

# What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



## *In their Own Words*

### Developing Self-Awareness

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 using their increased sense of self-awareness.

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 responses related to students' increased sense of self-awareness.

We discovered that students express their increased self-awareness in terms of finding where they fit in, awareness of their own learning, discovering what motivates them, and finding ways to get connected at UI.

**Finding a Fit:** Many students reported greater awareness of where they belong, both in the present and as they look to the future.

*"I've learned more about myself and who I am at this school. I've learned what I can handle and what I can't, how to manage stress, friends, and school work. I see myself at other schools, but I'm glad I made the decision to come to Iowa. It's made me grow as a person."*

*"I have learned a lot about myself. I transferred twice (UI being my third school), and it is by far the best college I have attended. There is a lot of diversity here and I have met so many new people."*

*"Being able to be in the nursing program at UIowa has really allowed me to grow and become the woman I am today. I constantly was challenged and exposed to new experiences through clinicals, that were hard but shaped me into the nurse I will be once I graduate. The tough curriculum taught me to push myself and that with hard work and a good attitude anything is possible!"*

Many students also reported greater **awareness of their or their own learning processes**, whereby they address new perspectives that they adapted from their involvement on campus:

*"Being part of diversity discussions within Tippie College of Business. It is nice to see people expressing how they feel in their college environment, whether it may be good or bad. The only way we can make change is by discussing the problems and not just ignoring them or putting them on the back burner."*

*"Getting exam grades that were not as good as I expected. At my former university a student could cram the night before and still pull off a B, but the University of Iowa challenges their students. It has helped me to value retaining what I learn."*

*“The most meaningful learning experience I’ve had this far would be my freshman roommate situation. All four of us randomly selected our room at Mayflower, and we ended up being close friends. Two of my roommates opened my eyes to cultural diversity and the challenges minorities face in society today, something I did not have any experience in prior to college.”*

Another way students acknowledge their own self-awareness is **discovery of what motivates them**. In another words, students are aware of the decisions they made or the reasons they do certain things:

*“I found my current major, Therapeutic Recreation, in the course catalog on University of Iowa’s website. I met with the department chair and added the major within a week. The best learning experience I have had is finding a career path I am passionate about with help from the faculty and staff. I enjoy all TR classes I am enrolled in this semester, and the faculty is extremely knowledgeable; they inspire me to volunteer, get involved, and work hard to reach my goals.”*

*“My student teaching experience has changed my life. I realized that teaching is my calling. The university prepared me very well for this life changing experience.”*

*“One of the most meaningful learning experiences I have had was a professional trip to St. Louis with Women in Business. I learned a lot about the career field I wanted to enter and ended up switching my major due to this.”*

Many students also reflect awareness towards their own feelings of **connectedness, belonging and identity at UI**:

*“I have had endless incredible learning experiences here at Iowa. Every day, I feel blessed to be a student here. One particularly incredible experience was the India Winterim. It allowed me to build strong bonds with many University of Iowa students and faculty. Furthermore, it increased my cultural awareness, led to research and scholarship opportunities and helped me develop academically.”*

*“Going to the football games made me feel like I was part of a bigger community, and made me feel truly at home here at the University.”*

*“Becoming involved on campus. I have always been a more reserved, introvert personality but I have challenged myself to expand my horizons during my time at the University of Iowa. I chose to be an OnIowa! leader one year and I also had the opportunity to participate in two practicums. These three things were the biggest factors in my decisions for my future and I am so thankful for the people they have introduced me to.”*

These findings demonstrate the wide variety of learning experiences at UI, within and beyond the classroom, which are helping students develop their knowledge, skills, and awareness of both who they are and who they want to be in the future.

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](http://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](mailto:seru@uiowa.edu)

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Student comments representing other common themes are reported in the series, *In Their Own Words*, available at [uiowa.edu/seru/their-own-words](http://uiowa.edu/seru/their-own-words)

