

# UW SOUL

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University of Washington Study of Undergraduate Learning  
Office of Educational Assessment

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## **SPRING 2002 INTERVIEWS: WHAT DO YOUR PROFESSORS DO THAT LEADS YOU TO THINK THEY CARE ABOUT YOUR LEARNING?**

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*“The great professors tell us that they want us to think about what we are reading and hearing and to judge the validity of it for ourselves.”*

In spring quarter, 2002, Lois McDermott, a faculty member in the Psychology Department, asked if the UW Study of Undergraduate Learning (UW SOUL) could illuminate students’ responses to a question on the UW’s course evaluation forms. The evaluation forms ask students to rate the “instructor’s interest in whether the student learned.” McDermott wanted to know what leads students to think that instructors care about their learning. In spring, 2002, we interviewed 85 participants in the UW Study of Undergraduate Learning who had completed their junior and senior years at the UW.\* Among the questions we asked them was Lois McDermott’s question:

*What things do your professors do that leads you to think they care about your learning?*

This report presents the method we used for analyzing students’ responses, the results of that analysis, and some of the implications of those findings. We have included student quotations to illustrate our results.

### **METHOD**

Using an inductive process and preserving the students’ own language whenever possible, we created brief summaries of the responses given by students in the interviews. We then let the responses generate categories—ideas or themes that were mentioned more than once. We counted the number of responses that fit those categories, as well as noting idiosyncratic comments. Please note that because the question was open-ended, we can assume that when several students give the same or similar responses to the question, other students are likely to hold those views as well.

### **RESULTS**

Nearly every student described multiple ways that faculty members communicate they care about students’ learning. The categories generated by their responses, as well as quotations, are listed below. Only 16 responses could not be categorized and were listed as “other.”

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\* A description of the UW Study of Undergraduate Learning, including a discussion of the sample, can be found at [www.washington.edu/oea/soul.htm](http://www.washington.edu/oea/soul.htm)

## What do professors do that lead you to believe they care about your learning?

1. **They interact with students in class, engaging them in substantive ways.** A total of 87 percent of the students talked about interaction between the professor and the students in class. Their responses could be placed into three subcategories, which are closely related. Those subcategories are listed in order of their frequency below:

Professors ask for questions in class and answer them respectfully and completely, checking to make sure explanations are clear (34 percent).

*“They make a point to make it easy to ask questions, even if it interrupts lecture. You do that by being really active in finding out if there are questions, noticing when hands are raised. Allowing the class to sometimes go on a little bit of a tangent without totally straying from the subject but leaving their notes to pursue what a student asks a little bit.”*

*“Every time the professor goes over one main point, they have to ask [if we have questions]—not if they go over five. You really don’t think they care if their back is to you and they are writing on the board and they never ask. Even if the students never ask any questions when the professor asks if there are questions, his asking makes us think he cares about our learning.”*

*“Also the way they answer questions in class—their attitude about it. There are times when there are stupid questions, but even then a teacher who cares about your learning will be nice about it.”*

Professors monitor whether students are learning through observation or requests for feedback (34 percent).

*“He could tell if you were clueless by looking at your face, and then he’d explain things differently. If people had questions, he’d explain things a different way.”*

*“When they check up on you. For example, [my professor] sent emails to random people once to see if they were understanding what was happening in class.”*

*“One professor I have this quarter will spend about 40 minutes doing a lecture and the last 10 minutes, we get to work on a homework problem with each other. He’ll walk around and ask us if we have any problems. If we are not doing well, they will approach us and ask us questions to find out what is wrong or what they can do to help us understand stuff better.”*

*“In class, it registers with them more easily if the student is not catching on to the concepts. They have a tendency to say, ‘I feel that everyone is not completely getting this, so let’s go ahead and break this down a little further.’ They are monitoring in some way.”*

Professors encourage students to share opinions or contribute to discussion (19 percent).

*“In class, they engage us in discussion and not just lecture at us. It’s not just, ‘Here’s a bunch of information; test next week.’ We are called upon to voice our thoughts and perspectives. We are treated more like human beings. We learn to put into words things that we think. Testing is not just based on ‘Can you remember this concept?’ but ‘Can you think, can you write, can you formulate ideas?’ That brings out the better part of students. I feel more acknowledged as an intellectual mind when I get to express myself.”*

*“Discussion is the way I’ve learned the best, and if teachers encourage everyone to talk, in a way their own teaching can be challenged. That shows me that they really care about the issues and what they are teaching. Just telling someone about something doesn’t ensure that they will learn it.”*

*“There’s a lot of interaction. There’s an open-discussion class format. They want to hear your opinions—right, wrong or indifferent. And that’s how they know you are learning, because they hear your opinion. The good teachers want to find out your opinions on things, and that helps them know how they are doing, too.”*

- 2. They design lectures/courses that anticipate and reduce barriers to students’ learning.** About 47 percent of the students talked about the ways that the course’s structure and daily lectures communicate that faculty members care about their learning.

*“When it’s clear they have put a lot of effort in creating a lesson plan that is geared to our needs. By that I mean, I guess when it’s not coming from the perspective of someone who understands all the bases of the logic for that class, especially when you are talking about a technical difficulty. We need to understand the bases—like what are your primary assumptions, things like that, so they start out explaining that first off—kind of a sequential presentation of the material, and coming back to earlier concepts, things like that.”*

*“First of all, he understands that it’s the first engineering class that many students are taking. He wants us to understand each aspect of thermodynamics. He goes through each section, labels it, and explains it thoroughly. He is not confusing for students.”*

*“I think when a professor is speaking a little more off the cuff, it feels like they are more interested in my learning than if they are just reading off a PowerPoint presentation. The professors who use the PowerPoint presentations tend to make less eye contact with the students in the seats, and there usually isn’t time for engagement or questioning. There is a general inflexibility in the topics for the day or the program for the day. And also, it just feels so rote. It feels like the lesson is locked down and nothing from the edges can make it into the conversation.”*

- 3. They are accessible in a variety of ways, including encouraging students to come to office hours, meeting students by appointment, soliciting and responding to email, and being available before and after class for students.** About 36 percent of the UW SOUL interviewees spoke about faculty availability.

*“In my sociology class after our first test, the professor put up our scores and told us that if we had scores under a certain level we needed to go see our TA and if we had scores below that, we had to go see him. So professors who make themselves readily available communicate they care about our learning.”*

*“When a professor has a good website and is accessible by email. When they respond to your emails and are really open to having office hours. When they respond to your needs and are willing to go with your schedule. And when they tell you that in class.”*

*“When they really strenuously encourage you to come in and talk to them during office hours. I’ve had a couple of teachers who have set up times you can meet them at the HUB or By George for lunch. I thought that was a cool thing to do.”*

4. **They demonstrate a passion for the subject; they are enthusiastic about teaching it.** Twenty-six percent of the UW SOUL students interviewed spoke about how professors' deep interest in their subjects can communicate that they care about students' learning.

*“Enthusiasm would be one. With the arts seminar, we all got into it, because he went out of his way to do the field trips. He went out of his way to expose us to things. He was excited and you could see it.”*

*“Many professors just talk very passionately about their subjects. They communicate that this is cool stuff and give you ‘change-the-world’ arguments, as unreasonable as that may sound sometimes. They are giving all their passion about the subject to the students.”*

*“Their passion about what they are teaching is what makes me want to learn. They don’t particularly say that they want us to learn, but their interest in what they are teaching makes you feel that you want to learn more from them. It makes you think that there are things to be learned from them.”*

5. **They get to know something about the students’ personal experience or interests and know at least some students in the class by name.** About 19 percent of the UW SOUL students felt that personal knowledge was important.

*“In class, they try to find a way to get to know your name, even if it’s a big class.”*

*“When they know people’s names in the class, even if it’s not my name. When a student asks a question, when they ask what the student’s name is first.”*

*“When professors learn my name, that really means a lot to me. I want to do better in their class then. I try to introduce myself to the profs too. When you raise your hand in class, they call on you by name, or if they write a personal message on your midterm or a paper you get back--it could be either criticism or praise--that communicates they care.”*

6. **They have high expectations and standards for students’ learning; they challenge and stretch students’ thinking.** Sixteen percent of the students who were interviewed mentioned explicitly that challenging classes demonstrated that professors care about their learning.

*“They expect a lot, which is a good thing, because when someone expects a lot, I work harder. When they set the bar high, that’s really helpful. That makes me work harder and that makes me learn more in the end.”*

*“They actually give you challenging homework that is not always straightforward. If you are going to turn in homework then you should have to learn something.”*

*“They challenge you. They might ask you to retry or redo something, because they don’t think it worked. You don’t always get the easy way out—that’s a sign they care about my learning.”*

7. **They provide critical feedback that guides students' learning on assignments.** About 14 percent of the students mentioned that feedback on their work indicated that faculty cared about their learning.

*“Constant feedback. I’ve had classes where you turn in a homework assignment and they just check it off and others where they dissect it, like yours was the only one. When they do that, you know that they are not just giving you a grade on it, but they are helping you learn it, learn the information.”*

*“Writing good comments on my assignments and critiquing well—not just positive but negative too, because I want that feedback to improve.”*

*“They give quality comments back on your papers. They give you pointers about what you should have done to achieve a little better grade. Also if they offer time to talk to you about how you are doing, why they gave you the grade you got in your paper. That helps you know what you need to do next time.”*

8. **They are experts in their fields of study.** Eight percent of the UW SOUL interviewees mentioned the importance of professors' expertise.

*“It’s really those aspects of being a credible source, someone who gets up there and knows what they are talking about, someone who presents both sides.”*

*“I like it when it is apparent that the teacher knows his stuff, and he could teach it to anyone, even a 2-year old, if he had to.”*

*“If they are really knowledgeable and can answer questions really well.”*

9. **They help students do well on tests.** About seven percent of the students who were interviewed spoke of faculty helping students prepare for or understand the results of tests as a sign that faculty care about students' learning.

*“I took a geography class as a freshman, and the professor wanted everyone to do well, so he had study sessions after class before the test.”*

*“In biology last quarter, a couple of my professors had extra review sessions for us to go to. They would schedule them around the time students could take them, even doing some on Sunday night. That was really nice to know—that they were willing to spend their extra time, even on the weekends, to help us.”*

*“Helping you prepare for your exams and stating what the learning objectives are for the class. Even if the tests are very hard, if they have laid out their objectives and talked about them, you get the feeling they want you to succeed.”*

10. **They treat students with respect and understanding.** About seven percent of the students interviewed spoke directly about how faculty treat them. This category, however, overlaps with others. For example, students see professors asking for their opinions as respectful treatment, and they regard lectures that are well-organized as demonstrating that the professor “understands” their abilities. Therefore, this category refers only to those students who specifically described how they are treated.

*“I like teachers who treat the students like scholars, who don’t talk down to us and ask us stupid questions. Stupid questions meaning that they have the answers and we are trying to guess what they are.”*

*“If I go to their office hours and they are willing to bear with me if I don’t have a clear understanding of a certain thing. I understand that for them it’s obvious, but if you are seeing it for the first time, it is not all that self-evident. So if the professor is willing to kind of wait for you.”*

*“He just takes time out and talks to you as if you are a human being and on the same level as him. He makes you feel like an equal not a peon. When you go up after class to ask them something, that’s when you can really tell if they care.”*

- 11. They connect course material to real-world applications and events.** Several students (5 percent) believe that linking course content to the world outside academia demonstrates that faculty care about students’ learning.

*“I guess my Biology 220 teacher right no. He tries to introduce us to specific cases, and he asks us to figure out why this happened. It’s a little game where we have to figure out the mechanisms behind things. It’s a game, but he wants us to figure out how what we are learning applies to the real world.”*

*“They make the material easy to understand for the students. They make it fun and more realistic—more related to real life, instead of just talking about the material in an abstract way.”*

*“Right off the bat, they start talking about how the class can have an impact on you in the bigger picture. They relate lectures to what is pertinent now.”*

## IMPLICATIONS

Students were articulate about the ways that faculty members demonstrate they care about students’ learning. Students’ comments mostly focused on what faculty members did *in class*, as opposed to time spent outside class. Therefore, the classroom is the medium for communicating faculty concern about students, as well as for communicating information about subjects. Regarding students’ descriptions of what faculty members actually do in class, there was remarkable agreement among students in the following areas:

Nearly all the students interviewed (87 percent) said that faculty interactions with students in class—through encouraging student questions, asking for feedback on learning, and incorporating discussion—led them to believe that professors cared about their learning.

Close to half of the students pointed to a course structure that acknowledges where students are in their thinking and clear course/lecture organization as indicators that faculty care about their learning.

More than a third of the students pointed to accessibility as a key sign that faculty members care about their learning. One student suggested that even the *appearance* of availability made a difference.

More than a fourth of the students said that professors who are passionate about their subject areas inspire students to want to learn about those areas.

A significant number of students said that some personal knowledge of students and their names, high expectations, and thoughtful comments on assignments let them know that faculty members cared about their learning.

Many of these findings echo earlier UW SOUL findings. For example, in an open-ended email question sent to about 200 participants, students reported needing help with question-asking in classes. They also spoke about the positive effects of high expectations on their learning. In surveys, students have reported that their learning increases when they are asked to think deeply about issues that matter to the fields they are studying and, further, when they are asked to demonstrate that thinking through papers, projects, discussion, and presentations. In focus groups and interviews, students have repeatedly spoken about the long-term, positive effects that professors, who are passionate about what they do, have on students' learning. In focus groups over three years, students have discussed the ways that class structure can help their learning.

What is significant about these findings is that they present a variety of methods faculty can use not only to show students that they care about student learning, but also to enhance that learning. When students ask questions in class; when they attend clear, well-organized lectures; when they spend time in conversation with faculty members about ideas, issues, and events; when they are asked to think and share their own ideas; when they get feedback from experts on those ideas; when students witness the pleasure and excitement that lifelong learning can provide; and when they are recognized as individuals—what students learn and how long they retain that learning will be increased. Therefore, by incorporating methods that lead students to believe that faculty members care about students' learning into their courses, faculty can also improve student learning. Everyone wins.