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Why Won't You Stay? A Quantitative Sociological Analysis of Factors Influencing Retention at IU South Bend

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Abstract

In a society where going to college increasingly is becoming a minimum educational requirement, colleges and universities are constantly looking for clues as to how to engage their students in such a way as to keep them attending and progressing steadily towards graduation. The following paper is the result of a survey I did on first-year, first-semester students at IU South Bend. The goal of the survey was to try to identify particular experiences students may have had that have a statistically significant correlative effect on their confidence that they will continue at the university beyond their first semester, their first year, and through to graduation. After assessing the recent literature on the topic, I decided to model my study after a survey done in Australia that focused on these types of experiences and their effect on retention. Using a Spearman rho correlation analysis, I was able to identify many common experiences that students reported as having either a positive or negative effect on their desire to continue at this institution. By considering the results of this analysis, educators and administrators may be able to determine where to focus their efforts in their attempts to increase both retention and graduation rates at this and in similar university settings.

INTRODUCTION

As someone who is interested in education and has worked in a number of different programs on my campus designed to increase retention and graduation rates, I decided to do research on our campus to try to determine the effects certain activities have on those outcomes. Research is being done throughout the country as more and more of the funding given to public universities is tied to these two measures. As Dan Clawson and Max Page point out in their book The Future of Higher Education, "Higher education in the United States is in the midst of a major crisis of funding, affordability, mission, and organization" (Clawson & Page, 2011, p. 1). As an economic sociologist, I'm interested in pinpointing the most economic activities that the university can support in order to keep students engaged. Research indicates that engagement leads to retention (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). According to fafsa.ed.gov, retention is "the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year. For example, a student who studies full-time in the fall semester and keeps on studying in the program in the next fall semester is counted in this rate" ("What are graduation, retention, and transfer rates?," n.d.). It is clear from the research that the experiences that students have in their first semester at any given institution can have a profound impact on whether they stay at that university the following semester, the following year,

and on through to graduation. My survey attempts to show that such a correlation exists at our university as well using Spearman's rho analysis model.

My basic research question throughout this project has been, "What experiences did students have during their first semester here at IU South Bend that had the most significant impact on their confidence that they would continue to study at this institution?" By determining those experiences, the goal of my research is to provide an argument for programming and, thereby, funding, that can be directed toward the encouragement of these types of experiences. What I will show in my research, and through this particular type of analysis, is that there are certain experiences that the students I surveyed have, which are significantly correlated even at the maximum threshold of $\alpha = .01$ in a two-tailed test. This type of statistical significance indicates that these types of activities may be worth the investment for the university if the goal is to increase retention. My ultimate thesis, then, is that if the university can find ways to increase retention beyond that first semester and subsequently that first year, they are likely to maintain that level of retention and subsequently increase their overall graduation rate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the aforementioned book by Clawson and Page, the authors write, "The problem with our system of higher education is that three obstacles work in tandem: students come from different backgrounds, have unequal opportunities, and live in a nation that hasn't yet made a commitment to equal higher education" (Clawson & Page, 2011, p. 31). Much of the literature that attempts to address the problems with our higher educational system focuses on generalizable issues that supposedly affect all of higher education. But, much like our secondary public schools, the population that attends these schools and the location of each of these schools has a significant impact on the effectiveness of said schools. However, as the authors point out, "It seems that everyone agrees that a college education is necessary for success" (50). In their book they advocate for free higher education for all. They argue that, "College should not be only an 18-21-year-old's investment in a degree, but also for all ages to develop new capacities by studying and expanding human knowledge" (52). As our economy transitions from a manufacturing base to a service and technological base, the reality of this need only increases. Unfortunately, coupled with this stark truth, is the reality of what is happening in a neoliberal environment (Lucal, 2014). Clawson and Page describe this as a "University-As-Business" model where "the more money it [the university] generates the better it is doing, and anyone or anything that brings in money is to be valued over anything that costs the university money" (19). The authors acquiesce later in writing, "To be fair, many boards of trustees, chancellors, and deans insist that they are trying to defend the traditional university's mission of teaching, research, and service and only adopt the business model because costs have risen and funding—especially for public universities—has declined at an unprecedented rate" (21). The goal of my research is to identify the types of experiences that have the most significant impact on students. This should help faculty and administrators find the activities that produce the greatest amount of payoff for their limited investments.

In their book How College Works, Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs argue that, "The key to improving education in college [...] is found less in the organization of programs than in the deployment of people" (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014, p. 155). Many of the activities I used as independent variables in my survey are directly associated with making connections with people on campus. These authors conclude that, for students, "Their chances for real engagement are always limited by the available resources (teachers, activities); but even a very brief positive encounter (even a single conversation) can motivate a student for a surprisingly long time; those positive encounters can always be leveraged to maximize students' gains" (158). They remind the reader that "freshman [sic] experiences have long been recognized as deeply consequential" (158), which is why the results of my survey are so important. If we can identify the types of experiences that are significant to our population, we can increase retention dramatically by channeling our resources toward these activities.

In my research, I even found support in psychological theory to defend my argument. In an article published in the *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling*, entitled "Increasing Undergraduate Student Retention Rates," the researchers discovered that "attrition occurred largely in year one and was not mainly due to academic failure" (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995, p. 1). They go on to state that, "The feeling of being unprepared for university was a major factor in students' decision to leave" (5), and another major influencing factor was "the support received from the environment during a transition stage" (6). What this study revealed was that many students simply are not prepared to handle the academic rigors of college, neither academically or emotionally, and to the extent that a university can identify who these students are, and thereby focus programming that meets them right in this time of transition, the higher the likelihood those students will continue at that particular university. My survey was intended to illustrate that this is true of the first-year student population at IU South Bend as well. My survey also examines the psychological and emotional status of the respondents in that it measures confidence levels and how they are affected by the experiences I examined.

Dr Linda K. Lau, in her article for the journal, *Education*, entitled "Institutional Factors Affecting Student Retention," confirmed much of what the British psychologists wrote in the article described above. She discovered the high likelihood that "freshmen might be overwhelmed with the transition from high school to college, and they might become overly stressed by the dramatic changes even before they finish their first year of college" (Lau, 2003, p. 127). She goes on to conclude that "higher education administrators must help students adjust to their new learning and living environments, and ensure that the institution is accommodating to the student's needs, interests, and learning styles" (128). In support of why I structured my survey in the way that I did, Dr. Lau draws on Vincent Tinto's *Model of Institutional Departure* by arguing that, "The student retention process is clearly dependent on the student's institutional experiences. In other words, students who are satisfied with the formal and informal academic and social systems in a college or university tend to stay in school. To the contrary, students who have negative interactions and experiences tend to become disillusioned with college withdraw from their peers and faculty members, and ultimately, the institution" (127). I designed my survey in such a way as to measure the level to which our students may have had positive or negative experiences on our campus. By using Spearman's rho correlation analysis, I was

then able to identify the statistically significant factors that affected student confidence that they would stay for their second semester, stay past their first year, and that they would graduate from IU South Bend.

My final piece of academic literature I will discuss provided the model from which I built my study. Lesley Willcoxson, Julie Cotter, and Sally Joy are all faculty of business at three different universities in Australia. In their project entitled, "Beyond the First-year Experience: The Impact on Attrition of Student Experiences throughout Undergraduate Degree Studies in Six Diverse Universities," they did a 70 question survey "that was conducted over a two-year period (2008 and 2009) in six of the 36 public universities in Australia" (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011, p. 334). The goal of their research was to identify experiences that had a significant impact on whether students would remain at the university past their first year and then into their second or third year. They actually were able to survey first, second, and third year students in an attempt to discover whether attrition factors were significantly different each successive year of study. They used a seven-point Likert scale. I used a five-point scale. "Factors associated with intention to leave were ascertained by correlating responses to the 70 questionnaire items with responses to an additional item asking students to 'Please rate the likelihood of the following: I am likely to leave university before completing a degree' which required respondents to choose a point on a seven-point scale ranging from 'certain to leave' to 'certain to stay'" (336). As you will see in the methods section of this report, my survey was similarly structured. Also, like my study, this study used Spearman's rho for data analysis "because the responses to the 70 questionnaire items and the item exploring intention to leave were on ordinal scales, and the data obtained failed the assumption of normality in that responses to the intention to leave item were expected to be strongly skewed toward the 'certain to stay' end of the scale" (336). Given the similar structure in our surveys, a similar assumption was made concerning my data and, therefore, the Spearman's rho analysis seemed the most effective tool for my data analysis as well. My research attempts to replicate much of the findings of this study. What the authors of this study suggest in the end is to "deal with first-year student expectations through support strategies and invest more resources in providing transition support to students at university" (348), which coincides with much of the literature I've discussed throughout this section.

METHODS/DATA COLLECTION

The data I used for this analysis came from a 27-question survey that was administered mid-semester in the fall of 2015. My goal was to get a sample of survey data from the three different programs on campus specifically designed to address the needs of our first-year, first-semester students. Those programs include a First-Year Seminar program run by the Office of Undergraduate Studies, a course called U-100 run through our School of Education, and the Business Cohort Model used in the Judd Leighton School of Business and Economics. Each of these programs has a different structure and philosophy toward fostering student success. But they each include a peer mentoring element, and each is designed with the intention of helping our first-year, first-semester students navigate the transition to college. By taking a sample from each of these programs, my goal was to eliminate the influence of any one program on the results. I was able to administer the survey personally in two of the FYS classrooms by simply approaching the instructors with whom I'd already had previous interactions. I served as a peer mentor in one of these classrooms. In the business cohort program, I administered the survey in one classroom in which I also served as a peer mentor and the instructor administered the survey in a different section of the same class I was unable to attend. Finally, I was able to have the instructor of a U-100 course administer the survey in one of her classes. She had been my academic advisor my freshman and sophomore year.

A total of 118 surveys were collected. There was no way of identifying from which classroom any of the surveys came, nor was there any way to identify the instructor. The first page of the survey was intended to identify demographic characteristics asking the following questions and offering the following possible responses:

1. Is this your first semester at IU South Bend?

a. Yes

b. No

2. Have you attended any other university other than IU South Bend?

a. Yes (If so, whre:_____)

b. No

3. Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend college?

a. Yes

b. No

4. Did you graduate from high school in the last year?

a. Yes

b. No (If not, when: _____)

5. How many hours a week do you work at a job outside of school?

a. 0-5 hours

b. More than 5, but less than 10 hours

c. More than 10, but less than 20 hours

d. More than 20, but less than 30 hours

e. 30 or more hours

6. How would you identify yourself?

a. Female

b. Male

c. Neither

In the analysis, those who answered "No" to question number one and "Yes" to number two were eliminated, narrowing the total number of respondents to 107.

On page two of the survey, there were two groups of experiences being evaluated: nine considered positive experiences, statements, or activities and nine considered negative. Although they were grouped together on the page, they were not identified as such to the respondents. Each of these experiences were used as independent variables in my analysis. The following is what the second page of the survey looked like:

On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 5 being "Strongly Agree," please rate the following possible experiences you may have had during your first semester here at IU South Bend (mark N/A if you have not had any experience with a particular option):

Would you say you:

Strongly Disagree Neither Strongly Agree

1.....2.....3.....4.....5

a. I find my courses interesting ___

b. I have a clear reason for attending university ___

c. I know the type of occupation I want after college ___

d. Having a peer mentor in my class has been helpful ___

e. I have met or plan on meeting my professor outside of class ___

f. I have participated or am planning on participating in a Student Life activity not required by a class (i.e. club meeting, sporting event, lecture, etc.) ___

g. I have visited or plan on visiting one of the Tutoring Centers on campus ___

h. I attend class regularly ___

i. I have been able to make several new friends while at IUSB ___

a. I find it hard to manage my time effectively ___

b. I find that my class schedule often conflicts with my work schedule ___

c. I have too much homework ___

d. Scheduling a meeting with my advisor has been difficult ___

e. My professor never responds to my e-mails ___

f. Finding time to participate in any campus activities is challenging ___

g. I have too many distractions at home ___

h. I feel as if I was unprepared for the amount of work college requires ___

i. I feel as if I get little support from the university towards my success ___

The final section of the survey was used to set the dependent variables and was intended to measure the confidence levels of each of the respondents about the three scenarios described:

On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "Not Confident At All" and 5 being "Extremely Confident,"

Please rate the following:

Not Confident At All Extremely Confident

1.....2.....3.....4.....5

1. How confident are you that you will continue to pursue your degree at IU South Bend next semester? _____
2. How confident are you that you will continue at IU South Bend beyond this year? _____
3. How confident are you that you will graduate from IU South Bend? _____

In the final analysis, I chose not to use demographic characteristics from the first page as independent variables. Since the intent of the project was to evaluate experiences and their effect on retention, I decided to leave the demographic influences to further research opportunities.

FINDINGS

In my univariate analysis, my main focus was on painting a picture of the type of students represented in the survey. Of the 107 respondents (using valid % figures):

46.7 % were Female

53.3% were Male.

When asked if they were the first person in their immediately family to attend college:

27.1 % said "Yes"

72.9 % said "No."

When asked if they graduated from high school in the last year:

94.4 % said "Yes"

5.6 % said "No"

When asked how many hours a week do you work:

29.2 % said "0-5 hours"

6.6 % said "More than 5, but less than 10"

25.5 % said "More than 10, but less than 20"

24.5 % said "More than 20, but less than 30"

14.2 % said "30 or more hours"

So the typical student in this survey is male, not a first-generation college student, who graduated from high school in the last year and works between 10 and 20 hours per week. This contrasts with the reality at our campus at which the women outnumber the men by a 2 to 1 margin but fits in with a typical, traditionally aged student who holds a part-time job while attending classes at a traditional university setting. This is interesting since the perception of our campus is that is a non-traditional, commuter campus, where students attempt to go to school while working at or near full-time hours.

As I stated in my methods section, each of my independent variables was intentionally grouped into two categories. The first nine experiences, statements, or activities described were considered to be positive, while the second group of nine experiences, statements, or activities were considered to be negative. After running means tests on each of the ordinal rankings for each variable, I determined that the positive experiences were consistently skewed toward the "Strongly Agree" category and the negative categories were skewed toward the "Strongly Disagree" category; therefore I chose to use the Spearman rho analysis to attempt to compensate for these biases.

The three dependent variables (DVs) I measured in this analysis were:

DV #1: Confidence that the respondent indicated that they would continue to pursue their degree at IUSB next semester

DV #2: Confidence that the respondent indicated that they would continue to pursue their degree at IUSB next year

DV #3: Confidence that the respondent indicated that they would graduate from IUSB

9 Positive Experiences, Statements, or Activities

The independent variables that displayed a positive correlation that was significant at $\alpha = .01$ level (two-tailed) for all three dependent variables were:

- *"I have a clear reason for attending university"*
- *I know the type of occupation I want after college"*

"I find my courses interesting," was only able to achieve this level of positive correlation as it related to DVs #2 and #3, not DV #1, although it did achieve positive correlation at $\alpha = .05$ level for DV #1. "Having a peer mentor in my class has been helpful," and, "I have met or plan on meeting my professor outside of class," were both able to achieve the statistically significant positive correlation at $\alpha = .01$ level for DVs #1 and #2 and at $\alpha = .05$ for DV #3. The only other variable that was able to achieve correlation significance at $\alpha = .01$ in this group was "I attend class regularly," and that was only able to achieve that for DV #1.

The independent variables in this category that were unable to achieve a statistical correlative significance even at $\alpha = .05$ were:

- *"I have participated or plan on participating in a Student Life activity not required by a class"*
- *"I have visited or plan on visiting one of the Tutoring Centers on campus"*
- *"I have been able to make several new friends while at IUSB"*

Analysis: What these numbers seem to indicate, at least for this particular sample, is that having a clear reason for going to college and knowing what type of occupation you want to pursue has the most positive impact on the likelihood that these students will stay at IUSB and graduate. One suggestion might be to focus on career aptitudes early on in the first-year experience. By providing a practical illustration of how what they are doing is going to impact their long term employment opportunities may help students want to stay. Having a peer mentor and meeting with the professor outside of class had a clearly significant impact on the first two DVs: Confidence that they would continue into their second semester and second year. Any programming that supports this type of activity appears to be a good investment, at least with this particular sample of students. The FYS program includes both of these elements as an essential part of their programming and the U-100 and business cohort classes use peer mentors as integral elements of both of their programs, so these investments seem likely to pay off in the future.

I believe the most significant findings in this section have to do with three independent variables that did not achieve statistical significance: participation in Student Life activities, visiting a Tutoring Center, and making new friends. This runs counter to almost all of the research in this field. What this may indicate is that our student population is unique in that they simply don't see any value in these types of activities. Does this mean we should abandon them or does it mean we should do a better job of educating our students about their value? I know that efforts are made in all three of the programs I've been discussing to do the latter, so maybe we would need to do more research at a later date to see if we are being effective at conveying the value of these activities or if, at least at our university, illustrate that these are not good investments.

9 Negative Experiences, Statements, or Activities

Of the nine independent variables measured in this section, not one of them was able to exhibit a statistically negative correlative effect even at $\alpha = .05$ as it affected the respondents' confidence that they would graduate (DV #3). There were three independent variables that achieved a statistically negative correlative effect at $\alpha = .05$ for DV #2: Confidence that the respondents would continue to pursue their degree at IUSB beyond this year:

- *"I find it hard to manage my time effectively"*
- *"I have too much homework"*
- *"I feel as if I was unprepared for the amount of work college requires"*

These same three independent variables had a statistically negative effect at $\alpha = .01$ on DV #1: Confidence that the respondents would continue to pursue their degree at IUSB next semester.

The only other variable to have a statistically negative correlative effect on any of these DVs was, "I feel as if I get little support from the university towards my success," which had an effect at $\alpha = .05$ on DV #1.

Analysis: The indication from these numbers seems to be that none of these particular so-called negative experiences is so negative as to have a profound impact on whether one of our students will graduate, but there do seem to be some variables that have a statistically significant impact on whether a student will make it into their second semester and subsequently their second year. Having difficulty managing their time, feeling like they have too much homework, and feeling unprepared for the amount of work that college requires appears to have a relatively large impact on these students' confidence levels that they will be able to continue past their first semester. Again, these are areas that each of the programs on our campus, that I've been discussing, attempt to address. Unfortunately, these are not factors that the university can have much effect on prior to students beginning their coursework here. But, to the extent that we invest in helping them make these transitions, it appears that this too could have a significant pay off in overall retention rates. This concept seems to be supported in much of the literature to which I referred earlier.

One other quick piece of analysis in the rho correlations is that as you are able to help the student succeed at each level from first semester to second semester, from first-year to second year, the impact that has on their confidence that they will graduate increases steadily. This supports the theory that the investments that we make in our students during their first semester will have the greatest impact on our overall retention rate and graduation rate.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

As I have shown in my findings, there are many similarities between the things that work on our campus and the research that supports these theories. As was the goal, I have been able to identify several significant experiences that our first-semester, first-year students have that impact overall retention and graduation potential. Based on my survey, having a clear reason for attending college and knowing what they want to do after college will likely help students succeed while at college. This is probably true at most universities, but it's particularly relevant to our students. The three factors that had the most negative impact on our students had more to do with how well they were trained before coming to college, than any particular aspect of the university itself. Further research might help identify what we can do as a university to help better prepare students for the rigors of college life. Investing in summer programs for high school seniors considering IUSB; might help alleviate some of these challenges. The summer bridge programs might be better focused on students heading into their senior year of high school rather than those who have already committed to IUSB, however, it appears that any investment we make in preparing our students before they get to campus can achieve positive results.

The most interesting discovery made in this particular study was the lack of apparent positive impact that several, traditionally considered important, retention-producing activities had on this sample of students. Engaging in on-campus extra-curricular activities, utilizing tutoring centers, and making new friends are considered by nearly every educator as extremely effective tools in increasing retention. That does not appear to be the case with our first-year students. However, more research may need to be done to see if this is a consistent revelation or just one unique to this particular sample.

That leads to the weaknesses associated with this research. This study attempted to collect as random sample as possible of our first-year students, but since I couldn't do a true random sample there is a possibility that this data does not truly represent the population of first-year students at IUSB. And, since each of these respondents was in a program intended to address some of the issues I was hoping to examine, the data may be skewed in such a way as to prevent truly generalizable results. In order to produce the most effective study possible, I would have to come up with a way to take a truly random sample of all first-year, first semester students and that could prove to be difficult. For those attempting to replicate this study, they may want to work with their admissions office to help select random first-year, first-semester students to implement an online survey at some strategic point in their first semester.

One of the methodological weaknesses with this research was that it may have been too broad in its scope. Because of the time and resource limitations that I was under, I may have been attempting to find out too much information and therefore, may not have adequately addressed my research question effectively. The second methodological weakness is that the questions I used to determine my variables may not have been succinct enough. They, too, may have been too broad and open to various interpretations. If I were to redo this project, I would work to refine the scope and identify a much smaller set of variables with which to analyze my data. I would also spend more time refining the questions so as to eliminate any ambiguity that may have been present in the research.

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