

LEARNING ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY: CAPTURING THE STUDENT VOICE

Executive Summary



Purpose

The goal of this research was to capture students' reflections on their learning and to uncover ways they integrate learning into their lives.

Research Process

A qualitative approach was used to capture students' "meaning making" of their overall UW-W learning experience. Over a six-month period, 96 students met in subgroups with 21 staff facilitators from across the Division of Student Affairs. Each month, a learning question (see below) was posed to students for written response followed by small group discussions. Student participants were affiliated with 4 Colleges and 8 Student Affairs units.

The Learning Questions

Who on campus has increased your desire/love/curiosity of learning? How did/do they do it?

At UW-Whitewater, we talk frequently about liberal learning goals for students. What does the concept of liberal learning mean to you? In what ways are you developing liberal learning at UW-Whitewater?

We are interested in how students apply learning through college classes, out-of-classroom activities, and interactions with peers, faculty and staff to their lives. Give an example of how a person or experience at UW-Whitewater has helped you to apply learning to your life.

As you think about "who you are" — your identity — what experience(s) at UW-Whitewater have helped you most in getting a "sense of identity?"

When thinking overall about your learning at UW-Whitewater, what's making a difference for you? What experiences have been most powerful? What's held you back?

Please respond to the following statement with a YES or NO: "At UW-Whitewater, I am having a good diversity experience." If you answer YES, please tell us how you define a "good diversity experience," and why you think you're having one. If you answer NO, please tell us what you had hoped to gain from a diversity experience, and why you think you're not having one.

Emergent Themes

Individuals Who Prompted Curiosity & Love of Learning

Individuals who had the most impact on student learning were described as being "passionate," engaged holistically in students' lives, and who viewed themselves as co-learners with students — demonstrating a strong commitment to student success. One student comment captured this notion of learning together: "Instead of learning from the top down, you learn all around you."

Notions of Liberal Learning

Most students had not encountered the notion of "liberal learning" at UW-Whitewater and used the subgroup experience to explore this idea. Those who excelled at promoting liberal learning were identified as faculty, staff and peers who made the curricular or co-curricular experience "relevant," prompted practical, "real life" application, and who highly valued personal interaction.

When asked, "What's making the most difference for you at UW-Whitewater," most participants cited meaningful relationships with faculty, staff and peers as being critical to their success as learners — emphasizing relationship with people who were passionate about their work.

Identity Development

Students shared varied reactions to the role college played in shaping their identities. Several students talked of entering college with a strong sense of identity that did not change — particularly in regards to religious beliefs or atheist/agnostic values. Others described being in the process of understanding self and felt that college plays an important, broadening role. A number of participants talked about ways that their identities and values related to gender, race/ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, class, geographic region, gender identity, and spirituality were challenged, supported and influenced by the college experience.

Diversity

Students described a desired vision for diversity as a place that honors the unique cultural identities of all students. This vision was expressed by the following student quote: "What makes a good diversity experience is when you can interact with many different cultures on any given day without feeling awkward or like you do not belong." Interacting with diverse peers was of high value, but many students were unsure if they were truly welcome at campus events focusing on identity groups different from their own — even when advertised "everyone welcome." Students described diversity in broad ways, often outside traditional categories.

The Desire for Public and Private Reflection

Students uniformly stated that their participation in the project provided an uncommon campus experience: getting to know others through guided conversation and reflection on one's learning, one's personhood, and the task of finding meaning and purpose in life.

The following quote reflects a sentiment shared by most participants: "There are few people and places on campus where I talk about my experience as a whole." Moreover, students identified the development of "relationship with others" and the use of deliberate, probing questions as ingredients that prompt deep reflection of self.

Meaning Making: Multiple Ways of Knowing

In describing their learning, students spoke of experiences that moved them intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and interpersonally. The most powerful learning experiences involved several of these domains or "ways of knowing."

From literature on holistic student development to the findings from this study, one thing becomes clear: students' inner life is not to be separated from their outer life. In the process of pulling all their disparate learning together — to make meaning of it — students resonated with the passions of faculty and staff, and to the notion of becoming co-learners with others in the process.

Unexpected Results of the Research Study Process

As a result of staff and student participation in this study, the dynamics in relationship between them (and among students) changed substantially. Students described a keener awareness of staff's role in their development, and an increased comfort level in approaching them for conversation. Students also described how they talked about the learning questions outside of the study subgroups, and how they posed the same questions to their peers. Students expressed a desire to replicate the experience for other students, and to continue ongoing learning conversations among themselves. Staff noticed a greater "esprit de corps" and more effective teamwork by students in their offices. Staff also described how their participation caused them to move beyond their traditional roles, becoming more involved in student lives and in supporting the integration of multiple forms of learning.

Hot Spots for Meaning Making

With student learning and development at the University's core, the activity of "meaning making" becomes a priority. While students mentioned that deliberate and sustained public reflection on their learning is uncommon, it doesn't mean that meaning making conversations are not occurring on campus. The questions it prompts, however, are:

Where are the hot spots on campus for student meaning making — where does it occur, who prompts it, and how is it sustained?

How can we learn from these hot spots and amplify this work across campus?

In what ways can we improve our capacity for guiding reflective learning, and what are ways to infuse it into aspects of our interactions with students?

How can student and academic affairs, as well as student governance, collaborate on the creation of meaning making hot spots? What other spheres of the University can be involved?

What additional ways can reflective, meaning making discussions be infused into high impact practices such as student employment, internships, study abroad and service learning?