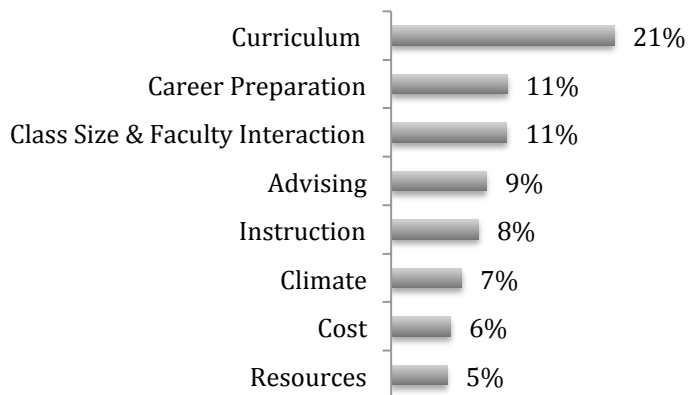


Improving Undergraduate Education: Views from Alumni

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 thing U-M should do that would improve undergraduate education.”

Over 1,600 alumni provided a response to this question. Some alumni wrote at length and some offered more than one suggestion. Their responses covered a wide range of topics, the most common of which are summarized below.

Improving Undergraduate Education at UM: Common Themes



The vast majority of comments fit into eight categories: curriculum, career preparation, advising, instruction, class size & faculty interaction, climate, cost, and resources.

One theme that was evident in the vast majority of comments is the extent to which personal attention influences the undergraduate experience. Although a need for personal attention was not always stated explicitly, comments about class size, faculty interaction, resources, the campus climate, and advising often shared a subtext of students wanting to be treated as unique individuals.

The comments quoted below represent a very small sample of the many thoughtful and vivid observations expressed by U-M alumni.

Curriculum

The majority of comments addressed aspects of the undergraduate curriculum, and ranged from very specific suggestions (“mandate foreign language”) to more general observations (“Force engineering majors to have more well-rounded educations”). Opinion was divided as to whether the University should emphasize depth over breadth, or whether program requirements should be eased to allow students to elect a wider variety of elective courses. Many comments indicated that more applied, technical courses would have been useful for career preparation. Other alumni regretted not having the opportunity to take some classes “just for fun” or to elect courses that would be broadening both personally and professionally.

Several sub-themes were apparent. Five in particular – degree requirements, research, writing, the engineering curriculum, and foreign language – accounted for the majority of comments and will be discussed separately below.

Degree Requirements: Comments regarding degree requirements were mixed, with some alumni wishing for more opportunity to explore subjects outside of their major and others feeling they had wasted time and money on what they perceived as “unnecessary” courses.

Offer more chances for students to take classes outside of their concentration. It's hard enough to fit in all of your reqs as it is, but when you want to try out some kind of random class that you think might be really interesting or useful, that becomes almost impossible. Whether that could be done through offering more 1 credit short classes, or something else, that would have been awesome.

The general degree requirements often force students to take courses in subjects unrelated to a major, or that there is limited interest in. While I understand it is important for students to be exposed to a wide-array of coursework, perhaps tailoring the requirements toward degrees a bit earlier on in the process.

I did not get much of an opportunity to explore classes outside of my major. There were such strict requirements to meet each semester, I barely had room to take anything for curiosity/something different than my major. I wish I had a great opportunity to explore other interests.

Have fewer distribution requirements and make the students focus their studies more. After studying in the UK and seeing how undergrad differs here, I've come to the conclusion that although LS&A is enjoyable, most students have absolutely no idea what job to get at the end and they aren't especially prepared for the future.

Research: A number of alumni suggested that undergraduates be encouraged to pursue research, and that the University provide more opportunities for undergraduates to be involved in research.

Require all students to enroll in the UROP program or work for a semester as a research assistant.

Make research opportunities more accessible for undergraduates. Again, I am speaking for myself alone, but I tried to get in with UROP, lost the lottery, and had no guidance as a freshman/sophomore in finding other opportunities.

Bring more research into the general curriculum. Right now it seems like there are two separate areas: teaching and research. I think it may be useful to expand the research aspect by making some involvement mandatory in undergraduate education. Granted, not everyone will choose to pursue a career in academics, but even for those who won't I think this will be a valuable experience.

Writing: Many alumni urged strengthening the University's writing component, noting that it is key to success both within and outside of academe. Some alumni were particularly critical of the Introductory Writing courses, stating that they were not sufficiently rigorous and that lack of individual attention rendered them less effective than they could have been.

In retrospect, I would have loved more direct, hands-on instruction when it came to improving my writing skills. This is the one problem I see with the huge lectures/small sections w/a GSI set-up: there was practically no one-on-one writing guidance, only occasional red marks on papers, which the instructor would never have the chance to follow up on. Being in the RC helped me minimally with this, but even in my creative writing tutorial, the professor's approach was more hands-off (which does have its benefits and its place). I never attended an LSA writing class, so I can't speak to them, but I found it very easy to graduate with an English major not having had anyone thoroughly critique my writing. This is something I really regret.

A better entry-level English class. The silly, pointless journal-type writing assignments did not prepare me at all for more specific, in-depth research papers I had to do later. In my opinion, the entry-level class should focus on grammar and vocabulary since that seemed to be what most students I interacted with struggled with in their writing skills.

UM should also focus more on purely business-related writing, such as the basics of professional email correspondence, business proposal writing, etc. The English classes I took taught me to include a lot of "fluff" in my writing which is the opposite of what is necessary in the business world.

Engineering curriculum: The undergraduate curriculum in Engineering was the topic of numerous comments, although some were contradictory. While a few alumni felt that program requirements in Engineering should be tightened, many others stated that the Engineering curriculum should be more flexible, allowing students to gain a more balanced education.

Less Humanities and Social Science (LSA) requirements for Engineers. It would have allowed me to take more engineering classes which would have been much more

challenging, interesting and useful in the long run than Linguistics or American Culture etc....

I understood the attempt to round-out the curriculum. However, considering the costs, I would have chosen to take more engineering related classes instead of humanities/social sciences/etc. courses that were required. That would have been more valuable overall.

U of M (Engineering) allows students to graduate with few or no classes in the Liberal Arts (b/c so many come in with AP credits). As a result, they are brilliant technically, but lack an understanding of the human factors (history, sociology, etc.) affecting organizations/countries/humanity in general. This must be changed for UM Engineering graduates to be more successful.

Engineers need more flexible schedules to learn things outside of engineering.

Foreign Language: Some comments about Curriculum were focused specifically on the University's foreign language requirement. The majority of comments were critical of the requirement itself, or the way it was structured. Several alumni suggested that students be permitted to complete two term of language instead of four, while others suggested that the requirement should be met by taking a mix of languages or through courses with an international focus. However, a few alumni suggested that foreign language should be mandatory for all students.

I have no idea if it's still a requirement, but the mandatory LS&A "4 semesters of a foreign language" was a big bummer to a lot of people back when I was an undergrad. I would estimate that 90% of the students -- myself included -- were taking it Pass/Fail (rather than for a grade). I felt bad for the teacher, since she was forced to have to teach a class full of students who didn't really want to be taking that class in the first place. I think one or two semesters of a foreign language would've been plenty. I think it would've been a more enriching experience if I could've taken some other elective classes rather than being forced to take those 200-level French classes.

I would have liked to have left being fluent in a foreign language. Although I passed the class, it didn't really help me speak, even though I could read. I think the foreign language requirement should be increased.

Foreign Language requirement does not seem to get the desired end-result. Most student waste 4 terms by going through the motions with little or no interest and forego the opportunity to take a semester's worth of credits in other areas that may actually provide a broader cultural experience.

Require foreign language for the engineering students. I did not take it because I did not have to, but now I am studying it on my own because it is necessary for working in a global company.

Career Placement & Preparation

Comments about career preparation included several broad themes: issues related to career advising and mentoring; specific aspects related to finding a position after college; and preparation for the “real world.”

Many alumni felt that career advising had been lacking in quality or accessibility. Some alumni lacked direction in connecting their undergraduate program to future plans for career or advanced study. Alumni suggested students needed more coaching in key job search skills such as resume writing, networking, and interviewing. Several alumni mentioned the Business School and College of Engineering as models of good career advising and assistance, and wished that equivalent resources were available across campus.

On a certain level, I think I chose graduate school because I didn't really understand the non-academic world. It was as if I was blind to the opportunities that I now am very aware of, and if anything, I think certain fields don't expose students to a very wide range of career options. In my case, the biology program was heavily dominated by the traditional medical vs academic dichotomy, with corporate pharmaceutical research making some in-roads in the mid-90s.

I think the University should attempt to do a better job of pairing liberal arts degrees with possible career tracks. It seems a sizable portion of LS&A students do not have proper career direction. I think each department should do a better job of providing guidance to these students.

Make mandatory at least one career advising appointment per school year for each student. I did not attempt to utilize the career services office until it was too late. Most students probably do the same. LS&A graduates above all else need greater direction and guidance towards a professional career.

Career support for LSA is seriously lacking. As a senior, I went to the career center on a weekly basis and was essentially told to pursue a consulting career, despite the fact that I said I was interested in exploring other areas. No one could help me with something that Michigan didn't routinely send grads off to do - which in those days, was consulting, consulting, consulting.

Many comments focused on the skills and knowledge that alumni discovered to be necessary in the professional world. Some alumni felt that their undergraduate education had not adequately prepared them for careers in a non-academic environment, or had not provided hands-on experience and skills.

Influence the course requirements with more real world approaches...classes tended to be overly theoretical and left a large leap to career reality. Theory absolutely has its place, but by the time you reach upper-class status, you should be working toward realistic transitions.

Even though I majored in a social science field, I wish that I had taken more statistics, math, and economics classes. Having more quantitative skills coming out of school would have helped me in my job.

After graduating I found myself with two degrees, but had few valuable career skills. It was hard to find an employer that was willing to train. I found myself in a large city surrounded with other applicants from Universities that offered concentrated degrees in Marketing, PR, and Supply Chain Management. It would have been helpful to have more classes with a professional focus, for example, more marketing classes or writing for business. I took all the classes available with these topics, but they were not enough. Also, it would have been helpful to have more career counseling and career events to help undergraduates explore possible career paths.

With all the vast amount of knowledge given, there should be some effort on practical application of that knowledge. There was little in my education there that prepared me for the realities of working within my field. While I know all the history and know how to use all the technology yet I have had to figure out how that actually applies in the workplace. While there is no better teacher than experience I still feel more efforts could be made on the applications of the knowledge gained.

I think that Michigan can be too focused on the theoretical side of engineering and sometimes forgets or does not have enough time to teach as many practical applications. It seems to be geared toward people who want to go onto graduate school instead of those who want to go into the workplace.

Class Size & Faculty Interaction

Many alumni considered large courses to be a problem because the format limits class discussion and inhibits personal interaction with faculty. Many alumni also expressed the desire for better connections with faculty, particularly during their freshman and sophomore years.

Smaller classes: increased participation/engagement from students and interaction with faculty

Encourage more one on one interaction between students and faculty. A lot of times when I went to office hours there would be 10+ students there and the professors seemed to just want to get it over with. It was hard to get to know professors well. Maybe a lot of this has to do with how large science lectures can be, like Organic Chem, physics.

While difficult to address, I think courses for freshman and sophomores should be smaller. Large lecture courses are inevitable, but closer interaction with tenured professors could serve to inspire students far more than sitting in a lecture hall with 500 students.

More small school atmosphere (like my SNRE experience) to reduce some of the bureaucratic anonymity faced at such a large university

It would have been nice to have a more personal connection with my professors. Such large classes don't really expose you to the work of the individual's scholarship, and I wish I could have taken better advantage of learning more about their work.

Because it's such a big school, I think students can sometimes feel lost in the classroom. Personally, I found a support group through my co-curricular involvement, but I wish there would have been more of a focus to develop personal relationships with professors.

Facilitate more opportunities for faculty/student interaction, as opposed to grad student/student interaction.

Facilitate student/faculty interaction!!!! I know you do the take your professor to lunch program--which I believe began my junior or senior year (2004/2005). That is a WONDERFUL idea for a program. It's so intimidating to get to know profs here--especially because research institutes can feel like the teachers aren't always here to teach; they just care about research. But going to lunch was a terrific way for me to get to know a prof, who ultimately became my advisor for my undergrad thesis & is STILL my advisor in grad school today. So more opportunities like that--or just a serious effort to encourage faculty to participate and get to know students. Otherwise, at UM, you just feel like an anonymous number. (Which is something I still hear ALL the time from my students as a GSI.)

Advising

Many comments addressed academic advising. Alumni felt they needed better or more frequent guidance to negotiate the wealth of curricular choices. They needed help creating well-balanced schedules and laying out sound, long-term academic plans. Other alumni reported receiving poor, incorrect, or conflicting advice from advisors. Many of the comments echoed the sense of the University as a large, impersonal entity that offered insufficient individual attention.

I think U-M should have a more personalized program to advise students throughout their undergraduate experience. It is too easy for students to get lost at such a large school. Students do not always know about opportunities and it would be helpful to have a counselor or adviser that is readily accessible. As an undergraduate, I often felt like the advisers in LSA had little interest in helping me choose classes or making decisions about my major. In fact, I generally felt as though I was inconveniencing them when I did bother to make an appointment.

Improve undergraduate advising. I believe I met with my advisor twice (in four years) and did not get particularly helpful advice on either occasion.

I was less than impressed with academic advising on campus. I only met with academic advisors two or three times (as required), but it all felt very impersonal and factory-like. They just pulled out a list and ticked off the requirements I'd met--and usually I knew better than they did what I'd done and what I needed. Fortunately I knew what I wanted and rarely felt like I needed any real "advising" because I can't imagine that any of the

advisors I met with (either in LS&A or my concentration advisor) would have had much to say.

It would have been helpful to have a non-overworked academic guidance counselor. This was supposedly one of the advantages of being in the honors program, but I found that program to be pretty much useless to me as it was heavily skewed toward social science and humanities majors.

I think, particularly for incoming freshman, Michigan could take a more active role in directing and advising students as to their decision in what major they will pursue. As a freshman, I struggled with feeling like a number to my counselor as opposed to having a relationship with him in which he could guide me and give me suggestions.

Instruction

Comments were sharp and concise when regarding teaching that alumni perceived as indifferent or poor in quality. Alumni were critical of instructors who they perceived as not wanting to be in the classroom as well as those who were simply ineffective teachers. Some specifically noted language problems with graduate student instructors.

I had some really rotten Graduate Student Instructors; they very much determined whether I had a good experience in a course or a really miserable semester.

GSI's REALLY need to be more carefully chosen and trained. Poor communication and instruction abilities ruined a handful of my classes. It makes the university look sloppy and uninterested in education when they choose to have inept people leading their classes. That said, I also had some AMAZING GSI's that were even better than the professors. But the bad ones could really have been weeded out with simple screening.

Just because somebody is extremely smart in their field, and a great researcher, does not necessarily mean that they are able to effectively communicate their knowledge to the student.

My worst experiences were working with international graduate students who meant well but unfortunately had a hard time communicating due to a language barrier.

Hire professors that actually want to teach and are not just required to teach.

Some professors were excellent, some were too immersed in their subject to be able to communicate to someone just learning, and some just wanted to coast through with power point outlines and do no real teaching. The quality of the professor made all the difference- and aside from actually having representatives sit in the courses or talking with the students, I'm not sure how you can improve on that.

Make sure profs want to teach - even 100 level classes. I had a prof say on the first day "I'm only teaching this class b/c nobody else would."

Recruit faculty that are not only world-class researchers, but also world-class teachers.

Climate

Climate comments described alumni perceptions of the community on campus and the intellectual & social atmosphere they encountered while students. Many of the comments in this category addressed diversity, with the majority suggesting that the University do more to actively promote interaction between students. Another common theme was the perception that U-M was a large place with a “sink or swim” mentality.

During my undergraduate years, there was an overemphasis on superficial kinds of diversity. At times, this atmosphere had the unintended effect of stifling the kind of honest discourse that should be at the heart of a liberal arts education. At times, though not always, education took a back seat to politics and political correctness.

Diversity in the student body needs to be improved. This is not directed only to racial diversity but a variety of social economic status, cultures, and regions.

Help students from feeling lost and insignificant at a big university.

Figure out what diversity of thought is, and allow it, then (and I know this is crazy) encourage it.

Promote more cross-cultural interaction. UM is diverse on the surface, but often separates into social groups based on very traditional lines, undermining its reputation for diversity.

In my experience, I was preached a lot of extremely liberal viewpoints from my professors. Often, these same professors were unwilling to hear more conservative viewpoints. Students would benefit from understanding that both sides of the political spectrum are important and have valid viewpoints.

I think departments should take a more hands-on approach with their students, having social gatherings and other outings to build a better sense of community. I did not feel tied to my department in that way.

Offer more opportunities to create community freshman year. I was stuck in Baits II on north campus and had a hard time connecting and making friends.

Tuition/Costs

Some comments addressed the cost of attending U-M. Most comments were short and to the point (“lower tuition”). Some alumni suggested increasing financial aid and/or scholarships, particularly for middle-class students. Some alumni expressed

concern about how financial constraints might limit students' ability to fully participate in campus opportunities.

Give deserving middle-class non-minority students appropriate financial aid grants. I can't stand when U-M sends me requests to contribute money for scholarships when I never had one, even with a demonstrated need for my time there as an undergrad.

[Working full time] made my time at Michigan very difficult, and limited my opportunities for internships in fields I was interested in.

The most important thing UM can do to improve undergraduate education is to keep costs down so that money does not become a barrier to a world-class education.

My only criticism is the expense of attending Michigan. I loved my time there, but it was SO expensive that I feel like I have to make sacrifices now in order to pay off my school debt. I'm not saying I wouldn't make the same choice again, but it would be better to have less debt.

Resources

Numerous comments spoke of the need to better connect students with many resources and opportunities available on campus. In some cases, alumni identified services and resources that they felt the University lacked, but in many cases alumni felt students needed help finding what was already available.

I was a good student in high school but I was unprepared for the rigors of UM. I learned the hard way how to study, learn, and prepare for my academics. Perhaps a first-year seminar for every new student involving study skills, time management, and adjusting to college. With such a big school, it could be easy for some to get lost in the academic ocean never to be seen again.

Looking back I wish someone had spent more time getting me to realize all of the resources available to me to help with my learning experience. I knew they were there, but perhaps if I had heard more about them or specifics about what those places have done to help people I would have been more apt to visit and take advantage.

U-M is great at welcoming students to campus as a whole, but once we arrive, we were left to our own devices to make it. There should be more support available to out of state students that have a more difficult time fitting in and making the transition.

Maybe provide a mentoring network of upperclassmen to freshman who are joining the VAST Michigan community? Sometimes the plethora of opportunities is overwhelming. Having someone who has been around campus for a while and can provide insight into the community and how to pursue your interests could be very helpful.

Other Comments

Other suggestions offered by multiple alumni included:

- Emphasize study abroad opportunities. Some alumni see international experience as critical for success in the professional world, and as a necessary component of a quality undergraduate education.
- Pay attention to transfer students. Alumni who entered the University as transfers reported feeling lost, isolated, and left to “fend for themselves” when, as new members to an established community, they needed as much (or more) support as incoming freshmen.
- Strongly encourage students to pursue passions and interests through the many extracurricular opportunities on campus.