

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



In Their Own Words

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 examples of student comments related to taking their learning beyond the classroom.

Taking Learning Beyond the Classroom

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, and the most frequent kinds of learning experience they described were related to connecting classroom learning to other contexts, increased self-awareness, and development of interpersonal skills. This summary focuses on students using their learning in other contexts.

Putting ideas to use in other settings: Many students wrote about learning in a class that contributed to their experiences outside of that class.

"The most meaningful learning experience is learning to think critically by incorporating all other class reading materials from other classes. I have not thought about relationships among philosophy, politics, and health. But, as I study several subjects, and read political, philosophical, and health issues I get to form an idea that all these go together."

"I got a research assistant position and it has helped me bring things from in the classroom to work, and things from work into the classroom. I learned more than just what we research, such as skills and resources."

"Intro to American Politics was a very meaningful learning experience for me. I am very engaged in the election process currently going on because I better understand the process after taking that class."

Learning to see the world differently: Other students reported UI learning experiences that changed the way they see the rest of the world.

"Marketing and Sustainability ... I learned from my fellow students, my professor, and myself in ways I had never imagined possible ... Every single class session taught me something new about myself, the world, and my place in that world. I think this is truly a one-of-a-kind experience that can only be found at Iowa."

"I was a part of a service-learning class and I was able to volunteer my time with Shelter House of Iowa City and it really opened my eyes not only to the problem of homelessness Iowa City faces, but also to the issues that homeless people face."

"I would say one pivotal experience that really changed my way of thinking was my study abroad experience in India ... The experience of being in a new country opened my eyes to many ideas I'd never considered [and] taught me so much about the American culture and issues I had never realized or faced myself."

Learning to see the themselves differently: For some students, their UI learning experiences changed the way they see themselves.

“Professors in my department have opened my eyes to various encounters they have come upon and it makes me view the world with an open perspective and passion to make the world a better place.”

“Entrepreneurship & Innovation - I was able to go through the beginning phases of drawing out a plan to start a company. It was the first realization in my life that I could actually start a business, and that it could be an opportunity for me. After this class, I opened myself up to countless incredible opportunities that I otherwise had viewed impossible or “not for me” - and have grown tremendously in the process.”

“Classical Japanese was a class I struggled with greatly, but my professor taught me that it's more important to focus on where I am at my skill level, and how I improve, rather than trying to be at another's level ... She helped me every step of the way and repeatedly encouraged me to look at how much I progressed over the course rather than comparing myself to other students. This lesson changed my entire outlook on my education.”

Learning in practice: Many other students wrote about practical activities and assignments that gave them hands-on experience with course material.

“Senior design class. This helped me to learn real world experiences and how to work with clients when they are unhappy but still give a great result. Best learning experience of my college career.”

“I have taken several classes that involved hands-on experience that will benefit me in the real world.”

“One of the best learning experiences was in my foundations of special ed course. My instructor's assignments were not your typical do some research and write a paper. He forced us to go out into the community that we live in and interact with people who have learning or physical impairments. I learned a lot and began to question my own views on these individuals.”

Learning to rise to a challenge: Students also reported that they value what they learned from the experience of being challenged in their courses.

“I would say the most meaningful experience I had was seeing my scores reflect my new study habits. It gave me more confidence going into exams and improved my grades.”

“So far it would have to be my General Chemistry 2 class, because I am doing not very well in it, yet I'm not giving up and I'm making adjustments to do my absolute best.”

“I have had to take challenging courses and have spent a lot of time working with my professors to improve my study habits and understanding of the course material. I have had so many amazing professors that are passionate about their job and it is very apparent they want me to succeed just as much as I do.”

These findings demonstrate the wide variety of experiences at UI which broaden and deepen student learning far beyond the settings where students first experienced it.

Student comments representing other common 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:

TELL US.

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 and what helps them be successful in 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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