

Love it? Hate it? Freshmen's perspective on college life at Indiana State University: A content analysis of qualitative MAP-Works data

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MAP-Works Overview



MAP-Works, an evidence-based tool for improving student retention and success, is used by over 1,500 colleges and universities in the United States (EBI MAP-Works, 2013). Faculty and staff use MAP-Works at ISU to identify students by risk factor level in order to develop programming and individualized interventions. Activities such as the residence life House Calls event in February of 2013 and individually tailored emails from advisors facilitate student retention, particularly among those at greatest risk for drop-out. With features that allow staff and faculty to track student contact and responses on

the MAP-Works survey, this tool is invaluable for compiling a wealth of information useful for identifying and meeting student needs.

At the three-week mark in the fall semester of 2012, all freshmen at ISU ($N = 2,659$) were invited to complete the MAP-Works survey, and 2,206 responded for an 83% response rate. Among the questions posed in the MAP-Works survey, a series of two open-ended, qualitative questions were included: “What do you like most about college?” and “What do you like least about college?” In terms of the first question, 1,748 students provided an answer regarding what they like most about college, and 1,709 shared about what they like least about college. Respondents to one or both qualitative question consisted of 1,677 on-campus residents and 87 commuters.

In the current report we focus on responses to these two open-ended questions. Using content analysis we reviewed all responses and assigned a code to each idea presented in the students' responses. We developed a codebook and discussed each code to ensure agreement on the appropriateness and meaning of each code. In this report we summarize the key themes that emerged in response to both questions and offer suggestions for policies and actions to be taken based in the results of this qualitative data analysis.

Executive summary

Overall, it appears that the students are going through an adjustment phase in life (logical, given their age as freshmen). Many of them recognize and enjoy the college experience, but several appear to be struggling with personal (e.g., time management), social (e.g., making new friends, not getting along with others), academic (e.g., learning to navigate college courses and coursework), and environmental (e.g., poor environmental [HVAC] control in the dorms, noise in the dorms and surrounding area) issues. These early struggles with adjustment often lead students to feel they cannot control the environment, especially as it relates to academic endeavors (Stupnisky, Renaud, Daniels, Haynes, & Perry, 2008). This lack of control is indicated by student responses on the MAP-Works surveys, wherein students included statements such as, “I hate everything,” and “there is nothing good about college.”

Many students appear to have a satisfactory relationship with faculty, with more positive comments appearing than negative. The negative comments focused on inconsistent demands across classes, inability to understand faculty members (language barriers), or dislike of a particular course subject. Information on what students reported specifically liking and disliking most about college is included below, along with representative quotations, which were taken from the MAP-Works survey responses entered by freshmen at ISU. Minor edits were made to the quotes (e.g., capitalization, spelling corrections) as students completed this survey quickly and in one sitting. Such minor errors are to be expected and might not accurately reflect their actual writing skill sets. The findings lend themselves to an ecological interpretation (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), as students reported individual characteristics, interpersonal interactions, and environmental factors that influence their likes and dislikes about college life.

Things students like about college

Regarding individual-level factors that students enjoyed about college (and topping the list overall of what students liked most about college) *freedom* was often reported. One woman's response characterizes this concept well: "I like the freedom of starting my own life and the chances to meet new people and enjoy new life experiences." Related to freedom, but expressed as different individual-level elements of college life that were particularly enjoyable were the concepts of *independence* (having the option to make decisions on one's own) and *responsibility* (actually having to make decisions on one's own). Students reported enjoying being on their own, not having to attend classes back to back, having personal time and free time. As one young man reported, "I have a lot of free time and it's a lot on me on how I do." Among grade school students, humanistic psychology interventions founded on "...the belief that people have the freedom, right, and responsibility to choose their own goals and how to achieve them..." have demonstrated usefulness for improving academic performance (Villares, Lemberger, Brigman, & Webb, 2011, p. 52). Such interventions might be adapted for use at the undergraduate level, building on the sense of freedom and responsibility that is valued by so many freshmen.

The next circle in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is made up of close, frequent social contacts, which many students reported as elements they enjoyed most about college. Specifically, students reported enjoying various aspects of the social life provided through the college experience, including interactions with other students (peers) at ISU, interactions with peer mentors (student leaders [e.g., RAs or APA]), and interactions with faculty and staff. Detailing what he liked about his interactions with faculty, one student shared that he enjoyed "...being treated more as an adult in the classroom, and less like a student who needs guidance. I also enjoy the friendliness of this campus and the staff go out of their way to make a difference in our personal experiences." Many students expressed that the exposure to diversity provided by college life at ISU was what they enjoyed most about college. One young woman, who mentioned enjoying the opportunity to present her true self to others at college, appreciated the diversity at ISU, stating, "...the student body features so many different cultures, religions, different people, and it's so cool getting to meet and know all these different individuals."

Students also highlighted the enjoyable aspects of the more distal social environment afforded by college life. For example, students appreciated the opportunity to get involved in various

activities and to be active outside of the classroom. As one student put it, “I like that the college keeps the students active with many different activities on campus.” Students frequently mentioned enjoying Greek life and sports (both intercollegiate athletics teams and intramural clubs). Overall, there is strong evidence that indicates that social connectivity is predictive of persistence at college and adjustment to college life (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). Facilitating new students’ development of such social connection may enhance student retention and success.

Finally, several students indicated that the overarching atmosphere of life at ISU was what they liked most about college. One young man stated, “I like meeting new people. I also like that I don’t have to sit in the same building all day and how my classes are broken up. *I just like the college life in general.*” [Emphasis added]. Many reported enjoying the educational opportunities and the learning experience provided within the academic environment at ISU, and several shared that they enjoyed the availability and/or quality of eating options on campus (although several highlighted campus dining as what they liked least about college; see below). Students frequently pointed to the physical environment (e.g., the attractiveness of campus, resources/facilities available at ISU) as being especially enjoyable. The Student Recreation Center was frequently mentioned specifically: “I love having access to the Student Recreation Center because I always wanted a gym membership but could never afford one.” The small-campus feel and the friendly environment on campus and in the community were mentioned often.

Things students don’t like about college

Interestingly, there were many parallels between what some students reported liking most about college and what other reported liking least. In terms of personal characteristics, some students appear to struggle with the freedom associated with attending college, as many reported that being away from friends, family, and home life was what they liked least about college, although many of the students indicated they were aware this was an adjustment period. They tended to focus particularly on the physical separation or distance and/or missing significant others from home (e.g., one young woman said that “The occasional loneliness, and being so far from home” were particularly hard for her). Several reported a similar theme of experiencing homesickness, which is associated with poor adjustment, but can be alleviated by peer support (Brar, Ryu, Shaikh, Altman, & Ng, 2012). Many students also indicated that the personal responsibility required by college life (a characteristic often reported as a positive aspect of college) was actually what they liked least. Several expressed difficulty with self-management and self-regulation (i.e., difficulty directing themselves to meet responsibilities and manage their time effectively).

Regarding the negative aspects of social life as a freshman in college, many reported challenges presented by interaction with others or lack thereof. These challenges centered particularly around feelings of loneliness, a lack of friends, and a sense of not fitting in. Many students cited an unpleasant social context, making complaints about the character and behavior of peers, including yelling at inappropriate times and the presence of racism.

In terms of the broader social and experiential context of college life, many students expressed disliking interactions with faculty or staff and indicated belief that faculty hold negative perceptions of students. One young man reported that what he liked least about college was “class, not because it is hard or because I don't like class but because of the teachers. Very few of my teacher seem to give a crap one way or another. They don't care if I succeed or fail. They act or talk like they do, but their attitude is do as I say or GTFO.” However, he did go on to say, “I have some teachers that seem to genuinely care about me.” LaNasa, Olson, and Alleman (2007) found the quality of relationships between faculty and students to be one of the more important factors affecting student engagement in college.

Some students shared comments about external factors that contribute to a sense of being over-extended, stemming from both interpersonal demands from peers (i.e., a sense of excessive pressure from others to participate in various activities and social events) and especially pressure related to courses. Many students reported that the extensive demands of courses (e.g., high homework load, the level of challenge of various assignments) were what they least enjoyed about college. In the words of one young woman, “I don't like the busy-ness. There are not enough hours in the day. It has been laid out to me like this: social life, good grades, enough sleep. Pick 2 because you can't have all three.” Another student mentioned disliking the fact that college professors did not spell out exactly what is expected of students.

Many who mentioned the high course demands went on to say that they had not adjusted yet or were aware of their own shortcomings (e.g., procrastination) and the fact that they were not used to college life yet. One student put it as, “I feel like I am unorganized and I need to get organized. It is by far my biggest weakness.” Another student admitted to missing having a mom around to help with time management.

Other issues with course requirements included the lack of consistency across courses (different demands and expectations, confusing and unclear deadlines for assignments, difficulty meeting all of the demands and expectations) and challenges associated with course schedules (e.g., the availability and timing of courses). Technology issues were also mentioned frequently, with several students struggling with lack of consistent internet access and/or technological support. There were also many complaints about online assignments (faculty do not all use Blackboard, those who do use Blackboard are not all equally proficient with the system, and faculty appear to assume students know how to use any technology effectively). For example, one student noted that “...The school seems to try to incorporate a lot of technology but, it makes it difficult to find out my assignments when I constantly have to click multiple links.”

Some students indicated that they had difficulty finding ways to engage in meaningful activity in college (e.g., a few specifically mention that there are no African American Greek houses at ISU). Others indicated that the stress of college life and strain created by the college experience itself was the least enjoyable aspect of college. Still others reported struggling with the culture of university life and adjusting to the unfamiliar culture. In particular, students indicated dissatisfaction with dorm rules and policies, taking particular issue with curfews (e.g., one student disliked “That I have a curfew of when I can let people come inside my room. My mom didnt even care but at college when I am paying to live in a small room I have a curfew? IT

BLOWS MY MIND!!!!!!”) and regulations in the dorms as well as communication (or lack thereof) regarding the policies.

Regarding the physical environment, students offered several comments about negative aspects of the campus and the surrounding area. Complaints about campus related primarily to the lack air conditioning in dorms, poor food options and availability, limited availability of parking, hot classrooms, issues associated with doing laundry (e.g., limited quantity and quality of facilities), and the presence of excessive noise (e.g., from other dorm rooms, from trains, etc.) There were also some negative comments about the city of Terre Haute and the challenge of adjusting to a new community.

Other negative aspects of college life centered around finances. Students frequently mentioned the difficulty of paying for college and disliking other expenses associated with being a college student. Several disliked the fact that they had not been able to find a job and felt bad about the lack of a disposable income. Still others reported feeling that they were wasting time and money and sensed that being at ISU was not valuable. As one young woman put it, “I can do everything in college at my house. This is a waste of money.”

Summary and suggestions

Overall, responses to the survey indicate the majority of ISU students appear to be happy with the campus and their college experience. Those who provided negative comments focused more on the physical environment of campus life and adjustment to the academic life. Many of the negative aspects mentioned by students could be alleviated or reduced by maintenance or repair to existing structures. We recommend evaluation of the HVAC systems in the dorms and suggest investing in making the living space for freshmen more comfortable and pleasant. Physical environment is associated with more positive mental health, which may help address some of the key barriers to success among freshmen in college (e.g., homesickness, depression, etc.)

Among the responses to both questions, there appeared to be more positive comments than negative, and several students made comments such as “There isn’t anything I dislike about ISU.” Given the age of the respondents, this reflects well on the campus environment and academic structure at ISU. To address the dislikes mentioned by students, we encourage the continuation and expansion of policies and efforts that students reported appreciating in order to maintain and build positive momentum.

Specifically, the most frequently mentioned dislikes were the requirements for courses (primarily the heavy homework load) and being away from home. While the shock of the homework load in college compared to high school is something to which students will have to adjust in order to be successful in college, a suggestion for facilitating that adjustment (and decreasing busywork) would be to create more co-requisite classes or learning communities in which one assignment could serve double-duty. Students randomly assigned to participate in learning communities during their first year of school passed more classes that year and earned more credits than those not in learning communities, although that difference diminished over time (Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011). Therefore, if, for example, an AHS 111 (Personal Health and Wellness; a Foundational Studies wellness option) were linked to ENG 101, students could write a paper on

their efforts to modify a particular health behavior and have the content graded for AHS 111 and the grammar and writing graded for ENG 101. Furthermore, such learning communities should be retained beyond the first year to facilitate continued students success.

The issue of being away from home can't really be resolved through university efforts, but the university could reflect the terminology used by the students. Homesickness is reported as one of the major issues that leads students to the counseling center, yet the students rarely referred to being "homesick." The word "homesick" (or "home sick") was used only 12 times by this sample of students, but the idea of "being away from home" was expressed verbatim almost 3 times as often (34 times) and as a concept at least 10 times as often as being homesick. By reflecting the students' language, more at-risk students may be reached through interventions to address a key issue related to student success.

The next most frequently mentioned complaint was the cost of college (but that was mentioned quite a bit less than the first two issues). Tuition will only continue to rise, but tuition rates at ISU (while far from being the lowest rates in the country) are lower than other regional comprehensives in Indiana and Illinois, including Ball State University, Eastern Illinois University, and Western Illinois University (Cameron & Rasmussen, 2011; see p. 17). Recruitment materials might highlight the savings students experience here, stress the high proportion of students receiving free aid (e.g., Pell Grants), and educating students about the increase in lifetime potential earnings with a college education (c.f., Policital Calculations, 2009). None of those activities will reduce the cost of college or make paying those costs easier, but they might reduce students' displeasure regarding the cost, increasing their satisfaction with college in general and ISU specifically.

The next most commonly mentioned complaint was issues associated with social life here (especially lack of activities and unhappiness with others' activities such as partying). Regarding the complaints about lack of activities, there are not a lot of activities, particularly on the weekends on-campus (which leads students to go home every weekend to assuage their feelings of not liking being away from home, which prevents their acclimation to life on campus). residential life, student affairs, and other groups might work to develop additional interesting activities, particularly for weekends early in the school year, to encourage students to stay on-campus early on, make friends, study on the weekend, and generally imbed themselves deeper in university life earlier in their college careers. Furthermore, existing programs should be evaluated to determine the usefulness and appeal – if students do not respond to what is currently being done, programs should be revised.

Regarding the second aspect of this dislike (not liking being around others who are partying), incoming students are mainly assigned roommates/dorm space based on requests for specific roommates and/or themed community, or randomly if no request received. Some universities allow students to select housing based on a commitment to being substance free (c.f., Brown University: http://reslife.brown.edu/current_students/special_interest.html). If such an option is not currently in place at ISU, we could implement this option, which might help students who would rather not be exposed to or surrounded by others who "party."

The fifth most commonly mentioned dislike was issues with faculty, particularly the lack of consistency across faculty and courses in terms of expectations of students. Faculty, of course, have academic freedom to conduct classes as they choose, but perhaps faculty (especially those who teach introductory, first semester courses) could be informed of this challenge that students face. Students frequently mentioned the variety of submission requirements (Blackboard, hard copy, other online systems [for which the university does not provide technical support], etc.) and the fact that faculty assume the students know how to use any technology seamlessly, which they cannot always/automatically do (this would be a useful discussion to hold in the New Faculty Orientation course). ISU might also provide training for incoming students on how to use Blackboard, Turnitin, and any other software commonly used in courses here (e.g., Excel, PowerPoint, EndNote), particularly as the CS 101 that teaches Microsoft Office software is no longer a Foundational Studies requirement.

Finally, ISU might also build on aspects of college life that students like rather than focusing entirely on addressing complaints. For example, many students liked the freedom associated with living outside of their parents' homes, and several enjoyed the fact that they were responsible for making their own decisions. Several students seem to struggle with that responsibility though, which might provide a good opportunity for faculty and staff in residential life, student affairs, and elsewhere to develop peer mentoring programs wherein students comfortable with independent decision making might work with those less ready for the high level of self-reliance thrust upon them as they enter college. The Academic Peer Advisor system might, therefore, be expanded to include a focus on decision making outside of the academic realm. As LaNasa, Olson, and Alleman (2013) report, any programs that bolster relationship building with students should be recommended as learning groups are successful in large part because of the social relationships they foster.

In sum, students identified many positive aspects of attending ISU, yet there is room to improve in some areas where students mentioned complaints or dislikes. The suggestions provided in this report may serve as a starting point for addressing student dislikes, building on student likes, and generally contributing to greater retention and graduation rates at ISU.

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