career adjustments that entailed. I also faced completing my degree with a weak immune system and Covid-19."

Other frequently mentioned challenges, apart from the pandemic, include mental health concerns, getting used to meeting college expectations, and learning to manage time and responsibilities.

Getting used to meeting college expectations

"Self-motivation was the biggest challenge that I faced in terms of achieving educational goals. There is no one here to tell you when or what is needed to be done outside of class, so it was a learning process for me."

"As a first generation college student, the path I was walking wasn't laid out for me. Also starting residency my freshman year made the transition in the beginning of college difficult, as I went from being a student, to not, to being one again."

"The main challenge was overcoming what seemed like an insurmountable amount every week only to have to do it all over again the next week. While this was challenging, it has taught me many time management lessons and has prepared me for the future. It also gave me an early appreciation for what work and life balance may be like in the future and how I can attempt to cope with it."

"High school was easy for me to do well. Here at the University of Iowa, I was definitely challenged more in my academics and was required to put more effort and time into my studies to better succeed. I also had to put myself out there more in order to make stronger connections."

Managing time and responsibilities

"I worked full time during my entire time as a student at UI, which proved to be extremely difficult at times. I have advocated for myself, owned up to mistakes I've made, and have made real connections with some of my professors and TA's."

"Planning and time management skills were the main contributors to my academic success. Mapping out each week on a day-to-day basis made a heavy workload more manageable while reducing stress. I'd recommend taking twenty to thirty minutes each Sunday to get the week's deadlines, appointments, etc. in order."

"Time management. There is always a deadline or something due so you have to work extremely hard to stay on top of those things as well as enjoy the other things college life has to offer."

Mental health

"The biggest challenge for me was learning to accept myself and have personal growth alongside classes. Managing things like depression and anxiety led to me having a better understanding of myself and has moved me in a positive direction."

"Overcoming mental health issues brought on by life and increased stress due to course work were the hardest things for me. Also proving to myself and my family that I could succeed taking the route I wanted to take rather than what they thought was good for me took a lot of hard work."

"Beyond challenging coursework that I am grateful for, my hardest challenge was battling depression in the middle of my college career. It was hard, but services proved by the University helped me overcome it."

This summary is based on an analysis of responses by the 2504 graduating seniors who chose to answer the Senior Survey's final open-text question. Analysis was conducted by Alyssa Yao and Danielle Ramsey-Smith for the Office of Assessment. Responses to other Senior Survey questions are reported at <https://assessment.uiowa.edu/reports-and-surveys#Exit>.