

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



In Their Own Words

Students' Most Meaningful Learning Experiences

Student Experience in the Research University (SERU)

Student learning in higher education is complex and multidimensional, leading to academic, social, and personal development. To gain an understanding of students' most significant learning experience in their own words, we reviewed more than 2400 UI student responses to the question, "What is one of the most meaningful learning experiences you have had at UI?"

Data Collection

This question was part of the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, administered to all degree-seeking undergraduates at the University of Iowa during Spring 2016.

Just over 21% of students responded, and the profile of respondents was broadly representative of the undergraduate population in terms of academic characteristics, college, race/ethnicity, and year of study.

Findings

We used an emergent coding system to identify themes in student responses, followed by integrative coding to identify common characteristics within and across themes.

The most frequent theme identified in student comments reflected connecting their learning in class to other contexts, and almost as many identified increased self-awareness and development of interpersonal skills. Other frequently occurring themes included developing leadership skills and descriptions of specific classroom experiences.

This brief report provides an overview of student comments and distribution of most frequently occurring themes represented in the comments.

This *SERU Brief* reviews student responses to the SERU question, "What is one of the most meaningful learning experiences you have had at UI?"

More than 2400 students responded to this question. This summary highlights integrative ways that students describe their learning, and provides a distribution of most frequently occurring themes in student comments:

Students describe learning from faculty and from one another, inside and outside the classroom.

"One of the most meaningful learning experiences I have had at the University of Iowa is getting the opportunity to learn from professors who love what they do. Their passion translates into their teaching and makes me appreciate the material more."

"If I never came to this campus I would have never been able to get so many experiences and knowledge from people all around the world. I think being here really helped formed my views on more realistic things and helped open my eyes and mind to be a better person."

"I am able to take courses and work on a capstone project on issues that I truly care about. It's definitely the most valuable learning experience during these four years, as I got to not only learn from reading textbooks, but also to learn from doing something in the community."

Students often describe their UI learning experience as a whole that is the sum of many parts.

"I think it has just been a combination of my classes, where I worked, the student orgs that I am/was in, they have all shaped my experience here at Iowa. On top of all the academic parts of college ... I have met people from all over with different backgrounds and ideas. I feel like I have taken bits and pieces of things and ideas that I like and it helped me grow into who I am today."

"My time as a student athlete has been incredibly valuable shaping my work ethic, self-efficacy and thirst for a challenge ... My time as a research assistant has greatly impacted my intellectual confidence, group dynamic skills, appreciation of diversity, as well as both my written and verbal communication."

"I think the most meaningful learning experience that I've had at the university is the one I'm still going through right now. The courses and conversations I've had here have really reinforced the idea that life is a learning experience. Going through all the experiences I've had in the past few years have helped me realize that hard work and being mindful is what really helps you learn and develop as an individual."

Many students talk about their classes in terms of both what they learned and how they were changed as a result.

“I think that simply studying Geography, in any of the focus sections, is a wake-up call about my place in the world.”

“The most meaningful learning experiences I have had were my social work classes ... These classes have allowed me to grow as a person and better learn who I am and who I want to work on becoming. I have learned how to communicate with others, understand others, and step out of my comfort zone.”

“One learning experience ... occurred when I got my first C on a paper. I learned about the fact that I’ve been looking at things one-dimensionally my entire life, and in order to fulfill some of college’s many expectations, I have to think more broadly.”

When asked to describe meaningful experiences, most students focus on academic experiences, in or out of class, and on personal or interpersonal development.

About half identify their most meaningful experience as one that involved using their learning in other contexts, and just as many highlight experiences that affect how they understand themselves (Figure 1).

Other frequently occurring types of comments include those which describe a particular course or instructor they learned from, and those in which students describe learning to work with others more effectively. Students do not all report only favorable experiences, but nearly 95% report benefiting from their learning experiences at UI in one or more of these ways.

Figure 1: Distribution of Most Common Themes in Open-Text Responses



% of student comments reflecting each theme that emerged in analysis of open-text responses (total >100% because some comments reflect more than one theme)

Examples of student comments representing these themes are reported in the series, **In Their Own Words**, available at uiowa.edu/seru/their-own-words

Sample invitation to complete the SERU survey:



Student Voices Make a Difference

The University of Iowa has over 24,000 undergraduates, in more than 100 different fields of study, and we want to know what each of you thinks.

Tell us by taking a survey that lets us hear from all of you – about your classes, your major, life as a student here, and your overall experience at UI. When we hear from you, everybody benefits.

Digging Deeper

This Brief provides a snapshot of responses to just one SERU question. Other sections of SERU address a wide range of topics, including:

- how students report using their time, in and out of class
- perceptions of majors
- future plans
- student financial concerns
- levels of satisfaction and interaction with faculty
- climate for diversity
- community involvement
- common obstacles faced by students
- spite of obstacles

The full survey is at: uiowa.edu/seru

To view student responses to other SERU questions, or to explore responses by college, major, class level, or other demographic variables, contact seru@uiowa.edu

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