SERU Brief 2014 (3)

Stretching Our Students

UI is committed to preparing students to be engaged participants and leaders in a culturally diverse world. We offer many opportunities to support student achievement of this outcome, but students vary widely in how extensively they participate in these kinds of experiences.

We examined student responses to the campus-wide SERU survey in order to learn more about student engagement and learning related to diversity. Our goal was to identify:

- To what extent do students report changes in their understanding of diversity between their arrival on campus and the time that they took the survey?
- Where in their undergraduate experience do students report gaining a deeper understanding of others’ perspectives?
- What are implications of these findings for teaching, learning, and student success on our campus?

Two important patterns stand out in the survey responses:

Students see UI as a place where they are growing in their awareness and understanding of diversity. SERU asks students to rate their understanding of specific areas of diversity at the time they entered UI and at the time they took the survey. Comparing self-assessments of these two points in time, we see self-reported learning gains in all areas of diversity explored by SERU, including racial and ethnic identity, gender and sexual identity, and social or economic difference. Students also reported gains in ability to appreciate global diversity and work with people from other cultures.

Self-reported gains are not necessarily an accurate reflection of learning that has occurred, but this consistent pattern suggests that students see UI as a place where they are growing in their understanding of these kinds of issues.

Greatest awareness gains happen in the classroom. The setting in which students report most often gaining a deeper understanding of others’ perspectives is in academic classes. Student organizations and residence halls were also often identified as places for learning others’ perspectives – but fewer students report having these experiences, and they tend to give them relatively lower ratings as settings for this type of learning. Other settings such as places of employment, internships, community service, and cultural events received relatively lower ratings as places to gain deeper understanding of others’ perspective.

Implications: Stretching Farther

These findings suggest that opportunities for engaging with diversity and perspective-taking occur throughout the undergraduate experience. UI faculty and staff across all divisions are partners in stretching our students through:

1. Experiences in the Classroom

SERU tells us that students spend more time attending class than in any other activity, and a wide variety of class activities can both demonstrate and reinforce the importance of understanding perspectives other than their own:
• In their courses, students are learning the subject matter and also seeing an example of the perspective that a scholar brings to analyzing a problem, framing a question, or formulating an argument.
• Academic classes create opportunities to have students work together with other students that they would rarely have occasions to interact with outside of class.
• As students observe that others vary in the knowledge and skills they bring to the course, students can see that their own experiences and perceptions are not necessarily representative of everyone else’s.
• While students work together to solve a problem, they are learning both about finding the solution and about working with classmates who bring different backgrounds and abilities to the problem.

These opportunities regularly occur in many classes, and instructors can take advantage of these experiences to explicitly teach about other perspectives and facilitate student ability to engage with difference. Contact the Center for Teaching to explore strategies for taking more advantage of these opportunities: teaching@uiowa.edu

(2) Learning Outside the Classroom

In SERU responses, all settings outside of class – including student organizations, residence life, employment, internships, community service, and cultural events – were identified by some students as places where they often or very often gained a deeper understanding of others’ perspectives.

Like academic classes, each of these settings has multiple goals of its own in addition to helping students gain an understanding of other perspectives, but each can also be an opportunity to mentor students in learning different ways that others understand, value, and contribute to the experiences they all share:
• Out-of-class engagement often challenges students to integrate and apply their learning in a different context, or see it through the eyes of others who don’t share the same academic interests or experiences.
• While students work on the task at hand, they are also learning what they can contribute to achieving a larger group’s goals, and how to lead (or follow) others who bring something different to the group.
• Through mentoring such as Iowa GROW or UI STEP, students begin to see out-of-class experiences from the perspective of how they contribute to successfully achieving their educational goals.
• Mentors and facilitators in all settings can directly discuss diverse perspectives, draw them to students’ attention, and create times for them to reflect on what they are learning about engaging with difference.

Visit the Multiculturalism & Diversity Initiative of the VP for Student Life to learn more about supporting students as they engage with diverse perspectives outside of class: http://vp.studentlife.uiowa.edu/initiatives/diversity/

(3) Coursework and Class Materials

Materials in many courses present opportunities to challenge students to see how their understanding changes when they see more than one point of view:
• Interdisciplinary courses examine a topic from distinct perspectives of faculty team-teaching the course. Examples at UI include Astronomy, Biology, and Geoscience faculty team-teaching “Origins of Life in the Universe,” and Anthropology and Engineering faculty team-teaching “People and the Environment.”
• Addressing widely held misconceptions in the field or contested findings in research can present opportunities to gain insight into issues by examining perspectives of others who see them differently.
• Courses that explore power and privilege ask students to examine their own perspectives in light of the social conditions that shaped them, and to recognize that others don’t always share their perspectives.
• In community engagement projects, students can learn to see community members as partners and experts in their knowledge of the community, rather than only as recipients of volunteer service.

Through these kinds of opportunities, faculty and staff help students see and value the perspectives that others bring to issues they are studying. Cases such as these show students that they learn more by asking not only, “Why is this important?”, but also “Who is this important to?” and “Why do they see it this way?”

To learn about SERU, visit the Office of Assessment web site: http://www.uiowa.edu/assessment/seru

To consult on questions about teaching, contact the Center for Teaching: teaching@uiowa.edu