



# RESEARCH ON IOWA STUDENT EXPERIENCES: ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Elizabeth J. Whitt, Ashley M. Asel, and Sherri I. Edvalson

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The University of Iowa

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## Academic Engagement at Iowa

The extensive body of research on college impact suggests a clear strategy to foster student learning, development, and persistence: focus on student engagement. Student engagement has two key components: (1) the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success, and (2) the ways an institution allocates its human and other resources, and organizes learning opportunities and services, to encourage students to participate in and benefit from such activities. Therefore, the RISE study of undergraduate experiences and outcomes at The University of Iowa was framed according to dimensions of student engagement demonstrated to have the greatest impact on undergraduate student success, including aca-

ademic challenge, student-faculty interaction, active and collaborative learning, and educationally-purposeful co-curricular activities. This research brief focuses on RISE results regarding students' academic engagement.

## The RISE Project

In June, 2005, then-Executive Vice President and Provost Michael J. Hogan commissioned the University of Iowa Center for Research on Undergraduate Education (CRUE) to perform a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative study of undergraduate experiences and outcomes at The University of Iowa. The Center undertook the Research on Iowa Student Experiences (RISE) project during the 2005-06 academic year and the summer of 2006. Researchers collected quantitative data via a web-based survey instrument sent to all undergraduate first-year and senior students in late March. Completed surveys were obtained from 1,477 first-year students and 1,676 seniors, a response rate of 36.5%. Although the first-year and senior samples were representative of their respective populations by race/ethnicity, women and individuals with high ACT scores were overrepresented in both samples. To adjust for this response bias, the samples were weighted up to population values by sex

and ACT composite score quartile; the quantitative analyses we report here are based on weighted sample estimates. The mean GPA for senior survey respondents was 3.3, for first-year students, 3.0. To gather qualitative data, researchers conducted interviews with focus groups including 75 first-year students and 45 seniors who chose to participate. The Center submitted its final report to the provost in fall 2006.



For more information or comments, please contact:  
**Tom Rocklin**  
Office of the Provost  
111 Jessup Hall  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, IA 52242  
319-335-3565  
thomas-rocklin@uiowa.edu

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## Additional Resources

Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J.I., Schuh, J.H., Whitt, E.J. & Associates (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J.I., Schuh, J.H., & Whitt, E.J. (2005). *Assessing conditions to enhance educational effectiveness: The inventory for student engagement and success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (2005). *How college affects students (Vol. 2): A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Whitt, E.J. (2006). Are all of your educators educating? *About Campus*, 10(6), 2-9.

For the full RISE Report, please visit the website for the Center for Research on Undergraduate Education at:

<http://www.education.uiowa.edu/crue/publications/documents/RISE.Report.9-06.COMPLETE.pdf>

## Academic Climate and Challenge

Two items on the survey sought student impressions of the academic climate at UI: (1) “Students (at UI) spend a lot of time studying and completing academic assignments” and (2) “Academic work at UI is challenging and requires serious intellectual effort.” Sixty-one percent of first-year students and 58% of seniors agreed that UI students spend a lot of time in academic pursuits; 82% of first-year students and 74% of seniors agreed that academic work at UI is challenging and requires effort (see Table 1).



The interviews, however, offered a different picture of the academic climate for undergraduates. All the focus groups were asked to describe the quality and quantity of “academic challenge” they had experienced in their time at UI. How that term was defined was left to the students, but the discussions about it referred, among other things, to time spent studying and on homework, the pressure students felt to work hard in—and prepare for—their classes, expectations of faculty for student effort and performance, class attendance, and general feelings of being challenged (or not) academically and/or intellectually. Both first-year students and seniors tended to describe their UI experiences as lacking in aca-

ademic challenge and characterized by low expectations—particularly their own, but also their peers’ and their instructors’—for time spent studying, preparing for class, studying for exams, writing papers, and, in general, focusing on the academic aspects of college. Many noted that “academic challenge is what you make it,” because they felt little external academic press. Some first-year students asserted that this lack of academic challenge was a surprise and/or a disappointment: they expected more challenge than they encountered and many were surprised at the amount of free time they had in their first semester at UI. Many seniors with whom we spoke noted a decline in perceived academic challenge over their time in college; most asserted that once they “figured out the system,” they needed to spend little time on academic endeavors. This seemed to depend, to some extent, on a student’s major (e.g., some—though not all—Engineering majors described extensive and intensive academic challenge) or on whether the student was working on a senior thesis. Some of the seniors asserted that a general lack of academic challenge for UI undergraduates was associated with the “culture of alcohol” they perceived to characterize Iowa student life; that is, according to these students, if more academic effort were expected and/or necessary, students would spend less time “partying.”

## Academic Activities

In addition to general impressions of the academic climate, the survey sought specific information about students’ academic engagement. Students were asked, for example, to estimate the amount of time (in hours) they spent on a variety of academic activities during the current (spring 2006) semester. Students were asked, for example, to estimate how much time they spent “preparing for

class in a typical week.” The most frequent response for both groups (25% of first-year students and 26% of seniors) was 6 to 10 hours per week. Twenty-three percent of first-year students and 22% of seniors said they spend 11 to 15 hours per week preparing for class. Twenty-one percent of first-year students and 19% of seniors said they spend more than 21 hours per week preparing for class; 10% of first-year students and 15% of seniors said they spend 0 to 5 hours per week.

Students also were asked to identify the number of books, term papers, and essay exams they had completed in the current (2005-2006) academic year (that is, as of the end of March, 2006). Twenty-five percent of first-year students and 34% of seniors said they had read 0-4 “assigned books and readings *this academic year*” (emphasis added); 43.5% of first-year students and 39% of seniors said they had read 5-10 assigned books or readings (the most frequent response for both groups). Sixty-five percent of first-year students and 68% of seniors had completed 0-4 essay exams. Fifty percent of seniors said they had completed 0-4 term papers or written reports. In contrast, 47% of first-year students said they had completed 5-10 term papers or reports and 20% said they had completed 11-20.

The academic activities reported by the survey respondents could appear to be inconsistent with the survey results about the academic climate at UI. One could argue, for example, that reading 0-4 assigned books or readings in the first 7 months of the academic year (as reported by 25% of first-year students and 34% of seniors) contradicts the assertion that UI students “spend a lot of time studying and completing academic requirements” or that “academic work at UI is challenging and requires serious intellectual effort.” It might be

**Table 1**  
**Academic Climate at UI**

	Strongly agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior
Students at UI spend a lot of time studying and completing academic assignments	9.80%	8.50%	51.30%	49.80%	26.00%	30.00%	10.60%	10.20%	2.30%	1.50%
Academic work at UI is challenging and requires serious intellectual effort	29.90%	17.90%	52.40%	55.80%	14.10%	21.20%	2.40%	3.90%	1.20%	1.30%

  

	>20		11-20		5-10		1-4		0	
	First Year	Senior								
Assigned books and readings read this academic year	5.10%	7.40%	31.80%	19.30%	43.50%	39.40%	18.90%	31.20%	0.60%	2.70%
Essay exams completed this academic year	0.90%	1.90%	10.50%	8.70%	23.40%	21.40%	46.70%	52.80%	18.60%	15.20%
Term papers and written reports completed this academic year	3.80%	4.30%	20.40%	15.60%	47.40%	30.30%	26.20%	43.70%	2.10%	6.10%

  

	>20		16-20		11-15		6-10		0-5	
	First Year	Senior								
Hours spent preparing for class in a typical week	20.70%	19.50%	22.30%	17.40%	22.80%	21.80%	24.70%	26.50%	9.50%	14.70%

the case, however, that the respondents were not referring to themselves when they said UI students spend a lot of time studying. Or the respondents might view 0-4 readings in 7 months as “a lot” or intellectually challenging. The survey data regarding small numbers of assigned readings, essay exams and papers identified by both seniors and first-year students and low number of hours spent in class preparation could, however, be viewed as supporting the focus group assertions about lack of academic challenge.



### Interactions With Faculty

Research on college impact affirms the critical role student-faculty interactions play in achieving the desired outcomes of college. Therefore, the RISE survey asked students a variety of questions about frequency of student-teacher interactions and the impacts of student-teacher interactions outside the class-

“Some of the seniors asserted that a general lack of academic challenge for UI undergraduates was associated with the ‘culture of alcohol’ they perceived to characterize Iowa student life; that is, according to these students, if more academic effort were expected and/or necessary, students would spend less time ‘partying.’”

room. Note that respondents could have interpreted “teachers” to refer to tenure track faculty or to all classifications of instructors.

The survey results (see Table 2, page 4) indicated very positive perceptions of the quality of teachers at UI. Most survey respondents described UI teachers as “genuinely interested in teaching,” “genuinely interested in students,” and “genuinely interested in helping students grow in more than academics.” More than half of the seniors, and 48% of first-year students, described UI teachers as “outstanding.” In addition, about three-quarters of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that “teachers are willing to spend time outside of class on issues of interest to students.”

Student-faculty interactions outside of class appeared, however, to be fairly uncommon among the survey respondents. Most frequent (“very often” or “often”) were interactions to discuss class assignments (first-year students: 41%; seniors: 47%) and to discuss ideas from reading or class (first-year students: 35%; seniors: 32%). Sixty percent of first-year students and 42% of seniors said they “never” interacted with teachers on non-coursework activities (e.g., committees, student life activities) and 54% of first-year students and 40% of seniors “never” interacted with teachers to discuss personal matters. In addition, 44% of seniors reported they had “rarely” or “never” interacted with teachers to discuss career concerns and plans.

Students who had interacted with faculty reported a wide range of important gains as a result of those interactions. Students agreed that “non-classroom interactions” (respondents decided how to interpret this) between students and teachers had positive effects on personal growth (52% of first-year students and 62% of seniors), intellectual growth and interest in ideas (56% of first-year students and 68% of seniors), and career goals and aspirations (44% of first-year students and 61% of seniors). In addition, the experience item “Worked on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements” had a significant positive association with all educational outcomes measures (i.e., grade point average, satisfaction, growth in general/liberal arts education, growth in career/professional preparation, personal/interpersonal growth, and composite growth) for both first-year students and seniors, even with controls for a host of background factors.

Focus group interviews also included specific questions about students’ interactions with faculty. In general, as with the survey respondents, students in the interviews spoke in very positive terms about these interactions. In fact, even a single interaction or a single individual could have a significant impact on students’ satisfaction with the University and/or their sense of themselves as important and competent.

Faculty were—with few exceptions—described as approachable, available, and willing and able to help students. By the way, for first-year students in particular, “faculty” often included teaching assistants. Some distinctions were made between the availability and approachability of faculty in large classes and those in small classes, but some students noted positive interactions with faculty in the very largest classes. These faculty were exceptions, rather than typical, but the impact they had on students’ sense that students and undergraduate education mattered to these faculty was striking. Instruction in large classes also tended to be described more negatively than instruction in small classes, and students—particularly first-year students—tended to be most positive about instruction that required active engagement with class materials and with other students, techniques which students described as occurring in small classes, not large. Students also were much more likely to feel their presence was noted and, therefore, important in smaller classes than in large.



When asked about advice they would give to prospective or new UI students, most seniors offered some form of “Get to know your professors” and “Go to office hours so they know you care.” Across the board, however, students asserted that positive, meaningful interactions with faculty had to be initiated by students, something that most—but particularly first-year students—described as difficult and intimidating.

**Table 2**  
**Student-Teacher Interactions**

	Very Often		Occasionally		Rarely	
	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior
Frequency interacted with teachers to discuss ideas from reading or class	35.10%	32.10%	33.70%	36.40%	31.30%	31.60%
Frequency interacted with teachers to discuss career concerns and plans	11.20%	22.10%	23.20%	33.50%	65.50%	44.50%
Frequency interacted with teachers on non-coursework activities	7.60%	13.40%	13.00%	17.40%	79.50%	69.20%
Frequency interacted with teachers to discuss personal matters	8.10%	10.90%	16.80%	19.80%	75.10%	69.30%
Frequency interacted with teachers to discuss assignments	40.90%	47.50%	43.60%	41.30%	15.60%	11.20%

**Perceptions of Teacher Quality and Impact of Non-classroom Interactions with Teachers**

	Strongly Agree/Agree		Neutral		Strongly Disagree/Disagree	
	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior	First Year	Senior
My non-classroom interactions with teachers have had a positive influence on my personal growth, values, and attitudes	51.80%	62.10%	42.20%	33.50%	6.00%	4.30%
My non-classroom interactions with teachers have had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas	56.00%	67.70%	39.20%	28.80%	4.80%	3.50%
My non-classroom interactions with teachers have had a positive influence on my career goals and aspirations	44.40%	61.10%	48.10%	33.70%	7.40%	5.20%
Teachers are genuinely interested in students	74.40%	77.50%	18.30%	15.10%	7.30%	7.40%
Teachers are genuinely interested in helping students grow in more than academics	55.40%	57.80%	31.10%	27.40%	13.50%	14.80%
Teachers are outstanding	48.20%	58.50%	39.10%	31.20%	12.70%	10.20%
Teachers are genuinely interested in teaching	69.60%	71.40%	23.20%	20.00%	7.20%	8.50%
Teachers are willing to spend time outside of class on issues of interest to students	74.00%	75.00%	20.90%	19.40%	5.20%	5.60%

**Summary and Implications**

In general, UI students reported positive impressions of and experiences with their teachers, and noted positive outcomes of student-teacher interactions. Non-classroom interactions between students and teachers lead to a number of self-reported—and, from a university’s perspective, highly desirable—outcomes for students. Students reported, though, that however available and approachable students perceive faculty to be, taking the initiative to interact with faculty in meaningful ways was intimidating and challenging. In addition, the majority of survey respondents perceived that UI students spend a lot of time in academic pursuits and that academic work at UI is challenging and requires effort. At the same time, however, first-year and senior students—in interviews and in the survey—reported fairly low levels of academic challenge and engagement, as illustrated, for example, by hours spent preparing for class and assigned books and readings completed.

Academic engagement not only is a key element in fostering undergraduate student success (e.g., by assisting students to achieve institutional and personal educational goals), it is a key element in achieving the University’s academic mission. The RISE results imply a need to examine and enhance the extent to which UI undergraduates expect and experience academic challenge.

**Questions for Faculty/Instructors**

- What is the role of faculty and instructors in setting expectations for academic engagement by undergraduate students?
- What do you do in your role to communicate and reinforce expectations for academic challenge and rigor? What could you do more frequently or more effectively? How would your students describe the level of academic challenge at Iowa?
- What can faculty do to facilitate meaningful out-of-class interactions with undergraduate students? What barriers exist to such interactions and how might you address them?

**Questions for Staff**

- What roles do you – and can you – play in encouraging academic engagement on the part of undergraduate students? In what ways do you facilitate and/or inhibit academic engagement?
- What could you do more frequently or more effectively?
- What messages do you, your office or department send students about academic expectations? How do you know?

**Questions for Institutional Leaders**

- What UI policies, programs, and practices support and inhibit meaningful faculty-student interactions?
- What messages does the University communicate to undergraduate students about academic engagement? Are these messages consistent with the University’s mission and/or its students’ needs?