

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Surveys of Prospective Transfer Students

*University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa*

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Surveys of Prospective Transfer Students

University of Northern Iowa • Cedar Falls, Iowa

Summary of Key Findings

As part of a larger research project, Noel-Levitz conducted an online survey of a sample of 145 transfer students. The survey was designed to gather information about the college choice process, their understanding of key concepts (“friendly faculty,” “highly qualified faculty,” and “academic quality”), and their perceptions of the image of UNI and key competitors.

Key findings from these surveys include:

- Somewhat less than half of all students plan on continuing their education beyond a bachelor’s degree. Showing how UNI’s undergraduates succeed in graduate school will also be important for this segment of the university’s market.
- Unlike the first-time college students studied in the inquiry and parent surveys, most of these students plan on applying to only one college or university. Early communications to potential transfer students may be necessary in order to broaden the market of prospective transfer students who are considering UNI.
- Two of three transfer students who completed the survey list UNI as their first choice, an indication of the university’s strong position among the respondents.
- When choosing a college, the most important considerations for students are:
 - Transferability of credits;
 - Financial aid or scholarship assistance; and
 - Quality of the program they are interested in.
- The transfer students who completed the survey favor UNI on nearly all of the features tested. The only items where UNI wasn’t selected as best were:
 - Reasonable cost of attending (community colleges ranked highest);
 - Small classes (community colleges ranked highest); and
 - Nationally knownNationally-known athletic programs (Iowa State preferred).
- The following items are among the least important considerations for transfer students, with less than 25 percent rating these items as “very important” when choosing a college:
 - School has small classes;
 - Opportunities to participate in community service;

- School has nationally-known athletic programs.
- Among the respondents to the survey, UNI has an exceptionally high level of “name recognition.” Furthermore, respondents were highly likely to mention some aspect of the university’s programs or classes as a best feature. Teacher education was the program most frequently cited as a program that UNI offers by the respondents.
- In light of the high levels of awareness and position as a “first choice” school, it is not surprising 70 percent of respondents say they will apply to UNI.
- Availability after class or having the time to meet with students as well as getting their questions answered is what these students look to when they describe the type of ideal interaction they would expect with faculty. They are most likely to believe that this type of personal attention will help them succeed in college.
- Transfer students are most likely to say that “highly qualified faculty” are those who possess extensive experience, both as teachers and in the world of work. They value highly qualified faculty because they believe they will receive better preparation for their career as well as a better education in their specific major program.
- Nearly all of these students say that feeling confident that they will be successful academically is “very important” to them in their choice of a college. Nearly as many also want to feel secure that there will be a good return on their financial investment in their education. The “emotional components” of a student’s response to a particular college is probably a mixture of things, but assuring prospective transfer students that UNI is a place where they will succeed should be central to the marketing communications for this market.
- Excellence in classroom teaching is most likely to define “academic quality” for transfer students, although additional dimensions probably also play a secondary role:
 - Exceptional knowledge/skill development;
 - Ease of employment for graduates of the institution; and
 - Specific academic programs that have a reputation for excellence.
- Transfer students are most likely to respond to an institution that takes good students and helps them develop into a “whole person.” They also have a preference for an institution with highly successful graduates and strong academics.
- A clear majority of transfer students believe that “a college education should be primarily focused on getting [the student] ready for life after college” rather than that college should provide an “excellent experience . . . because it’s a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence.”
- The more intangible, experiential dimensions of a college education are generally not the sorts of things that transfer students respond to when evaluating colleges and universities.

Introduction and Methodology

Noel-Levitz conducted an online survey of prospective transfer students as part of the larger market research project. Based on the following research objectives, we designed customized survey instruments for this population:

- Gather information on the college choice process;
- Identify the most important features and benefits that prospective transfer students are looking for in a college or university;
- Explore what students look for from interaction with faculty and their definitions of academic quality; and
- Measure the perceptions of UNI among transfer students as well as their perceptions of key competitors.

The survey was fielded between October 6 and October 27, 2008. It was sent via an e-mail invitation to students at North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC), a comprehensive two-year college in Mason City, Iowa, and to transfer inquiries in UNI's own inquiry database.

A total of 145 qualified respondents completed the survey (respondents who indicated that they were planning to enroll in a four-year college or university by 2011). Three of every four respondents were female. The following table summarizes the distribution of race/ethnicity for the respondents, who mostly identified themselves as white/Caucasian.

To which of the following racial or ethnic groups do you belong?

Response	Percent of Respondents
Alaskan Native	0%
American Indian	0%
Asian	3%
Black / African-American	1%
Hispanic or Latino (including Puerto Rican)	5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0%
White / Caucasian	87%
Multi-racial	3%
Don't Know/Refused	1%

The following table summarizes the distribution of approximate household income reported by the respondents.

What is your family's (your) approximate annual household income?

Response	Percent of Respondents
Less than \$25,000	13%
\$25,000 to under \$50,000	31%
\$50,000 to under \$75,000	35%
\$75,000 to under \$100,000	15%
\$100,000 or more	7%

About a third of the respondents have a parent who has not had any college-level education.

What is the highest level of education completed by your . . .

Level of Education	Mother	Father
Elementary school	6%	6%
High school diploma or GED	29%	47%
Some college, but no degree	16%	13%
Associate's degree	23%	12%
Bachelor's degree	18%	13%
Master's degree	7%	7%
Doctoral or professional degree	0%	2%
Don't know	1%	2%

College Plans and Preferences

Students were asked, “What is the highest degree you plan to pursue?” The majority of students (55%) in UNI’s market plan on a bachelor’s degree; however 39 percent are planning graduate studies. This is comparable to the percentage of inquiries (43%) who indicated plans for graduate study.

What is the highest degree you think you will pursue?

Degree	Percent of all respondents
Associate’s degree	1%
Bachelor’s degree	55%
Master’s degree	29%
Doctoral or professional	10%
Other	1%
Don’t know	4%

With a substantial group of transfer students also planning on graduate study, UNI should be able to showcase examples of bachelor’s degree recipients who go on for advanced study. Real student stories are most effective for this.

Students were asked the number of schools they planned to apply to, including any to which they had already applied. More than half (59%) are only planning to apply to one school for transfer. It may very well be that many prospective transfer students selected the school they plan to transfer into even before enrolling in a community college. If so, marketing communications to prospective transfer students may need to start prior to their enrollment at the community college. Still, more than a third of prospective transfers are considering multiple options.

To how many schools are you planning to apply for transfer – including any to which you have already applied?

Number	Percent of all respondents
One	59%
Two	32%
Three or more	9%

Respondents were then asked to list which private and community colleges they were most familiar with. Drake University was the private selected most often by students.

With which private college in Iowa are you most familiar?

Iowa private college	Percent of all respondents
Drake University	15%
Wartburg College	12%
Buena Vista University	11%
Saint Ambrose University	6%
Simpson College	6%
AIB College of Business	5%
Upper Iowa University	5%
Loras College	4%
Luther College	4%
Mount Mercy College	4%
Cornell College	3%
Iowa Wesleyan College	3%
Waldorf College	3%
Allen College	2%
Central College	2%
Coe College	2%
Grand View College	2%
University of Dubuque	2%
Other	9%

Des Moines Area, North Iowa Area, Hawkeye, and Kirkwood top the list of community colleges most often selected by transfer students.

With which community college in Iowa are you most familiar

Iowa community college	Students
Des Moines Area Community College	22%
North Iowa Area Community College	17%
Hawkeye Community College	13%
Kirkwood Community College	13%
Eastern Iowa Community College District	8%
Northeast Iowa Community College-Calmar	6%
Indian Hills Community College	4%
Iowa Central Community College	3%
Ellsworth Community College	2%
Iowa Western Community College	2%
Marshalltown Community College	2%
Southeastern Community College	2%
Western Iowa Tech Community College	2%
Other	3%

Next, transfer students were asked to indicate their first choice school for transferring. Nearly two of every three respondent to the survey indicated that UNI was their top choice. Note that this may reflect some response bias, as a portion of the survey population came from UNI's own inquiry pool.

If you had to decide today, which of the schools you are considering would be your first choice.

School	Students
University of Northern Iowa	66%
Iowa State University	8%
University of Iowa	6%
Buena Vista University	2%
Other	12%

Rating the Importance of Features

The students were then presented with a series of 14 features of colleges and universities that are often part of the decision-making process when choosing an institution. They were asked to indicate how important each feature was to them when selecting a school for consideration. They were instructed to use a 5-point rating scale, from “very important” to “not important at all.”

For each of the following items, please rate how important this item is to you when choosing a college.

Feature	Students: Percent “very important” or “important”
Quality of the program you are interested in	99%
Transferability of credits	97%
Professors who are excellent teachers	96%
Quality of academic resources and facilities such as classrooms, labs, library	93%
Financial aid or scholarship assistance	93%
Friendly professors who readily meet with individual students	91%
Job or graduate school opportunities for graduates	88%
Overall reputation of the school	88%
Cost of attending	87%
Safety on campus	86%
Students interact directly with highly qualified professors	85%
School has small classes	64%
Opportunities to participate in community service	41%
School has nationally-known athletic programs	15%

For the students, these 14 items cluster into three groups. The top category suggests the marketing messages that should be used with the target group. Of primary importance are:

- Transferability of credits (80% said “very important”);
- Financial aid or scholarship assistance (74% said “very important”); and
- Quality of the program they are interested in (73% said “very important”).

These items are either “very important” or “important” to about nine out of very ten students, with at least three out of every four students saying they are “very important.”

Of secondary importance, but still quite high on the list of features to consider are:

- Professors who are excellent teachers (66% said “very important”);
- Job or graduate school opportunities for graduates (62% said “very important”);

- Cost of attending (57% said “very important”);
- Friendly professors (55% said “very important”);
- Safety on campus (49% said “very important”);
- Quality of academic resources (47% said “very important”);
- Students interact directly with highly qualified professors (38% said “very important”); and
- Overall reputation of the school (35% said “very important”).

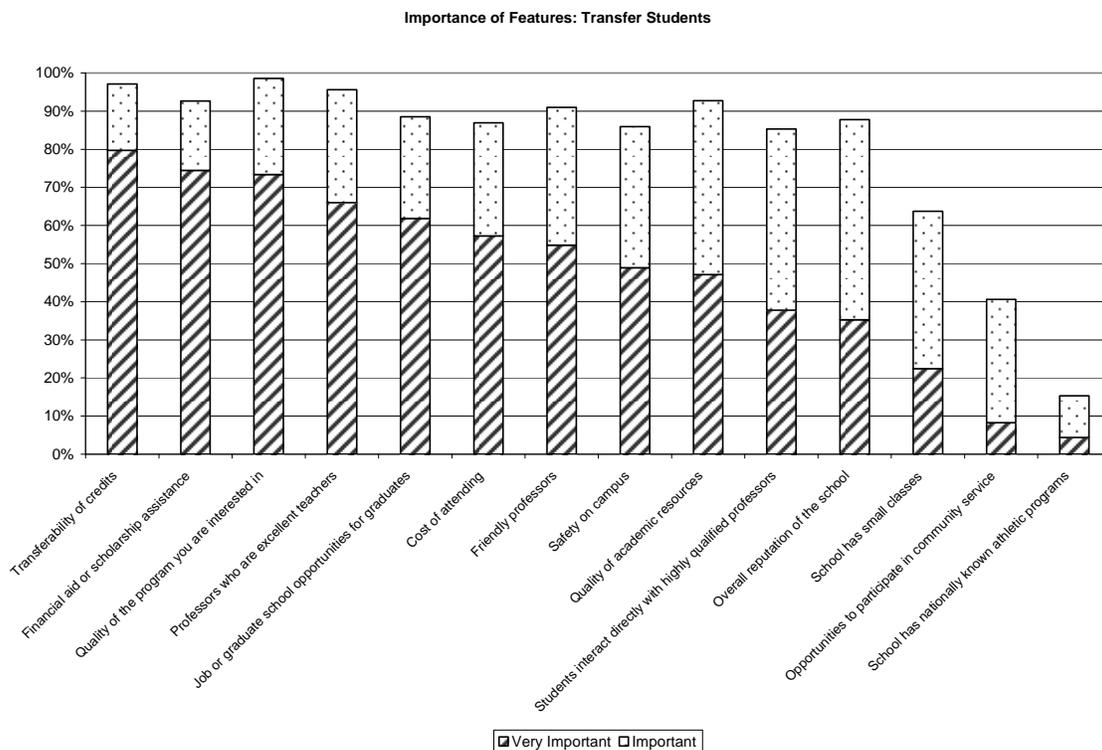
These are all either “very important” or “important” to about nine out of every ten students. But less than 70 percent rate them as “very important.” Note that these items above are listed in descending order of the percentage who rated them “very important.” The lower an item is on the list, the less likely it is to be decisive for the decisions of most prospective transfer students.

The remaining features are “very important” to less than a quarter of the students:

- School has small classes (22% said “very important”);
- Opportunities to participate in community service (8% said “very important”);
- School has nationally-known athletic programs (4% said “very important”).

These features are unlikely to be decisive for most prospective transfer students.

The chart on the next page illustrates the percentages of students rating each item as “very important” and the percentages of students rating each item as “important.”



Friendly, Accessible Professors Described

Students who rated “friendly professors who readily meet with individual students” and “students interact directly with highly qualified professors” as important or very important were asked some follow-up questions to explore how they view interaction with faculty and faculty qualifications.

To understand the nature of the interaction these students would expect with faculty, they were asked to describe the kind of ideal interaction they would expect from a “friendly professor” who readily meets with students. Availability after class to meet with students and answering questions or explaining things well was the type of comment most often provided by these students. It is likely that transfer students (compared with first-time in college students) have gained enough self-confidence so that they are more likely to take the initiative to seek out their professors when they feel they need help. If so, then when they encounter frustration it is likely to be either that they aren’t able to make contact with the professor or the professor’s answer isn’t sufficiently helpful.

If you could choose a professor who is friendly and works with individual students, describe the kind of ideal interaction you would expect.

Description	Students
Available after class/has time to meet with students	20%
Answers questions/explains well	19%
Friendly/easy to talk to/get along with	12%
Helpful/willing to help/works with students	11%
Offers one-on-one/individual attention	11%
Patient/respectful/willing to listen	10%
Knowledgeable	5%
Replies promptly/organized	5%
Caring/interested in students	3%
Other comments	5%

When asked which is the *most important* reason why having friendly professors is important, the majority of transfer students also said that personal attention from a professor will help students succeed in college.

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

Reason	Students
Personal attention will help me succeed in college	69%
Personal attention can lead to better career opportunities	16%
Personal attention means I won’t get lost in the crowd	15%

Highly Qualified Faculty Described

To understand the nature of the qualifications that students would expect *highly qualified* faculty to have, they were asked to describe these qualifications. For about four of every ten students, extensive experience and especially experience outside of the classroom are the marks they would look for from a professor they regard as highly qualified.

If you could choose a professor who is highly qualified in a way that matters most to you, how would you describe that person's qualifications and experience?

Description	Students
Experienced/has taught/worked a long time	41%
Knows their field/what they are talking about/specialize	14%
Has the right credentials/degree/qualification	14%
Helpful/works with students	10%
Communicates/conveys knowledge/can explain	9%
Good teacher/likes to teach	5%
Patient/respectful/caring	4%
Other	4%

When asked which is the *most important* reason why having experienced, qualified professors is important, half of these students said that these faculty would provide them with a better preparation for their career.

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

Reason	Students
I will receive better preparation for my career	50%
I will receive a better education in my major	44%
I will have a better classroom experience	6%

When reviewing the comments about faculty qualifications and the slight preference for faculty who will provide them with a better preparation for their career it seems that the transfer students are more likely to be focusing on the career-related outcomes of their education and less on the more intangible aspects of a college education when compared with first-time in college students.

Emotional Components of Transfer Decision

Recognizing that there are emotional components to choosing a college or university in addition to rating schools on different features and benefits, we asked transfer students to rate the importance to them of four “emotional components” of choosing a college. Nearly all of these students say that feeling confident that they will be successful academically is “very important” to them in their choice of a college. Nearly as many also want to feel secure that there will be a good return on their financial investment in their education.

In addition to specific features, there are emotional components to choosing a college. How would you rate the following in importance: (not at all, somewhat, very important)

Emotional Component	Students (% “very important”)
I feel confident that I will be successful academically at the institution	94%
I feel secure that there will be a good return on the financial investment in my education	88%
I feel comfortable that I/my child will find friends and enjoy the college experience	61%
I feel a sense of pride that I attend that institution	64%

Transfer Student Definition of Academic Quality

For transfer students, the quality of the specific academic program the student wants to study is among the most important considerations when evaluating colleges or universities. “Academic quality” is notoriously difficult to define and so we wanted these students to elaborate on what academic quality means to them. Students were asked to select up to three statements that best reflected their personal definition of academic quality.

For transfer students, four statements were selected by at least half of the respondents:

- Faculty have excellent classroom teaching abilities
- Students develop exceptional knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Graduates have an easy time finding jobs
- The particular major I am interested in is known to be excellent at the school

Excellent classroom teaching abilities was selected by three of every four students, and so is likely a primary determinant of academic quality. Transfer students are much less concerned with the publications, research, and pedigrees of faculty when judging academic quality.

There are many ways to define academic quality. From the following list pick the THREE items that best reflect your personal definition of academic quality.

Statement	% Choosing
Faculty have excellent classroom teaching abilities	74%
Students develop exceptional knowledge, skills, and abilities	50%
Graduates have an easy time finding jobs	49%
The particular major I am interested in is known to be excellent at the school	49%
Resources and facilities are excellent and up to date	25%
The institution is continually looking for ways to improve the student experience	22%
Other students are highly satisfied with their experience	17%
Faculty are involved in nationally recognized research and scholarship	14%
Faculty have studied at prestigious institutions	5%
The curriculum is academically rigorous	4%

Forced-choice Questions on College Selection

Through a series of forced-choice questions, we sought to identify which of a pair of statements is ultimately more important to these students when choosing among colleges. In reviewing these results, we look for cases where a clear majority of students selects one statement over the other as an indication that the preferred statement reflects some aspect of a college that they strongly prefer.

The pairs of statements in the first set of questions were:

- Belonging vs. Academics:
 - Is primarily known as a place where students feel they belong and are highly valued; OR
 - Is primarily known as a school with strong academics
- Excellent teaching vs. Caring staff/faculty:
 - Is a place where professors provide excellent classroom instruction; OR
 - Is a place where professors and staff genuinely care about students
- Safe environment vs. Successful graduates:
 - Is located in a safe community and environment; OR
 - Has graduates that are highly successful in their chosen fields
- Develop whole person vs. Push for academic excellence:
 - Is a place that takes good students and helps them develop into whole persons; OR
 - Is a place that takes great students and pushes them to excel academically

These items were chosen by a majority of students:

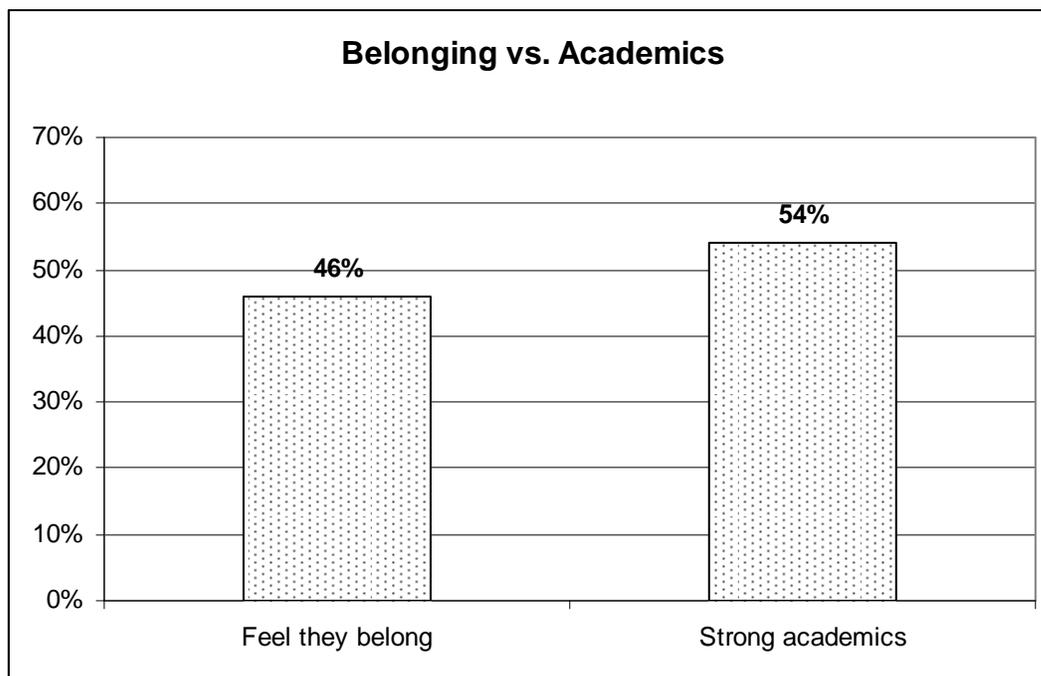
- Is primarily known as a school with strong academics (54% of students);
- Has graduates that are highly successful in their chosen fields (57% of students);
- Is a place that takes good students and helps them develop into whole persons (63% of students)

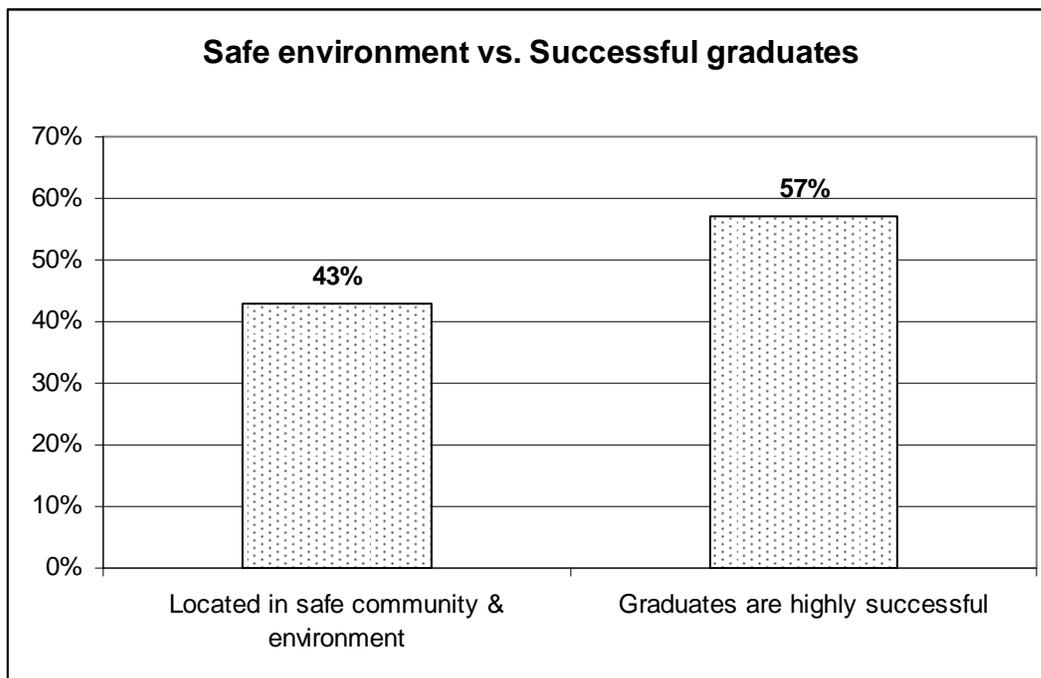
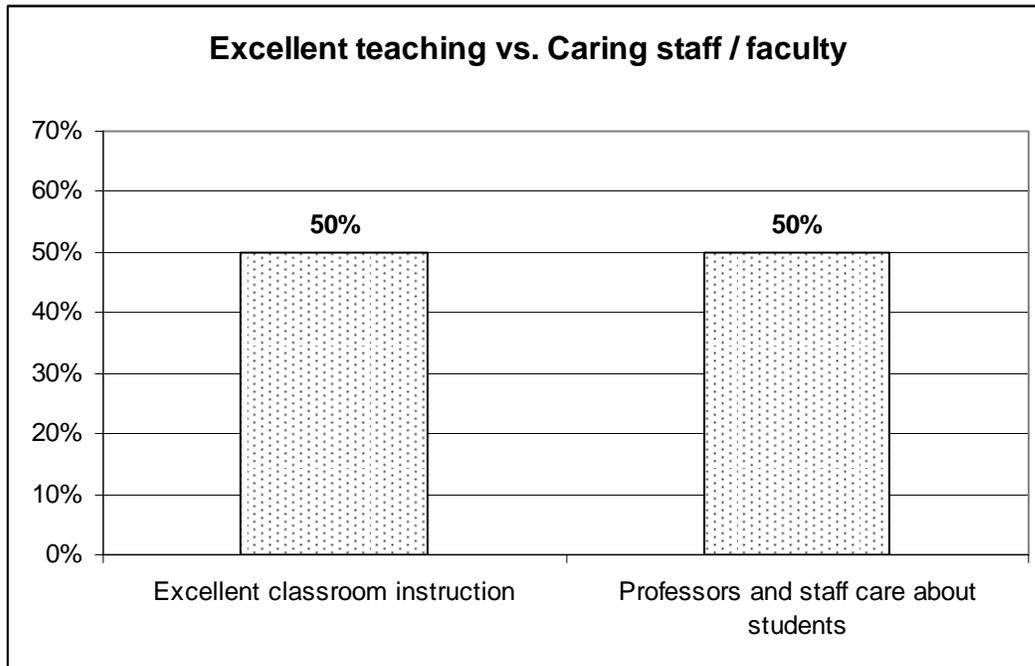
Transfer students are most likely to respond to an institution that takes good students and helps them develop into a “whole person.” They also have a preference for an institution with highly successful graduates and strong academics.

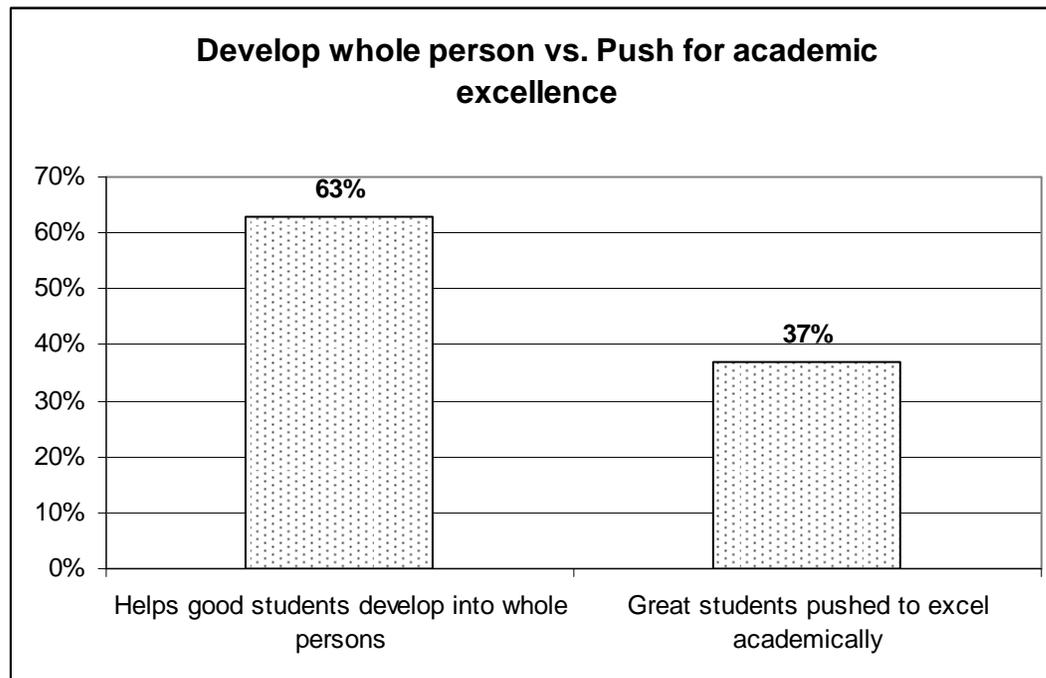
There was no clear preference between:

- Is a place where professors provide excellent classroom instruction; OR
- Is a place where professors and staff genuinely care about students

The following charts summarize the responses to this set of forced choice questions.







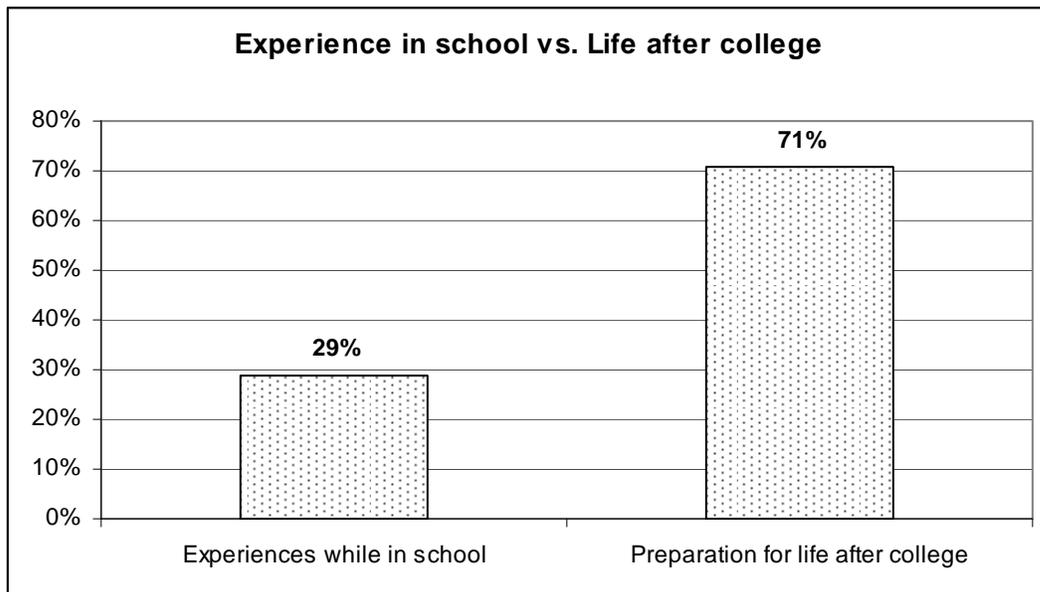
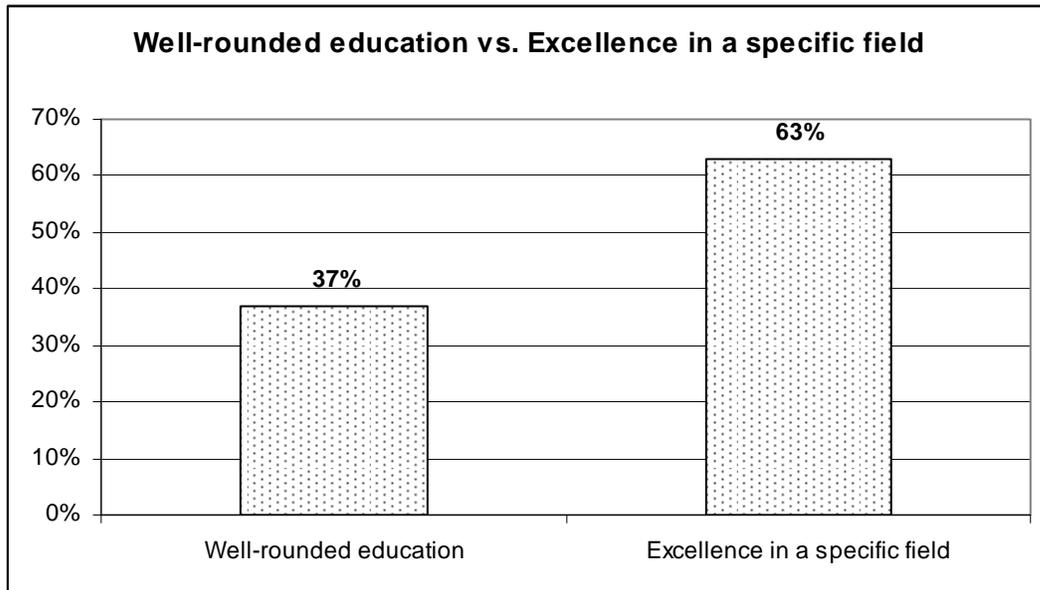
Expected Educational Outcomes

We also included a set of forced-choice questions designed to identify the outcomes of a college education that transfer students are most likely to expect. The pairs of statements in this second set of questions were:

- Well-rounded education vs. Excellence in a specific field:
 - 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; OR
 - 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.
- Experiences while in school vs. Preparation for life after college:
 - A college should provide me with an excellent experience while I am in school because it's a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence; OR
 - A college education should be primarily focused on getting me ready for life after college.

A clear majority (71%) of transfer students selected the focus on preparation for life after college. A clear majority (63%) also selected the focus on excellence in a specific field. Again, the more intangible, experiential dimensions of a college education are generally not the sorts of things that transfer students respond to when evaluating colleges and universities.

The charts that follow summarize the responses to this set of forced-choice questions.



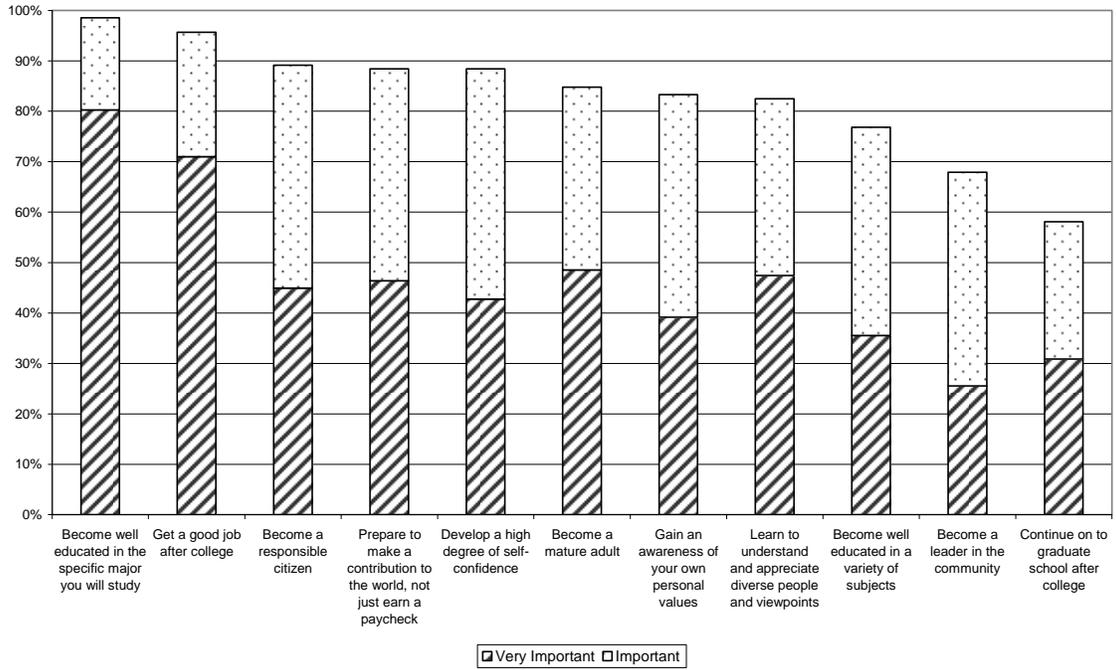
Transfer students were asked to rate the importance of 11 college or university outcomes. Becoming well educated in the major or program was of critical importance to nearly all of these students, as was getting a job.

A college education can provide many things for students. Please tell me how important it is to you that you . . .

Outcome	Students: Percent “very important” or “important”
Become well educated in the specific major you will study	99%
Get a good job after college	96%
Become a responsible citizen	89%
Prepare to make a contribution to the world, not just earn a paycheck	88%
Develop a high degree of self-confidence	88%
Become a mature adult	85%
Gain an awareness of your own personal values	83%
Learn to understand and appreciate diverse people and viewpoints	82%
Become well educated in a variety of subjects	77%
Become a leader in the community	68%
Continue on to graduate school after college	58%

While many of the other items also were either “very important” or “important” to close to 90 percent of transfer students, the following chart shows that only the first two items (become well educated and get a good job) were “very important” to 70 percent or more of the transfer students.

How important is it that you:
TRANSFER STUDENTS



Perceptions of UNI and Key Competitors

Having explored what factors influence the preferences of transfer students, it is important to understand how they view the University of Northern Iowa and key competitors on some of these features. Students were presented with a list of characteristics and asked to choose which institution is best known for each characteristic. The institutions they were to choose from were:

- University of Northern Iowa;
- Iowa State University;
- University of Iowa;
- The private college in Iowa with which they were most familiar; and
- The community college in Iowa with which they were most familiar.

UNI was chosen most often for nearly all of the items selected, indicating that UNI has a strong position among those transfer students who were invited to complete the survey and responded.

Iowa State University was only preferred for having nationally-known athletic programs.

There are two items where community colleges enjoy a clear advantage: reasonable cost of attending and small classes. In addition, community colleges and UNI were tied for financial aid or scholarship assistance.

Indicate which of the following institutions is best known for each of the following characteristics:

(UNI, Iowa State, University of Iowa)

Characteristic (in descending order of importance to students)	UNI	Iowa State	Univ. of Iowa
Quality of the program you are interested in	61%	14%	11%
Transferability of credits	38%	6%	8%
Professors who are excellent teachers	36%	14%	11%
Quality of academic resources and facilities such as classrooms, labs, library	23%	31%	22%
Financial aid or scholarship assistance	28%	6%	8%
Friendly professors who readily meet with individual students	25%	2%	3%
Job or graduate school opportunities for graduates	34%	28%	14%
Overall reputation of the school	29%	29%	15%
Reasonable cost of attending	17%	0%	4%
Safety on campus	34%	3%	9%
Students interact directly with highly qualified professors	36%	9%	16%
Small classes	15%	1%	0%
Opportunities to participate in community service	31%	13%	12%
Nationally-known athletic programs	6%	69%	14%

(NOTE: Figures in bold indicate that this percentage is statistically greater than the percentages captured by any of the other institutional competitors. When no percentage is bolded this indicates that there is a statistical tie among the institutions most often chosen.)

Indicate which of the following institutions is best known for each of the following characteristics:

(UNI, Private College, Community College, Don't know)

Characteristic (in descending order of importance to students)	UNI	Private College	Community College	Don't Know
Quality of the program you are interested in	61%	5%	1%	7%
Transferability of credits	38%	4%	37%	6%
Professors who are excellent teachers	36%	12%	15%	12%
Quality of academic resources and facilities such as classrooms, labs, library	23%	8%	8%	8%
Financial aid or scholarship assistance	28%	13%	35%	10%
Friendly professors who readily meet with individual students	25%	14%	45%	11%
Job or graduate school opportunities for graduates	34%	11%	3%	10%
Overall reputation of the school	29%	17%	2%	7%
Reasonable cost of attending	17%	2%	73%	4%
Safety on campus	34%	20%	26%	8%
Students interact directly with highly qualified professors	36%	16%	13%	10%
Small classes	15%	22%	53%	8%
Opportunities to participate in community service	31%	17%	15%	13%
Nationally known athletic programs	6%	1%	1%	7%

(NOTE: Figures in bold indicate that this percentage is statistically greater than the percentages captured by any of the other institutional competitors. When no percentage is bolded this indicates that there is a statistical tie among the institutions most often chosen.)

In the closing sections of the survey, we asked questions to explore the extent of awareness of UNI among transfer students. They were asked if they had heard of the University of Northern Iowa. Nearly all (99%) indicated that they had heard of UNI.

Those who indicated they were familiar with UNI were then asked an open-ended question regarding what they thought were the best features of the university. Nearly a third of the students (32%) mentioned one or more programs or something about the classes offered at UNI. UNI enjoys a relatively high level of awareness among transfer students about its programs and classes.

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

Feature	Percent of Students
Classes/programs	32%
Location/campus	28%
Size of the institution	26%
Faculty/staff	12%
Price/cost	3%
Athletics	5%
Other	8%
No response	23%

Transfer students were also asked to name any programs offered at UNI that they were aware of. Teacher education programs at UNI topped the list, followed by business. Fifteen percent of transfer students did not mention an academic program at all.

Can you name an academic program or major that UNI offers?

Program	Percent of Students
Education/teaching	50%
Business/Management/Finance	27%
Accounting	8%
Biology	4%
Graphic Communication	4%
Arts	3%
Music	3%
Political Science	3%
Psychology	3%
No response	15%

No other program was mentioned by more than 2 percent of the respondents.

As a final measure of their level of interest in UNI, students were asked how likely they would be to apply to UNI. Not surprisingly, given the strong ratings and high level of awareness of UNI among the transfer students who completed this survey, 70 percent indicated they would be applying to UNI, and only five percent said they would not apply.

Given what you know about the schools, how likely would you be to apply to the University of Northern Iowa?

	Percent of Students
Would apply	70%
May or may not apply	25%
Would not apply	5%
Don't know	0%
