



A Full Measure of Student Learning

University of Wisconsin - Whitewater

Division of Student Affairs

A Select Review of Student Learning for 2012 - 2013

Designing Environments: Stewards of Our Own Cultures

Whether we work for a university or any other institution, organizational life is both exhilarating and difficult. The ability to achieve organizational goals is largely determined by our environments.

Danah Zohar, author on spiritual intelligence and spiritual capital states that: “We are not primarily economic beings; we are fundamentally creatures of meaning . . . designed to seek an overarching story about ourselves that gives meaning, value, and a sense of purpose to our lives.”

If people hunger for meaning, for purpose in life, the question for all of us as organizational leaders is: How do our environments reflect our presence in it? We are all responsible for creating the types of environments that allow people to flourish.

As humans, we have a bi-directional relationship with the environment: we adapt to it and at the same time we make it a reflection of ourselves. Since we know the human potential to adapt to the environment, we can use this to our advantage by designing environments that don't inhibit people from expressing who they are, but that actually guide people toward success.

In the Division of Student Affairs, we have made considerable progress in designing environments that allow students and staff to flourish. **These efforts involve focus and deliberateness.** What we focus on becomes magnified. If we look for the bad, we find it. If we look for the good, we find that as well. When we trust others, we are trusted in return. When we seek to understand, we are better understood.

A full measure of student learning (and that of our own) requires environmental management. Let's continue to work toward creating environments that provide meaning, value, and a sense of purpose.

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Beyond Measure

At the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater, student learning is broadly defined. As depicted on this report's cover page, learning involves aspects of our being that make us a whole person.

Student learning occurs everywhere; it is not confined to classrooms, residence halls, athletic fields or any one venue. As educators, Student Affairs professionals foster students' learning and strive to help students draw the connections between that learning and its applications in their lives.

This report **does not** capture all of the ways that our Division contributes to the learning mission of our institution. Rather, it is a **selected** summary of efforts and accomplishments made toward student learning during the 2012 - 2013 academic year.

Factors Contributing to Student Thriving versus Surviving

During the spring of 2013, the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) facilitated focus groups and one-on-one interviews with undergraduates to understand factors that contribute to students' thriving in college. While many studies focus on reasons students fail, this study sought to identify markers of success.

Students in the study had previously attended CSD's Summer Transition Program — a four week residential academic program. CSD invited 141 underclassmen to participate. Thirty-two (n=32) or 23% chose to participate; 19 males and 13 females. Types of student disabilities included physical disabilities, autism spectrum, ADHD, mental health, learning disabilities, visual impairments and mobility disabilities. In addition to students, individuals from 19 families were interviewed to gain insight into their students' thriving. The 6 themes that were uncovered included:

Resiliency

Resiliency was identified as the ability to “bounce back” when encountering a barrier. Students with disabilities noted multiple times that they had to deal with situations other students did not. Students in this project specifically noted the importance of being able to cope successfully with failure as a learning outcome:

“Sometimes you have to fail a couple times to learn from your mistakes. If you were to do well every time, then you're not learning anything.”

“I told myself continuously that it would turn out all right.”

“When something didn't work out the way I wanted it to, I always looked for the good things that would come of it.”

Engaged Learning

Students identified engaged learning as an important opportunity and responsibility. Students recognized that engagement had to emanate from themselves through studying and participating in class — and not expect to be “entertained” by instructional staff.

“Neither of my parents went to college, I am just trying to set the bar.”

“We choose to engage ourselves in our learning.”

“I'm trying to do more than just sitting in the classroom and then leaving.”

Positive Perspective

Students identified aspects of positive thinking. This attitude contributed to students' strong sense of self-worth and the ability to problem solve.

*“I do my best to **not** decline any opportunity that comes before me.”*

“I've overcome so many things since I got here; I feel there is nothing I can't do.”

“I always just kind of go forward and confront it.”

Acceptance and Diverse Citizenship

Students acknowledged the importance of accepting themselves and others, and an awareness of diversity beyond disability. Students talked about personal experiences of being the “only one” as a student with a disability. Students noted the importance of acceptance and engagement if diversity learning was to occur.

“Diversity can be broken down in so many different ways . . . just by your hair color or your skin color or even your personality.”

“Oh my goodness. If you put me in a classroom filled with people from all over the world, I think I would want to talk to everybody.”

“Just be accepting of everybody; have a little connection with everyone.”

Social Connections

Students identified the importance of social connections and involvement. This was demonstrated through joining clubs and

organizations and making friends. Many students noted the importance of being a leader and creating community.

“It's kind of like that six degree thing, that friend of a friend. You make more friends by going to class.”

“It's not simply just hanging out, but also earning the trust and respect of others.”

“College is where people from all sorts of areas come together to learn and figure out what their path in life will be.”

Real World Connection

Students identified real world outcomes such as a job as the financial return on investment that education represents. This was grounded in the desire to connect learning to future responsibilities.

“I have put money in an investment [me] and want to get more out of it.”

“I try to be a free thinker. I have a binder full of all my stuff from my major that I keep with me because I'm going to need it in future.”

“It's more of a whole experience not just, well I have a certificate.”

“I've always wanted to become a teacher and to impact the lives of kids.”

Families identified four elements of their students' success:

Shared Connection to the Campus and Resources

Family members identified the university's reputation in working with disabled students, and close relationships with CSD staff as elements that enhanced student thriving. Campus proximity to home also created a sense of trust and connection to the university.

“Communication was clearly understood by the parent and student.”

“We felt confident that if our student asked for help, he/she would get it.”

“Being called less frequently was a good thing.”

“Knowing he could come home if he needed to was important.”

High Expectations

Family members appreciated that expectations were the same for students with and without disabilities — not only academic expectations, but individual responsibility for problem solving.

“Their k - 12 school teachers never challenged them. They saw them with their disabilities. They are struggling with a few classes, but I'm very proud of them.”

“My daughter is on the high honors for the first time! She loves her school and her confidence is soaring.”

“This experience gave ownership to him; it is his gig and his responsibility.”

Holistic Development

Student growth outside the classroom was seen as an enhancer for classroom and life success. Families perceived students' increased self-confidence, personal responsibility, and **happiness**.

“This was more than a degree and passing classes; he was making relationships and seeking help . . . he was not alone.”

“I have seen tremendous growth in my student; she has learned those small life skills that other people take for granted.”

“I see him being successful as a whole person, having experiences social and academic; he is comfortable with his independence.”

Relationships

Two types of relationships were essential for success: strong relationships with CSD staff, and relationships with peers.

“Your program, the summer transition program, created opportunity.”

“Meeting with CSD ahead of time made the transition better.”

“She established friends in the summer; this made the fall so much easier.”

“He is coming out of his shell.”

“I was worried about bullying, but during the summer he made friends.”

Career & Leadership Development: The Fruits of Involvement

This past year, Career and Leadership Development (C&LD) sought to better understand the learning that students acquire as a result of their participation in practices and programs sponsored by the department. C&LD focused on select experiences that required students to devote considerable time and effort to a purposeful task, and that provided participants with a supervisor or advisor who served as a guide and mentor to them during the experience.

Assessment focused on 83 students whom either served as C&LD Interns (32 students), representatives of the Panhellenic Council (30 students) or members of the Homecoming Steering Committee (21 students). At various times during the year, C&LD staff asked students to reflect upon their learning and how they believed the experience would help them in the future. At the end of the year, students completed a written survey responding to questions designed to prompt reflection. The learning themes identified were:

Gains in Confidence and Self-Efficacy

The most prevalent theme that students reported was gaining confidence as a result of their experience. Students described their internship or leadership experience as one that required them to step outside of their comfort zone. At the beginning of their experience, students reported feeling apprehensive and unsure of whether or not they would succeed in their new role. Upon completion, they felt pride for what they accomplished. When asked what they were most proud of, one intern stated: *"Pushing myself to do something new. Being in a setting that allows you to step out of your comfort zone and still be able to be yourself and be appreciated for that."*

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation. Students began their internship or leadership role holding varying degrees of belief or non-belief about whether or not they would succeed. What's clear is that the opportunity to participate in these C&LD experiences, coupled with supportive staff mentors who provided feedback throughout the process, allowed students to gain confidence in their ability to enter, navigate, and successfully complete challenging roles. A member of the Homecoming Steering Committee reported that he had *"... become more reliable, accountable, (and is) no longer afraid to try new things simply because I am scared of failure."*

Inclusive Excellence and Interactional Diversity

We believe that diverse teams of student employees and volunteers provide individuals with opportunities to develop relationships that cross identity boundaries. These experiences help students to learn both explicitly and implicitly about "the other," and promote a greater understanding of identity and culture. One of the PRIDE Center Interns stated that *"I've been able to grow from having a co-worker with a disability by learning what makes her upset and what privileges I have that I often take for granted."* Because of the opportunity to interact with others from identity backgrounds different than their own, students gain confidence in their ability to navigate more diverse environments. Another of the PRIDE Center Interns stated that the intern experience *"increased my ability and comfort interacting ... simply by making an effort to interact with those different from me more often — instead of shying away."*

The mission of the Homecoming Steering Committee is to foster school spirit and tradition as the group plans and implements major events during the University's Homecoming week. While diversity education is not the primary focus of the group, one of the HSC members shared that the experience helped her to *"... reach out to new and diverse people and make new friends I trust and care about."*

Assembling diverse teams is a way to operationalize Inclusive Excellence. When students "see themselves" in our programs and departments, they feel welcomed. One of the C&LD Interns shared that she is *"... most proud of the emphasis on diversity of the program. I didn't feel left out. I was accepted by everyone even though I am a minority, and my work wasn't looked down on because of my ethnicity. And I am very proud to be a great resource to our students on campus."*

Developing Relationship Skills

Students reported developing competence and confidence in their interpersonal skills, which includes oral and interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, and the ability to contribute as a member of a team. Many students indicated that they overcame their fear of sharing their opinion in front of their peers, and believe that they will carry this confidence into future settings.

When asked to summarize their C&LD Internship experience, one student reported, *"I gained confidence, learned to accept failure, and further developed my social skills."* Upon reflecting on the skills she learned in her role, one member of the Panhellenic Council shared, *"I have learned a lot about working with different types of people and adjusting to meet their needs. As a future teacher, it's important to be able to know the difference between holding students accountable and helping them with their struggles."*

Exposure to new social situations provided an opportunity for students to improve their social skill and comfort. When talking about how they most improved during the year, one C&LD Intern stated that they improved most in *"putting myself out there and being in social situations that made me uncomfortable."*

Developing Practical Skills

Students reported gaining practical knowledge and skills as a result of their experience. Practical skills most frequently reported by students were time management, organizational skills, event planning and management, social media knowledge and skill, public speaking, and professional etiquette and networking. Students also shared that they are better able to manage multiple priorities and see themselves as more flexible and able to "switch gears" more readily than they were before the experience.

Integrative Learning

Our practices should help students make connections between knowledge and skills learned in their course work, the co-curriculum, and work and life experiences. Within the context of the C&LD experiences, students were able to integrate their learning into their lives. One C&LD Intern stated that his experience was *"... foundational. I had the parts but no way to bring them together and connect. This experience did this in an organized way ... brought everything together."*

Through making meaning of their experiences, students enhance their ability to assume professional positions upon graduation. Students reported that they developed an understanding of how to be mission-driven within their roles that frequently demanded them to be self-directed.

Several students reported finding significant meaning in their work, to the extent of discovering their career direction. As one intern shared, *"I was able to develop more as a professional. It was a great learning experience where I was able to adapt to a more diverse experience. I learned about other ethnic groups as well as professionalism and how to be effective in the workplace."*

Recreation Sports Employment Develops Career- and Life-Related Benefits

During spring of 2013, the Department of Recreation Sports and Facilities surveyed former student employees to understand the career- and life-related benefits they gained through their employment in the department.

Surveys were sent to 252 former employees who held leadership positions over a 26 year period (1986-2012). The response rate was exceptional with 146 former employees completing the survey (58%). Of respondents, there were 59 females and 87 males.

Typically, students from various undergraduate majors seek employment in the Recreation Sports and Facilities Department, and respondents revealed that 105 former employees (72%) were in undergraduate majors other than physical education or a related field. Moreover, statistics showed that a large number of past student employees (55%) remained employed in Recreation Sports and Facilities for 3-4 years during their undergraduate career.

This tendency for students to remain employed in the Recreation Sports and Facilities Department throughout their entire undergraduate career continues today. The Department has a practice of promoting students from entry-level positions (e.g., intramural official, fitness staff, lifeguard, grounds crew, equipment room, etc.) to higher leadership positions (e.g., building supervisor, intramural supervisor, aquatics/fitness manager, etc.) based on job performance, skill set, and abilities.

Contributions Toward Success

The survey posed a simple question to alumni:

"Reflecting upon your employment in Recreation Sports at UW-Whitewater, what lessons did you learn that contributed to your success in life after college?"

Various themes arose from alumni responses. While personal growth occurred in many areas, three areas were identified as affected most: (1) development of social competence, teamwork, and leadership; (2) development of conflict resolution and dealing with others; and (3) development of self-discipline.

The organizational environment in Recreation Sports and Facilities is designed for student employees to be a part of a group that emphasizes teamwork, conflict resolution, communication, and relationship building skills.

Alumni confirmed teamwork learning by stating:

"My involvement with Rec. Sports at UW-W had a profound impact on my feelings of inclusion. I felt involved as an integral part of the campus community."

"Working for Rec. Sports allows you to be a part of a team . . . a team that works to service the community and the campus."

"Working in Rec. Sports was not only fun, but it also taught me to stay organized, work with a variety of people, and juggle all of the things that college life has to offer."

Former student employees identified growth in conflict resolution and interactions with others. Given the nature of intramural competition, club sports, and service-oriented programs, conflicts are inevitable. Moreover, from a peer-to-peer perspective, the ability to handle conflicts with peers becomes a transferable skill to organizational life after college. Respondents stated:

"Working with a wide variety of people and personalities, while dealing with conflicts that arose, have helped me tremendously in my classroom today."

"As an official and supervisor, I had to deal with conflict between students and how to come to a resolution quickly . . . before things could get out of hand. It helped me to adapt when things didn't go as planned. There is always a solution if you keep your mind clear and focus on a positive resolution."

"Assuming responsibility over the building and providing a positive venue for all events and recreation empowered me to take action when there were conflicts and concerns. This allowed me to become more of an active rather than passive individual, and helped me immensely post graduation as I started a career."

Keys to Personal Growth: Responsibility and Accountability

Former student employees used two words to describe important elements of their work experiences: **responsibility** and **accountability**. Survey respondents stated their importance:

"Having the responsibility of making decisions and being able to make them . . . accountability for what I did."

"There were times that our supervisor was unavailable, and it became our responsibility (college students) to maintain the effectiveness of the Intramural Program."

"Having authority to officiate games was really overwhelming. As I grew in confidence, it became easier to handle, but the responsibility was something for which I really was thankful."

"I felt that as a leader, I needed to consistently set a good tone and to be a good role model for officials and other supervisors. That responsibility kept me on my toes and well-rounded. It allowed me to grow at my own pace while maintaining a professional profile."

Beyond Anecdote

Within Recreation Sports and Facilities, staff knew anecdotally that they were having an impact in students' lives. These final excerpts from the survey provide evidence of this:

"I spent two years as an official in the intramural sports program and three years as an intramural sports official supervisor. I have to say that the experience was one of the highlights of my college career. I made many friends and learned a lot about myself, my abilities and what I was capable of doing."

"My experience was very memorable and enjoyable. It was there that I developed a lot of the traits that I still use in my career today."

"One of the best work environments and staffs that I've been associated with in my life."

"My entire experience working at Rec. Sports is a highlight of my college career and when I think of UW-Whitewater, my first thoughts are of my work/friends/staff at Rec. Sports. It made a lasting impression on me as a student and person."

"Working in Recreation Sports gave me real world responsibilities and opportunities that I could not receive in the classroom. I consider these experiences to be just as or more valuable to my current and future careers than my actual degree."

To read the entire report, go to:

<http://www.uww.edu/recsports/mission.html>

THE IMPACT OF THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT (RA) POSITION

In spring of 2013, The Office of Residence Life surveyed 115 former RA's, targeting individuals that had been out of the position between three to six years. The survey intent was to measure aspects of the RA position that impacted students later in their lives. Survey participants were in the RA position from one to nine semesters, with 44% serving either four or five semesters.

Some of the survey questions and responses were:

How satisfied were you with your RA experience?

89% [Very Satisfied](#)
6% [Satisfied](#)
4% [Dissatisfied](#)

Reflecting on your time as an RA, what lessons did you learn that contributed to your success in life after college?

[Time Management/Balance \(number one answer\)](#)
[Communication](#)
[Conflict resolution/Confrontation/Crisis Management](#)
[Appreciating differences/Understanding others/Diversity](#)

If there was an RA job responsibility in particular that prompted your growth while at UW-Whitewater, what was it?

[Interaction log \(number one answer\)](#)
[Programming](#)
[Duty](#)
[Conflict resolution/policy enforcement](#)

If you were to summarize everything that you learned from being an RA in one word, what would it be?

[Leadership \(number one answer\)](#)
[Balance](#)
[Impact/impactful](#)
[Relationship](#)
[Responsibility](#)
["I don't think that's possible"](#)

This survey framed what we have long suspected about the RA position. Specifically, it has a life-lasting impact on most individuals and provides them with a skill set they can utilize regardless of career path. A small sampling of survey comments include:

How are you utilizing skills learned?

The conflict resolution and communication skills I picked up as an RA have done so much to enhance not only my work life, but my personal life. After my training and time spent in the position, I've been able to identify communication breakdowns and work toward their resolution.

Everything from working with others on a team or just working on time management, conflict resolution, and crisis situations. Everything I have learned started with the foundation I received at UW-Whitewater.

As an HR manager, I diffuse situations all day. Communication and the ability to listen would be the two things I utilize most in my job today and that I was able to strengthen through my RA role.

A write-up is very similar to case notes that I have to write now for my current employment. Learning how to document facts as opposed to opinion. I also learned a great deal about conflict resolution.

I think being an RA really helped me develop a lot of communication and conflict resolution skills. I know as a student I was nervous and hesitant about some situations, and being an RA helped me develop those skills. Whether it was from addressing policy violations, putting on programs or other events/ training.

Many lessons learned in the RA job helped contribute to my current success including: diversity training, involvement, self-awareness and a deeper understanding of working with people.

What experiences left you with a profound imprint in your mind as you reflect back on your time as an RA?

Reaching out to students that were depressed or withdrawn. Being all inclusive and trying to make residents' college time more enjoyable.

Changed my life. Gave me direction. Has given me the foundation to do the work I love. Best decision ever! I can't tell you how much I learned and grew from that experience and how much it has shaped who I am and what I do now.

I had a resident that had suicidal ideation and asked me to help her with getting to the counseling center. I didn't think that I did very much, but when she checked out, she thanked me for hearing her and probably saving her life. I don't remember her anymore, but I'll never forget that goodbye conversation.

The opportunity for leadership, from peer-to-peer education, programming, relationship building, communication and accountability. All of these things made me a well-rounded, confident young leader. The RA job allowed me the growth opportunity to define myself.

How would you summarize your RA Experience?

As an undergraduate leadership experience, I do not think you can find anything much more developmental and comprehensive.

Being an RA at UW-Whitewater was the best experience I could have had in college. Through the position I grew as a person and was able to make life-long friendships.

This program sets you up for great success in your future; it is up to you to embrace the people, position, and tasks in order to fully develop as a great leader. This program gives you the steps; it is up to you to make them into something lasting and meaningful.

The most valuable and transformative experience of my life up until that point. It shaped my career and my identity development.

Being an RA had a positive impact on my development of:

	Extremely Accurate	Accurate	Somewhat Accurate	Not at All Accurate
Self	61%	32%	6%	1%
Social Competence/ Teamwork & Leadership	71%	25%	4%	0%
Decision-Making and Organizational Skills.	53%	42%	4%	1%
Appreciation and Understanding of Diversity	65%	21%	11%	3%
Accepting of Other Values, Morals, and Lifestyles	60%	31%	8%	1%
Ability to Interact Cross-Culturally	40%	35%	24%	1%
Managing Time Effectively	54%	28%	14%	4%
Self Confidence	54%	25%	17%	4%
Communication Skills	54%	39%	6%	1%
Conflict Resolution and Dealing with Others	73%	23%	4%	0%
Ability to Perform Academically	20%	35%	33%	12%

Subtle Learning is Deep Learning.

So, what is one of the lessons we are learning about student learning throughout the Division? Perhaps, it's that subtle learning is deep learning.

We take in subtle learning without knowing it; it often becomes an intrinsic part of us. Take diversity learning for instance. We often create learning outcomes related to diversity. This isn't wrong or unsavory. Yet, students have told us of the unpredictable learning that occurs through interactions with people different than themselves. The learning gained from these engagements could never have been predicted by pre-designed learning outcomes.

Students have often suggested to us that we put diversity in the background — not foreground — of our initiatives. When one's identity isn't put at the center of a relationship and interaction, it nonetheless moves to questions of self-identity if the engagement is sustained over time. There's no need to always preface these encounters with prescribed learning outcomes. Our challenge is to create environments that allow for students' sustained engagement, and that have elements that promote student growth and learning.

Essential Elements for Experiential Learning

Much of our Student Affairs work focuses on experiential learning. A quick review of literature on the topic identifies what students consider to be elements needed to be present for learning to take place:

- There must be a balance of aural, visual, tactile, and emotional stimuli.
- Learning involves observing, doing, or living through things (it is associated with skill development, practical knowledge, and action — the result or residue of experiential learning is the long term memory associated with it).
- Intrinsic motivation transcends extrinsic motivation.
- The learner, in some significant respect, is the initiator of the learning. The learning process, in some respect, is perceived to be controlled by the learner; the goals of the learning process are thought to be the learner's goals. Accountability for the learning act or actions is the perceived province of the learner.

Given students' desire for experiential learning environments as described above, our continued challenge is to balance *our* desire/need for structure and clearly defined learning outcomes with the flexibility that affords students control over their own learning.

It's good that we give thought to students' learning environments and elements that prompt deep learning. Our environments don't always allow students to flourish. Without emotional investment, students don't gain a full measure of benefit from experiences both in- and out-of-the-classroom. And, unfortunately, we're good at that — separating cognition from emotion in student learning.

As depicted on the cover of this report, let's continue to learn about our students' varied domains of learning, and help students to shape their environments toward that end.