

Retention and Graduation; Student's Experiences at IU South Bend

JAZMINE A. MEDINA

Abstract

This paper explores students' thoughts toward the low retention and graduation rates at IU South Bend in hopes of finding ways to increase these statistics. Data for this paper came from five interviews between myself and current or former students in South Bend, Indiana, in the spring of 2015. Participant observations were also conducted on two separate occasions, during which I observed the behavioral habits and study habits of our students while on campus. Three key themes were found in the data; anxiety/depression, lack of advising, and distorted expectations of college work and life. The complications resulting from these themes often became the cause of many students' self-described frustration, pressure, and struggles as they try to complete their education.

Introduction

Attending college is one of the more difficult ventures in a person's life. Whether the difficulty is found in deciding which college to attend, what to major in once you're in college, or difficulty in completing your major amidst setbacks that everyday life can bring you. I wanted to find out what were the difficulties that current and former IU South Bend student faced when going to college. More specifically, I wanted to find out why students at IU South Bend had such low retention and graduation rates in hopes of finding a way to increase these statistics. What I found were three key themes throughout all of the interviews that I had conducted. Those themes being anxiety or depression, lack of advising, and false expectations of the reality of college life and the difficulties that come along with pursuing a college degree. These themes are important to note because each one of them have consequences both inside and outside of the classroom. I have conducted this study with the hopes of finding solutions to IU South Bend's low retention and graduation rates by offering perspective through these three most common themes found in my research.

Literature Review

In order to understand the impact that these three themes have on the lives of students here on campus, I examine accompanying literature that support these themes and illustrate just how common the issue of retention and graduation rates are on universities across the nation. First, I focus on the reoccurring theme of anxiety and depression among our student population by reviewing the article "The Influence of Psychological Symptoms on Mental Health Literacy of College Students,"—a piece that reports on both the prevalent presence of depression and anxiety on college campuses as well as the drastically low number of students seeking help, due to low rates of Mental Literacy. The paper details studies conducted, where one study in particular focuses on college students and their experiences with depression and anxiety (620). Of the 332 students surveyed in Study 1, just over 32% of respondents were considered highly depressed. Likewise, those individuals considered to be highly depressed were half as likely to recognize their depression and seek help. Within the study, respondents were asked to identify common factors that attributed to their depression, and a majority of respondents identified stress to be the most common cause with a total of 30.9% of respondents in agreement (623). With stress being a common obstacle that college students all over this country experience, the possibility of students suffering from depression and anxiety is high. Furthermore, these students are less likely to recognize their symptoms of anxiety and depression or seek out help. The combination of stress, depression, or anxiety can all add up to

become reasons why so many students are not staying in school and graduating with a degree. Many students perhaps find their anxiety or depression to be socially limiting, causing many to skip class, drop courses, or postpone their pursuit for a degree.

Along with assisting students on building their class schedules every semester, faculty advisors are a resource that can be vital to students who may be suffering from depression or anxiety, or any personal or academic issue that affects a student's life. An advisor has both the formal and informal knowledge needed to help a student succeed, whether that be tutoring resources, counselling services, or course credits and transcripts. For many students, however, experiences with their advisors are less than satisfactory, and sometimes rarely helpful. In the article, "Faculty Advising to Support Student Learning," researchers found that many times advisors were not relaying enough personalized information for each student, taking almost an absent approach in their responsibilities. When dealing with students—especially non-traditional students—researchers argue that a students' advising experiences must be "positive and proactive from the beginning" and that in order to be successful, the advisor must "understand the unique needs of the developmental education student" (20). This means that advisors must take the time to understand the specific needs and hardships for each student in order to provide them with the best tools for staying in school and graduating on time. However, many students feel that their advisors are often on a type of auto-pilot. When studying the advising experiences of over 2,000 college students, researchers found that, "Very often it was less about true educational advising or planning than about picking classes from a predetermined list" (20). Students are overwhelmingly feeling as though their personal path towards a degree is something as minimal as checking off classes from a generic list provided by the university. As a result of this, students are often taking advising matters into their own hands, and missing out on the crucial informal knowledge such as how to build a resume, secure an internship, publish in a journal or present at a conference. This not only limits the experiences college students have during their time at university, but it also fails to utilize each student to their full potential, ultimately limiting their opportunities after graduation. Though for students who may not know how to navigate college on their own—such as the many non-traditional or first-generation students at IU South Bend—this absent advisor can be detrimental to their college career; oftentimes causing students to waste precious time and money while simultaneously making retention and graduation even harder to accomplish.

For the many students who try to make their own decisions about their college career, most decisions are harder than they seem. Oftentimes students will find themselves on an unfamiliar campus with little to no references that they feel comfortable pursuing. The research article titled, "High Expectations for Higher Education? Perceptions of College and Experiences of Stress to and Through the College Career" explains how since 1997, the number of first-year students reported to feel overwhelmed has doubled (635). Here at IU South Bend, our campus is occupied by a diverse student body with both non-traditional and first-year students. For either groups, oftentimes this extremely common overwhelming feeling can attribute to an increase in stress for many of their students. This increased stress and overwhelming feeling can act as catalysts for many students experiencing disappointment and failure during their college career (636). For our students at IU South Bend, oftentimes the workload is underestimated before enrollment, contributing to the initial shock many feel once coursework begins to pile up. It is important for our university and many like it to set a standard for how college and university life is perceived, and to likewise enforce that standard in reality. This will help students feel and become better prepared for their first years in college, possibly decreasing the amount the stress they feel and as well as increasing their rates of retention or graduation.

Data/Methods

For this research, I conducted five interviews with current and former students of

Indiana University South Bend about their beliefs and experiences of IU South Bend. I asked each of my interviewees about various topics including advising, their emotional health, and their experiences in the classroom. Of the five interviews that I conducted, one interview was roughly a half hour long, while the remaining four were each an hour long. I interviewed a total of four women and one man. Four of my interviewees identified themselves as Caucasian while one identified their self as African American/Black. One student that I interviewed had graduated three years ago while the remaining four students are still currently enrolled at IU South Bend. I interviewed all but one of these participants in a closed environment with little to no sound entering the room to ensure complete confidentiality. I have changed the names of all of these participants to also ensure their anonymity.

I also conducted a participant observation on two separate occasions on the IU South Bend campus, near an old cafeteria that was surrounded by tables, chairs, and desks. During these observations, I silently watched the behavior of our students, whether they were playing games, studying, or socializing with others. I focused on what they were wearing, what they were talking about in the public school setting, and what their main priorities appeared to be in that place and time. I found that the backgrounds and lives of each student that I observed and interviewed differed drastically, yet they each also had very similar stories and experiences that they were willing to share with me. I hoped that this information could lead us as a University closer to increasing our graduation and retention rates here at IU South Bend.

The Detriment of Mental Illness

Anxiety is a form of depression that often includes distress, fear, and uneasiness. It is something that hinders many people's daily lives and, ultimately, can hinder their success in daily activities. So when those activities include balancing school, work, homework, and family life, anxiety and depression are mental illnesses that can drastically effect one's retention and graduation from college. One of the most recurring themes within the interviews with college students that I have conducted was anxiety and depression. The students that I interviewed described their struggles and expressed their fear of not being able to graduate on time. I wanted to know more about the trials and triumphs of students at Indiana University South Bend, so I went to interview some current and former students. When I asked on current student what his feelings about staying in school has been, he responded by saying,

"I feel pressure to stay in school. Because I've just been doing it for so long it's just...I've built up a lot of stress, anxiety, and depression that it's just hard for me to focus and try to go to class and feel motivated because of just doing this for so long and everything not working out the way I want it to. Because I want to succeed, it's just that so many road barriers have happened and it just stops me. And so I feel pressured, but, I'm happy and I'm sad about it. Because it's, like, I know that I need to be in school and doing the things that I need to do but I don't know how to get back on track by myself because at the end of the day, I'm still the one that's depressed and has anxiety when it comes to myself."

CJ, the student that I interviewed, has changed his major from elementary education to now being undecided. He is a full-time student with a part-time job, a fiancé, and a son at home. He stated that he feels pressured to staying into college because that is what his family expects of him. When I asked him if he has ever had to take time off of school to take care of the other responsibilities that he has, he responded by saying,

"Every time I miss class. Every time I miss class. It's because of my depression, anxiety, or having to take my mom somewhere or my sister...if I'm missing class, it's because I'm depressed, I'm unmotivated, helping family and friends, and I just give up. It's like every day I miss class, it's just a reminder of how, like, miserable I am because I can't focus."

And while he has transferred from Purdue University to IU South Bend, this is now his fifth year in college as an undergraduate student, and he states that his main motivation for staying in school is the goal to establish a career in order to pay back his student loan debt.

CJ is not the only student that has expressed their fears of pressure, anxiety, and depression while attending college. Melody, a sophomore at IU South Bend explained her troubles with anxiety while I interviewed her at her home. While talking about her parents and how they support her emotionally, Melody explains,

“they definitely help me when I’m having a break down with school and very stressed out. But, um, they bring me back up and tell me how it’s gonna work out... (Whispers) I was totally crying last night because I’m so stressed out. (Clears throat, speaks louder)...I mean, that’s what parents are there for (laughs).”

When I asked her what the most difficult part about being a college student was, she answered, “I don’t know, the most difficult part is kind of staying emotionally stable throughout the years there.”

In contrast to CJ, Melody is currently in her second year of college, and she explained to me that she has a part-time job, but has no dependents that she has to take care of financially. So while she may, at first, seem to have less responsibility than CJ, she still feels the pressures of stress and anxiety caused by college. But looking beyond the internal stress, anxiety, and depression, I wanted to see in what ways these disorders affect a person’s academic standing. While I spoke to Amanda, a former IU South Bend student, she explained to me what she thinks may have been a consequence of her anxiety,

“I just didn’t always open up to people...very easily. So I probably didn’t make as many friends, long lasting friends here...I wouldn’t want to, you know, certain professors if they weren’t really friendly, then, you know, I would automatically be like, ‘ok, is this a big enough issue to bother them with?’ you know? That sort of thing.”

Amanda explained to me how her anxiety made her distance herself from her fellow students as well as her professors, worrying whether or not she should try to ask questions, or form relationships, with each of them. This lack of relationship and communication can not only prevent students from succeeding within classrooms, but can also hinder their opportunities to gain valuable resources for their success either in graduate school or for starting their careers.

When students are restricting themselves from forming relationships with their classmates, professors, or advisors, they are limiting their resources that help them continue through college and ultimately to graduation. By limiting their resources, students can easily find themselves overwhelmed and struggling, contributing to higher anxiety or depression as well as contributing to a lack of motivation to get ahead with their school work. Anxiety and depression are not just mental illnesses that only affect a student’s academic life, though. Within their homes, students may feel helpless as they are balancing work, school, and any other responsibilities that maintaining a home can include. This not only lead to social isolation within one’s University, but also isolation from loved ones within the home. It is apparent that anxiety and depression are issues that are affecting student’s lives and, possibly, their success inside and outside of college.

Lack of Advising

Advising is a tool that is essential for student’s success and graduation. To have an ad-

visor who is passionate about the success of a student is an added motivation for that student to stay on track to graduate. It is also important to have a hands-on advisor that will not only make a student's time in college easier, but to also develop genuine professional relationships that will help a student establish their career after graduation, as well. Another recurring theme that I found was the lack of advising that some of the students I interviewed said they experienced. As I interviewed these students, they described to me their relationships with their advisors as well as their past interactions with these advisors. When I asked Amanda if she had an advisor while she was attending IU South Bend, she replied,

"Officially there was an advisor and I sat with her...a few times. But it was, you know, kind of a, 'ok, this is where you're at, and, ok, you should think about taking this classes and go on your way'... I don't think there's enough advisors at IUSB. That's probably my biggest complaint about IUSB. It's (sigh), they just kind of go, 'here (lays hands gently on table), choose your journey wisely' but, you know, it's, there's not a whole lot of guidance. So I've had a lot of weird semesters...packed with either things that were not about my...major and then other semesters where it's like overwhelmingly, like, 'ok, I just need to, you know, read a short story out loud.'"

Amanda described to me how she did have an advisor, but that that advisor rarely gave her personal help, professional help, or career advice during their meetings together. She recalled that she only met with her advisor once or twice every school year. So while Amanda did have an advisor, the conversations that she would have with her advisor were less than helpful to Amanda's success in college.

When I interviewed Lily, another current student at IU South Bend, she informed me that she acted as her own advisor, due to the fact that she was consistently being re-assigned different advisors every semester. She explained,

"I switched majors, like I said, I switched them once. So that counts for one change of advising. (Laughs) I don't know what all the other times. I had three while I was in fine arts, and then I've had three since I've switched out of fine arts. One might have been a transitional year. So it might have been before I was technically in general studies...It's been the system, though. Not me."

When I asked her how the constant changing of advisors made her feel, she replied,

"Kind of, like, over it. Because, it's like a laugh, it's like a joke to me. Like, how many advisors can I get? Because I haven't, I haven't really, like, utilized them. Probably because I haven't seen any of them more than once (laughs)."

I asked Lily what a typical advising session looks like when she would only meet her advisors once, and she described the scene, stating,

"I've kind of just figured it out myself. I go in, they tell me...that everything looks good on my transcript, that, like, it's a lot of A's and they're like, 'that looks really good' and...sometimes they told me...one advisor was like, 'have you thought about the honors program?' and I told her I didn't really know anything about it. And it was the end of my third year and I graduate this year, my fourth year, and so I'm like, well it's too late. I'm not gonna cram in all these honors classes just because it wasn't worth it to me. And then, we'll talk about classes, I'll show them what I had in my mind. We'll make up this plan and sometimes I'll follow the plan and sometimes I do whatever I want."

Lily told me that while she has never had a stable advisor, she is still on track towards

graduating after four years of college with a Bachelor's degree. And while that is an accomplishment in itself, her account of her advising sessions are a cause for concern. To have a different advisor every semester is detrimental to a student's overall success, as Lily was forced to find her own way towards accomplishing her degree. Advisors are meant to be helpers, offering opportunities and advice for each of their students. Yet, while Lily is still graduating, she has missed out on the opportunity to graduate within the Honor's Program because a piece of advice that she did eventually receive was offered too late within her college career.

I also interviewed a woman named Michelle who is a current student and single mother of two. When I asked her about her advisors, she informed me that she has had four advisors throughout her college career. She told me that this past year and a half, her relationship with her advisor has changed, and has become tense. When I asked her why she believes this to be so, she answered,

"There's been tension with other students. I personally feel that she has changed her opinion of me because of those things... I think it's frustrating because I was really close to her. And when I asked her for a scholarship recommendation. And with all of my involvement on campus, I assumed that I would get good recommendation but she just told me that she would just send a brief letter. And that was kind of a smack in the face. But I'm a good student, "and now I'm worried that I won't get scholarships because of her letter."

Michelle described to me how personal relationships with other students has impacted the quality of advising that she feels she now receives. As Michelle gets closer and closer to graduation, her quality of advising is pertinent to her success after college, which is why her relationship with her advisor is so important. When I asked her how helpful her meetings with her advisor are now, she answered,

"...not really, at all. I pick my own classes and even when I've picked my minors, she never knows what the minor's requirements are. I think that all professors should know what major and minor requirements are. They should have a list or something. You shouldn't have to meet with two different people."

Michelle confided that her meetings with her advisor are not helpful to her, as she picks all of her courses, and as her advisor offers no tangible advice about Michelle's college career. She further explained how frustrated she feels when she is instructed to seek help from multiple advisors, as though her confidence in her one advisor is being put to the test whenever she is referred to someone else for help. It appears that there is a trend of students advising themselves, from picking their own courses to determining their own path to graduation, these students seem to be fending for themselves.

To have these relationships depending on only a few meetings per year, sometimes only once before an advisor is switched, it is hard to imagine the rate of success from these trends. While in college, students need to have someone that they can rely on for advice, motivation, and awareness of opportunities. Inside the school, students could find these advising meetings as a source of frustration, doubt, and they can even view these interactions as evidence of incompetence on the University's behalf.

Distorted Expectations of College

The expectation of college being a time for personal growth and fun is almost a culture within our country today. The idea that college is where young adults go to throw parties and then turn around and cram for big tests and essays is something that we see in films, television, and even in some college recruitment brochures. But IU South Bend is unlike many other big colleges in that it is focused on the students who may be from out of town, with children, or

students who may be returning to school after years of working without a degree. For this reason,

IU South Bend is also seen as a lesser college, one that is supposedly easier or less important to attend. For Michelle, it was a starter-college, one that she was not expecting to graduate from, as she explains,

"I wanted something that said 'IU' on it and not 'IUSB.'...people are more likely to see that 'IU' and not necessarily know that I went here... And the standard of IU behind it, the quality and standard of IU that people will recognize."

Michelle stated that she decided to attend IU South Bend when she realized that there would be an IU logo on her diploma, rather than an IUSB logo. This told me that there is possibly a negative connotation to attending IU South Bend rather than attending a bigger school within the IU system, like IU Bloomington. This feeling was met when I interviewed Amanda, who says that she felt her first impression of IU South Bend left her feeling as though she didn't need to care about college, and in fact, none of her family or friends encouraged her to attend IU South Bend. She continues,

"Before coming here...I thought that it was going to be a second-rate, just, you know, dried up professors that don't give a shit or couldn't make it in a real school and ...I was gonna get...a piece of paper that didn't mean anything at the end of it... I was like, 'eh, it's cheap and at least people will think I got taught.' So, that's what I thought before coming. (Laughs) BEFORE coming...I just thought it was going to be, I mean, you know, they don't—they wouldn't give a shit and, I, they know I'm not going to give a shit because...you know. (Flops hands on the table) I felt like, ok, well if you're gonna accept kids who have, you know, these terrible grades like me, then you obviously don't care...they're not gonna care about me. I'm not gonna care about them."

Amanda informed me that she felt that IU South Bend was not a college that needed to be taken seriously, as IU South Bend has a tendency to admit students with lower GPAs. Through this assumption, Amanda admitted to not putting in much effort the first time she attended IU South Bend,

"I thought it would be super easy. And I acted like it was super easy (laughs). You know, I didn't have to go to class and you know, that whole freedom is not a good thing, necessarily. So I thought it would be really easy, you know, kind of show up when I wanted to show up and skim through my stuff and I'd be fine. Yeah, (chuckles) I imagined all the way through my first, second and third semester. I was delusional."

Amanda stated that she felt that IU South Bend wouldn't care about her success, so she felt that she wouldn't need to care as well, making her first year and a half the worst semesters, academically, of her college career. As she let her GPA drop, Amanda stated that she wished she had taken IU South Bend and her college career more seriously in the beginning.

While the factor of success relies greatly on the student, it is important to understand that a student's expectation of the University and the requirements of the classroom can greatly determine their success or failures within the school. If a student believes that he or she does not need to try as hard at IU South Bend, then they won't. However, if the standard is clear that IU South Bend is not a University that is conducive to a 'slacker' approach to schooling, then the student is presented the opportunity to motivate themselves with the proper guidance.

Now, Amanda explains how her perceptions of IU South Bend has changed over the years and since she has graduated, stating,

"I studied my ass off the second time around. Every single night, I worked on something and I would look at the syllabus, anything that was to be read for the next class or whatever, everything that was asked of me, I always did it. Which is the complete opposite of everything I did my senior year of high school. Yeah, that was my top priority."

Because of this, Amanda was able to graduate in 2012 with a degree in Business. Her expectations of college changed over the years, and she says that her dedication allowed her to appreciate IU South Bend more now than she would have before,

"No, I'm a huge fan of IUSB. Even more so now that I'm out of it. Because I can step back and see it from a different perspective because there's lots of little things that bug you about stuff, then once you're out of it, I miss it every day."

Conclusion

While each of these students seemed to have very different experiences for each setting, it is interesting to note that they are also sharing very similar patterns within their experiences. Their heightened sense of anxiety and depression has caused them distress both within the classroom as well as outside of the classroom. Some of these instances, like Melody's story, seem to have been minor inconveniences that were solved with emotional support from her family. While other interviewees, like CJ, found that their anxiety and depression has caused a serious lack of motivation in the classroom, and that has compromised his attendance record.

In addition, the lack of advising that each student stated that they received has caused them to, in some instances, advise themselves. Because of this, their success in college is put directly into their own hands, which can be frustrating and overwhelming for a student. Without offering that emotional, professional, or educational guidance, the students have found that they feel that IU South Bend is a school that might not care. Or, as Lily mentioned, she feels the advising at IU South Bend is a joke, due to the fact that she has had six advisors during her entire college career. This lack of advising does not seem to have had substantial negative effects on these students who are months away from graduation, however, for an incoming student with little to no experience of expectations of college, this task of advising oneself can be daunting and overwhelming.

Lastly, I found that the remaining theme within my interviews have been distorted expectations of college life. During my interviews, I found that some students initially thought that IU South Bend was a school that didn't need to be taken seriously. And because of this mentality, these students came to their first semester with little to no preparation for the academic, social, and emotional stress that college life can bring. This use of misinformation can—and has—lead to distorted views of the college in general. While some interviewees—like Michelle—admitted that they were only willing to come here when they knew the degree would look no different than a degree earned in Bloomington, other interviewees—like Amanda—assumed that IU South Bend was a college that required little to no hard work. And because of this, her GPA plummeted, causing her to work twice as hard during her second trip to college. This misinformation can be an inconvenience, but more often than not, it is detrimental to the resilience and motivation that is required of college students.

All of these themes combined can begin to answer why IU South Bend has such low graduation and retention rates. From the minimal expectation of college life in general, to the lack of advising received by students, to the anxiety and depression often felt by students who just want to succeed. These themes can, and do, work together to make college success even harder than before. In hopes of changing this trend, the students that I interviewed advised that regular attendance and taking one's time is the best way to get the most out of IU South

Bend.

Within my study, I had major weaknesses and strengths of my interviews. The first weakness to my study was the lack of time that was devoted to each interview. While most of the interviews were an hour long, much more could have been said about each student's experiences here at IU South Bend. The second weakness to my research was the fact that I knew, relatively speaking, most of my interviewees by association through past classes and clubs. Because I did not find my interviewees at random, there were qualities that each interviewee and I shared that may have contributed to each interview being so closely alike.

The two strengths within each study were primarily the willingness of each interviewee and wide variety of questions presented to each interviewee. While each of my interviews could have been longer, each of the participants were more than willing to share as much information that they could about their experiences at IU South Bend. Because of this, their willingness to discuss even personal information was able to be used for the benefit of this research. Along with their willingness to discuss a wide range of topics, the second strength to this research is the variety of questions that I was allowed to ask each interviewee. This benefited my research because it allowed each interviewee to discuss a wide range of topics, and then elaborate on which ever topic of discussion that they wanted to. This showed me which aspect of their college life held each one of their priorities, and therefore allowed me to understand their trials and triumphs of being a college student at IU South Bend.

Works Cited

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