University of Southern Indiana Report on October 2022 Focus Groups with Staff, Faculty, and Students

December 7, 2023

Charlie Blaich & Kathy Wise
Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS)

◆HEDS

About us

- **We lead the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS)**
  - Located at Wabash College in Indiana
  - Non-profit organization
  - 200 member institutions
- **Our mission: Improve undergraduate liberal arts education, inclusive excellence, and student success**
  - We work with 4-year and 2-year colleges and universities across the country
  - Focus on using evidence, working with people at institutions
- **Our work includes**
  - Quantitative and qualitative research
  - Grant and program evaluations; workshops with faculty, staff, and students; assessment support; professional development
  - Providing surveys
- **Emphasis on making HEDS affordable for institutions**

Our experience conducting focus groups

- **We've done over 20 focus group site visits in the past five years**
  - Conversations with students, faculty, and staff about climate and diversity
  - Conversations with students about
    - The impact of HHMI Inclusive Excellence grants and other grants
    - Their vision of success and experiences at their institutions that have helped them move towards, or slowed their progress towards, that vision

Our work with USI to date

- **HEDS designed and administered the 2020 Insight Survey**
  - Administered to USI students, staff, and faculty in spring 2020
- **We've given several presentations on the survey data to people in the USI community**
  - September 2020
    - Presentation to President Rochon and Provost Khayum
    - Presentation to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Council (EDIC)
  - March 2021
    - Presentation to Board of Trustees
  - March and April 2022
    - Presentations to USI community
- **Follow-up on the survey**
  - Focus groups with USI staff, faculty, and students - October 2022
    - Discussed themes from the focus groups with President Rochon and Provost Khayum in December 2022
    - Presentation to EDIC in March 2023

Focus group visit

- **Nine hour-long focus groups across three days**
  - October 24-26, 2022
- **Spoke with 36 people**
  - 15 staff, 11 faculty, and 10 students in the following groups
    - African American/Black students
    - Latinx students
    - Students with disabilities
    - Academic support staff
    - Hourly support staff
    - Minority staff
    - Student affairs staff
    - Non-tenured faculty
    - Tenured faculty
  - No one came to session for LGBTQIA+ students

Structure of the focus groups

- **We took notes rather than recording the conversations**
- **Names not included in our notes**
  - Titles, departments, and other identifying information are not included in our report
- **Started with introductions and a warm-up question**
- **Next we asked people to jot down notes in response to our focus group questions**
- **Then we started a conversation about their responses**
  - Went around the room, starting with the first question
  - Collected the written notes to help in our analyses
- **Read through our notes, identified themes, and wrote a summary report**
  - Draft report delivered to Pam Hopson a week after our visit
  - 27-page report includes many quotes
    - Removed potentially identifying information, used neutral gender pronouns, and sometimes lightly edited comments to protect people's identity

Focus group questions

- **What do you like *most* about being a student/staff member/faculty member at USI?**

- **What makes you feel like you are part of the USI community?**

- **What, if anything, makes you feel like you are *not* part of the USI community?**

- **What can USI do to better support you and increase your sense of belonging to the USI community?**

A few notes

- **We are not trying to make generalizable comments about staff, faculty, and students at USI**
    - Representing the voices and experiences of the people who spoke with us
- **Our goal is to accurately represent what people told us**
    - We don't fact check or verify information
- **People are complicated!**
    - Please remember that people can say complementary things about the institution in response to one question and negative things in response to a different question
- **Lingering COVID effects?**

Responses to focus group questions

What people like most about being at USI

- **Students**
  - Small size, friendly, get to know people
  - Small classes
  - Support of faculty and staff
  - Multicultural Center (MCC) essential for Black and Latinx students
    - "Place of refuge, place to have fun, and a place to be seen"
- **Staff**
  - Friendly place - "community of family"
  - Flexibility in their work
  - Autonomy, chance to be creative
    - Bosses who don't micromanage
  - Enjoy working with students
    - "Value the chance to guide them, help them get support, and prepare them for life after college."
- **Faculty**
  - Enjoy working with and supporting students
  - Enthusiastic about teaching, experimenting in the classroom
  - Respect and enjoy their faculty colleagues
  - Appreciate the "faculty lifestyle" - flexibility and freedom

Student quotes

"I love the community aspect, the atmosphere, and the connections. Everyone here supports each other. It feels like being in my hometown. No matter what, someone has my back."

"What I like most is the fact that it feels sort of like a family. By this I mean the staff are always so nice to you. They remember your name. That's something that doesn't happen at other schools. You also get one-on-one interactions with professors."

"I like that the MCC is available because it provides a sense of community. It's the only place I see people who look like me and where I feel completely accepted. It provides a space to express myself without getting the side eye from people who don't understand what it's like being Black at a PWI."

Staff quotes

"The camaraderie in our department is awesome. The people in my department work so well together, have fun, and help each other. It's a warm and friendly atmosphere."

"Getting a variety of different tasks/assignments which keeps the job interesting. And there's a great balance of independence and support. I'm largely independent in my role, but I can get support when I need it."

"Helping students find their way. Supporting them. Educating students and developing their minds. Bringing them back to reality - telling them to relax, reassuring them that things are going to be okay. They may not know who to go to for help, and I can direct them to other resources on campus if I can't help. Helping students navigate the university."

Faculty quotes

"Working with students, helping them work towards and realize their future goals and careers. Developing relationships with them. Getting to know them on an individual basis, and helping them through non-academic stuff."

"There are very supportive faculty in my college. We share ideas and support each other. Our students are incredible."

"I love that I have flexibility in what teaching practices I use. I can try out fun things. We have goals for the class and the department, but I can do what I want to get there."

What makes people feel like part of the community

- **Overall - when other members of the community support them, are kind to them, and treat them like fellow members of the community**
- **Students**
  - When staff and faculty get to know them, check in, and help them when they need support
  - The MCC stands out as a supportive organization for students of color
- **Staff**
  - Collaborating with colleagues in and out of their departments to make good things happen for USI
  - Supporting students
  - Attending events that bring the USI community together
- **Faculty**
  - Having good colleagues
  - Involvement with committees or work that has an impact on the institution
  - Working with students and helping them succeed

Student quotes

"My professors know me by name. One of my professors is the sweetest person you'll ever meet. They check in on us, asking, 'How are you doing? How's it going?' I appreciate the personal one-on-one interactions. Everyone at USI is so friendly and welcoming."

"The MCC provides a sense of belonging to me. When I'm sitting in the MCC lounge, hanging out and talking, I feel like I belong. Not everyone on campus is as welcoming. I can't just walk up to anyone and say hi."

Staff quotes

"I like how we try to grow this community together. For example, when we have a new program, building, etc. We all feel like we come together as a whole to build these things. It feels like we're building USI together."

"Interacting with students and other staff/administrators. Interacting with all the parts that make up USI. Students and staff supporting each other. Attending events with school spirit."

"Working with staff and faculty in different colleges and departments. If a student needs something, all of a sudden three or four departments swoop in to help. For the most part, you can just count on people like that."

Faculty quotes

"Collaboration with other colleagues and organizations at USI. That often comes about through working with people from other departments or colleagues on committees that have goals of bettering the student experience, atmosphere, and culture at USI."

"My students are the biggest part of what makes me feel like I'm part of the community - when I'm in the classroom with my students; when students come to visit me in my office; when they say hello to me in the halls."

"Connecting with like-minded faculty across the university. There's a good sense of collegiality among most faculty. The faculty in my college are, for the most part, doers."

What makes people feel like they are <u>not</u> part of the community

- **Overall - not being recognized for their work, not having their ideas considered, being isolated, or being treated unkindly**
- **Students**
  - Being in a community where few people look like them and share their experiences
  - Being treated poorly in ways that feel connected with their racial or ethnic identity
  - Lack of support for aspects of their identity
- **Staff**
  - Feeling like their work isn't valued
    - Low pay ⇒ not being valued
  - Not being brought into decisions that affect their work or call upon their expertise
  - Being treated as "less than" by faculty and administrators
  - Leaders who are in it for themselves, not USI
- **Faculty**
  - Poor institutional communication
  - Feeling like their work isn't valued
  - Leaders who are in it for themselves, not USI

Student quotes

"The overall demographic and lack of diversity. If I sit anywhere outside of the MCC, I always feel like I'm being judged. Just being in class is hard because I'm often the only Black person in class. It makes it uncomfortable when we touch on certain topics because everyone looks at me."

"Being 'the minority.' I hang out in the basement of the library. I feel comfortable there because no one else is there. When I walk on campus, it feels like everyone is staring at me, like I don't belong here. And if I do something, I feel like people will say it's because I'm a Black man."

"I went to talk to my financial aid counselor, and they asked if I was interested in getting food from Archie's Closet. I was like, 'No, I'm here to discuss financial aid.' I felt like they assumed I needed food because I was Black. In another situation, one of my professors kept calling me out in class and asking, 'Did you understand this?' I was like, I'm not the only one in this class. Why are you only asking me if I understand?"

"There needs to be more accessibility to the facilities. ...And there aren't enough handicap parking spaces close to buildings."

"There isn't enough support for non-traditional students and commuters. Our issues are different, and there's nothing for us here."

Staff quotes

"People's personal agendas can impact work relationships and make it hard to feel like I belong. It feels like some people are all in for USI, while others are only here until they get a chance to go on to the next thing. The second group of people think about what's going to benefit them and where they want to get to over what's going to benefit their department or the university."

"When my work goes unappreciated or ignored by others on campus. When I need to justify my work to others."

"...when I'm being stifled... Constantly hearing 'no this, no that, that's not appropriate, not now, maybe next time' and then someone else comes in and does something new or does the same thing I've been trying to do for a whole year. This makes me not feel valued and not feel like part of the community."

"I don't feel valued as a student affairs practitioner. It seems like the academic side doesn't respect what we say, but we see how students live and what they're struggling with."

"The separation between faculty, administrators, and support staff. The lines between these groups have been here a long time."

Faculty quotes

"...anytime I feel underappreciated or undervalued, it's hard to feel like part of the community. I can think of an instance with previous leaders in my college. I was talking about tough times I was having, and this person said, 'Well, I know someone who's having a tougher time than you.'"

"As an instructor without a terminal degree, I'm sometimes left out of conversations, funding opportunities, and teaching opportunities even though I have years of experience, and that's pretty upsetting. Sometimes I'm ignored in my department or treated/talked to like a less valued member of the department."

"USI is like Double-A ball - we are the place where people go to grow their careers so they can go on to something better."

"Our problem here is communication. There are some of us that administrators talk to, but those conversations need to be way more inclusive. Horizontal communication is good at USI, but communication up and down is bad."

How USI can better support people

- **Students**
  - More opportunities to see and interact with people like them
    - Recruiting and retaining students, staff, and faculty of color
  - Better support for students with disabilities
- **Staff**
  - More opportunities to interact with students and colleagues
  - Better and more collaborative relationships across departments
  - Show staff that their input is valued
  - Make it clear that USI has fair and equitable procedures for working through conflicts
- **Faculty**
  - More collaboration with faculty in other colleges
  - More acknowledgement and recognition for their work
  - Efforts to retain faculty from underrepresented backgrounds
  - Support for parents - better parental leave, child care on campus, breastfeeding spaces

Overall themes

Strengths of USI's community

Strengths

- **People value USI's smallish size**
  - Able to get to know people in the community
  - It's friendly
- **Beautiful campus**
  - Enjoy bringing families to campus
  - More than an assemblage of buildings
- **People want to give to the institution to make it better**
  - Important to be recognized for good work

Strengths (cont'd)

- **Staff and faculty**
  - Value and enjoy working with colleagues in their departments, colleges, and programs
  - Have a high regard for USI students
  - Enjoy their work and feel like part of the community when they have autonomy to be creative and try new things
    - Value "being trusted" to do their work
    - Want to feel like their ideas and opinions matter
    - Hearing "no, we don't do things that way" makes them feel stifled
  - Enjoy collaborating with people outside their departments
    - Positive comments from faculty about committee work!
  - Newer staff and faculty especially positive about their students, their colleagues, and the institution
    - People who'd been at USI longer were a little more jaded and unhappy about changes at the university
- **Staff in the Multicultural Center (MCC) are having a profound impact on the USI community by supporting Black and Latinx students**

Strengths (cont'd)

- **Everyone we spoke with valued USI's students**
  - "People report that their sense of community is strongest when they have the opportunity to collaborate with other community members to make USI better for students. This is true whether it's faculty working on improving classes and academic programs for their students, staff working on projects that support students, or students who are engaging with campus organizations like the MCC."

Challenges for USI's community

Challenges

- **People most comfortable working with colleagues on a similar level of the org chart**
  - Concerns about the intentions of "the administration"
  - Not being heard by people up the org chart
- **Notable line between staff and faculty**
  - Staff seemed invisible to many faculty, and some staff were aware of this
- **Black and Latinx students, staff, and faculty face significant challenges at USI**
  - Few in numbers; they often feel isolated
  - Negative experiences - treated unkindly, not acknowledged for good work, had ideas disregarded, experienced racism
- **Appreciated the benefits, but the pay is low**
  - Can be taken as a sign that people aren't valued as members of the community

Thank you!

Our thanks to:

- 🎈***Dr*** Pamela Hopson and her colleagues for setting up the visit
- The 36 people who found time in their busy schedules to speak with us

"We enjoyed our conversations. We also appreciated the passion that we heard in all of our conversations for USI, USI's community, and USI's impact on the Evansville community. Every conversation was thoughtful, and while people occasionally made critical remarks, most of them didn't focus on airing grievances. [In our report] We've done our best to honor the time they gave us by accurately reflecting the themes behind their comments."

Questions or comments?