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Freshman Voices
After Their First Semester at MSU
January 2006

In January 2006, first-year students were asked to reflect on their first-semester at Michigan State University. Almost 1200 freshmen responded to the formal survey questions (summaries are in the white boxes) and also gave over 3500 comments to questions about what they had learned, in five topical areas which relate to the department's core student learning areas. Only a sample of the comments is featured*. Both the quantitative and qualitative responses are grouped by topical area: developing multicultural competence, citizenship and community responsibility, critical thinking and values clarification, maintaining health and well-being and achieving academic success.

Developing Multicultural Competence

% Yes or Most/All of the Time

44% realized their own personal prejudices and stereotypes towards others (35% some of the time)

15% pursued opportunities to learn about different cultures or lifestyles (30% some of the time)

34% had experiences on their floor which broadened their understanding of people different from themselves (33% some of the time)

9% had experiences which challenged their beliefs (23% some of the time)

9% changed their views because of conversations with people different from themselves (29% some of the time)

27% learned about the social and political systems that govern our society (30% some of the time)

A lot of people come here from fairly sheltered backgrounds. A lot of the people I met had prejudices against people of other races and sexual orientations. I came from a very diverse high school/area of town where there were many different races and cultures and it was odd to be with people who were racist.

I experienced prejudice and acceptance, sometimes because of my race and at other times because of me as a person and my background. I learned that we are all the same and that everyone's going to talk about everyone who is different from them. I must admit, however, that here is where I experienced racism for the first time in my life and actually knew about it.... can't believe the ignorance of another person due to my skin and where I come from...

I come from a very privileged background in more ways than just money.

I took a Cultural Differences class and that opened my eyes so much about other cultures as well as my own. I think that should be a required course for freshmen because coming here is such a big change no matter where you come from.

White males always seem to hold the power and privilege and being a white male, I want that to change. I don't ever want someone to be able to say I gained something from the color of my skin. This would take a long time to accomplish, but I hope that like-minded individuals come into power and can help me achieve this.

I am still looked at strangely no matter how many diversity groups there are; things will always remain pretty separate.

I come from a very conservative area, and coming here broadened my outlook-both socially and politically. I have made friends with people of a different races or sexual orientation than myself...and I've learned that those 2 things don't affect who a person is.

I have learned a lot about culture by coming to college. I have learned about it both in classes and out of classes. Many people have shared things about their culture and their way of life during floor meetings and others shared things like that in classes. You never really realize how much your culture influences the way you live until you are put into a room with someone from another culture or way of life. You quickly realize how different you are.

I actually have seen much less diversity of culture at MSU than I did at my high school. I was very surprised to see how students segregate themselves, in some cases, almost exclusively based on ethnicity. I have learned that there are still cultural tensions that need to be resolved. I have tried and have succeeded, for the most part, in making friends of many different cultures despite ethnic cliques.

I have always learned that we must work as a team. Living with someone other than family, I thought it was going to be tough. I learned that we can overcome most of our inhibitions and live with each other, but you have to speak up about problems, work to compromise, and live on with each other.

I learned that volunteering is a key to developing the person that I want to become, and that there are a number of opportunities every day offered through MSU. You just have to look for them.

I learned about living in a community, compromise, conflict resolution, and giving back to the community just by living in the dorms. To realize the standards of living in a community and how to compromise as well as how to resolve conflict are all great lessons I've learned.

I've learned the only way to live in these tiny dorms is compromise and no matter how hard it is to say what's on your mind or what's bothering you. You HAVE to or it all builds up. I learned a lot about sticking up for what you believe is right too. Most of which is learned from the dorm rooms.

Being a leader is something you can do every day. Giving back to the community is a worthwhile endeavor. I learned these from tutoring in Lansing.

Citizenship/Community Responsibility

% Yes, or Most/All of the Time

50% joined a campus, departmental, or hall organization

51% attended regular community meetings (23% some of the time)

33% were involved in establishing and maintaining floor-based community standards (30% some of the time)

25% took on a leadership position on campus

15% did volunteer work (23% some of the time)

It is important to compromise especially when living in a community such as the dorms because the quarters are so close. I have learned more about the power of compromise since coming to school here because now I have to share a room and other things with multiple people. It is pretty much all about respect.

I have learned that living in a community is not always as easy as it may seem. Discrepancies do arise, especially when two people have different views on different things. I have learned, though, that the best ways to work these conflicts out is to sit down and talk about how you are feeling and what it is that's bothering you.

Being in a community is a lot of fun but it takes a lot of work. It is fun taking part in floor activities as well in order to bond with other students on the floor.

Living in the dorms, basically in a box, with another person will teach you a lot about how to compromise, but be assertive to resolve your conflicts. Although the whole year hasn't been enjoyable, it's an experience that you can apply to the rest of your life. Observing my Resident Mentor helped me see what it's all about and now I know that I'd also like to be a leader and help others get through the process and learn from it like I did.

Well, living in Brody. I think we have a really good floor community. Most people know everyone and hang out with everyone, but we have had our fights, which most people do now and then, but we still have made it through, but I also think that it has a lot to do with our Mentor. She is really nice, and is always there for us, which helps us get through difficult times.

Being a leader/part of a group really makes you feel like you belong somewhere. Becoming part of different organizations really makes the university seem a bit more cozy and inviting. Outside of this, it also gives you a chance to learn who you are and it also enables you to exhibit and improve upon your personal strengths. I learned this just by joining different groups and taking on leadership positions in RHA and hall government.

It's hard to live with someone and have to tell them you are unhappy with them. You don't want to make any waves in the pond because you still have to live with that person...but you don't want to continue being upset either. Being in Holden Government has taught me that people really can make a difference if they speak up!

I have learned a lot about compromise, because it can be really hard to live in a small dorm with 4 girls and only one bathroom. You learn to give up the little things and your normal routine and instead make a new one that allow all 4 of you to do what you have to do and still get along. Some of the new things I learned were like perhaps taking a shower at night instead of the morning so it goes faster, and maybe skipping a TV show that I would normally watch so that my roommates could watch theirs and then I could watch a different one of my favorites. You all have to give a little to get something in return and I think that is a very valuable lesson that I have learned from my experiences at MSU.

I haven't really gotten a chance to be a leader yet, but I know being a group member is almost just as important. The role of listening to everyone and working together to get things accomplished is imperative as well. In order to deal with roommates and people living on your floor, you must be assertive to your needs but you must also compromise and be considerate of other people's space.

Being away from everyone from home, family/friends alike, makes it a lot harder to make decisions, but in the end you realize that you need to step away a little from the influence that you constantly had at home and make some bad choices and learn the consequences.

Alcohol is the biggest thing that will make people do something that they thought they previously were against. At MSU you learn a lot about yourself. Sometimes you make the right decisions, and sometimes you don't, and when you don't you learn. It is always important to keep your values in mind because they will be challenged and only you know how you feel and what you think.

I learned that this is truly the time where I am able to make my own views and...decide the difference... between right & wrong is. I didn't just follow what I have believed my whole life. This is just a whole new situation that really can open or close your eyes to things. Everyone makes mistakes. That's natural. There are definitely things I guess I regret that I did Fall semester, but I am now able to learn from them and look back and reflect on my life.

Academics are important to me but so are friends and a social life. No friend will convince me to do anything illegal...no matter how much pressure; it's just wrong.

I feel like I am pretty set in my values and I know what I am doing, but I have to stop letting others opinions of me get in the way.

I have done things that I never thought I would because someone I trusted wanted me to. I have never done anything that I completely regret or that is too horrible, but I didn't realize how easily I would give in to certain people.

I think that I am in charge of my own life! The choices I make now will affect my future. I think I have made some bad decisions, but the important thing is that I learned from them. That is all that matters.

I learned what I believe in isn't always what I do. I need to make conscience efforts to do what I believe in. (it's easier said than done) I learned this by living with four people.

It is important to remember that the main reason we are in college is to learn...not only in the classroom, but about ourselves.

Good grades, good morals, good friendships, going to class are all important to me and I learned that here.

I feel like I change my mind all the time on my values and everything.

I am always questioning my beliefs, because I think it's good to always keep an open mind. If you can do that, the university is a wonderful place to be because so many people are expressing different ideas and opinions for you to explore.

Even though there was pressure, I made decisions based on my morals ...and never gave in to anything I didn't want to do.

Critical Thinking/Values Clarification

% Yes, or Most or All of the Time

48% learned a great deal about themselves and what was important to them (34% some of the time)

5% found themselves caught between doing what they believed to be "right" and "wrong" (20% some of the time)

2% gave in to pressure by others to do something they didn't really want to do (10% some of the time)

I hold family so high and would never do anything intentionally to shine a negative light on them due to my actions or choices... I know what I hold in high regard and make sure that I don't lose sight of it each night I go out or find myself in other new situations.

I learned a lot about managing my time to lower my stress level. I kind of freaked out the first few weeks because I had so much to do and I knew I had the time to do it. I just didn't know where all that time went. I was also faced with a few new choices. The first couple weeks I was here I was invited to several parties and saw many of my new friends come back drunk for the first time. I decided that wasn't something I wanted to get into and I wasn't comfortable enough with my new friends to go party with them so I stayed in instead. A lot of my learning just came from being faced with new things.

In making friends I learned that what people most often desire is someone who is willing to listen to them, which I learned both from other's reactions and from my own reactions to others. I also learned that the friends you hang out with influence the way you look at things and sometimes act, so that while it's good to have a diverse group of friends, it is important to be around people who share at least some of your values. This I learned from my interactions with people and the realization that the people I was most happy around were the ones I trusted the most.

My first semester, I enrolled in an Aerobics class. It really helped relieve my stress. I also invested in some workout tapes to do in my room. This semester I bought an IM East membership. Personal safety on campus is easy in just a few words. Be aware of your surroundings and don't go out alone at night. As long as you're with someone you will feel completely safe. Making friends is the easiest thing in the world at MSU. Living in the dorm really helped because my floor became so close I would consider them another family to me. You have hundreds of chances of new friends through your classes and once spring semester rolls around you are already running into familiar faces you met only a semester ago.

The whole drinking issue played into effect last semester. I never realized the consequences that came with drinking.

By realizing that, unlike in high school, I had no sports practices to keep me in shape, I learned to take responsibility to make sure that I do participate in physical activity as often as I can.

Drinking makes you fat, be extroverted, eat stuff off the salad bar!, talk to people next to you that you don't know because one day you'll need their notes.

Being a freshman at Michigan State, you learn quickly that you have to make a conscious effort to take care of yourself. No one is going to tell you to exercise some and eat well most of the time. I just think you learn so much about yourself in such a short amount of time and it can be quite overwhelming. So much that you're not even sure if you're the same person anymore.

As long as you make the effort, it is easy to stay healthy, workout, and make friends! I love meeting new people, making friends and recognizing all the faces I saw last semester. I have a consistent workout plan and have actually become healthier since I came.

I learned that it is way more challenging to avoid eating healthy when you're presented with a huge variety of foods at every meal, but I also learned that the IM's are great places to go and take a well-deserved study break. I also found that making friends is pretty much an everyday occurrence, and I have made four new friends that I have no doubt I will stay in touch with for the rest of my life. When it comes to personal safety, the bottom line is safety in numbers: never go anywhere shady alone...ever. And the last thing is to have fun and be a college student...but not to excess, the reason I'm here is for my education, the friends and fun are just a perk.

For first semester, I wish I would have had a little more structure to my schedule. I probably needed to study more than I did, but there was no one there looking at what you did or made sure that you got something done. (No one is worrying about you).

All through high school I decided I would never drink or do drugs. In college I stuck to my values and never gave into peer pressure. I also learned you can go out and have fun at parties and not drink.

Being careful and making good choices just kind of came naturally, you just have to think. I think I've learned this because it's inside of you, and being away from home makes it come out. You have to take care of yourself and be responsible, whether it be for homework, studying, and just having fun with your friends.

By seeing the variety of food available, I learned that eating healthy isn't something that just comes to one but is rather a choice one makes to continue.

I learned that I have to be open to all people even if someone else says something bad about them, if you get to know that person without taking into account what others said you will make your own judgment about them. I also learned that the busier I keep myself the less time I waste chatting online or being bored.

Maintaining Health and Well-Being

% Yes, or Most or All of the Time
61% had the best time of their lives (25% some of the time)

78% lived successfully with their roommates (12% some of the time)

24% developed a significant romantic relationship

66% felt connected to a group of other students (20% some of the time)

87% felt personally safe on campus time (11% some of the time)

71% stayed healthy (24% some of the time)

85% made good personal choices about their level of sexual activity (11% some of the time)

37% got a part-time job

35% exercised regularly (33% some of the time)

35% were on the internet for non-academic purposes at least 3 hours a day (33% some of the time)

57% managed their time effectively (35% some of the time)

35% got adequate sleep (38% some of the time)

I've learned by living on my own without my parents, what I believe is right and okay, and what I would never do because I think it's wrong. I have a lot of freedom and yet I still regulate myself so things don't get out of control. I learned just by experience, staying out all night isn't fun and when you skip class you miss out.

Achieving Academic Success

% Yes, or Most or All of the Time

53% found a faculty or staff member they could trust with something important

8% had significant out-of-class conversations with faculty members (20% some of the time)

85% kept up-to-date with classes and assignments (13% some of the time)

42% felt that other members of the floor were serious about their academics (36% some of the time)

9% skipped a class (30% some of the time)

43% were on the internet for academic purposes at least one hour a day (39% some of the time)

27% studied in a study group with other students (37% some of the time)

21% studied with other students on the floor (29% some of the time)

35% had changed their career plan or major

18% utilized an academic support service

It is very, very easy to let the TV, friends, and the siren song of the high speed internet distract you. The key is to determine how much concentration you need for your work and make sure the environment is not being prohibitive.

I really have not established good study habits but I will soon.

First semester I think is the learning stage. I didn't really know what to expect as far as time management. I got behind on my classes, and now I realize how much effort and work and time you actually have to put into your school work to get the grades you want. College is definitely harder than high school.

I learned a lot about how to study and how I learn and time management. I have learned that I can't just take lecture notes and learn the science materials. I need to actually read the textbook so I can have a better understanding of the material. I also learned that I learn better if I make flashcards of some things so that I can take them with me and whenever I have a little break I can actively participate in my reinforcing the topics that are on the flashcards. I have also learned better time management skills. I have classes that required a lot of reading and writing papers and if I didn't have a well thought out schedule I realized that I would start to fall behind in my homework and never be prepared or understand what it was that we were learning.

I bombed my first test in math, and I started doing my math homework. Certain events like me bombing tests forced me to realize that this JSNJ high school, no matter how much I want to believe it. Time management has really been a huge deal for me too. If I played video games like my roommate, I would be in a deep hole academically. There are a lot of decisions to be made and you learn how to say no to distractions in college.

I got totally overwhelmed by my honors archaeology class and after I failed the first test of 3, I realized that I had to change something. I couldn't treat college the way I treated high school and still maintain high academic standards. I studied a lot harder (although I got less sleep) and worked on getting in small amounts of homework where ever I could. I ended up getting an 88% on my second archaeology exam which was one of the highest grades in the class. That gave me a boost of confidence and I'm much better at managing my time now.

I've learned how to manage my time effectively/efficiently in order to have a good time and maintain my grades. I had to learn that myself through trial and error. I've studied more my first semester in college than I ever have before in my life.

Although I don't have very good time management skills, I'm very good at making lists and setting goals and priorities, but no matter what I still complete all of my work on time and in an adequate manner, as I think is reflected by my GPA.

Everyone knows in their mind what they have to do; it's just difficult sometimes to make your body do it. Don't procrastinate. Get your studying done. It will make you feel good that you accomplished something important.

I have found the best thing for me to do is to study in my room where I can control my environment to the maximum extent. I have found that the best way for me to manage my time and keep track of my assignments is to keep a list of all the assignments that I need to do, and then every night before I go to bed make a list of the things that need to get done the next day. I have found this simply by experimenting with different time management techniques until I was able to settle upon one that worked.

Definitely realized that environment plays a big part in how motivated I am to do work, and that my room is not the best place to do work efficiently. There are too many distractions. Each class is different...I found that attending class regularly was the best way to make things easier. By skipping classes, it just becomes more of an uphill battle. Study groups are extremely important... oftentimes other people can add insight to something you can't figure out alone.

I have shifted my priorities toward social interaction. The computer games that almost exclusively occupied my free time at home have been massively scaled back, and I still have the same priority for homework and studying.

I always had to study a lot in high school so college was not that much of a change for me. You just have to manage your time well and go to class because there is no one to check up on you. I made a schedule of my entire month of what was due and test dates so I could plan ahead and it really worked out well for me.

Last semester, I really didn't do that well due to my own bad habits. I didn't really care that much and figured that I could pull my classes off without studying. Boy was I wrong. I am doing much better now, giving myself at least 3 hours per day of studying/reading. I can honestly say that I am more prepared for class every time I walk in. Last semester I skipped a lot of classes (well one in particular) and didn't do much reading, but this semester I am doing all of my work, and I only skipped one class due to a previous class arrangement.

Basically, if you want to study you have to go in the study lounge or go home. It tends to get pretty loud when 50 girls are on the same floor. Time management is very important if you want to get adequate sleep. I thought I did a pretty good job my first semester but I still think I could have gotten more sleep.

*Student comments were corrected for spelling.