

Graduation and Retention Rates at Indiana University South Bend

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is aimed to ascertain why the student graduation and retention rates are so low at Indiana University South Bend. Through original research, oral interviews, and field observations, I have collected data to further support my analysis of why the rates at IUSB are so dismal. This research paper will hopefully shed some light on how students think, what their attitudes are like towards this institution, and why they feel the way that they do about IUSB.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

INTRODUCTION

In this study, I conducted research to ascertain why the student graduation and retention rates at Indiana University South Bend are so low. In the presentation presented by Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Linda Chen, she informed us that the fall to fall retention rate for students going from their first to second year at IUSB was about 65%. This means that 35% of students are transferring or dropping out of IUSB altogether. In the following research paper I will explore different concepts of college life that will hopefully shed some light on why our graduation and retention rates are so low. By exploring these different concepts I hope to enlighten my readers about the lives of IUSB students and why they do what they do.

The reason why it is important to study our graduation and retention rates is so we can better understand why students are choosing to drop out or transfer. We need to focus on our graduation and retention rates because we should be holding the university accountable. If students are

not graduating and dropping out of school then the university should question what they are doing wrong. Our low rates implies that the university is not doing its job. This indicator should be a signal that the university needs to make changes to accommodate its students. The students should be aware that the graduation and retention rates are low because it shows them that changes need to be made. The students need to have a voice and tell the university what is and is not working for the students.

METHODS

Qualitative research attempts to understand a culture from their perspective through thick description and face to face interaction. During this research project I conducted field observations twice at the Student Activities Center lounge to see how they interacted with each other and to get an idea of what a student's typical day at school looked like. The Student Activities Center, or SAC, is a place students can go to exercise, lift weights, engage in fitness classes, get something to eat from the sandwich shop, or study in the lounge. My observations lasted, on average, about an hour and forty five minutes. During these observations I watched people as they studied or talked to one another. I took notes on people's conversations and mannerisms. This was a way of observing students in a natural setting. I also conducted five interviews with students from IUSB to try and decipher what their thought processes were when it comes to college and their experiences here at IUSB. One interview was with a twenty five year old, Caucasian female. Another interview was with a twenty one year old, Latino male. One interview was with a twenty two year old, Caucasian male. Another interview was with a twenty three year old, Caucasian female. My last interview was with a twenty one year old, Caucasian male. These interviews ranged in time from twenty to thirty minutes. During these interviews I asked many questions pertaining to their lives as students here at IUSB. For example, I asked about their academic advising sessions, what they did in their free time between classes, how often they attended campus events, etc. These interviews were primarily used to understand the student's

perspective, a quality of qualitative research that allows the researcher to understand the context of the situation.

MINDSET

It is important for college students to have the mindset that they can do it, that they can make it through school, and that they have the power to persevere through anything. That is not always the case though. Some students cannot maintain that positive mindset and they lose their way along the college path. For example, I had one interviewee, a young female, that did not start college until later in life. When I asked her how she thought the difficulty at IUSB would be she responded,

"...I think one thing that I was worried about was that it was gonna be harder than what it actually is, that I wasn't going to be smart enough to be in college... So I just felt like I wasn't going to be able to do it."

This student came into college with the mindset that she was going to fail already in her head. She had not even begun her college career and already she was feeling defeated. In college, it is expected that we constantly strive to do our best and always keep a positive mindset. However, I have found through my studies that that is not always feasible. College students get worn down and tired out. The students attending Indiana University South Bend have it even worse because it is a commuter college. These students have jobs and families and other obligations besides school. It is hard for them to be able to put all of their focus on one area of their life when they have so much going on around them. Our students here at IUSB get bogged down with their scholarly workload and lose their sense of direction. Their motivation falls and they feel as if they cannot continue on.

Too many college students come into school with the mindset that they will fail, that college will be too hard for them. If they do start to fail, they are encouraged to drop the class or drop out of college altogether. Some professors simply do not care if you are trying your best. For example, in one interview I conducted with a young, Caucasian female, she told me about how her professor gave her a bad grade on a paper. She talked to the professor about the paper and asked what she did wrong and tried to

argue that some of the topics that she was marked down on she had provided. Despite her best efforts, the professor still gave her a low grade on the paper. It was clear that the student was trying her best and tried to show the professor that, but the professor did not budge on her decision. The student had the mindset and tenacity to pursue a better grade despite the professor's harsh criticisms. This is the kind of mindset that students need to have in college in order to succeed. When faced with difficulties or when they are struggling they need to remember to keep a positive mindset and to keep trying.

I interviewed a young, Caucasian female and asked her what she thought the difficulty at IUSB would be like. She responded with,

"I thought it would be a lot harder. I thought I would be pretty swamped like all the time. Like that's what you see in the movies and stuff so..."

This student came in with the mindset that she was going to be overwhelmed by school. However, once she started school she learned that it was not as tough as she imagined it would be. I think some of the reason why students drop out of school is because they just think school will be too hard and do not give it a proper chance. They believe that they will not succeed and that school will consume them with an extensive workload. Maybe sometimes that is the case but students still need to try. They need to put forth the effort that they have in order to be successful in school. If a student comes into school with a negative mindset and thinks that it will be too hard then they will have the predisposition that they will fail. This is not the kind of mindset you can go into college with and expect to be successful. I believe this is one reason why IUSB students decide to drop out. They think they just cannot do it.

During one interview I asked my interviewee why he thought it was so difficult to balance school, work, and a social life. His response was:

"Because there's, for me, there's too many things that go on at one point and you want to get everything done but then another thing arises and you have to choose between one or the other. Usually one will fall off."

This mindset shows that our students often feel as if they have to choose between work and school. This particular student worked four days

a week and his hours ranged from twenty five to thirty hours a week. When it comes to choosing between work and school, IUSB students will often choose work because they need a way to support themselves or their families. This allows schoolwork to be neglected and usually the student's performance in classes falls as well. This can often lead to students dropping out or failing out of school. Their mindset is not focused on school as much as it should be in order to have a more successful future. Their mind is focusing on the now and whether or not they will be able to make ends meet. This could be a reason why IUSB's graduation and retention rates are so low. Students have too much going on in their lives in order to properly focus on school.

BALANCE

Students need to figure out how to balance their time accordingly to be a successful college student. One of my interviewees, another young female, told me about her life and how it is difficult to balance everything that goes on. She has a job on top of school and cannot afford to lose that job. When asked what the most difficult part about being a college student was, she responded,

"I mean, it's never college that's the hard part. It's everything else and fitting college into it that's the hard part. Like, I make no money but you gotta keep in college so you can make more money in the future instead of right now. Or like sometimes life gets hard and you want to give up on college because it's the only thing you can control."

This right here shows that IUSB students are worried about more than just school. Most of the students have to work to support themselves or their families while going to school and it is expected that they will still make school their number one priority. Sometimes that is just not a feasible goal. As my interviewee said, sometimes students just want to give up on college because it is the one thing that you have control over.

Time management and balance go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. Students have to learn to balance their schedules and time in order to be successful in their college career, especially with all

that they have going on. When asked what advice they would give to a student just starting at IUSB, one interviewee responded:

“To get their time management and balancing skills down now and to get their studying, the way that they study, the way that they get big projects done, because it just hits ya in the face your junior year when you get into your major classes. It gets a lot heavier. And if you don’t have it figured out at that point then it’s just harder to figure out.”

Balance is something that students constantly struggle with due to their busy lifestyles. As I mentioned before, IUSB students oftentimes have more going on in their lives than just school. Time management is extremely important when it comes to balancing school and life. If a student feels overwhelmed with their schedule, they are not going to want to continue on in their college career. When I asked one of my interviewees, a young Latino male, what he thought the most difficult part of college was, he responded:

“I don’t know. Time management. Balancing your time. Trying to figure out how to get all your stuff done and not be lazy and work hard I guess.”

When students are as busy as our students here at IUSB, it gets tough to balance time and figure out when to do things. When this becomes too much it makes it very easy to want to drop out. If you think you cannot do something and you have people telling you that you cannot do it either, on top of having a busy schedule then things get hard and dropping out of school starts to look better and better. When asked why it was difficult to balance their multiple commitments one interviewee responded:

“Because it’s hard to compartmentalize your life and only focus on one aspect at a time. So you just gotta do like school, baseball, social life. It all just starts to blend together. It’s hard to keep them distinct.”

Because of the way our students’ lives are set up, time management is essential to being successful here at IUSB. Too many IUSB students have finances to worry about among many other life aspects and it impedes their ability to do well in school. Their time management skills come into play when it comes to deciding between schoolwork and their job. Students have to be able to balance both in order to be successful. Many

students do not figure out how to manage their time properly and often end up leaving school in order to work more to support themselves. I think this is one reason why our graduation and retention rates are so low; students cannot figure out how to properly balance their time to fit school into their busy lives.

CAMPUS INTEGRATION

One aspect of college that is important to a student’s success is being involved. A student cannot expect to get the full college experience unless they are involved in different activities and campus events. Being integrated into campus is essential to obtain the maximum benefits the school has to offer you. When I interviewed a young, Caucasian, female about what she thought about the social life on campus she responded with:

“I didn’t think there would be like any social activities or events. But usually there’s like one a week that you can go to and there’s events for pretty much anything you might like. Like videogames or political things. If there’s something you like then there’s probably an event for it.”

Across the board, the majority of my interviewees stated that they did not think there would be much of a campus life when it came to IUSB. The idea of it being a commuter school has shaped their perspective in a way that is detrimental to campus involvement. The students believe that because it is primarily a commuter school that their job is to go to class and then leave. They do not expect there to be any sort of activities or programs going on for them to engage in. However, according to my interviewee I just mentioned, there seems to be a club or event for anything and everything, you just have to be willing to look for it. Despite that, IUSB still sees low participation rates in activities and programs. What some students fail to realize is how important it is to be involved in order to be successful. Those that are involved in campus events, clubs, or organizations tend to be happier, more successful, and gain relationships that could potentially help them in the future. Two of my interviewees are involved in IUSB’s housing. They both are significantly happier because they are involved and feel like they are a part of something bigger. One of my interviewees is a baseball player and he is

much happier than if he were not involved in anything. He truly enjoys baseball and being a part of campus in a way other than academically. For example, when I asked him why he transferred to IUSB from his previous college his response was:

“Baseball.”

When I asked him whether or not he thought baseball impeded his schoolwork his response was:

“That’s tough. Maybe. I mean definitely in the spring because I don’t take classes as seriously because I’m so focused on baseball. I don’t know that’s a good question.”

It is clear that this student highly prioritizes baseball in his life. He has found something in college that he truly enjoys and has become so involved to the point that he neglects his schoolwork at times. This shows that, while sometimes being involved can be a little detrimental to your schoolwork, it is also a way to keep you in school because you are so dedicated to the organization you are involved in that you would not think twice about quitting. However, I have found that a majority of IUSB students are not involved in campus events and find it to be an inconvenience to be involved. For example, when I asked one of my interviewees if he had ever been involved in a campus club or organization he responded:

“No I don’t believe so. Most of the time it’s because of time obligations. I know I’m really bad at time management so adding another thing to the pot isn’t really a good idea.”

This shows that some students feel as if being involved in a campus organization is just too much work. This student in particular thought that being involved in an organization would be an inconvenience because of his time schedule.

If you ask random students on campus if they know about the events occurring within the next week or so the majority of them will tell you they had no idea anything was going on. Is this because there is not enough advertising? Or is it because students do not pay attention or

simply do not care? This a question I do not have an answer to. However, if I could take an educated guess I would say it is a combination of both. Some students at IUSB are complacent with just going to class and then going home directly after. They are not interested in staying on campus for any extended period of time if they do not have to be. I also think students simply do not pay attention to the advertisements for campus events. For example, I asked one of my interviewees if they attended campus events. He replied:

“Besides the very first day, I have not attended another event because I never hear about them.”

He also said:

“Honestly, I wish they would email.”

This student was talking about the fact that he wished the school would send out emails about programs, organizations, and events. When I informed him that there is a newsletter that goes out every day to students called the Daily Titan with information like campus events he was shocked. He did not even know that our school did such a thing. This goes to show that students do not pay much attention to the resources being set out for students to utilize. However, that being said, sometimes events are not advertised enough in advance or simply are not advertised well.

In my opinion, the majority of the students that participate in events come from IUSB’s housing because events are always advertised in the housing buildings and students are a little more aware of what is happening on campus than the commuter students are. I interviewed four housing students and when asked if they participated in events all four of them said that they did. Being a resident assistant I have the advantage of going to events and seeing how many housing students are attending said events. It is so much easier for students living on campus to attend events because they are right on campus already. It is a simple walk across the pedestrian bridge to go to a volleyball game or run in the

nearly naked mile. For example, when I asked one of my interviewees that lives on campus how often she attended events she responded:

“On average at least one a week but some weeks it’s more some weeks it’s none. So it just depends on what’s going on. Obviously all the housing events I try to attend. I try to attend some of the Titan Pro events, I like to attend the athletic games but sometimes I plan things over it. But I’m pretty involved.”

This shows that not all students are unaware of the events on campus. Some students do attend events and pay attention to when and where activities are taking place. It is possible that these students are more involved and happier due to their participation in events.

As I mentioned before, the fall to fall retention rate for students going from their first to second year at IUSB was about 65%. I believe part of this is because students do not think that IUSB integrates students into their campus as well as other schools. Larger schools have more events, more students living on campus, and larger budgets to create programs. Many students want to go to a larger school such as IU Bloomington or Purdue because they get the “college experience” so to speak. At these schools, students are always looking for activities to get involved in and organizations to become a part of. This is partly due to the fact that these schools are not commuter campuses for the most part so students are constantly on campus and in search of different ways to get involved on campus. When I asked one of my interviewees what she thought her relationships with classmates would be like she responded:

“...Classmates, I think I expected to make better connections in classes but because of the way the campus is a commuter college it’s easy to just walk in and out of class.”

Because students are not making those connections with other classmates they feel less obligated to stay at IUSB. There is nothing tying them down or making them want to stay here. Because of this, it is easier for students to drop out or transfer because they do not build those

essential relationships that are needed to really encourage students to continue on in college.

For the most part, I have stated that the reason campus integration is not so great at IUSB is due to lack of interest, being a commuter campus, and not advertising well. However, you also have to remember that IUSB students tend to have many different obligations outside of school. A vast majority of them have jobs and sometimes more than one. They also have families to worry about in some cases. These obligations obviously take precedence over trying to attend an event on campus or getting involved in a club. Some students simply do not have the time to entirely integrate themselves into the college world.

Campus integration seems like something that could be insignificant at first. Who cares if students attend events and join clubs? However, it really does make a difference in the success a student sees in their college career. It also greatly affects the school’s retention rates. No one wants to go to a school that does not have clubs, organizations, events, and programs to get involved in. This is why it is so important for students to search for those clubs or programs that interest them. Being involved helps encourage students to stay in school and continue their education. This is because if they are involved in a club then they feel like they belong. If a student feels as if they belong they will be less likely to drop out or transfer to a new school. Every student wants to feel like they belong in some way or another. When asked what advice you would give to a student just starting at IUSB, an interviewee responded:

“My advice would be to get involved in activities as soon as possible. Because I’m just starting to get involved but I’m about to graduate. I wish I would’ve gotten involved sooner.”

This just shows how important it is to get involved on campus. Many students that are in their final years of college often say that they wish they had gotten more involved in campus events while they could. People do not realize how fulfilling it is to be a part of something and participate in activities with different groups of people. Not only does this help students make new connections, it also ties the student to the school in a way that makes them want to remain at that college. No student likes

to feel lonely, so when they have an opportunity to make new friends they often jump at the chance. Unfortunately, that is not seen as often at IUSB. People are not making those connections and developing those friendships that will make them want to continue their education at IUSB rather than drop out or transfer to another school. This is why campus integration is an integral part to the college experience for students.

RESILIENCE

One aspect of college that many people forget to mention is the idea of resilience. Students have to have the ability to recover from different types of occurrences in their life. Resilience is a key element to being successful in college. If you fail a test you have to be able to pick yourself up and encourage yourself to try harder. In one of my interviews, I asked a student about the last time they had difficulty in a class and what they did. The young, Caucasian male responded with:

“The last time I had trouble with a class I reached out to my professor and explained my situation and I did ask for help or asked for additional readings that might help me. And I also made a study group with some students that were having similar troubles with the class but were doing well as far as grades were concerned. So I was seeing what I was doing wrong and getting help from my peers as well as my professor.”

This student was having trouble in a class but instead of letting it get the best of him and giving up he talked to the professor, asked for help, prepared a study group, and analyzed what he was doing wrong. He persevered through the class and continued to work hard despite the fact that he was struggling. This is the kind of resilience that students need to have in college in order to be successful. Another great example of resilience comes from a young, Caucasian female talking about when she had some struggles with a class.

“The two that I did [struggle with] was sociology and that was online. And I emailed the professor so there was like this one paper that pushed my grade down a lot, like she gave me a bad grade. I emailed her about it and she explained to me why she gave me the grade but I still didn't think it was fair. Like I still didn't feel like I did absolutely zero on things

that she marked me absolutely zero. So I just made sure that my other homework was done and I ended up getting a C.”

It is clear in this student's response that she was frustrated and upset with her professor and her grade. However, instead of putting all of the blame on the professor and just giving up on the class she strived to work harder on homework in order to get her grade back up. She very easily could have dropped the class or just given up entirely and continued to perform poorly in the class but instead she picked herself back up and worked harder in order to get a grade that was a little more palatable. Part of being a resilient student is being able to ask for help when it is needed.

Nearly everyone has a point in time during their college education where they consider giving up. When I asked my interviewees if they had ever thought about taking time off from IUSB or quitting altogether the answers were all the same. They had never considered it except in passing or in a joking manner. This shows how dedicated students are to getting their education and being successful students in college. Without resiliency, there would be no hope for students. Without resiliency, students would give up more easily. This is one category that I believe IUSB students perform well in and this is part of the reason why our graduation and retention rates are not lower. It is because the students of IUSB know how to work hard, be resilient, and persevere no matter what.

CONCLUSION

In my research, I found that many students have a mindset that is not set up for success when going into college. They think it will be too hard or that they will not be good enough. I also found that many students struggle to balance their lives and manage their time efficiently. A typical IUSB student has many other obligations besides school that they have to worry about. Many students are not integrated into campus as much as the campus would like. Most of the time students do not know about events or are too busy to attend events. On a positive note, our students

appear to be very resilient. They often try hard despite life's difficulties and continue to try hard.

Qualitative research has many good qualities when it comes to research of this nature. It looks at people as individuals instead of numbers or masses such as quantitative research. For example, I conducted interviews with five individuals to really see what they thought about IUSB. It also involves thick description with in depth analysis involving smaller groups. This allows the researcher to delve into the problem at hand more deeply and more effectively. I only interviewed five people so I could really go in depth with them on their experiences at IUSB. I believe qualitative research was the best way to approach this research question due to its nature of getting to know people rather than looking at them as numbers such as in quantitative research. For example, qualitative research asks the how and why questions in order to truly understand what a person is thinking. Qualitative research can provide you with details about human behavior, emotion, and personality characteristics that quantitative research cannot.

There are, of course, some downsides to qualitative research methods. The research is not representative of a population. In the research I conducted, I only interviewed five people. This does not represent the entire student body at IUSB. It is hard to get an accurate description of what the university is like if I am only interviewing five people. I found it hard to truly identify the needs of the university that were not being met through only five interviews. It would have been much easier to identify the problems the university was seeing if I could have interviewed more people and gotten their perspective on why exactly our graduation and retention rates are so low. There is also the possibility in qualitative research that the researcher might develop a bias. The researcher could become particularly attached to a certain interviewee and only look at the data that person has provided in their research. For example, a researcher could look at one person's interview and use that interview to skew the data and research in the way that they want the research to be seen.

It can be said that IUSB's graduation and retention rates are rather dismal. There are many factors that play into why students decide to drop

out or transfer and I have only touched on a few of those reasons in this paper. The issue is not being ignored either. Linda Chen brought up some of the ways that IUSB is trying to increase graduation and retention rates. Some options include creating metamajors. This is a grouping of similar majors so students will be able to explore within those majors if they have an interest in that particular area. Another option being explored is introducing the idea of choice architecture. This is the idea of encouraging students to explore different major options rather than having students keep a one track mindset. IUSB is trying to better the university and encourage students to stay on the path to success by finishing their degree. It may not be entirely understood why graduation and retention rates are so low here, but the university is trying to understand and improve themselves to better the university for the students' academic success.

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