

Six Week's : Real or Urban Legend

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Introduction

While scholars studying the first-year in college have studied the impact of pre-entry and programmatic variables on retention and success quite extensively and have produced a significant body of literature, there is little information from the non-returning students themselves on why they did not return and even less on when these students made their decisions. Betsy Barefoot, in an address to the 2002 Fall Institute for Academic Deans and Department Chairs, noted this dearth of academic literature when she challenged the validity of the commonly voiced opinion that the first six weeks in college were critically important to retention. This paper reveals the results of a survey of ISU non-returning students in which they were asked when they began to think about leaving, when they solidified their decision, and what factors weighed on it. The paper also discusses a proposed methodology for getting at the question of critical moments.

The 6-Week Claim

College integration and intervention programs around the country are designed to “get students off on the right foot.” Whether this is because of the claim that the first six weeks are vital or whether it is merely coincidental, colleges and universities have invested enormous resources in pre-entry and first-semester programs. Summer programs, of many names and varieties, seek to prepare students for the rigors and atmosphere of higher education. First-year seminars and learning communities operate almost exclusively in the first semester.

When we at Indiana State University, along with many public and private institutions in the state of Indiana received money from the Lilly Endowment to transform our first-year experience, we bought the 6-week claim. We designed and redesigned programs for the summer and fall and totally ignored the second semester. Our School of Business even designed their first-year seminar to end after 8 weeks.

Our programs include a *Summer Reading Program*, a revised integration and registration program called *Sycamore Advantage*, a revised three-day orientation program called *Knowing Sycamores*, and learning communities in every college in the University. By any measure we have invested heavily based on this claim. Part of the process of building a consensus around these programs was bringing nine ISU Deans and Chairs to the 2002 Fall Institute for Academic Deans and Department Chairs. When Betsy Barefoot rose to discuss the importance of the first-year, she offered an analysis of the literature on the first-year experience that suggested that there was no evidence offered in it for the 6-week claim.

This is not to say that the 6-week claim does not have an intuitive appeal. For institutions like Indiana State that have a significant population of under-prepared (under 50 percent have a college preparatory high school degree) and first-generation (under 40 percent come from families in which a parent earned a four-year degree) students, the idea that the first weeks of college are vital to retention and success makes sense. Specifically, the notion that an investment in the emotional and intellectual needs of first-year students using an intentionally focused combination of Residential Life, Student Affairs, and

Academic Affairs pervades the assumptions of what constitutes the Policy Center on the First-Year Experience's "Foundation of Excellence" initiative.

Why the 6-week Claim May be Wrong

Marriages that fail in the first year rarely fail because the honeymoon did not live up to expectations. Marriages fail in the first year because the couple does not get along after they return from the honeymoon. College students may be influenced by early disappointments or deviations from expectations, but it is at least as plausible that students make their decision to leave college, or leave a particular college because over the year they come to decide that they are not ready for college or that they are not fitting in with their particular college. For students who want to succeed but do not align their behavior with what is necessary to succeed, it is not axiomatic that they skipped class or failed to study enough in the first six weeks.

At Indiana State University we have instituted an attendance reporting mechanism in an attempt to comply with Title IV financial aid issues. These attendance reports occur in at the end of the third week and tenth week and as part of mid-term grades. Faculty report students to be in four categories (attending, stopped attending, never attended, and excessive absences). To a practically and statistically significant degree, faculty report that students who either stopped attending or had excessive absences were more abundant as the semester goes on. Both of these indicate that students fall out, not in droves during the first six weeks but as they grow bored, disinterested or disgruntled as the first year goes on.

A plausible alternative to this 6 week claim is that students who are destined to drop out after the first year are excited during their early college days, grow weary, miss class or fail to study, and receive poor grades in December. Those that return may make a promise to themselves (or to their families) that things will change come January only to fall victim to the same pattern of failure. The critical moments during this hypothetical are much harder to pin down. Disinterest and disengagement do not occur all at once; they occur over time. In some cases, they occur only during the second semester. Programs that focus on making the “honeymoon” great, would totally miss the mark for students such as this.

Testing the 6-Week Claim

Nothing of what we have done and report below should be construed as sufficient evidence that the 6-week claim is wrong, but what we find certainly can not be construed as supporting that claim either. In this section we will describe the methodology of testing the claim and the results of our survey. In the section that follows we will discuss our ideas for answering this empirical question in a more thorough and generalizable way.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the survey instrument asked questions relating to the reasons students left ISU as well as the timing. Those eligible to be surveyed included 355 students in the Fall 2002 first-year cohort who were eligible to return to ISU in the Fall 2003 semester. We sent letters outlining the reasons for the survey and directing them to a web-based survey. After three weeks we sent follow-up postcards to those that had not

yet done the survey. With 45 usable observations we set out to compare those that were willing or able to go to the web survey with those who chose not to. From a randomized list of non-respondents we generated 22 complete phone surveys. Generally, these were men and women who had the same phone number they listed with ISU when they were first-year students. Only two family members would give us a forwarding phone number, and we had one other return our calls.

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, 21% (12 of 56) indicated that they planned to transfer from ISU after the first year (and all but one did.) Of the 44 remaining usable responses none indicated that they began considering an early departure in the “first few days” and only one indicated that they were thinking about leaving in the “first month.” Only three more indicated that they considered leaving during the semester. For these students, the real decision points appeared much later in the year. Twelve began considering their departure after the first semester had ended, sixteen during the second semester, nine as they ended the second semester and three first thought of leaving during the summer following their first year.

For these former students, the ultimate decision to leave occurred shortly after the initial contemplation. Of the sixteen who began thinking of leaving during or at the end of the first semester, nine firmed up that decision during that timeframe. Of those 32 that began thinking about leaving prior to or during the second semester nine made their decision during the second semester and another fifteen had firmed-up that decision as the semester came to an end.

Clearly programs that are obvious, visible, and accessible in the first semester, and in many cases during the first few weeks of the first semester, are at least potentially mistimed. At ISU the programs offered by Academic Affairs and Student Affairs are not aligned with a late Fall through Spring decision.

What motivates students to leave college is a well-studied issue. Our results confirm much of what the literature cites. A majority of students who leave attribute their departure to personal, financial or family reason. A third considered the classroom experience an important or contributing factor to their departure. Financial Aid, a local whipping boy, was blamed by 28% of departees though the same number were unhappy with their amount of aid as to their treatment by the Office of Financial Aid. This could well mean that the students conflated their displeasure with the messenger and the message. A similar number of students considered parking, academic advising and their residence hall experiences as factors in their decision to leave college. It is worth noting that the answers to the “when” questions were not statistically or practically different between sample groups but they answers to the “why” questions were both statistically and practically different. All the respondents who expressed any concern about the Office of Financial Aid or the amount they received were in the first sample (those who actively answered the survey.)

Why the 6-week Claim May Still be Right and Future Research

While these results show a clear pattern, they represent a sample of only 56 students out of 355 students who failed to return one year, to one university. It was also only a survey conducted of those who were academically eligible to return. Students may very well have engaged in behaviors that caused them to be academically ineligible that began in the first six weeks. Furthermore, it is quite possible that students engage in subconscious behavior during the first-six weeks that predisposes them to failure. The phenomenon of “suicide-by-cop” may have an academic parallel, perhaps labeled “dropped out by Dean.” What we would need to know is when students began engaging in behaviors inconsistent with their success and retention. Programs that get at these underlying behaviors when they begin may be more effective than programs that aim to influence a decision that is in the process of being made but nevertheless already foretold by those behaviors.

What is required is a contemporaneous survey of students conducted throughout the first year as a longitudinal study. Questions would ask about behaviors, the results of those behaviors, when the behaviors got started, and how and when the students who engage in them can be influenced. In an effort to avoid influencing decisions by asking about them, there would have to be a strategic intersperse of questions concerning thoughts of dropping out. To have an influence on such a widely-held proposition such a survey would, by necessity, be performed simultaneously on multiple campuses, across the country and across institutional types.

Table 1
Number of Students Reported with Excessive Absences

	Number of Classes Reporting Absences	Spring 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004
3- Week Report	1	95	133	132	209	228
	2	18	23	54	38	62
	3+	2	3	14	9	17
10- Week Report	1	146	194	160	299	300
	2	44	45	72	108	105
	3+	4	9	17	26	28

Table 2
Number of Students Reported to have Stopped Attending

	Number of Classes Reporting Absences	Spring 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004
3- Week Report	1	35	62	49	56	86
	2	1	8	8	5	12
	3+	0	4	0	1	1
10- Week Report	1	82	153	84	217	175
	2	24	48	38	57	33
	3+	10	24	22	40	17

Table 3
Decision to Leave College: First Thoughts
(N=sample)
(n=usable answers)

Answer	First Sample (N=45) (n=37)	Second Sample (N=22) (n=19)	Total (N=67) (n=56)
Always Intended to Transfer After First Year	4	8	12
First Few Days	0	0	0
First Month	1	0	1
Middle of First Semester	3	0	3
End of First Semester	8	4	12
During Second Semester	12	4	16
End of Second Semester	7	2	9
Summer	2	1	3
No Answer	8	3	10

Table 4
Decision to Leave College: Ultimate Decision

Answer	First Sample (N=45) (n=37)	Second Sample (N=22) (n=19)	Total (N=67) (n=56)
Always Intended to Transfer After First Year	4	8	12
First Few Days	0	0	0
First Month	0	0	0
Middle of First Semester	1	0	1
End of First Semester	7	1	8
During Second Semester	10	3	13
End of Second Semester	12	5	17
Summer	7	2	9
No Answer	3	3	6

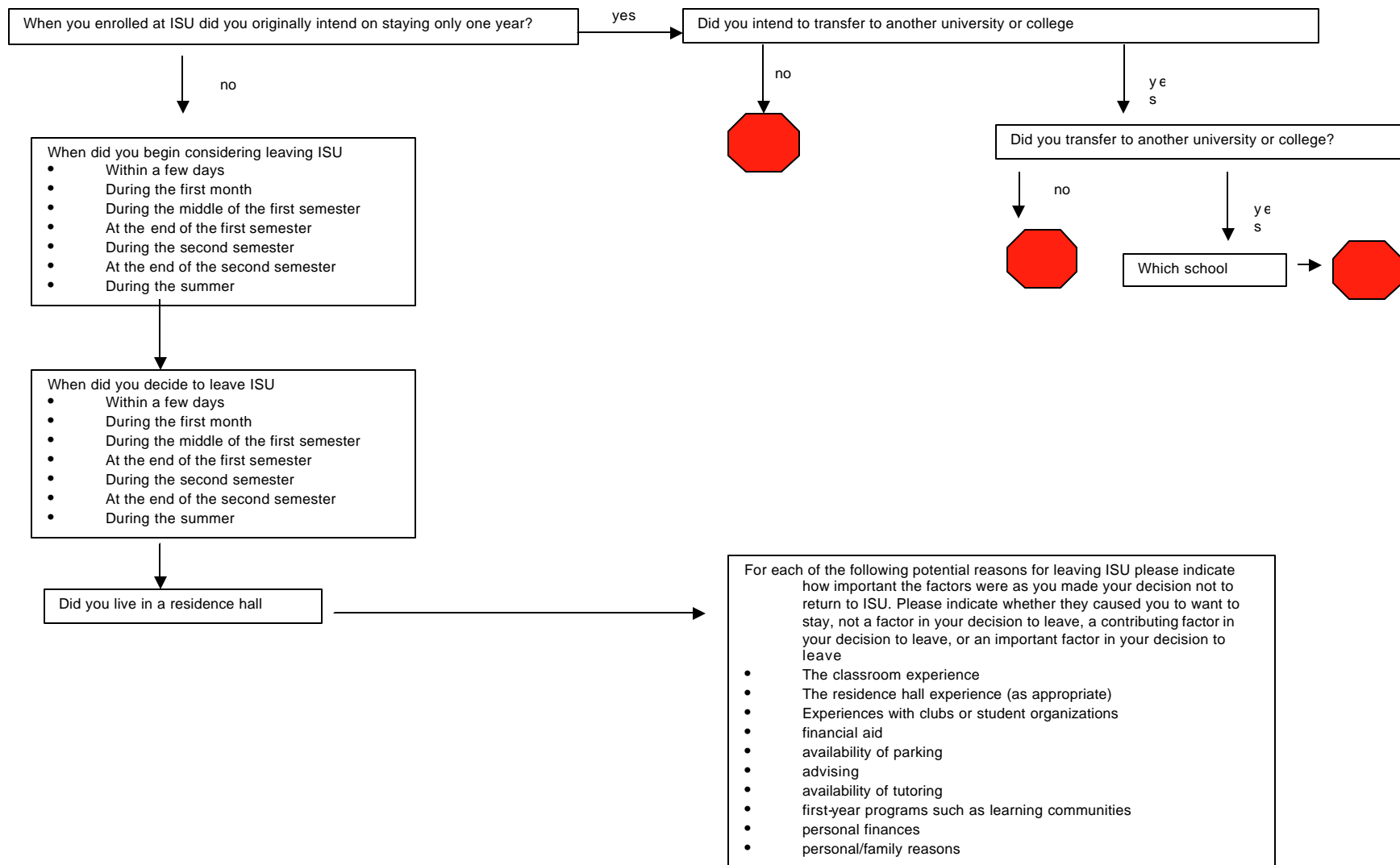


Figure 1 Survey Design