Principal Investigator: Ezella McPherson, Ph.D.

Program Overview

Mentoring through Storytelling was a series of college oriented workshops, funded by a Vision 20/20 Grant, and hosted through Indiana University (IU) South Bend. Mentoring through Storytelling was designed to mentor and advise approximately 80 incoming IU South Bend freshman (e.g., 2015 Leadership Academy and 2015 Summer Bridge Program, including those at the Elkhart Center) and 30 first-year ABC program\(^1\) / IVY Tech students. At each workshop, a small group of IU South Bend upperclassmen shared their stories of trials and triumphs in the hopes of providing first-year students with knowledge about successfully navigating through college, including understanding college expectations, increasing their financial literacy, and choosing and/or changing college majors. Similar to prior research (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014), we also hypothesized that first-year students who participated in our workshops would have higher first term grade point averages (GPAs) than their freshman peers from similar backgrounds who forwent these workshops.

Mentoring through Storytelling: Background Information

The plan for Mentoring through Storytelling was designed by Dr. Ezella McPherson in the spring of 2015. Recent studies suggest that, over the past decade, there has been a surge in enrollment of underprepared and underserved groups (e.g., minorities, adult learners, first-generation) in postsecondary settings (Kim, 2011; Steele & McDonald, 2008). Research also shows that the first year of college is when the highest student attrition occurs (Tinto, 2012). Similar to prior research (Kim, 2011), while there has been a surge in enrollment at IU South Bend, fewer students are being retained and graduating when compared to the IU system (Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2014).

The Mentoring through Storytelling program was created to address the issues that research suggest to be the most prevalent transition issues faced by students in order to narrow this gap. Our workshops addressed four goals: (1) transitioning to college (e.g., attending class, asking for help), (2) studying for college exams, (3) college financial literacy, (4) choosing and/or changing college majors.

Participant Recruitment

Eighteen upperclassmen from IU South Bend were recruited as peer mentors in April 2015 and trained by Dr. April Lidinsky and Ernestine M. Raclin School of the Arts, senior lecturer, Kevin Gillen. These students were volunteers and were compensated with T-shirts. The peer mentors who came to the focus group were also given Mentoring through Storytelling mugs.

First-year students were recruited through various means. Programs, such as IU South Bend’s 2015 Leadership Academy, 2015 Summer Bridge Program, and the ABC program through Ivy Tech, were invited. Fliers were designed for each individual workshop inviting IU South Bend first-year students to participate; they were posted throughout campus, particularly in high-traffic

\(^1\) The ABC (Associate + Bachelor’s = Career) program consists of 30 Ivy Tech first-time freshmen who plan to transfer to IU South Bend after earning their Associates’ degrees from Ivy Tech. The Mentoring through Storytelling workshop series exposed ABC program students to current IU South Bend upperclassmen.
areas such as the Library, The Grille\textsuperscript{2}, and in academic buildings. Information about workshops was posted on social media (Facebook and Twitter), as well as distributed through a campus-wide daily email (the Daily Titan). On the day before or day of, small fliers were distributed in person to first-year students.

A total of 44 students attended the workshop series. Thirteen students from the Leadership Academy Program attended the “Transitioning to College and Financial Literacy” workshop on July 29, 2015. Ten students from the ABC Program participated in a separate “Transitioning to College and Financial Literacy” workshop. Twenty-one students participated in the “Choosing and Changing Majors” workshop on March 23, 2016. Unfortunately, the “Preparing for Midterms” workshop was not attended by any students expect for the upperclassmen speakers. For the Focus Group conducted in April 2016, 16 students participated as well as the 3 Titan Success Center coaches.

\textbf{Mentoring through Storytelling 2015-2016 Workshops}

There were four workshops conducted throughout the 2015-2016 Academic year. The workshops were moderated by Dr. McPherson, who prepared questions for the upperclassmen specific to the workshop’s topic. The upperclassmen answered each question by discussing their first year experiences, upperclassman experiences, and hindsight. Audience members (first-year students) were encouraged to ask questions and engage with upperclassmen.

1) Transitioning to College and Financial Literacy – July 29, 2015

Upperclassmen addressed topics such as adjusting to college life, developing confidence as a college student, and developing or persisting in their motivation to complete a college degree. They also shared lessons they learned about maximizing scholarships and financial aid, as well as retaining their eligibility for aid. Other topics that were addressed were the benefits of on-time degree completion, loan management, and alternative funding options.

2) Preparing for Midterms – October 5 & 8, 2015

Upperclassmen discussed adjusting to the differences between high school and college coursework, in particular adapting their study habits and time management skills. Upperclassmen offered tips to first-year students on studying for college tests, keeping on top of course work throughout the semester, and overcoming bad test grades.


At the final workshop, upperclassmen discussed the variety of paths they took to explore and decide on a major suitable to their interests and needs. Some questions targeted the connection between their career objectives and choice of major. A primary focus of discussion was on the manner in which students approached changing their major and/or career path, including the resources available to them to make such a decision. This workshop also included a dinner reception to celebrate the end of the first year and completion of the workshop series.

\textsuperscript{2} The campus’ cafeteria.
Program Assessment

The program assessment differs from the initial program assessment. Each program was successful in bringing mentors to discuss their stories with their peers. Some of the mentors have graduated from IU South Bend since serving as mentors. Others are in their junior or senior year of college. Many of the program participants have progressed in their major fields of choice since participating in the program. The focus group had different participants from the initial workshop in the summer 2015. Questions on the focus group protocol asked about the Mentoring Through Storytelling workshop series’ program content, including topics on transitioning to college, funding college, preparing for midterms, and careers.

Transitioning to College -How did you learn about the differences between high school and college?

STUDENT ELEVEN: Ok well, being in high school, you don’t have as much freedom as when you’re in college. Come and live in the dorms you live with people that you go to school with. In high school, you don’t gotta see them. That could be a good thing or a bad thing depending… but then on the same time, you’re coming into your own, learning to be an adult. I mean if you have to switch them around it wouldn’t really make sense. Another thing is that you’re classes are so spaced out so you got a lot of time management that you gotta do. High school is like just go to high school all day and come home at a certain time every day. College you got do this at ten a.m., then you go to sleep, you go to the gym, then you’ve got another class here, that’s way different. What else? People are more mature after freshman year, I suppose. Like I said, you’re growing up. You figure you don’t really care if you don’t like that person because you go and do your own stuff.

STUDENT FIVE: ... In college, money just don’t come in. It’s like your mom get cold or something. I spent the better half of my freshman year broke. I know, that’s what woke me up, for real, because for anyone, high school was easy for me. In high school, I didn’t even study. I went home and did whatever I wanted to. And if any exams came, I’d get out of class. I’d go in and make a split decision ‘do I need to pass it?’ I didn’t really care about grades in high school. As long as I had over a 3.0. I came here, I had a feeling, I studied the first two chapters of my math before class even started, because I had a feeling, I knew it was going to be hard. Stuff happened that way. Eventually it started to mash together. It doesn’t get any better. I feel like when I came back for my sophomore year, I had to start all over. I had to learn a lot of the same things again.

STUDENT SEVENTEEN: I had a first semester algebra class and I thought I don’t really need to come to this because I know this stuff, so I used to skip it all the time. And I ended up getting a B in the class, which for me was a huge wake-up call of, like you need to actually show up to class and actually do the readings and do well on assignments that I thought I was kind of above. So that helped me a lot. And then I didn’t skip classes anymore. It’s hard, you don’t really have anyone watching you go to class or making you do anything.

STUDENT ONE: So for me, I went to a boarding school for high school, so everything was scheduled. Even eating time was scheduled. So you woke up early in the morning and you had class until breakfast and you went back to class. And then up to lunch, then you had a free period then you went back to dinner and then you went back to prep. Prep was from
7-10 or 7-9 depending on what day it was. So you were always in class. So when I got to college, it was a huge culture shock because for the first once I had all of this free time. And I realized I grew up in a really structured environment so for me it was figuring out how can I create my own structure instead of just not doing anything. So for me it was really a learning process of figuring out how to I prioritize, how do I organize my time, how do I do all that stuff that was basically forced on me when I was in boarding school.

STUDENT THIRTEEN: I worked in high school. I remember they had different programs they were offering, which was good. Particularly they had for business. They brought everything in, pretended like it was in the real world. You had your own desk and you had to be responsible for your own stuff. And most likely you helped other people to. They had us do competitions. They taught you a whole bunch of things you wouldn’t have learned any other way. Different machines. How to calculate by memory. Adding machines. Ditto. Just introducing you to everything, getting you used to everything. You started out there, then they got you a job and then you got hands on until you graduated.

STUDENT TWO: The biggest thing for me and for a lot of the students that come in, you don’t realize at first, ‘oh, I have to read the syllabus and I’m responsible to know when things are due. The teacher’s not going to tell me.’ So that was something that happened to me and I’ve noticed a lot of students that come into the Titan Success Center will come in with the same problem and say ‘I didn’t know it was due’.

Funding College Education

STUDENT FOUR: …Basically, I took it upon myself to go to the IU website and just investigate because I had no clue. I had never done it before. And in fact my very first semester, I didn’t know about FASFA; I didn’t know about anything. And I basically had to pay for the first two semesters that I was here. Part of it too was because I had been out of school for so long, I didn’t have a grade point average that they would accept – they accepted my grades and everything, a lot of stuff transferred over, but it was like, shoot that stuff was so dusty they didn’t even want to consider the grade point average. They weren’t even sure and nor was I, that I could even think any more! So, the first two semesters I had to pay for and then by that time I figured there’s got to be a better way so I just went to the website and I went to financial aid, and I went into the financial aid department and talked with people there and got some advice from them. And then scholarships – I looked into those… I just got the Herald Zisla. That one is very prestigious for me.

STUDENT SIX: I didn’t learn. I was hardheaded. I didn’t learn until this year. I got a lot of information. They do try to help you. When you start school, they give you all this information, but I was hardheaded. I knew everything, so get out of my way. Let me do this. So I took out all these loans that I can’t pay back. It’s just – but, like I said, I’m getting a good job so I’ll be able to do something. Little by little, I’ll trim it down. You should really follow the advice of your advisor in financial aid because they know what they’re talking about. And scholarships is the way to go.

STUDENT TEN: Well, I found out I guess by my parents. They were both in the military. And my dad is a disabled veteran so the military kind of pays for my tuition at IU colleges. It
pays for the tuition, but not housing, so I had to kinda take out loans to pay for housing but that’s the only thing that’s in debt, so…

Preparing for Midterms-How did you learn to prepare for midterm exams?

STUDENT FIVE: You don’t… You study. You study the best that you can. My experiences in some of my hard classes is there’s no way to actual get on top of it. My professor she actually teaches you stuff and then she puts completely new material on the exam. So the only way to actually pass it is to know what she's going to do beforehand or to study it so much you can put in anything in anywhere and solve for it. Anything you want to. And yeah, study. Do what you have to. Don’t do the normal amount. Do twice as much that. That’s all I had to say.

STUDENT ELEVEN: Growing up, everyone learned how to study. So I mean – I feel as though a midterm is the same as every other exam to me. That’s all I’m saying. Just go to class, pay attention, talk to the teachers – be involved and do well.

STUDENT FIFTEEN: I know with me, I don’t like to study. … which is weird because I'm an honors student. I think the most effective thing for me was to build that cushion at the beginning of the school year because we all know that at the end of the year we’re burnt out. So you build that cushion up at the beginning of the school year – you do all those extra credit opportunities, you do all your work, you try your best – because towards the end you lose your motivation and you want that cushion for your midterm so you can get a C or a B and still get an A in the class.

Choosing and Changing Your Majors and Careers- How did you learn about choosing a major? And how did you learn about the process to change majors?

STUDENT FIVE: It was a rude awakening for me because I really wanted to major in aerospace engineering and I was looking through the majors here after I applied and all that and I’m like ‘engineering’s not on here’. So I had to pick the closest thing to it which is physics and I had to make myself love it. I hated math. I hate math. I hated math for nineteen years of my life. I’m twenty now, but I had to adjust to it and I had to keep myself motivated. And I never changed majors. Never will.

STUDENT THREE: I went to the Titan Success Center because originally I was an art major and I didn’t like it. It was like New Media. It wasn’t what I thought it was. So went to the Titan Success Center and went through six personality tests. Erin sat with me all day and went through all these personality tests and everything and found out what major fits me best.

STUDENT FIFTEEN: I mean kind of off of what [Student 5] said, you kind of go with the major closest to your career path. Like with me, I wanted to go to Law School so I’m like what’s closest to that. Political Science and Economics was my initial. And then I got into that I thought, well this is boring but I still want to go to law school. So I started going to the career and internship fairs and I started networking and talking to people and just getting that insight into other careers. And I thought about what I’m good at – oh, accounting, I started talking to business people and the Dean of Business and said ‘I can do this’ and that’s
where I’m at. It was like the same school – Political Science, Economics, all of that is in the same school – so it wasn’t really a big transition I guess.

STUDENT SIX: I wanted to be a judge because I’m nosy. I used to watch the judges and be all that ‘oh…’ and get all the inside stuff. But then I was a CNA for a good while and I seen how they were treating the people, the psychotherapists was treating the people and I was like ‘man, how can I become a psychotherapist?’ There’s no degree for psychotherapy, so you have to go by way of social work. If you get a masters in Social Work, then you can sit under a psychotherapist for six months and get a certificate and be a psychotherapist. So that’s how I found out.

Caring in college: Who (if anyone) cares about you on IUSB’s campus?

STUDENT SIX: Ok, I believe that Dr. McPherson cares about me. I believe that this young lady cares about me –Erin, I do. I believe that Kofi cares about me. I know one day I ran to your office and I was really, really upset and he ran up to me and was like ‘What can I do for you?’ and I was like ‘Nothing, where’s Dr. McPherson at?’ … I was looking for an outlet…

STUDENT THIRTEEN: The Titan Center and, of course, Dr. McPherson.

STUDENT FIVE: Couldn’t go without her, Dr. McPherson.

STUDENT SIX: No, but that’s real though. I believe that. That’s real. Now we joking around, but – Believe me, Dr. McPherson.

STUDENT THIRTEEN: I’m really serious.

STUDENT FOUR: So, besides Dr. McPherson caring about me. I also have Professor Natella who’s always got my back. She’s amazing. And actually pretty much most of my professors. Dr. Renck she’s incredible. Tough as nails but she really cares about her students. New professor – Bill Tourtillotte is crazy good. He really cares about his students. Who else is really cool is Pam Mendenhall in the Office of Raclin School of the Arts. If you have a problem you can go there and she takes the time, she takes the time. Dr. Neovi is incredible. She does a great job. She’s always caring about all the students and always giving us opportunities. … Really I feel like everybody here – you were asking earlier about people making you feel welcome, and I have felt so welcomed by everyone. Not just by the professors, but by every single student in my classes. It’s been amazing.

STUDENT SIX: Dr. Massat because she cares about you going where you’re going. I was only in the BSW program and she grandfathered me in. She was like, ok, you already have a degree and you have this and this and this, so we’re going to invite you into the master’s program. So I was like, ‘wow, ok thank-you.’ So she absolutely took my credits and passed over the bachelor’s degree and took me straight into the master’s program. She didn’t have to do that because I know somebody else that was telling me about, they have another man, I ain’t going to say his name, but anyway she was like ‘how did you get into the master’s program’ and I explained it to her. So I believe she [Dr. Massat] cares. I’ve talked to her on several occasions. She’s religious and sweet and she cares about the people.
STUDENT SIXTEEN: I believe that one of my old professors from last semester – her name is Renee Korster, she’s a public speaking teacher. I had her, she’s one of my professors, and I believe that she really cared about me being successful because she complimented me on certain things that I did well in her public speaking class and she would tell me that I need to work on my weaknesses and that I had a voice and I had talent, what I’m saying, so she made me believe that if I worked hard at what I wanted to do, then I could achieve it. And by her being on my back and pressuring me to do better, I felt like she cared about me.

The above narratives suggest that some IU South Bend students relied on themselves, family members, campus resources (e.g., faculty and staff) to transition to college, prepare for midterms, and choose/change majors. IU South Bend students felt cared for by faculty and staff member as well.

Program Outcomes

The program officially ended in April 2016 with the focus group funded through the Vision 2020 grant. After positive feedback from prior mentors, Dr. Ezella McPherson agreed to formally house the program in the Titan Success Center. On April 25, 2017, the Mentoring through Storytelling workshop was held in in the Community Building in campus housing.

The program has been presented at the 2017 All-IU Edge program in a session entitled “Mentors do matter for student engagement, persistence, retention, and graduation.” On campus the program has been presented to parents at New Student Orientation in 2017.

Next steps

The next steps in the process are to collect more data from former participants and IUSB faculty and/or staff members for an article to be published in the IU Foundations magazine.