

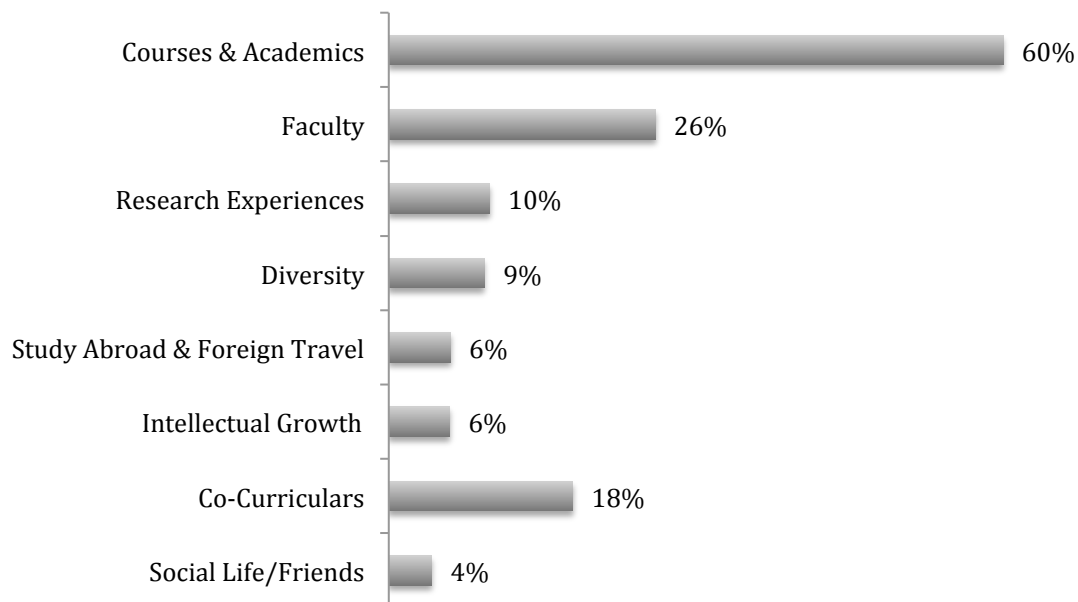
## Meaningful Learning Experiences At Michigan: Views From Alumni

In 2009, the University of Michigan conducted a survey of several cohorts of young alumni who had graduated from the University in the previous decade. Among other questions, alumni were asked, "Describe one of your most meaningful learning experiences while an undergraduate student at Michigan."

Approximately 3,000 alumni responded to the survey, with about half providing an answer to the question about meaningful learning experiences. This report summarizes alumni responses by grouping them into categories and briefly discussing common themes. Also included are sample alumni responses, chosen because they were representative of comments within that theme or because they provided compelling information about their experience.

Most alumni responses touched on academic themes such as classes, research experiences, contact with faculty, or study abroad. Alumni also shared vivid comments about the diverse climate at Michigan and how they changed and developed intellectually. A minority of alumni named co-curricular or social aspects of Michigan as their most meaningful learning experience.

### Most Meaningful Learning Experience while at U-M: Common Themes



Totals add to more than 100% because some alumni did not confine their responses to a single experience, or their comment fit into multiple themes.

## Courses, Coursework, & Academics

There were many comments related to classes, majors, and coursework. The theme was sufficiently broad to be divided into subthemes.

Small Classes: A common subject when discussing academic courses and experiences were small classes. Alumni named freshman seminars, upper-level classes, independent study, and courses found in smaller departments or units as the source for these more intimate experiences. Alumni appreciated the opportunity to speak to faculty one-on-one, and enjoyed the intellectual stimulation afforded by discussion.

*I particularly enjoyed the smaller, seminar-like courses where I had greater access to the professor and in which the conversations were more appealing and academically stimulating.*

*"Super Honors" Organic Chemistry. The one-on-one contact with a great grad student and the professor made what should have been a horrible class experience into one of my favourites.*

*Being a member of the Residential College was, by far, one of the best experiences I had at the university. The small class sizes, interaction with professors, emphasis on the arts, and the encouragement to constantly "think outside the box" truly made me a better person. Most of my favorite classes were in the RC--and I have so many happy memories of walking around East Quad to go to class, and the conversations that would spill out into the hallway afterwards. It is definitely a program that does not receive enough credit.*

*Classes, particularly Honors Literature and some of my science classes with smaller class sizes introduced me to the joys of academic discussion/debate. This skill has been invaluable to me since.*

*I enjoyed my upper level classes the most, because we were able to have discussions. My teachers were interested in our feedback. It was a conversation, not just a lecture. It forced me to think harder about my coursework, from different perspectives.*

*...there were 10 or 12 students and a professor in a mid-sized room all seated around a central table. The reading list and number of written pages required seemed almost impossible in the beginning, but the small class size led to great discussions. The size also leant immediate access to the prof. and her gentle nudgings of the discussions was invaluable. At the end I felt I had really been able to get into a subject thoroughly and really examine the nooks a crannies of the ideas presented, an experience often lost in the large lectures.*

Capstone projects: Another common theme was capstone projects such as senior design projects and honor theses. Alumni wrote about the effort required to

manage and complete such comprehensive academic work, and their feeling of accomplishment. Some valued that the projects allowed them to pursue their own ideas; others appreciated the chance to work closely with a faculty advisor. Alumni also described how projects caused them to knit together ideas from multiple courses. Several alumni spoke of the “aha” moment when they made connections and realized how their previous coursework fit together.

*Group project for my senior design class. To this day, I still reflect upon how that experience taught me the analytical, teamwork, and communication/presentation skills that have been very applicable in my professional career.*

*I particularly enjoyed participating in an honors seminar in my junior year - having the opportunity to do real empirical analyses on a topic of my own choosing was a wonderful experience and probably the single experience that best prepared me for graduate school.*

*After studying late into the night, finally understanding Fourier Transforms - it was one of those 'ahh-ha' moments that marked a switch in my thinking. I went from accepting what I was taught to actively learning how to learn new ideas, concepts, and problem solving techniques.*

*My senior design course in Aerospace engineering was the best experience. I finally felt like the engineer I had been working a lifetime to become. I wish I could have taken a mini course like that earlier in my college career.*

*The research done on my undergraduate thesis was by far the most meaningful learning experience of my undergraduate years, as it put together all the things I had been learning before and forced me to undertake major work to prove I understood them.*

*Being able to complete an honors thesis in Psychology. It was hard work, I often felt like there was not adequate support and I had to be more self-motivated and sufficient than I preferred to be, but it also forced me out of my comfort zone and got me ready for research activities in graduate school.*

*Working on my Honors Thesis was my most memorable learning experience. The pride I had when finishing it, after producing something of my very own, gave me the skills, confidence, and desire to move on and pursue a graduate degree.*

**Group Projects:** Alumni, in particular those who graduated from business or engineering, talked about the value of group projects.

*Group work in general. As an engineer, we were constantly working in groups - I learned a lot from my peers (work styles, leadership, approach and strategy) and those experiences really shaped my growth. I worked in groups for all 4 years, and as a result team well with co-workers, clients, etc.*

*Being in classes that involve lots of teamwork were meaningful learning experiences in working with others. At times it was frustrating but learning to deal with others is an*

*important skill that has to be learned through practice, and throughout my degree I had many opportunities to gain experience.*

*Working in project teams my senior year in engineering was very relevant. Considering 90%+ of the work I do currently is team based, I believe this is a critical skill set that should continue to be emphasized in any undergraduate program.*

**Breadth & Variety:** A number of alumni mentioned courses they took outside of their major (sometimes reluctantly, to fill distribution requirement) that changed their worldview, expanded their minds, and inspired new interests and passions.

*In order to fulfill distribution requirements, I took a comparative literature course on colonial Southeast Asia. Being very much a science person, it still amazes me how much I loved that class. The instructor, a graduate student, was absolutely wonderful. This was the class that convinced me that I am capable both of enjoying a literature course and doing well in one, and that distribution requirements exist for a reason.*

*One semester, I had taken what I thought was a random mix of classes, but as the semester progressed I was able to draw so many meaningful relationships between the different disciplines. Globalization, culture, meaning, and personal relationships came up in my World Politics course, my Architecture course, my French course, and my Linguistic Anthropology course.*

*Unlocking hidden interests by taking courses I never had thought would interest me - this specifically relates to the first honors course I had to take (Great Books 101). I still maintain a strong relationship with the GSI and it's an experience I will never forget.*

**Hands-on Experience:** Alumni mentioned academic experiences that allowed them to work with their hands, apply coursework to solving real problems, and gain experience. Subjects included clinicals, labs, fieldwork, project teams, peer tutoring, and student teaching.

*Student teaching full time for a term in a 2nd grade classroom. Actually "doing" what I had been learning about for 2 years was an incredible experience.*

*Nursing clinicals in the pediatric units helped me find my passion and challenged me intellectually and emotionally.*

*hands on science labs were excellent...they really enrich the material from lecture*

*I was able to take a graduate level Linguistics course with a research focus. During the course of the class, I was able to meet with local Senegalese immigrants and to record their speak patterns. I really enjoyed being involved in a research project that had a hands-on/field component to it.*

*I think that my community-based learning experiences were the most meaningful for me, because I was able to see how my field of study related to the "real world".*

Special Programs: Some alumni cited special academic programs that gave them unique experiences, particularly beyond U-M's campus. Some involved fieldwork or service learning, such as the Biostation or field trips to museums and research facilities, or which provided them intensive study like the New England Literature Program.

## **Faculty**

Many alumni specifically credited faculty for their most meaningful learning experience. Some mentioned the general benefit of working with and learning from top scholars across campus. Others mentioned specific professors who taught them in class or supervised their research. They described faculty who were passionate about the material, cared about students, and set high expectations and inspired students to meet them. They valued professors who were accessible and helpful and who encouraged discussion and engagement with the course material. Alumni comments below are largely truncated to focus on the laudable practices and personal traits of faculty, rather than on their identities.

*friendly and accessible*

*An amazing professor who was the most dedicated teacher I had at U of M... His hands-on lectures and the effort that he would put into describing not only the most cutting edge aspects of science, but also the deep history of scientific principles made for a much greater understanding of the material.*

*My [language] teacher started coming in one hour before class twice a week to help me with the readings, so that I would know what was coming ahead of time and would feel confident reading aloud in class. I would not have passed without his help. All of the teachers in the department were incredibly patient with me and took lots of time to meet with me and explain the things I didn't understand. I realized that a good teacher can really make a huge difference in how a student learns, and even how a student feels about the material he or she is learning, and this is what inspired me to become a teacher.*

*[The professor's] attention and respect, even though I was just one freshman out of a class of probably 100 students, really cemented my interest in the field.*

*...many students in the class were moved to tears by the passion and conviction in which he spoke. The fact that it was directly tied into the lesson for the day amazed me.*

*actually enjoyed teaching and cared that I learned the concepts.*

*He was very demanding, paid a ton of individual attention to each student, and really set the tone for me about how college should be a time to be intellectually curious and not intellectually lazy.*

*The class was extremely challenging, but the professor showed how learning could be challenging, but fun, interesting, exciting...when you woke up clearly enthused to walk into this class, you realized how mature you were becoming.*

*His great passion for the course material, and his theatrics in presenting it, had a profound effect on how I viewed the role of professors, in general, and their relationships to their work.*

*His courses involved a nice balance between didactic, self-learning, and group learning.*

*He tied our studies into what was going on in the world outside us.*

*He gave me lots of insight on writing and life, and was always willing to help in office hours.*

*He really took the time to help me on an individual level and helped me see that I could handle both athletics and academics at UM.*

*He really pushed us to develop our thoughts and ideas.*

*She was an absolutely brilliant professor who made your most personal work your hardest. She truly cares about every student in her classroom and makes you realize the complexity of every individual.*

*I received a letter from a professor I had for a required Race & Ethnicity course telling me how impressed she was with my performance in the class and that I should consider changing my major. I ended up changing my major the next semester and am now in law school instead of medical school as originally planned.*

*He was an amazing intellect and educator. I learned so much from him about intellectual integrity.*

*He was a great mentor and friend. He taught me reasoning skills and always challenged me and my other research partners to think deeply about what we were doing and how we could succeed.*

*He took an interest in my work and thinking towards a subject and created a way to relate my passions to the subject at hand. He really made U-M special by working with me after the class had ended.*

*Not only did they know their subjects, but they knew how to make the information accessible and interesting.*

## **Research**

A significant number of alumni mentioned research as their most meaningful experience, either as part of an undergraduate research initiative, a course requirement, or through independent study. Alumni wrote about the privilege of working closely with a faculty member, being treated as a scholarly peer, and feeling like their research could make an impact on the world. Some alumni enjoyed the hands-on experience of lab or fieldwork. Several alumni credited the experience

with motivating them to go to graduate school and pursue research careers of their own.

*Being able to work in a laboratory at the medical school really opened doors for me and exposed me to what science is really like.*

*Getting a chance to work as an undergrad researcher with an amazing young professor who convinced me I should go into science as a career.*

*[During] my research project I had leadership responsibilities, I was published, I made professional contacts, and I was deeply challenged intellectually and personally.*

*My independent research project, mentored by two professors, led to my undergraduate thesis. This experience not only built the foundations of my graduate research work, it also opened up doors for networking within and outside of UM during and after my undergraduate career.*

*Being an integral part of a team, performing research unique to the lab, and being the first person to perform said research in an exciting field, and publish it all in a well respected field. That was a rush--not to mention character- and passion-building.*

*While working on a professor's research project, I was able to use the critical thinking skills I was being taught in the classroom. I have continuously drawn on that experience.*

*Undertaking self-directed independent research was so helpful, both from an academic perspective as well as learning how to set deadlines and work with an advisor. It was especially helpful when I entered the working world after graduation.*

## **Study Abroad & Academic Foreign Travel**

Some alumni named study abroad experiences as their most meaningful learning experience; some spent an entire term or year abroad, but others mentioned shorter trips for courses, some led by faculty.

*Learning a different culture, language, way of life, etc. It completely changed the way I view the world and how I live my life today.*

*I raised the funds for and traveled to Venezuela to conduct field research for my undergraduate thesis.*

*My study abroad to South Africa to do HIV prevention work exposed me to a whole new world. I was able to learn about the South African culture, what parts of it drive the HIV/AIDS epidemic there, and how those parts parallel to cultural factors here in the US. That trip solidified my desire to want to work in the Public Health field.*

*Being immersed in a different culture and academic system was really eye-opening, and learning to thrive outside of my comfort zone gave me an incredible opportunity for personal growth.*

## Diversity

Many alumni spoke about the life-altering experience of encountering diversity at U-M. Some described courses they took that dealt with topics such as social justice or identity. However, most described the climate on campus and the richness of a community where people from vastly different backgrounds live, work, and study together. Some alumni contrasted this to their previous experience coming from more homogenous environments. Alumni described the campus as “a constant learning experience” and said the lessons they learned about getting along with others and considering other perspectives made them better people. Several stated that these lessons were valuable to them in their careers after graduation.

*My entire undergrad experience opened a whole new view of the world to me. Coming from a small town, I realize now I had limited knowledge of the rest of the world. I had a lot of preconceived notions about different people from various walks of life. The most meaningful thing I learned at U of M was to have an open mind and not be judgmental of others.*

*Michigan provided such a diverse community that I was able learn about different cultures while I was there. I was able to adapt to different types of people and it helped me work with these differences in the real world.*

*It was awesome to interact with a VERY diverse group of students and professors. I took full advantage of the opportunity to learn from my surroundings.*

*Regular political/social discussions with students from very different backgrounds from my own, mostly outside of the classroom.*

*It never really dawned on me before attending the U-M that people really resented affirmative action. I think hearing both sides of the argument was probably the most challenging learning experience I had at the U-M.*

*My most meaningful experiences were those courses or discussion sections in which the student body was willing and able to have abstract and important discussions about difficult topics. I believe I learned the most from my diverse peers and from being able to agree and disagree on certain topics, and to communicate a point without offense to someone of a different school of thought or opinion.*

## Intellectual Growth

Some alumni spoke about how much they had matured intellectually during their time on campus. They spoke about gaining independent thinking, learning time management and balancing the demands of a challenging course load. Several alumni spoke about what they learned from failure and academic difficulty, and the challenge of not being the smartest student in class like they had been in high school.



This category focused on growth gained from academic experiences. Alumni also shared comments, not included in this category, about personal growth related to other experiences such as moving away from home, living in a residence hall, or participating in clubs and organizations on campus. These were counted among the social and co-curricular themes, described later.

*I must say that, more than any other time in my life, I learned the value of work, and of self-motivation. What I learned, I felt I worked for; what I did not learn, I did not know to ask for.*

*I took an undergraduate honors course in organic chemistry, and the professor drove us very hard to learn the material and become deeply immersed in the subject matter. I remember going to a review after having received our exams back, and while before we reached the question that I had gotten wrong, I had already figured out the right answer. It was a powerful moment where I understood that I could really figure out anything as long as I put myself in a position to learn and be passionate about the subject.*

*Learning how to manage your own time (day, night, weekdays, weekend, academic vs social life) was probably the biggest challenge and lesson in undergrad.*

*Almost failed out after freshman year, yet was given the chance to prove I could succeed by the College of Engineering, through an enrollment withheld process that challenged me to commit to a plan of action to increase GPA and make up for deficiencies. It taught a valuable life lesson on failure, addressing failure, and recovering from failure.*

*One of my most meaningful learning experiences was the first class (in my entire life to that point) which I almost failed. It was at this point when I realized: 1. UM is a serious institution, 2. My classmates truly were the brightest and best, and 3. I had thousands of resources at my fingertips, and it was up to me to utilize them to overcome challenges such as this.*

## **Co-Curriculars**

Some alumni credited co-curricular activities as the source of their most meaningful experience, or chose to list multiple examples so they could write about a co-curricular example alongside an academic experience. Alumni discussed their experiences in student clubs, academic organizations, performance groups like the Michigan Marching Band, residence life positions, volunteer organizations, and greek letter societies, among others. They described meaningful gains in teamwork, leadership, advocacy, public speaking, mediation, time management, and responsibility.

## **Social Life**

A small number of alumni spoke about making life-long friends, learning how to get along with others, living in close quarters with strangers, and simply meeting new people. Alumni credited their interactions with peers and classmates with changing their lives.

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