

Book Review

Inside the Undergraduate Experience

Catharine Hoffman Beyer, Gerald Gillmore and Andrew Fisher (Anker, 2007)

Review by

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Inside the Undergraduate Experience is a fascinating book for anyone who works in assessment and faculty development, or with undergraduates in learning communities, learning centers or first year experience courses. While it has all the numbers, charts, statistics and graphs that any assessment expert would want, it offers startling insights into the individual nature of undergraduate learning while at the same time giving an incredibly rich overview of what happens to undergraduates, in general, in their college years.

Based on a four-year study of 304 students who entered the University of Washington in fall 1999, the University of Washington's *Study of Undergraduate Education* (UW SOUL) used interviews, surveys, focus groups and even students' coursework to examine six areas of undergraduate learning: personal growth, understanding and appreciating diversity, critical thinking and problem solving, writing, quantitative reasoning and information technology and literacy. The authors also added a chapter on general learning that provides very interesting reading on what students consider helpful to their learning (faculty) and not helpful for their learning (their own behaviors).

Two perspectives were employed, a close-up focus on certain individual students whose stories are quoted liberally throughout the book, and a distanced view of the aggregate results of surveys and interviews. The authors established several purposes for their work, such as discovering what and where students learn in college, asking students to reflect on, and evaluate their experience as learners, illuminating the role of the university in students' personal growth, and identifying the factors that enhance or hinder learning.

The most interesting aspect of this study, in my opinion, is the decision to "maintain enough flexibility ... to respond to ideas, questions and directions set by faculty and staff" (p. 1), which allowed the researchers to ask the participants additional questions that might be raised by faculty or other consumers of their data. An excellent example of how this process was utilized is in Chapter 9. In response to a finding that "professors who were passionate about their subject areas and who demonstrated that they cared about students' learning" were the most important factors in student learning (p. 345), a faculty member from the Psychology department asked the researchers to find out what faculty behaviors students interpreted as caring. The researchers added that question to the next round of interviews and were able to identify 11 themes that very clearly define what behaviors the students perceive as evidence of caring in the classroom.

The results of this study tell us a story that is missing from the traditional theories of staged learning, “that assume that college students develop along a linear and progressive path, rather than paths that... are also iterative, dynamic, chaotic, and bumpy...” (p. 10). The authors make two key arguments: first, academic disciplines shape students’ experiences in every area of the six they examined, with the disciplinary effects being evident from an earlier point in the college trajectory than previously thought, and second, that asking students to self-reflect on their hopes of what they will learn when they arrive at college and later about what and how they have learned as they progress through their courses is, in itself, a valuable mode of learning that is often neglected at research institutions. The evidence for the influence of the majors on learning in the areas of critical thinking and problem solving, writing and quantitative reasoning brings into question the value of general education approaches and marks a departure from traditional assumptions around how the teaching of these skills is best directed.

There are several other findings that are equally worth noting but would need more space than a book review to fully appreciate. Suffice it to say that if you are involved in higher education, whether you work with faculty or students, as an administrator or a teacher, this book will provide you with a window on learning that has no equal.