



May 2015

## We Asked, Students Answered



### The UMay Survey

The University of Michigan Asks You (UMAY) survey is administered each spring to all undergraduates at U-M. It provides an extensive overview of the student experience, gathering information on academic engagement, experiences in the major, overall satisfaction, co-curricular activities, and perceived climate.

Responses have provided the University with helpful insights into students' experiences, informing policy, highlighting areas of success, and suggesting areas where the University can improve.

In 2014, 4,864 UM undergraduates (19%) responded to the survey.

This UMay report provides an overview of the responses to the main open-ended question on the survey, with a focus on student comments about faculty.

### University of Michigan Asks You (UMAY)

## In Students' Own Words: What Faculty Could Do To Improve the Undergraduate Experience

### Introduction

Each year, the UMay survey ends with an open-ended item that invites students to tell the University how it could improve. The question reads:

*What is the single, most important thing that U-M could realistically do to create a better undergraduate experience for students like you?*

Students' contributions typically cover a wide range of topics, including cost, housing, course requirements & availability, transportation, climate, facilities, advising, and communication about opportunities on campus. In 2014, 3,274 students provided a response to this item, and just over 430 of the comments, or 13%, referenced faculty in some meaningful way. This report summarizes those responses and provides illustrative examples using students' own words.

### Tone

The question concentrated students' attention on issues that needed improvement, so responses tended to be critical. Many students aimed to be constructive, however, and suggested solutions instead of just pointing out perceived problems.

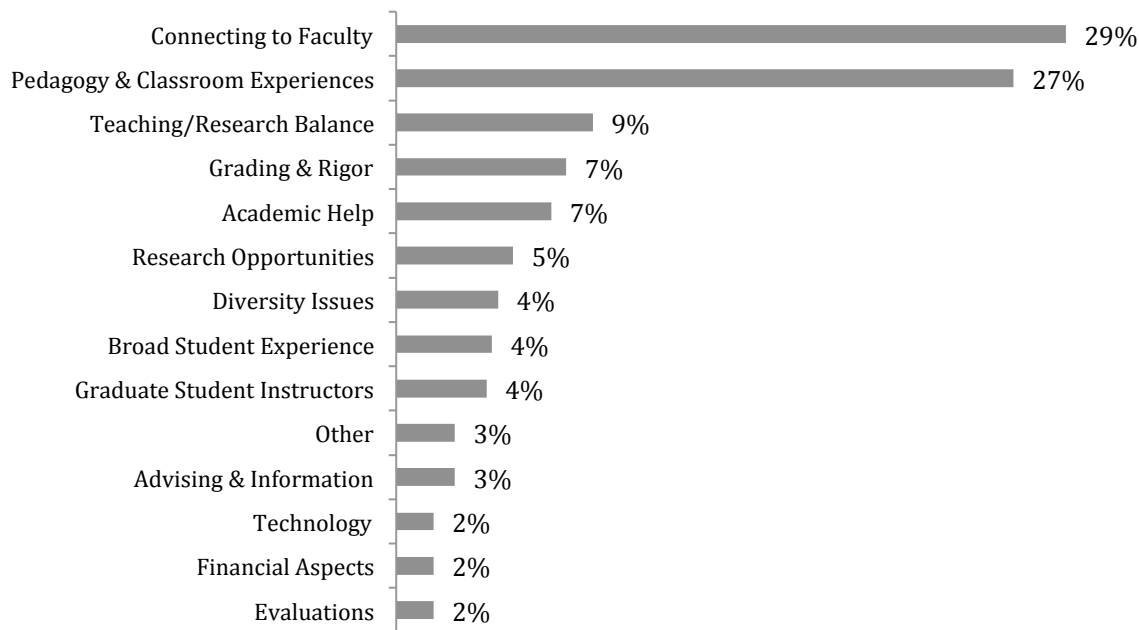
Furthermore, there were numerous comments that praised UM faculty for their expertise, dedication, engagement with teaching, caring, and high standards for students. Student satisfaction with faculty overall is evident in the responses to quantitative items on the survey, particularly about the quality of instruction (91% satisfied), access to faculty outside of class (90% satisfied), and advising by faculty on academic matters (85% satisfied). Respect for faculty is further echoed in the most common theme found in students' responses to this improvement question: their desire for deeper connections with professors.

## Themes

Student responses were categorized by topic. Two themes dominated the student responses, together accounting for over half the comments about faculty. The remaining fell into eleven other categories, plus a catch-all of “Other” comments that could not be easily categorized or which had unique content.

Figure 1 lists the themes and displays the distribution of student comments.

Figure1: Common Themes in Student Comments about Faculty



### **Making Connections With Faculty (29% of comments)**

The most frequent theme in faculty-related comments expressed students' desire to make meaningful connections with their professors. They want to know faculty better, and to do so earlier during their time at U-M. Students report that these relationships improve their engagement and can alter the course of their intellectual lives.

*Emphasize to professors how important professor/student relationships are. Getting to know my professors was the single most important and empowering thing I engaged in on campus. It's amazing to speak with researchers on the forefront of their disciplines. These relationships compelled me to excel and got me excited about their course material. I felt like I could engage in the subject matter much better. –LSA Sophomore*

*Make faculty more accessible to students, I wish every class required you find your professor's office and introduce your self; it has made a big difference for me in the classes that happened in. – LSA Freshman*

Some students admitted that they were intimidated by faculty, but more common were responses that addressed the other barriers to making connections, such as the limitation of office hours. Course structure

and size also come up in student comments—a third of the comments about connecting with faculty talked specifically about class size.

*In my first year of college, professors seemed like an entirely different species, and I would rarely approach them because they seemed extremely intelligent about their fields. After meeting one professor who was very informal with his students, my perspective drastically changed. Perhaps an emphasis on encouraging faculty to relate to the life of a college student during class sessions would incredibly help build rapport with students. –Engineering Sophomore*

*I think that the student-faculty relationship should be something to focus on. It is sometimes difficult for me to make the extra effort to get to know my professors since I am so used to being known extremely well by all of the teachers at my high school. Professors are very available, but sometimes students need the extra encouragement to take the first step in meeting them and getting to know them better. - LSA Freshman*

*Make professors more approachable. I know it is important to talk with one's professors as much as possible, but office hours often seem too intimidating for me. Maybe provide formats that aren't solely one-on-one. - LSA Sophomore*

*Provide more small classes. Most of the classes I have taken so far have an incredible amount of students and it's difficult to find a connection with your professor. In one of my classes that had office hours every week, her office hours had 30 people. It really is one of the things I would have re-considered if I could go back and decide on a school. You lose motivation if you don't have that connection with a teacher or an established relationship. - LSA Senior*

*Find ways to strengthen connections between students and professors. This can be through research assistance, in class discussion, etc. Having a personal connection with a professor is helpful for a multitude of reasons, and a lack of these personal connections is something that I would change. – LSA Senior*

Others included suggestions for facilitating student-faculty connections.

*I found that I was most engaged in classes with small student to faculty ratios. Not only did I get to know my professors at a personable level, I also became more motivated to participate in class discussion. I realize that offering smaller classes isn't entirely realistic, so I would propose offering more events that could foster faculty-student relations. – LSA Senior*

*Holding more events (such as lunch among EE students & professors) to help students and professors learn more about each other. – Engineering Senior*

*I know they exist, but I think more opportunities to meet faculty would be great! I feel like there were probably lots of faculty at U of M who had insights and advice I could have benefited from, but never received due to lack of communication opportunities – LSA Senior*

*Emphasize living/learning communities more to prospective students. Joining the Residential College was the best thing that happened to me during college and it's disappointing that many people do not know about these communities, which are wonderful for meeting new people and connecting with faculty. – Residential College Junior*

*More meet-and-greet type events with professors. Office hours are a good time to get to know them, but the hours don't always fit into students' class schedules and they may be rushed by how busy the professors are. I believe people are the best resources and this University has some of the best people in their field. I think students should have more access to these resources. – LSA Junior*

## **Pedagogy, the Classroom Experience, & Quality of Teaching (27% of comments)**

Students had a number of comments about the teaching process, including such things as faculty demeanor, classroom policies, provision of timely and useful feedback, the lecture format of courses, and delivery of content. Where students felt there was room for improvement, they did not mince words.

*Faculty should better define the way to succeed in the course and provide high quality work. A class in which I am currently enrolled is a prime example for a professor that does not fulfill his duties to the students; he rarely defines his expectations for high quality work and gets upset when the work is low to average quality. – Kinesiology Freshman*

*Focus more on teaching effectively in engineering classes. Too many professors are not good teachers. They're smart but they can't communicate information to students effectively. Thus students suffer in their learning experience. – Engineering Senior*

*Hire professors that are VERY interested in what they teach. It is so much easier to get myself to study and learn when the professor feels so passionately about the subject – Kinesiology Senior*

*Classes should not stick to traditional lecture style teaching for every class, they should look for more interactive ways of learning so that students can be hands on with their thinking and solving. Class activities are 100 times more interesting and effective than traditional lectures. I really wish there had been more of that, I think I would have gone above and beyond what I did throughout my past classes if it had been different. – Engineering Senior*

*Better review of teachers, some of them don't appear to care about the quality of their teaching or the quality of my learning. I have only had a handful of these, but they have had a very negative impact on my academic experience. - Engineering Junior*

*It should be required that professor return final exams/papers back to the students, with the grades received as well. This is because I often have taken final exams, and sometimes even written final papers, that I didn't see the grade to, or ever receive feedback either. I missed out on opportunities that could have allowed me to learn even more. –LSA Senior*

*Classes could stand to focus more on how to think than on facts and memorization. – Engineering Sophomore*

*A professor truly "makes or breaks" a classroom and learning experience. I have learned so much from my many excellent professors, but I experienced a major issue this past semester with one professor. I would like my campus to act upon incompetent professors, as it is very difficult and non-motivating for students to learn difficult material on their own, without the help of quality instruction and support from their professor. – Engineering Junior*

### **Teaching/Research Balance (9% of comments)**

Some students commented on the imbalance between faculty teaching and research responsibilities. Students took exception to professors who seemed significantly less engaged in teaching undergraduates than in their research. Students appeared to understand and appreciate the role that research plays at an institution like the University of Michigan, but objected when it diminished the attention given to undergraduate education.

*Professors who are not only engaged in their subject and research, but are actually good at teaching and explaining material and take an interest in their students professional future (some professors are like this, but not all). –LSA Senior*

*Encourage professors to become more invested in teaching, not just research. I cannot tell you how frustrating it is to be in a class with a professor who is at this University to research and could care less about teaching. I think this is a problem that's prevalent throughout the sciences. – LSA Senior*

*Remind science professors that while they do amazing research and are geniuses in their field, WE are not. I have had too many professors that seem unable to connect with students because they can't understand that we don't understand. I know that isn't necessarily a realistic thing to fix, but it has become a source of great frustration for me. The classes I take here should not make me feel like an idiot. There is no reason for a test to be so hard that the average is less than 50%. –LSA Senior*

*Hire professors who may not necessarily be famous in their field, but are genuinely interested in teaching and becoming better conveyors of knowledge. Sometimes I feel that I have seen better teachers at a community college. Teachers who care about teaching are worth much more than near any amount of accolades. Please. I pay to go to a great school but it can't be a great school if the teachers are average. –Kinesiology Sophomore*

### **Grading & Rigor (7% of comments)**

Students had suggestions related to grading, rigor, and expectations in courses. Some students felt that difficult exams and tough grading failed to provide them with meaningful feedback about their learning. While a few students reported a concern that courses were not sufficiently rigorous, the majority of responses in this category held the opposite view. Several students shared their concern that grading policies might diminish their chances to be admitted to selective graduate and professional programs.

*I have had many classes where I understood material and major concepts, and have been able to explain things to my peers. This doesn't seem applicable to some exams though, or even course grades sometimes. It's extremely frustrating and encourages the wrong kind of learning. I don't think this has to do with individual teaching approaches - it's about this idea that it has to be so difficult to succeed, which is an image that the university could work on as a whole. – LSA Junior*

*Reduce the competitive atmosphere by removing CURVES in classes and exams. Judge teachers as good teachers by how many students pass on the straight scale to truly get an understanding of how much students are learning. – Engineering Senior*

*Many professors I have are upset when the class average on a test is high. It is disappointing to me that professors would want their students to fail/make it extremely difficult for students to get an A. Doing well academically in a class should be encouraged. – LSA Freshman*

### **Academic Help (7% of comments)**

Students raised some concerns about their ability to get help from professors when they need it. Some students found office hours to be inadequate due to schedule conflicts or other issues. They wanted faculty to reach out to struggling students and be more available. Class size was a factor for some students.

*I think the campus could improve upon the availability of professors during office hours. In large classes, it can be difficult to see a professor when there are so many other students who are waiting as well. – LSA Junior*

*Make tutoring resources more readily available. I have talked to peers, and a common occurrence I have noticed is a lack of assistance from professors or GSIs where help is desperately needed and the feeling of hopelessness that students have in the courses. I think there needs to be a greater awareness for students that need help and places they can go to get that help when they do not understand in situations where their professors/GSIs are unclear. – LSA Junior*

*Increase the availability of professors outside of class. There are several good resources available outside of the professors, but it would still be nice if office hours worked with my schedule. – Engineering sophomore*



*In lower level classes, some are so big that I do not feel comfortable asking questions about the material and I do more poorly than I should. – LSA Senior*

*I think the faculty should provide more time for students particularly through expanded office hours. I would like access to professors from past classes and to implement this, without the need to make an appointment, create a department website listing the hours a professor is available throughout the week. I have struggled with feeling like "I should have known this." and then avoided asking a question that was integral to my learning. Try to create a welcoming atmosphere regarding questions. – Engineering Senior*

### **Research Opportunities (5% of comments)**

U-M students express keen interest in research collaboration with faculty. While some students mentioned a need for more space in formal programs like UROP, other students wanted to pursue research with faculty independently but didn't know how to find an appropriate project, or how to connect with a willing faculty member. Several offered creative ideas for connecting students with faculty research projects; others suggested the University offer more funding or financial incentives to faculty.

*Besides UROP, the university could provide more research opportunities for older undergraduate students or provide resources that can actually connect students with faculty. – LSA Junior*

*I think it would be cool for professors to do a day that is similar to FestiFall or Northfest where they set up booths and talk about their research projects, and garner interest from students that are interested in their topics to help us find research positions – Engineering Sophomore*

*I have no idea how to gain research experience. I was unable to get into UROP my freshman year due to space availability and feel really behind my peers because I don't know how to become involved in research. Please, please develop resources other than UROP (online database for professors looking for undergrad researchers?) that will help other students take advantage of all of the fantastic research at this institution. –LSA Senior*

### **Diversity & Tolerance (4% of comments)**

Comments about diversity covered a lot of ground. Some students asked for more diversity among the faculty. Other students expressed the wish that faculty were more aware or more accepting of students from diverse backgrounds, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, and political orientation. Nearly a third of these comments mentioned a perceived lack of tolerance for conservative religious or political beliefs.

*More diverse faculty. It's one thing to increase student diversity, but if professors don't come from a variety of backgrounds, the narrative remains the same. – LSA Senior*

*Be more open to students with my political beliefs. Students should not be looked down upon, especially by teachers and GSI's, because of their own personal beliefs. I have experienced this frequently enough that it has strongly affected me and my grades. – Music, Theatre, and Dance Sophomore*

*Have professors who accept and understand students from different ethnicities and religious backgrounds – Nursing Senior*

### **Consideration of the Broader Student Experience (4% of comments)**

Some students wished for more consideration from professors towards their lives outside of the classroom, and the pressures they face along with their school commitments. Students talked about the stress of surviving sexual assault, struggling with mental health issues, or overcoming illness and disability. Students described competing demands on their time and attention due to ROTC, dual degree programs, or life circumstances.

*More faculty awareness on issues of depression and anxiety. I've had a few professors emailing students that "having the 'blues' is not a valid excuse for missing homework." As a student with mental illness, I do agree that work should be handed in on time, but I believe that these emails do nothing but stigmatize those with mental illness. It makes it seem as if we are a burden to or unwelcome in the class. I believe a better email would be one that recommends visiting CAPs. – Engineering Junior*

*Faculty could be more understanding of students pursuing a dual degree. Some professors are less considerate of students' other skills, interests, and time commitments, and are less encouraging of students creating a unique experience for themselves by exploring many different interests in college. – Music, Theatre, and Dance Sophomore*

*This fall, I was in an accident requiring two surgeries. While I understand the need for professors to be fair to other students, I was disappointed that some of my professors were unwilling to cooperate with my disability. By some miracle, I did finish all of my classes on time, but it was the most stressful time of my life. – Engineering Senior*

### **Graduate Student Instructors (4% of comments)**

There were a number of student comments about GSI teaching quality and concerns about the language skills of non-native speakers, but for the purposes of this report we tallied only remarks that reflected GSI issues that were also related to faculty. These comments typically asked for more supervision and higher standards for GSIs, or more instruction provided by professors.

*Have professors and GSIs connect on the course goals and topics. – Ross Junior*

*If I am paying this much to attend this university, then I expect to be taught by professors who are experts in their fields. Not GSIs who have little knowledge in the subject, don't know how to answer questions, and have no desire to actually teach for anything other than the pay. My first semester at this university was horrible and I will never take a science or math class here again due to the extremely limited contact with the professor and reliance on GSIs who can't answer my questions. – LSA Sophomore*

*Offer more discussion/lab sections with professors or more experienced GSIs. Otherwise, regulate the GSI teaching better. It is very much hit or miss, and they tend to have a lot of control over your learning and grade in certain courses. – LSA Junior*

### **Other Topics**

There were modest number of comments on **Advising and Information** (students desired more comprehensive & knowledgeable advising from faculty); **Technology** (primarily wishing to see it deployed more effectively); **Financial** aspects (concerns about resources, how tuition dollars were spent, and the burden of course fees) and on the use of student **Evaluations** (which students want to see used, both to improve teaching, flag problem courses, and inform other students).

*I'm not sure what could be done to improve this, but I did not have much help setting up my dual major. I basically figured out all the details on my own - and it seems like faculty from either degree don't know how well to go about it either. -Stamps Freshman*

*The thing that would have the most utility is to require professors to record all lectures and post them online. – Engineering Junior*

*Financially reward the professors that are good at teaching. My worst professor makes almost \$80,000 more than my best professor. That is unacceptable. – Engineering Senior*

*Take student's course evaluations into consideration and make changes. I know so many professors that have been justly despised by an entire lecture hall each semester and nothing changes in the following semesters. If you're going to pressure us to fill them out, do what you're supposed to do with them and take the opinions into consideration. – LSA Junior*

### **A Common Thread: The Importance of Class Size**

Finally, many of the student comments discussed class size. Size was not tallied as a separate category because students tied it to several other topics, such as connections with faculty, pedagogy, grading, and getting academic help. However, the prevalence of this theme justifies sharing additional student comments.

Some students appeared to be realistic about the need for large class size to accommodate students at an institution the size of U-M. However, they want professors to maximize engagement in these courses through good teaching practices. Students also expect their large-format classes to be balanced with smaller classes, and expect to have increased access to small classes as they progress through the University.

*Commit to decreasing class sizes. I knew that at a large university I would have to take my share of large lectures. But I was frequently told that as I went further in my major, classes would get smaller. They did to an extent, but I'm still taking 400-level English classes with 50+ students, and next semester will be taking one with 80. This is a far less fruitful learning environment that makes it very difficult to genuinely connect with professors, and has been frustrating and disappointing. – LSA Senior*

*Offer more classes and make them smaller. I LOVED my classes as a senior-- they were seminars of about 30 people or so, and I really felt connected to the teacher/other students, and the atmosphere was a lot more enjoyable. If more classes like these are offered to freshman and sophomores, even for intro classes, this would make going to class a lot more enjoyable, as I found large lectures stressful, and also disappointing since individual attention was almost impossible. – LSA Senior*

*I want more professors who interact more with the class. Who are extremely passionate about what they teach about, and are willing to turn the lecture hall into a room of one big discussion or many mini discussions. – Engineering Sophomore*

*Almost all of the science classes I have taken are in huge lectures, making it very difficult to get to know the professor. So there should be smaller classes in the science field considering most taking those classes are going on to further education and need recommendations from those professors. – LSA Senior*

*Because small classes are not that common here on campus, professors with around 30 students or fewer should make an intentional effort to learn their students names. It really helps students feel valued and known even on such a large campus. – Education Senior*

*A way to make classes seem more personal. In large lectures it is hard to focus and quite often your professor doesn't know you and wouldn't know whether you made it to lecture or not. The*



*discussions that go along with these large lectures can be uncomfortable. They do not provide a welcoming environment, in which a student feels open to express their opinions and ask questions. I would like to see either smaller lectures or a different type of class structure that better promotes learning.* – LSA Freshman

*I wish there were more small classes for science majors - sometimes I feel like it is really difficult to connect with the faculty, and sometimes understand course concepts, because the class format is a lot less personal in large classes.* – LSA Senior

*Smaller classes. I remember this being a concern of mine upon entering UM. I was told the requirements during the first year or two would be large classes and then class sizes would be smaller. With the exception of a one-credit course, I never had a course instructed by a professor in a small class. No Econ class smaller than 75. No classes in which I was consistently able to interact with a professor on a personal level. This was disappointing.* – LSA Senior

*Creating smaller classroom environments would help students like me the most. As someone from a much lower socioeconomic background than most of my classmates, I sometimes feel disadvantaged. However, I also struggle to reach out to professors to talk about my personal goals/problems, and I believe that having smaller classes would facilitate faculty-student interaction while also improving the quality of the course.* – Residential College Senior

### **A Note About the Information Contained in this Report**

A full set of student comments on the “Improvement” question from UMay 2014 has been made available to undergraduate deans and key academic administrators in schools and colleges. Please contact the Office of Budget & Planning if you have any questions or would like to review these or any other UMay questions in more depth.

Find more information about the UMay survey online at [umay.umich.edu](http://umay.umich.edu).