

INDIANA REGIONAL TRANSFER STUDY:

The Student Experience of Transfer Pathways Between
Ivy Tech Community College and Indiana University

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A report from Public Agenda by Alison Kadlec and Jyoti Gupta

In partnership with Ivy Tech Community College
and Indiana University

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171 Second Street, Suite 300,
San Francisco, CA 94105, USA.

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INTRODUCTION

Indiana’s rate of higher education attainment continues to lag at a time when high-quality postsecondary credentials have become increasingly necessary for success. If Indiana is to make significant headway in raising rates of college completion, the creation of stronger and clearer transfer pathways between community colleges and regional four-year campuses must become a top priority.

Although national researchers have paid increasing attention to the transfer process in recent years, they have made few efforts to gain a better understanding of the *student experience* of both barriers to and facilitators of smooth and seamless transfer. To help fill this gap, we conducted roughly 50, 90-minute focus groups with a total of 333 transfer students in Indiana from eight Indiana University campuses and eight Ivy Tech Community College campuses (see Appendix B for research design and methodology details). This work was planned and executed in close partnership with Indiana University and Ivy Tech.

This memo highlights the main themes that emerged from students’ experiences of the barriers and opportunities associated with transfer. The themes presented here reflect attitudes shared both by students who have already transferred from Ivy Tech and students who are currently enrolled there who may consider transfer. Unless otherwise indicated, the findings have been compiled across IU and Ivy Tech institutions within the state.¹

We also had the benefit of being able to feed in data from a set of focus groups conducted for a separate project with students, non-completers, professional advisors and faculty advisors at two Ivy Tech campuses, three regional four-year institutions and one flagship campus on the topic of student pathways.² We distinguish between studies within this document.

¹ See Appendix B for details on the student focus groups.

² In the related project on student pathways conducted for Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE), we conducted 11 focus groups and eight phone interviews in the spring and summer of 2013. Through these qualitative methods, we engaged 110 individuals from seven colleges and universities in Indiana as well as 21 individuals who at some point had attended college but did not complete their intended degrees (“non-completers”). These participants represented four types of higher education institutions: community colleges (2), four-year comprehensive regional colleges (3), four-year public flagships (1), and four-year private institutions (1). Participants represented four types of higher education institutions: community colleges (2), four-year comprehensive regional colleges (3), four-year public flagships (1), and four-year private institutions (1). Report available on the Public Agenda website: <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/guided-pathways-to-student-success>.

In what follows, we detail our findings from conversations with students, organizing them under four major themes: completion; pathways; advising; and communication. Part 1 summarizes these themes as they emerged in our conversations with students. In Part 2, we provide an overview of the context. Part 2, digs into each of the themes and illustrates the points with representative quotes from students. In Part 3, we summarize recommendations pertaining to each of the themes based on students' own suggestions, national research and examples from other states. We intend for these recommendations to serve as discussion starters and points of departure for improved and new forms of collaboration on behalf of seamless student transfer and timely completion. Finally, in addition to the representative quotes from our student focus groups that we offer to illustrate the points in the main body of the report, we provide extensive quotes in Appendix A to help convey student views in their own voices.

Part 1

THEMES IN BRIEF

Theme 1 – Completion

Nearly every student said a four-year degree is increasingly essential in today's economy. Many also said that completion of an associate degree is an important intermediate step toward a baccalaureate for both practical and psychological reasons.

Theme 2 – Pathways

Most students told stories suggesting college is experienced as a maze, rather than a clear path, and many reported losing time and money because they took courses that did not transfer or that transferred only as electives.

Theme 3 – Advising

Most students described frustrating and often unhelpful or even misleading experiences with the advisement system. Advisors in the separate, but related, ICHE student pathways study echoed this frustration through stories of large caseloads and changing requirements.

Theme 4 – Communication

Most students reported dysfunctional channels of communication both within and, especially, between institutions; information is hard to find and often inadequate, incorrect, or conflicting. Awareness of dedicated information resources is low and utilization limited.

While qualitative research is a powerful vehicle for generating a deeper understanding of a problem, the conclusions drawn from research of this kind should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. The themes presented here reflect attitudes shared both by students who have already transferred from Ivy Tech and students who are currently enrolled there who may consider transfer. Unless otherwise indicated, the findings have been compiled across IU and Ivy Tech institutions within the state.

Part 2

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

The eminently sensible idea that baccalaureate-seeking students in Indiana could save money and get a strong foundation for success by starting college at Ivy Tech and doing their last two years at one of the IU regional campuses is belied by the reality that many students experience college as a maze and not a path. Most of our conversations with students featured stories about false starts, costly wandering, poor advisement, time wasted and money lost. Understanding these stories is essential because the roadblocks students experience as they seek to progress from community colleges to regional four-year institutions can have serious impacts on persistence and completion, particularly for the significant majority of students served by these institutions who arrive at college as unconfident or underprepared learners.

Together, regional public four-year colleges and community colleges serve two-thirds of undergraduate students. Finding ways to encourage, inspire and empower these institutions to work more effectively together on behalf of clearer pathways for their students is vital. A number of examples of “bright spots” exist nationally, and we cite these as models. We hope that elevating the voices of students will help focus efforts on removing the barriers to effective collaboration between two-year and four-year institutions in the state.

This research was conducted in the context of institutional relationships that have been evolving over the past decade and in an environment of broader higher education changes in Indiana. Indiana’s higher education system was never structured systematically. Historically, coordination among the IU comprehensives was always relatively loose. The Ivy Tech system, by contrast, is much more centralized, but it is also among the youngest community college systems in the country. Not surprisingly, coordination between the two systems (and even among the sister institutions) has often been uneven. Prior to the early 2000s, problems with coordination were exacerbated by leadership attitudes shaped by a cultural history of suspicion and competition, which, in turn, exacerbated the barriers students faced in transferring from one institution to another.³

Within the past decade, however, a series of collaborative efforts between these two institutions has resulted in more educational opportunities for Hoosiers, as well as for out-of-state students. In recent years, these institutions have partnered to provide several credit-transfer opportunities throughout the state, easing the burden on students pursuing baccalaureate degrees. The establishment of the Course Transfer Library and a general education core have been key steps.

In addition to such statewide efforts and articulation agreements, IU and Ivy Tech have formed creative partnerships through regional agreements, characterized by joint services, shared staff

³ Steve Hinnefeld, “Ivy Tech Outgrowing New Campus,” *HeraldTimesOnline.com*, August 26, 2007.

and strong channels of communication at the faculty level, resulting in significantly clearer pathways for students. In 2008, IU East became the first of the regional four-year institutions to voluntarily stop providing remediation and focus instead on its role as a site for baccalaureate degree completion through an agreement under which students in need of remediation, along with those seeking two-year degrees, were referred to Ivy Tech Whitewater. These developments streamlined the process of transfer between the two institutions, creating greater potential for successful transfers and higher levels of degree attainment. In addition, IU allowed Ivy Tech to move a major portion of its enterprise applications equipment to IU's Data Center located at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and to join the I-Light Network (the IU-managed optical fiber telecommunications network for research and education in the state). IUPUI and Ivy Tech Central also established strong, high-functioning partnerships that allow for seamless transfer in a number of fields of study.

Despite a widespread feeling that Ivy Tech has come a long way since becoming the country's youngest community college system, and despite examples of hard-fought regional partnerships on behalf of clear pathways for students, the conversations we had with students across the state suggest IU and Ivy Tech still have a long way to go. The obstacles that face transfer students seem to be, at least in part, the result of policies and practices that weaken and obscure pathways.

A Note on Perceptions of Ivy Tech

Before diving into the themes in greater detail, we pause here to reflect on a larger, overarching—or perhaps undergirding—set of issues relating to the complex and often contradictory perceptions students have of Ivy Tech. These perceptions are important to understand because they influence how transfer students make sense of the barriers they face on their path toward obtaining credentials.

While most students expressed very positive feelings about their experiences at Ivy Tech, with many talking about strong courses and faculty, a significant minority in virtually every focus group reported that some of the courses they took at Ivy Tech did not prepare them for success at the four-year institution. While the groups generally agreed Ivy Tech is a great starting point for unconfident and underprepared learners, a feeling was also widespread that the quality of courses and instructors is mixed.

At the same time, most students reported feeling that unfounded perceptions on the part of IU that Ivy Tech is inferior, along with sheer competition between institutions, play a much stronger role than any quality gaps in the difficulty students face as they seek to transfer courses. Many talked about popular opinion being slow to catch up with the reality of the gains Ivy Tech has made since becoming a true community college system. Others saw the obvious competition between the institutions as key to the obstacles they faced.

Part 3

THEMES IN DETAIL

Theme 1 – Completion

Nearly every student said that completing a college degree is essential in today's economy. Many also said that completion of an associate degree is an important step, both practically and psychologically, for transfer students.

We began all of our focus groups by asking about the value of college, and in every group the same theme emerged: a college degree, particularly a four-year degree, is critical for getting a better job and for bolstering one's position in a fragile economy. The following quotes are typical of what we heard across groups:

I think that a bachelor's degree now takes you as far as a high school diploma did 30 years ago. It is a necessity to have a college degree now because of the economy, the job market. If you want to make that extra money you have to continue even past the bachelor's degree. (IU)

Like when I got laid off back in May there was a job in the company that I could have done and 'cause it's work that I had done personally at one point, but because I didn't have a degree they wouldn't even look at it. (Ivy Tech)

Attitudes were mixed in response to our question about the value of completing an associate degree, but many students said completion of an intermediate degree is an important step. Some said having an associate degree helps provide a competitive edge in the job market, while others described it as an important accomplishment that increases their motivation to pursue a four-year degree.

I think [an associate degree] can help you get a job that's not fast food or a factory. You can start working on job experience, because you're going to learn things to get your associate degree that are going to help you in the workforce. Even for clerical jobs and stuff like that, if you have an associate degree, you're going to be better off. They're going to be more likely to hire you. (IU)

An associate degree gets you in the door ... to where you can work up to a bachelor's degree to get something higher. It's kind of a ladder. You're kind of working your way, your steps, up the ladder. (Ivy Tech)

I feel like finishing [an associate degree] is like hitting "save" on my plans ... if life gets crazy and I have to take time off for awhile, if I don't finish, then I have nothing to show for it. But if I finish, I always know that I have that, and I can pick up from there. (IU)

Theme 2 — Pathways

Almost all the students we spoke with described problems with transfer pathways related to courses that did not transfer or transferred only as electives, often resulting in delays in completion and additional expenses and debt.

The combined problems of inadequate advising, poor information resources and the complexity of the relationship between the institutions presents a host of challenges to those seeking to transfer. In every focus group we asked transfer students to tell us, by a show of hands, if they had accumulated credits that were not needed for graduation. In every case a significant number, often a majority, of students raised their hands. The unnecessary credits add up, of course, to longer time to completion and additional expenses and debt for students.

Many students told us about taking courses that were totally unnecessary for their eventual completion. Some typical comments were the following:

I do feel somewhat ripped off because I worked very hard in all my classes. Ivy Tech tells you when you come in ... that their credits transfer. They should also say, but some don't. They don't do that. They say our credits transfer, and that's a big thing. (Ivy Tech)

I thought I did my homework on what would transfer, and then I get over [to the four-year institution] and I'm sitting with the department chair, and she's looking over the sheet that Ivy Tech gave me, pointing and saying, "You didn't need to take that class or that class, and this class isn't going to transfer." (IU)

According to other students, even courses that did transfer ended up counting only as electives:

Only 11 of the 25 courses I took transferred. And of the classes that transferred, not all of them transferred for my degree. I lost so much time and money. (IU)

Indeed, for most students, the term “elective” has lost its educational meaning as a way to explore subjects outside their majors. Instead, the elective category is a kind of academic graveyard where students essentially bury all those courses that transfer but do not meet any specific requirements in the new institution.

Of the students we spoke with, those who entered college with a clear plan were most likely to find the help they needed in addressing this issue. For example, they were more likely to reach out to IU while at Ivy Tech, particularly to the departments housing their intended majors, to make sure the courses they were taking would transfer and count toward their degrees. Those in clearly defined programs, such as nursing, were also much more likely to report having smooth and seamless transfer experiences.

In short, most students expressed very positive feelings about their experiences at Ivy Tech, with many talking about strong courses and faculty. The groups generally agreed that Ivy Tech is a great starting point for unconfident learners, but they also found the experience frustrating in terms of navigating a smooth pathway through Ivy Tech itself and then, for those students who wished to do so, going on to a successful transfer experience. Some were frustrated because they did not feel their courses adequately prepared them for a four-year experience, but the most common complaint concerned the difficulties transferring courses for credit toward a bachelor's degree.

Theme 3 — Advising

Students described their experience with the advisement system as frustrating and often unhelpful or even misleading. Advisors in the separate, but related, ICHE student pathways study shared their own version of this frustration through stories of large caseloads and changing requirements.

While most students described advisors as well-meaning, the majority reported that they typically have large caseloads and little in-depth knowledge of specific programs of study or articulation agreements. One student described the experience this way:

As far as scheduling classes ... when you schedule an appointment, it's so quick that you really don't have time to ask the different questions that you might have. If you send an email, sometimes it might be a day or two before you get a response. (Ivy Tech)

Others spoke of inconsistency in advising:

They were just pushing students through. I had three different advisors in about two years, and I never knew where any of them were. Any time I went to go see them, they weren't on campus at the time ... They would just change it, and there would be no notification ... It was very, very, very confusing. (IU)

In fact, the advisors we spoke with in the ICHE study described the situation in almost exactly the same terms. One said,

I think we're in the mode of let's get them out the door as quick as we can. The conversations go like this: "Here is what you need to take. You want this program? OK, boom, boom, boom. Now, is that going to interfere with your life? Oh, don't worry. It's okay."

Theme 4 — Communication

Students reported inconsistent information due to dysfunctional communication within and, especially, between institutions; information is hard to find and often inadequate, incorrect or conflicting. Awareness of useful information resources is low and utilization limited.

Many students described their frustration in getting information about what programs they should be in and what courses would be necessary for their programs. They frequently complained about receiving inconsistent information, even about the same program within the same institution. The following were some typical responses:

You speak to one person, “Oh, okay; it’s this, this and this,” and they say it with such authority. Then you speak to somebody else, they tell you something completely different with authority, and you have no idea what’s going on. (IU)

You talk to—whether it be financial aid, advisors, scheduling, whatever—and you always get a different story. (Ivy Tech)

But the most frustrating problems concerned the difficulty of identifying which courses transfer from one institution to another:

It’s kind of hard to tell what classes actually match up. You think you’re taking the right course that will transfer over [to Indiana University] but it’s not exactly the right thing. It’s either old, or it’s one level up or down. It’s hard to figure out. (IU)

The [Indiana University]/Ivy Tech relationship is kind of like a three-legged race. They’re really bound together in a way that is undeniable, but they’re not in sync. It’s very difficult, I think, on both sides. A lot of people mentioned that they had experiences where somebody gave them inaccurate information. The student had to go do the research, but the research shows up in a couple different places. It’s different in all those places. It complicates the issue. (IU)

Dedicated transfer information resources go a long way toward supporting transfer students, but they are hard to access for many students. Awareness of such resources like the Course Transfer Library is low, and their utilization is limited. Rarely did a student in one of the groups spontaneously mention using the Course Transfer Library or finding other up-to-date online resources useful for making sure they were staying on track. The inability to connect with vital information and resources is exacerbated for students who arrive at college without clear goals or who are juggling complex lives.

Once again, we heard similar complaints from the advisors in the ICHE study, who shared their own frustrations with getting good information about programs in their own institutions and, especially, about transfer credits. Those we spoke with said they often tell the students to contact the four-year institutions themselves to find out what will transfer. One community college advisor put it this way:

In the past there were articulation agreements. Each individual school had an articulation agreement with different four-year universities around it. Right now that's all up in the air. Now we are always asking, "What do you think they will take?" We don't know. It puts us in a very difficult position ... because we don't want to waste our students' time, but we're being told only some parts of this degree if not all parts will transfer over, although in the past everything transferred.

Concerns of faculty advisors in four-year institutions in the ICHE study were very similar. Some complained that students transferring from two-year schools did not have the right courses, but we heard just as many complaints about the difficulty of transferring from one regional school to another (or to one of the flagships). According to one community college advisor,

We advertise to our students to start your degree here and then transfer to [another IU regional]. But transferability options are minimal at this point because so many of the degrees are different. They have an engineering degree. Halfway through the year they decided they would no longer take our credits. Up until that point they always had, so I had a 3.9 student transfer there and get denied because he didn't have what they need.

It is important to note that amid the stories of frustration, many students told us they were able to negotiate their pathways because of a personal connection with someone, a faculty member or student services professional, who helped them find their way. Nearly every student we spoke with believed people at the institutions cared deeply about student success, and many told stories of individuals who made all the difference. While we found these stories of personal connections heartwarming, our experience suggests that many people telling us of personal solutions to problems can be a symptom that the systematic processes are not functioning well.

Part 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While students identified a number of obstacles to smooth and seamless transfer, their insights and experiences also suggested a host of opportunities for improvement at every level. By way of conclusion here, we present recommendations with regard to the three themes of pathways, advising and communication. They are drawn both from recommendations made by students in the focus groups and our experiences in Indiana and with other states and systems around the country struggling with the same or similar issues. We intend our recommendations to serve as discussion starters for system and institutional leaders, as well as faculty, staff and administrators. We hope such discussions will serve as points of departure for improved and new forms of collaboration in the service of seamless student transfer and timely completion.

Recommendations

In all of our conversations in this project, we asked students to share their ideas about ways to smooth transfer pathways. In addition we asked this of participants in the ICHE study and also looked to examples in other states where efforts are being made to create clear transfer pathways. The following is a synthesis of leading recommendations across these sources:

Pathways

- Examine institutional and student incentives to ensure they reward successful completion of associate degrees at two-year colleges before transfer to four-year programs after completion.
- Engage faculty from two- and four-year institutions in mapping out programs of study to clarify and simplify the path to graduation and employment so students can make informed choices that expedite degree completion.
- Strengthen ties and build interdependence between IU regionals and Ivy Tech through shared staff, joint services agreements and a proliferation of formal and informal collaboration that makes efficient use of resources while signaling to students that the institutions are, in fact, partners, not competitors.
- Study the “bright spots” where Ivy Tech and IU campuses are engaging in creative partnerships to create smoother paths, despite formal disincentives, and support the capacity of key actors at different levels of these efforts to engage peers at other institutions.
- Study the “bright spots” in other states where institutions have created clear pathways for students, such as the partnership in Florida between Valencia Community College and the University of Central Florida or Arizona State University’s Transfer Admission Guarantee program.⁴
- Share student transcript data among Ivy Tech and IU campuses and match student unit record data with data from the National Student Clearinghouse to track transfer patterns and outcomes for cohorts of Ivy Tech students.
- Conduct degree audits of a sample of transcripts of recent graduates from each IU institution who transferred from Ivy Tech to determine the percentages of credits that were accepted for transfer as electives and those accepted for credit toward the students’ degrees.

⁴ <http://valenciacollege.edu/futurestudents/directconnect/>; <https://transfer.asu.edu/index.php?q=guarantee>.

- Bring together faculty, academic staff and advisors from across systems to discuss the results and implications of research findings from studies based on the unit record data.
- Examine ways in which first-year curricula can be adapted so students can explore fields without limiting their options. Look at models such as the “exploratory majors” for undecided students at Florida State University and Arizona State University, the “macro majors” at Austin Peay State University and the Freshman Academies at Queensborough College CUNY.⁵
- Explore the potential for dual or concurrent admissions programs. If they already exist, study the feasibility of expanding them.

⁵ http://www.aacu.org/aacu_news/aacunews11/november11/feature.cfm.

Advising

- Carefully scrutinize the processes by which colleges provide students with information and guidance about transfer, and the quality, consistency and accessibility of the information provided. Consider how the intake process, initial advising, program advising, web resources and so forth can be redesigned to better provide students with the information and guidance they need.
- Redesign advisement systems to create a more sensible division of labor between professional advisors and academic program advisors, including faculty, program staff and advisors embedded in particular academic program areas.
- Create structured peer or student mentoring and support systems that allow transfer and “transfer-curious” students to connect with each other, and link this process to advisors to support the advisors’ efforts.
- Develop processes for helping students who are undecided choose a program of study and clearly define the transfer path for the student in the process.
- Provide specialized orientation activities for transfer students to put them on the right path and provide them with resources and support in using those resources, like the Course Transfer Library.
- Use early alert advisement systems to empower students to track their own progress by making them both advisor-facing and student-facing.

Communication

- Establish processes for collecting accurate, timely data about transfer program requirements and provide easy access to them to students, advisors, faculty and others.
- Make multichannel efforts to raise awareness of resources that are dedicated to helping students navigate transfer and minimizing unpleasant surprises, like courses that transfer but do not count toward a degree.
- Identify meaningful incentives to improve channels of communication among faculty, advisors and career services professionals within institutions.
- Expand efforts to bring together faculty from Ivy Tech and IU in related fields to compare learning outcomes, curricula and teaching methods.
- Expand opportunities for interaction between Ivy Tech and IU students, staff and faculty, and develop more joint marketing efforts to correct erroneous perceptions and raise awareness of incentives, resources and supports.
- Create opportunities for students who have transferred successfully to share their experiences with potential transfer students and create inroads for students to connect early on with information, advice and peers at the transfer institution.
- Focus administrative efforts on improving outreach, education and support with respect to financial aid services.

Appendix A

QUOTES BY THEME

Because this project was designed to bring student perspectives into the center of conversations about the creation of clear transfer pathways, this section is composed of extensive direct quotes from students on key issues.

The necessity of a college degree

It is very important to have a degree, because I've been in the work field. I'm 37, so I had a career when I was 17 that fell through. Then I've worked for [other] companies, but they always go back to—they keep the people who have degrees. (Ivy Tech)

That is why I'm in school, because I want to help families and I want to help different people, but I want to get paid for it, too, but I want to get paid what I deserve to get paid and not just working, like, slave hours just to get the amount of money that I need. (Ivy Tech)

Like when I got laid off back in May that there was a job in the company that I could have done and 'cause it's work that I had done personally at one point but because I didn't have a degree they wouldn't even look at it. (Ivy Tech)

I think that a bachelor's degree now takes you as far as a high school diploma did 30 years ago. It is a necessity to have a college degree now because of the economy, the job market. If you want to make that extra money you have to continue even past the bachelor's degree. (IU)

When you're by yourself and you're trying to make it, even on \$11 an hour, you can't. When you're trying to pay rent, and bills, and make car payments and everything else, it just doesn't happen. I don't want to have to live like that anymore, so that's one of the reasons I came back [to college]. (Ivy Tech)

For me coming to college, I didn't really want to, but I had a... shock one day. I looked at my mom, she works in the factory. She's worked there on and off her whole life, and I looked [at] her, and she came home. She said, "I hate my job. It is the most worthless job I've ever had." I said, "I'm not going to live that life." I had to deal with the struggling mom who works in a factory that nobody cared whether she came in or not. That was when I realized, I'm not staying like that. (Ivy Tech)

I honestly think now you need a bachelor's to work at McDonald's because now an associate is nothing. What I do now, I mean, most of these jobs [only require] high school diplomas. (IU)

Even to advance in anything now, they want you to have education, no matter how much experience you have on the job... I had 20-some years on the job—that's enormous experience. I started from the bottom up, but they still want a degree. Degree people came in and took the jobs. (IU)

I wanted a promotion because I was working in a bank, and they knew I was going to school, but they would bring in people who had just graduated saying that they got their degree. I'm, like, "Yeah, but I'm working toward my degree." They would get promoted over me, and I would have to train them. (IU)

I think [an associate degree] can help you get a job that's not fast food or a factory. You can start working on job experience, because you're going to learn things to get your associate degree that are going to help you in the workforce. Even for clerical jobs and stuff like that, if you have an associate degree, you're going to be better off. They're going to be more likely to hire you. (IU)

I've realized more and more how important education is. I'm tired of dead-end jobs. I even went and started taking pharmacy tech classes, and I'm only making \$9.86 after five years. I'm, like, "I need something that's going to help me out in life." (IU)

I feel like finishing [an associate degree] is like hitting "save" on my plans ... If life gets crazy and I have to take time off for a while, if I don't finish, then I have nothing to show for it. But if I finish, I always know that I have that, and I can pick up from there. (IU)

Ivy Tech as a good starting point

In the beginning I would have said, “No, [it’s not important to get the associate degree before the bachelor’s degree in nursing], but looking back on it, I say absolutely because it allowed me to get into my career, start making really good money, and it doesn’t make a difference in the world of nursing. To me, I see nursing students going through the IU program ... and they can’t start working until the BA is completed. I was on the floor working while getting the BA. That is two years of experience and working that they aren’t going to get to do. I think [the ASN] is a great thing. I can’t imagine being four years invested in a career and then getting into the workforce and seeing that it’s not a fit for me. They do their clinicals, but clinicals are not a good indication of what your true job is going to be. Until you work three 12-hour shifts a week, you’re not going to get a good idea. Like I said, I had to have a job. Being able to get that fast degree from Ivy Tech was really helpful because I was able to get my degree and get to working quickly to make some money so that [it] wasn’t as difficult on the family. (IU)

I transferred from IU to Ivy Tech because I just wanted to get my associate in nursing. I thought it would be faster and then I could go back [to] get my BSA, so I tried to make it quicker. (Ivy Tech)

I think associate degrees are very good. You can enter the workforce after two years, rather than waiting four years. That can make a huge economic impact... once you’re in, there is opportunity for promotion. You can try a job out. If it is really not what you want, you haven’t invested four years into a career that isn’t going to work. (Ivy Tech)

An associate degree gets you in the door ... to where you can work up to a bachelor’s degree to get something higher. It’s kind of a ladder. You’re kind of working your way... up the ladder. (Ivy Tech)

I view Ivy Tech as a stepping stone. I know that I’ll get my associate in this field, get my bachelor’s in that. Maybe it’s chemistry or it’s [computer information systems]. Maybe that isn’t the route I want to go, and maybe now I like this other thing. That associate is great... I think that’s the greatest thing about Ivy Tech. (IU)

One thing that Ivy Tech is really good at is [working with] students who were not prepared to go to a four-year school in high school, like somebody with a GED, or somebody who just blew off high school but then all of a sudden grew up and got serious. Ivy Tech is excellent in that because they have the programs to bring you up to speed, and then let you continue on. Brush up your courses. ... Get you up to the level in math that you need and stuff. (Ivy Tech)

Pathways and difficulties accessing information

It's hard to find [information] on the website. I've eventually found it, but in the beginning they need to make that clear. I was taking the harder classes first and the easy classes last... I had no idea. I was given the sheet that explained, "These are the classes you have to take at Ivy Tech. These are the classes you take at IU." When I took that paper to IU, they had never seen it before. I don't know. It might have been an older one, and it might be newer people now. I didn't know. I was very frustrated. (IU)

I found a PDF file that showed transferable courses between IU and Ivy Tech, and I matched it up with my core curriculum. ... You have to keep up on it, because they do change that list. The one that they show online, you don't want to go by that, because it is from 2008, and it hasn't been updated for four or five years. ... Too many times, people will rely on the information that is outdated on their actual website. (IU)

Two of the courses I took over there would have transferred, had I transferred a year earlier, but since they redid the contract, that didn't count, and so I'm having to retake those now here. I think that transitional period—it is really unfortunate, because one year it counts, and the other year it doesn't. (IU)

I remember ... being really frustrated trying to call in and get information [from Ivy Tech] and not being able to—feeling like—I was always having to drive over there for little simple things that I felt like I should've just been able to take care of over the phone. (IU)

It's kind of hard to tell what classes actually match up. You think you're taking the right course that will transfer over [to Indiana University] but it's not exactly the right thing. It's either old, or it's one level up or down. It's hard to figure out. (IU).

There is a [list of transfer courses]. You can get it online, but a lot of classes do not transfer. It's not updated very often. I think it's updated every other year or something. They don't keep very up-to-date information online for interested students. (IU)

When I [did] further research I found that some of the classes I'm taking now, they'll transfer, but they'll transfer as a different course and won't even go toward the degree I'm working for. It's like you're darned if you do and darned if you don't. (Ivy Tech)

Don't follow advisors blindly, because they can be wrong sometimes, so they will set you up for courses you don't really need. Sometimes you have to do the research yourself to see if you actually need that course. (Ivy Tech)

Yeah, you have to be on top of it because, like I said, then you have to document sometimes who you talked to, because if they say it's this and then you go to somebody else and they're, like, no, or you go to IU and they're, like, well, who told you that? I'm, like, the person that's over the transfer thing from Ivy Tech to IU. You have to tell them. Then, they're, like, oh, okay, we remember. It's crazy that you have to do that, but then at the same time, you have to save your butt. (IU)

It is a little hard to navigate, but on the website they have ... the new GPS program that they put on there that you can play, and it shows you a degree plan, and it shows you throughout your degree plan. I'm not sure what GPS stands for, but it is like an acronym. (Ivy Tech)

Inconsistent advising, poor communication

They were just pushing students through. I had three different advisors in about two years, and I never knew where any of them were. Any time I went to go see them, they weren't on campus at the time. ... They would just change it, and there would be no notification ... It was very, very, very confusing. (IU)

When I walked into the general advising, it was basically like a rubber stamp place—is how I felt—like, "Okay, you have to take this class, this class and this class. All right, I can get out of here." It just felt very much rushed, and it was like—I don't know—they already had made it up that you have to take this class. It didn't feel personalized, if that makes any sense. (IU)

There's certain advisor[s] for certain degree concentrations and some of them are get in, get out. I'm going to schedule your classes, I don't care what your schedule it is. We're going to do your whole college career on one sheet of paper and you better follow it. The other ones are, like, let's take this semester by semester. We'll go around your schedule. What makes you comfortable? It's just, it's crazy. Some of them are good and some of them are terrible. (Ivy Tech)

Yeah, [the advisors] are not on the same page. You will go through the head of department, but whenever they are not there, they are represented by another person, and so they are on two different pages. "Oh, you don't need [this]. You don't have to do this class. You can go around without this." Then you leave it, and you find out, "Oh, I needed it." (IU)

I would have liked to see more of an outreach from my advisor. Other than that, I know that I was prepared 'cause I went out and looked at the material and found out my courses. I kind of did that; I would have liked more of an outreach from my advisor. (Ivy Tech)

I wound up doing a lot of the research myself on what would transfer and what wouldn't, because [the] advisor at Ivy Tech was completely helpless. (IU)

Some of my anatomy instructors, they would point me in the right direction as far as advising what class I needed to take, because if it wasn't for that I probably wouldn't have known anything. (IU)

A professor did lot for me. He showed me. He took me to his office and showed me a lot of different programs on the IU website, where you can go and it'll tell you what classes you should be taking in what degree. ... He sat me down and explained everything. If it wasn't for that, I probably wouldn't have known a lot of this stuff either. (IU)

I wish I would've known [while I was at Ivy Tech] that I could've talked to an advisor at IPFW, because when I transferred, he was willing to sit down and talk to me and even asked me if there were classes still available at Ivy Tech, if I would go back and do that. He was interested. He did a lot more for me than the advisor at Ivy Tech. (IU)

Here [at IU] I feel so comfortable ... making an appointment with my advisor, and knowing that when I go in there they will answer my questions, and he will give me proof of what I've done, which is really nice. (IU)

When I came to [IU], it was ... very, very personal. [It] definitely dropped my anxiety level a little bit. Over at Ivy Tech it wasn't like that. It [was] long lines — "Next, let's go" — that kind of thing. I can understand why — because there is so much volume coming in. It just seems like it is a whole different world over here. (IU)

It is definitely like night and day between [Ivy Tech and IU. At IU] I hear from my counselor maybe once a month. I get an email, and we send stuff back and forth. Questions that I haven't even thought of, she has already answered them in an email, so definitely more than the nine-to-five. She is awesome. (IU)

I let my advisor pick [my classes] at first, but I've done it myself ever since. She gave me a sheet of all the prerequisites [I needed] to get into my program. After she scheduled my first semester, I've done it on my own. I want to take the responsibility to make sure that I get myself through college because she has so many people that she's advising. I don't want to slip through the cracks. I mean, this is my livelihood and my children's livelihood. This is my responsibility, so I have scheduled myself ever since. (Ivy Tech)

As far as scheduling classes... when you schedule an appointment, it's so quick that you really don't have time to ask the different questions that you might have. If you send an email, sometimes it might be a day or two before you get a response... (Ivy Tech)

Stay focused on your own stuff so that when you get close to the end you're [asking], "Well, let me check and see where I'm at, see what I actually need." I didn't do that. I wouldn't be here now [if I had]. I'd be working toward the bachelor's already. (Ivy Tech)

I went to the advisor my first semester back. I was going for accounting. She told me, "Well, this 090 class, you don't really need that. That's just a beginner class. Just go right into 101." I went into 101 and had no clue what I was doing. I got an A but still couldn't tell you what I learned. Went to 102. Completely over my head. Ever since then I do all my classes myself. I've got all my prerequisites for everything I got to do. Got a nice little thing on my computer that tells me when I got to take them, when they're going to be available. I just do it myself. I don't trust the advisor anymore really. (Ivy Tech)

There was one or two times I went up the advising office, and there was a group of four or five advisors. You just met with whoever was free. You sign a list, and you wait and you never talk to the same person twice. You don't get a lot of consistency. (IU)

They just didn't know who to assign me to... Whoever I talked to that semester changed my major to whatever their field was. Each semester I had a new major even though I was technically undeclared. (IU)

Second semester I was scheduled for anatomy and physiology, medical terminology, psychology and math. [The advisor] said, "I wouldn't normally recommend someone take these classes together, but I think you can handle it." At first it was okay. I ended up dropping anatomy after the first two weeks because I realized I didn't have the time to study for all of these classes. (Ivy Tech)

I allowed my advisor to do my schedule the whole time I've been here. He gave me classes. He did my schedules and everything without checking my transcripts... He set me up in classes, and I took the classes. Three classes I had already taken and passed with As. So I took three classes I didn't need twice. It really messed up my finances. I went over on financial aid and all that stuff. This semester I had to pay for the classes. (Ivy Tech)

Yeah, so you had your inside information [participant referring to another student who had an on-campus job at Ivy Tech], and what the students were getting was sporadic information from instructors, counselors—and there was no consistency with this. (IU)

Personally, I think our advising situation needs to be fixed. I think it is broken. I think a lot of students come in and they have trouble making appointments with their advisors, getting the right information from their advisors. I think the new students don't know who to go to. (Ivy Tech)

My advisor advised me the first two semesters. After that he's, like, do it online, you're smart, you can figure it out. We just floundered. I would talk to other teachers and say, "Who should I talk to?" Eventually I wound up talking to the vice chancellor. She took care of things. (IU)

You, as a student, don't know the courses, don't know the professors. You don't know how they are. You don't know what the course titles are. You basically come in there with your tail between your legs. You have no idea what's going on. An advisor takes one look at your transcript, and suddenly pounds out a schedule for you based on what he thinks you should take...How it should be done is the advisor takes more than half an hour to get to know you. (IU)

Orientation day you have group advising. When I started, it was, like, 30 people. She's walking around talking to 30 people. That's what I'm saying, like, she pretty much gave the same course of study to 30 people. (Ivy Tech)

Every time I went to go talk to somebody, they'd say, "Oh. Go over here and talk to this person." I'd go to those people, and they'd say, "Oh. Go over here and talk to these people." I never got to talk to anybody because they kept sending me different places. Nobody knew what they were talking about. (IU)

I just started to flounder a little bit, and I wasn't sure what direction I was going into ... I felt a little lost in the crowd. I was never really sure about what I needed to take, as far as classes. If you look at my transcript, I have Western masterpieces and some philosophy classes, and I just wonder if I really even needed that particular class. It felt like when you went for the—like, the advising—it was too generalized, and it wasn't personalized. (Student who started at IU and went to IvyTech)

The first semester I was here I was nervous to come back to school. Having an advisor who would tell me to take a certain class that I'd come to find out I didn't need, or that it was the wrong time, or that a class didn't fit with my schedule, but I had to take it in that semester—it was a mess. It really was. It's gotten straightened out ever since they've stopped hiring and firing people. That first semester, it was awful. (IU)

I was upset because, when I was at Ivy Tech, they told me you can take anatomy 1,2 and advanced anatomy, and it would be able to transfer to any university. IU didn't even take my credits. They put them as a biology credit. (IU)

My first two years there, I had an advisor walk me through picking the classes—I took two sociologies, two psychologies and stuff like that. I wound up going to financial aid for one reason or another. She's, like, "You didn't need to take two of these classes." I'm, like, "I could have been doing my own schedule and had stuff taken care of faster than that." That's what put me behind at Ivy Tech—the advisor I was going to. (IU).

You speak to one person, "Oh, okay; it's this, this and this," and they say it with such authority. Then you speak to somebody else, they tell you something completely different with authority, and you have no idea what's going on. (IU)

It's really frustrating since, like, when you're starting on going to school, and then you're trying to do the right thing, and you're trying to get on the right path. It's, like, if you don't have any family members in college or people close to you that know what to do, you would think that the people in the school system would put you on the right track. Then when they don't it's frustrating. Then one person will tell you, "Oh, no, you're supposed to be doing this. They told you wrong." Then you're the one delayed because somebody else told you wrong. (Ivy Tech)

They just don't seem to really care—like, what—I mean—they—I don't know if you've been over there, but right now the lines for advising is going down the hallway. They see so many people. You're just another face. (Ivy Tech)

I need to go talk to somebody who's always busy. There's a line outside his office every day. I can't get that one-on-one time I need, or additional assistance. It's not like my advisor is just sitting there waiting for me to come on in. (Ivy Tech)

I think the advisors have a pretty difficult task with the fact that there are so many programs and some programs that are floating around. Then they're also being over-tasked even more than teachers are with huge numbers of students. I think the overwhelming majority of students are not following what you would consider the traditional four-year plan...I almost wonder if the advisors are getting the support they need. We are having trouble finding some of this information, and they are having to give us incorrect information. Clearly, the information isn't as available or as transparent as it needs to be. They're almost being set up to fail, which in turn sets us up to fail. (IU)

You talk to—whether it be financial aid, advisors, scheduling, whatever, you always get a different story. (Ivy Tech)

I couldn't get any answers before I was in the program. I felt like no one called me back, but it is how they tell you to communicate. "Call the financial aid or call your advisor," but no one will call you back, and then, when you finally talk to someone, they said, "Well, you should've come in." "Well, that is not what you told me." (Ivy Tech)

Real and perceived gaps between Ivy Tech and IU

I was fortunate enough to have an instructor that takes extra time to read people and say, "Okay, I see your face. You're not getting it. What are you hung up on?" Taking that extra time to get you through it. That wouldn't happen at IU because the classes are so big, they don't see your face. They lecture and then they leave... Here, there's some of my classes I have five or six people in them. Some have 20, but always the teacher, I mean there's interaction. You don't feel like just a spot in a crowd. (Ivy Tech)

It's more hands on at a smaller school then it was when I was at IU. I absolutely hate IU because you weren't able to communicate with their professors. You weren't able to have that one on one conversation with them like you can have here. Here if I have an issue with something I can say "Hey, can I have some help with this problem." At IU you got office hours, you were lucky if you could get an appointment to talk to them. (Ivy Tech)

Ivy Tech focuses on getting people educated and out in the workforce. Here [at IU] there's much more focus on just everything else. They always talk about, oh, the bachelor degree nurse, and how you have to have a whole well-rounded education so the expectation is that you can write papers in perfect APA format. (IU)

I felt kind of worried about whether or not I was being prepared adequately for the next step. I felt a lot of times that the course load and the professors weren't going to go in-depth enough. It caused me to drop some classes and take different classes in an effort to take classes that wouldn't require anything further because ... if I had to take the second level at IU—I was afraid I was going to go to IU and have no idea what was going on. (IU)

I felt like, "Well, I have done good enough to come here," but coming, me being a one-to-one student, a student who likes close attention, coming in the hallway that has 200 students for anatomy, "Are you kidding me?" I felt like a grain of rice in that. Like it loses somebody like me totally, and I can lose my motivation totally. ... I felt very lost. I thought I was ready. (IU)

I've passed all of my higher-level English classes [at Ivy Tech], but I still have fallen back into lower-level English classes here [at IU], because I don't believe I still have a proper structure that is needed...I took those lower-level English classes at Ivy Tech, so—I mean—I passed all of the requirements needed to transfer here, but there was still a huge gap. (IU)

It's a lot harder, I'll say. The writing, I thought I did very well in English and writing, well, I always thought I did, but then I got here, and I found out I was just really ignorant. I [luckily] had some merciful teachers that have helped bring me up to speed, but the bar is a lot higher in the classes I've taken here. (IU)

As I transferred over here I came in here as a junior. It is quite a bit of difference between a 100-level class, and, well, I took maybe a 211, I think, is as high as I ever got in English at Ivy Tech. To jump up to a 300 class here, there's, there's quite a disparity. (IU)

The professors could know what type of students they were going to be dealing with in their courses. I had this math course. My professor was, like, "What's wrong with you people? This isn't high school; this is college. I'm not going to baby you. You get it or you don't. If you don't get it, then you don't need to be in this class." (IU)

Ivy Tech did not prepare me for IU. I remember I took anatomy and physiology at Ivy Tech and I showed up here at IU lost. I appreciate they didn't take the credits here because I needed to do it over. The nursing classes didn't prepare me at all, and my first semester was a real eye-opener, and I almost didn't make it. (IU)

They're not really supporting the adult student here. They're trying and they're well-intentioned, but I don't think that they exactly have a lot of sway. I know that we're a minority in the student body populace here. (IU)

[Older students] don't want to hang out. They don't do study groups of anything. Everybody is just on their own. You know? Like they were saying, there's kind of a division of campus lives. There's a lot of older people going to Ivy Tech. (Ivy Tech)

A lot of teachers demand you read three, four chapters in two days. If you have a family at home, that's not really possible. I understand that you have a curriculum that you need to stick to, but you also should probably consider what people do outside of college. Most people in college, they work, they have families. They might have two, three jobs. (IU Northwest)

I had a really hard time making [school] work with my schedule, because I worked part-time. I found it really hard at first, [but] it gets way easier as you go on. To figure out, "Okay, this overlaps with this," and to find classes at the right time... Maybe that's because I didn't have an advisor, too, so that could've been. (IU)

At Ivy Tech I was on track—I had to take this, this and this to get the associate degree. Then, at IU, it's kind of the same. I have to take the set list of classes, but I'm also doing my 150 credit hours to take the CPA exam, so it's like I need these classes, and then this schedule. There's just so many choices, and it's, like, well, I want to take this, but I can't take that because it overlaps with this, which I need for my degree. (IU)

The classes are all online so I could take them whenever it was convenient for me, which worked out really well because I didn't look at trying to finish [my] ASN, prepare for boards, apply for the BSN, with a baby at home and trying learn a new job as a nurse. That was probably the most stressful time for me as far as balance goes. Had it not been for online, I'm not sure that I could have done it. I've always worked nights, but I could work, and then when my son was asleep I could work on homework instead of physically leaving again. (IU)

There ought to be some kind of waiver, [because the introduction to college course] was the biggest waste of time and money. I mean—I could understand it if you were 18, 19—just out of high school, and maybe you don't think of these things, but I'm 55. If I can't figure out how to budget my time and balance my checkbook and—well, okay—we won't go there, but it was a waste. (Ivy Tech)

I feel as though at Ivy Tech they were always saying, "Continue on. Get your bachelor's. It is good that you're completing everything here and that you can transfer over." Whereas, if you come here from Ivy Tech, you are—sort of—looked down upon, perhaps, as though your education isn't as high as it could have been, if you had done all four years here. I feel as though some professors, once they find out you're a transfer from Ivy Tech, they think that you haven't put in as much work. (IU)

There's not as much pressure to get the best grade on the test [at Ivy Tech]. You're not feeling like you have to be the first one to get done. You know there're other people behind you. In my classes are [other] older students which I find a lot more comfortable, as opposed to being at a university where there're teenyboppers—the immature ones that don't really care, they're there to get just to do what they want to do. (Ivy Tech)

A lot of people in my classes, they kind of put down Ivy Tech. I have a sister that goes there, and she's doing well, so I don't think it's that big of an issue. If you had told me when I graduated high school that I was going to a community college, I would have laughed at you, seriously. It's just because they're looked down upon. Now that I'm older, I'm, like, why? You save so much money going to a community college. But coming out of high school, if you said, "Go to the community college," I would have just been, like, "You're crazy. I'm not doing it." (IU)

It is looked down on by a lot of people. That's kind of why a lot of people do—I know myself—that's why I'm doing the direct transfer just because in other people's eyes, it's—an Ivy Tech degree is not going to look as good as an IU degree or a Purdue degree. (Ivy Tech)

Back in the day, it was a community school, but coming here and experiencing it, I didn't feel like I was shortchanged at all in my education. I thought that it was as good as what I would have gotten at a four-year college. (Ivy Tech)

Everybody, especially who was going off to a four-year, are, like, "Oh, Ivy Tech, why would you do that. I'm, like, it's not—a lot of people had a lot of bad things to say about Ivy Tech. (Ivy Tech)

I saw the Ivy Tech logo as a marker of, "I screwed up." (IU)

Actually, I went to IU for a tour. ... Some people there alluded to that Ivy Tech doesn't hold to the standards of, like, APA. I took offence to that. ... I actually said something to the person that was leading. I have a 4.0. I've maintained it. I've worked very hard. ... I adhere to the APA and got an A because I'm here to learn. It's what you put into it. (Ivy Tech)

Appendix B

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research for this report was drawn from approximately 50, 90-minute focus groups conducted between November 2012 and May 2013, with 333 individuals from eight Indiana University regional campuses and eight Ivy Tech campuses (for participant distribution, see the table below).

Selection criteria

Ivy Tech:

- All students currently enrolled at Ivy Tech who are planning to transfer to a four-year institution
- All students currently enrolled at Ivy Tech who are seeking degrees and are not planning to transfer to a four-year institution (specifically to an IU campus).⁶

Indiana University:

- All students who successfully transferred to an IU campus (degree completers/non-completers; associate and non-associate degree holders)

Institutions	Total Participants
IUPFW	28
Ivy Tech Fort Wayne	10
IU Kokomo	19
Ivy Tech Kokomo	16
IU Southeast	11
Ivy Tech Sellersburg	26
IU Northwest	10
Ivy Tech Gary	11
IU South Bend	13
Ivy Tech South Bend	30
IUPUC	7
Ivy Tech Columbus	8
IUPUI	62
Ivy Tech Indianapolis	57
IU Bloomington	17
Ivy Tech Bloomington	8
Total:	333

⁶ It is important to note that this category ended up somewhat muddled, as many students who ostensibly fit this criterion ended up explaining during the conversations that they did, in fact, wish to complete a four-year degree at some point and were interested in transfer.

In the focus groups, we sought to explore issues through the lens of student experience by encouraging participants to reflect on their individual experiences and to make sense collaboratively of the barriers and opportunities associated with transfer. We asked students to describe their experiences moving along their pathways toward degree completion and transfer, probing specifically on such issues as the following:

- The value of, and students' expectations for, college
- The process of choosing a program of study or major
- The process of choosing and registering for courses to fulfill degree requirements
- Sources of information about course selection and academic and transfer opportunities
- Supports received from dedicated college resources, such as advisement and career counseling
- Experiences with course articulation at the time of transfer
- Recommendations to improve the system of transfer between institutions in Indiana

All focus groups were audio-recorded and the recordings professionally transcribed. Codes were derived by the focus group facilitators, and each transcript was coded and analyzed by two Public Agenda staff. The main goal of the analysis was to distill the most common experiences for students, identify those points in their experiences where interventions and supports were necessary, and to use that information to affect directly the transfer and articulation experiences of other students.