

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Individual Interviews with Alumni

*University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa*

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Summary of Key Findings

As part of the larger market research project, Noel-Levitz conducted individual telephone interviews with a small sample of UNI alumni. The script used for the interviews was designed to gather information about their views on the University of Northern Iowa and its place among other institutions of higher education within the state of Iowa. Specific areas of inquiry included alumni views of key concepts (“friendly faculty,” “highly qualified faculty” and “academic quality”) and their perception of the images of UNI and key competitors.

Key findings from these interviews include:

- The UNI alumni who were interviewed are immensely proud of their alma mater and the quality of the education they received. This sentiment is especially powerful among participating alumni graduating from the education and business programs.
- When asked to rate the characteristics of UNI that ultimately had the greatest value, nearly all of the respondents assigned high ratings to “*opportunities to interact with professors who were willing to work with students.*” Participants described relationships that extended beyond class and posted office hours. Alumni from education programs tended to describe their relationship with these professors as that of a mentor and several noted that the relationship continues to this day. This option was more often rated “very important” than was the response “*valued the opportunity to interact directly with highly qualified professors.*”
- When asked about their personal definition of quality participants seem to care little for the credentials and research pursuits of their former professors. Of greater value to the alumni who were interviewed was teaching ability, mentoring and proactive networking these teachers offered in support of their students.
- These alumni seem to value their UNI experience most for its contribution to their success in college and their preparation for life after college. Scores in the areas of “*Personal attention helped me succeed in college,*” and “*I received better preparation for career,*” ranked considerably higher than those items that referred to the social experience of college life.

- Alumni who were interviewed also tend to value their experience as a holistic process. Alumni were most likely to choose the following statements in the forced choice exercises:
 1. *...is primarily known as a place where students feel they belong and are highly valued*
 2. *... is a place that takes good students and helps them develop into whole persons*
 3. *The most important thing a college can do is provide a well-rounded education that helps me develop critical thinking skills that can be used in any profession*
- In terms of its reputation UNI scored high among participating alumni in four areas:
 1. *Quality of the program you are interested in*
 2. *Students interact directly with highly qualified professors*
 3. *Friendly professors who readily meet with individual students*
 4. *Safety on campus*
- As far as educational outcomes, nearly all items were rated as either “very important” or “important” by all alumni. The only items that were not rated as either important or very important were:
 1. *Continue on to graduate school after college*
 2. *Become a leader in the community*

Participants reported that these two features were based more on personal choice, and thus not something they expected the university to provide for its students.
- UNI is viewed as a first choice school by the majority of the alumni who were interviewed. Many point to the quality of their program as being key in setting UNI apart from other institutions.
- When asked to identify the best features of the university alumni comments were very consistent and can be grouped in descending order of importance as follows:
 1. Campus environment and culture – small, connected, caring, and friendly
 2. Program quality (with education and business at the top)
 3. Value for the dollar. To these alumni, UNI is everything you would want in a university experience without the daunting size and impersonal nature found at the University of Iowa. In the words of one alumnus, “*UNI is a place that attracts and brings in the best Iowans.*”

Introduction and Methodology

Using a script modeled on the telephone survey questionnaire of inquiries and their parents, we conducted individual, in-depth telephone interviews with 25 UNI alumni. Ten of the alumni interviewed lived within 150 miles of the university, while 15 of those interviewed lived beyond 150 miles. The interviews were conducted by a Noel-Levitz consultant with extensive experience in higher education marketing at public universities. Interviews generally lasted about 20 minutes. To complete the 25 interviews 300 calls were attempted.

Summaries of the responses to the individual questions asked in the interview are provided in the following sections. (NOTE: While we have provided these summaries, it is important to bear in mind that these represent a very small sample of alumni.)

Summaries of Responses

With which private college in Iowa are you most familiar?

- St. Ambrose (4)
- Drake (3)
- Wartburg (3)
- Grinnell (2)
- Morningside (2)
- William Penn (1)
- Buena Vista (1)
- Coe (1)
- Simpson (1)
- Kaplan (1)
- Iowa Wesleyan (1)
- Grand View (1)

With which Iowa community colleges are you most familiar?

- Hawkeye Community College (6)
- Iowa Central Community College (4)
- Kirkwood Community College (3)
- Scott Community College (Eastern Iowa CC district) (3)
- Iowa Western Community College (2)
- Southeastern Community College (2)
- Indian Hills Community College (1)
- Des Moines Area Community College (1)
- Muscatine Community College (Eastern Iowa CC district) (1)
- Western Iowa Tech Community College (1)
- Iowa Lakes Community College (1)
- Not familiar with any (4)

Looking back on your experience, what characteristics of UNI ultimately had the greatest value to you?

Item	Alumni w/ in 150 miles (most common rating)	Alumni beyond 150 miles (most common rating)
Overall reputation of the school	Very important	Important
Cost of attending	Important	Very important
School had small classes	Important	Very important
Professors were excellent teachers	Very important	Very important
Quality of the academic program you chose	Very important	Very important
Job or graduate school opportunities you were prepared for	Important	Very important
Opportunity to interact directly with highly qualified professors	Very important / Important (evenly split)	Very important
Quality of academic resources and facilities such as classrooms, labs, library	Very important	Very important / Important (evenly split)
Financial aid or scholarship assistance	Important	Important
The nationally known athletic programs	Not important at all	Not important at all
Friendly professors who were willing to work with individual students	Important	Important
Safety on campus	Very important	Very important
Many opportunities for community service	Somewhat important	Somewhat important
It was easy for students to become campus leaders	Somewhat important	Somewhat important

(NOTE: Alumni were given a five-point scale from “very important” to “not important at all.” The table above lists the most frequently mentioned rating from alumni in the two geographic areas.)

If you remember a professor who was friendly and worked with individual students, describe the kind of interaction you had. (Only for those who rated “Friendly professors who were willing to work with individual students” as either “very important” or “important.”)

- My advisor is still a friend and mentor today.
- Always available. Ready to listen and then advise.
- Frequently invited me in to chat about my career goals beyond the program.
- My math professor encouraged small group sessions with him outside of class.
- Available, extroverted and recognized differing learning styles.
- My professor knew everybody by name and was comfortable giving out home contact information.
- My professor was non-judgmental.
- She related things to my level. Her style was very non-authoritarian.

Of the following three items, which is the most important reason why having friendly professors was important/very important to you?

Item	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Personal attention helped me succeed in college	6	8
Personal attention led to better career opportunities	0	4
Personal attention meant I didn't get lost in the crowd	2	5

If you remember a professor who is highly qualified in a way that mattered to you, how would you describe that person's qualifications and experience? (Only for those who rated "Opportunity to interact directly with highly qualified professors" as either "very important" or "important.")

- She was very learned and globally published. Well respected by her peers.
- Real classroom experience. Well respected in the profession.
- Great ability to relate field experience to the classroom.
- More successful outside the classroom but loved teaching and personally invested in student success.
- Very connected to professional organizations and networks.
- Great at bringing in outside data that was relevant to what we were learning.
- Practiced what he preached.

Of the following three items, which is the most important reason why having experienced, qualified faculty was very/extremely important to you?

Item	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
I received a better education in my major	2	2
I received better preparation for career	2	6
I had a better classroom experience	3	3

There are many ways to define academic quality. How well do each of the following reflect your personal definition of quality at colleges and universities in general?

Item	Alumni w/ in 150 miles (most common rating)	Alumni beyond 150 miles (most common rating)
Faculty are involved in nationally recognized research and scholarship	Somewhat well	Somewhat well
Faculty have studied at prestigious institutions	Somewhat well	Somewhat well
Faculty have excellent classroom teaching abilities	Very well	Very well
Graduates have an easy time finding jobs	Very well	Very well
Resources and facilities are excellent and up-to-date	Very well	Very well
The particular major I am interested in is known to be excellent at the school	Very well	Very well
Students develop exceptional knowledge, skills and abilities	Very well	Very well
The curriculum is academically rigorous	Somewhat / Very well	Very well
Other students are highly satisfied with their experience	Somewhat well	Very well
The institution is continually looking for ways to improve the student experience	Very well	Very well

(NOTE: Alumni were given a three-point scale (“very well”; “somewhat” “not very well.” The table above lists the most frequently mentioned rating from alumni in the two geographic areas.)

When asked if there was anything else that they think is an important ingredient of quality, only one alumnus mentioned an additional ingredient: “Opportunities to get involved beyond campus in service learning, clubs and intramurals.”

In general, if you had to choose, which would you say is ultimately more important? That a college . . .

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Is primarily known as a place where students feel they belong and are highly valued	6	9
Is primarily known as a school with strong academics	4	6

In general, if you had to choose, which would you say is ultimately more important? That a college . . .

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Is a place where professors provide excellent classroom instruction	5	9
Is a place where professors and staff genuinely care about students	5	6

In general, if you had to choose, which would you say is ultimately more important? That a college . . .

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Is located in a safe community and environment	7	6
Has graduates that are highly successful in their chosen fields	3	9

In general, if you had to choose, which would you say is ultimately more important? That a college . . .

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Is a place that takes good students and helps them develop into whole persons	7	7
Is a place that takes great students and pushes them to excel academically	3	8

Which statement most closely reflects your beliefs?

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
The most important thing a college can do is provide a well-rounded education that helps me develop critical thinking skills that can be used in any profession	7	10
The most important thing a college can do is provide me with an excellent education in my major that prepares me for my field of choice	3	5

Which statement most closely reflects your beliefs?

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
A college should provide me with an excellent experience while I am in school because it's a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence	1	6
A college education should be primarily focused on getting me ready for life after college	9	9

A college education can provide many things for students. Please tell me how important you think it is that a college does the following things for its students.

That a college helps them . . .	Alumni w/ in 150 miles (most common rating)	Alumni beyond 150 miles (most common rating)
Become well educated in the specific major they study	Very important	Important
Become well educated in a variety of subjects	Very important / Important / Somewhat important	Important
Become a responsible citizen	Very important	Very important
Become a mature adult	Very important	Very important
Get a good job after college	Very important / important	Very important
Continue on to graduate school after college	Important / Somewhat important	Somewhat important
Become a leader in the community	Somewhat important	Somewhat important
Gain an awareness of their own personal values	Very important	Important
Prepare to make a contribution to the world, not just earn a paycheck	Important	Important
Learn to understand and appreciate diverse people and viewpoints	Very important	Important
Develop a high degree of self-confidence	Important	Important

(NOTE: Alumni were given a five-point scale from “very important” to “not important at all.” The table above lists the most frequently mentioned rating from alumni in the two geographic areas.)

Please indicate which of the following institutions is best known by Iowa residents for each of the following characteristics:

Alumni within 150 miles of campus

Characteristic	UNI	U of Iowa	ISU	Private	Comm. College
Overall reputation of the school	0	10	0	0	0
Reasonable cost of attending	3	1	0	0	4
School has small classes	1	0	0	3	6
Professors are excellent teachers	5	4	1	0	0
Quality of the program you are interested in	5	3	2	0	0
Job or graduate school opportunities for graduates	2	6	2	0	0
Students interact directly with highly qualified professors	6	3	0	0	0
Quality of academic resources and facilities such as classrooms, labs, library	5	5	0	0	0
Good financial aid or scholarship assistance	3	3	0	1	1
School has nationally known athletic programs	0	9	0	0	0
Friendly professors who readily meet with individual students	5	1	0	2	1
Safety on campus	7		0	2	1
Many opportunities for community service	2	3	0	0	0
It's easy for students to become campus leaders	3	1	1	2	1

Please indicate which of the following institutions is best known by Iowa residents for each of the following characteristics:

Alumni beyond 150 miles of campus

Characteristic	UNI	U of Iowa	ISU	Private	Comm. College
Overall reputation of the school	7	6	0	0	0
Reasonable cost of attending	4	0	0	1	7
School has small classes	5	0	0	4	7
Professors are excellent teachers	10	2	1	0	0
Quality of the program you are interested in	12	1	1	0	0
Job or graduate school opportunities for graduates	2	11	0	1	0
Students interact directly with highly qualified professors	11	1	0	1	0
Quality of academic resources and facilities such as classrooms, labs, library	2	10	1	0	0
Good financial aid or scholarship assistance	6	0	0	4	2
School has nationally known athletic programs	0	13	0	0	0
Friendly professors who readily meet with individual students	14	0	0	0	0
Safety on campus	9	0	0	3	1
Many opportunities for community service	5	1	1	4	0
It's easy for students to become campus leaders	5	6	0	4	3

What do you think are the best features of University of Northern Iowa?

Campus Environment (10 comments):

- Perfect size
- Enrollment and real estate
- Small campus
- Small classes
- Connection between the campus and Cedar Falls
- Friendly and caring campus
- Faculty, students, and staff
- Small and safe campus

- Lots to do on and around campus
- New facilities improving the student experience

Programs/Faculty (5 comments):

- Specific programs
- Education and Business
- Classes taught by full professors
- My professor's were #1
- Caring faculty

Value (4 comments):

- Great value for my money
- Great preparation for career
- Affordability
- Opportunities for internships

Other (1 comment):

- UNI attracts the best Iowans.

Would you say University of Northern Iowa is generally perceived by Iowa residents as:

Choice	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
A first-choice school for college-bound students	8	11
A fall back or "safety" school for college-bound students	2	4

Demographics

Gender

- 14 female
- 11 male

Major Program

- Elementary Education (4)
- Finance (3)
- Special Education (2)
- Accounting (1)
- Art (1)
- Communication (1)
- Computer Science (1)
- Construction Management (1)
- Criminology (1)
- Elementary Reading (1)
- English (1)
- General Studies (1)
- Health Education (1)
- History (1)
- Physics (1)
- Principalship (1)
- Psychology (1)
- Social Work (1)
- Technology Management (1)

What is the highest degree you have completed?

Degree	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Associate's degree	0	0
Bachelor's degree	7	10
Master's degree	3	5
Doctoral or professional degree	0	0

What is the highest level of education your mother completed?

Education level	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Elementary school	0	0
High school diploma or GED	8	4
Some college, but no degree	0	2
Bachelor's degree	2	7
Master's degree	1	2
Doctoral or professional degree	0	0

What is the highest level of education your father completed?

Education level	Alumni w/ in 150 miles	Alumni beyond 150 miles
Elementary school	0	0
High school diploma or GED	5	3
Some college, but no degree	0	4
Bachelor's degree	4	5
Master's degree	1	3
Doctoral or professional degree	0	0
