

**Between Flexibility and Frustration: Interdisciplinary Studies Majors and the Realities of Navigating Higher Education at Auburn University at Montgomery**

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## **Introduction**

As an academic advisor at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM) for nearly five years, I have observed the college life cycle of thousands of students. The life cycle of interdisciplinary studies (BIS) majors at AUM has become increasingly fascinating. They are a distinctive group of students, all coming from different backgrounds and ultimately pursuing this degree.

Looking at higher education research, I found that the institutions do not always look like AUM students. The majority of research is from large, selective public universities or highly selective private colleges. AUM is a small regional four-year institution and non-selective with around 1,500 students. Additionally, AUM has a diverse student population due to a high percentage of African American and international students. AUM also has a large percentage of first-generation and low-income students. Like the AUM student population, BIS majors are also diverse. These majors range from student athletes to first-time students in their late 50s. With this wide range of students, it creates challenges in terms of successfully completing the degree. This will become apparent from the advising appointments I have documented.

Additionally, the Interdisciplinary Studies degree is incredibly flexible and allows any prior credit AUM accepts. For some context, the BIS degree consists of the Alabama State core, 34 hours of electives at any academic level, at least 36 hours of courses at the junior/senior level, methodology, and capstone (IDSC4000). All undergraduate students take the Alabama state core, but, at the major level, most degrees have specific courses that are required. What makes the BIS degree so appealing is flexibility. This degree is also able to integrate transfer, military credit, and past coursework easily. This degree

essentially consists mostly of electives. The only real major requirements are the methodology course(s) and IDSC4000. A methodology can be an array of courses like a statistics course, research methods course, foreign language, programming course, or critical thinking course. IDSC4000 is a capstone course taken in their final semester at AUM. It combines career development and research skills to prepare students for the future.

This thesis examines the struggles and successes of Interdisciplinary Studies majors at AUM through in-depth discussions with the students. These conversations reveal that BIS students embody challenges faced both at AUM and within higher education more broadly. Their experiences reflect both the frustrations and the flexibility of the BIS degree—frustrations rooted in unclear pathways, inconsistent support, and institutional misunderstandings, as well as flexibility that allows students to tailor their education to unique goals and circumstances. The analysis is organized around key themes drawn from these experiences: BIS students' social and academic belonging, institutional policy support and risks to BIS, the role of BIS within the broader landscape of higher education, and the often-overlooked hidden labor of academic advising. Additionally, I will offer insights from my experience as a staff member at AUM, highlighting how institutional structures and advising practices impact these students in profound and often unrecognized ways.

## **Background**

There is a lack of research on small, non-selective four-year institutions like AUM. There is next to none on Interdisciplinary Studies. The majority of research is from large, selective public universities or highly selective private colleges. I use

scholarly books and articles such as *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life*, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*, *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*, *Degrees of Risk: Navigating Insecurity and Inequality in Public Higher Education*, and “*I’ve Learned to Love What’s Going to Pay Me*”: *A Culture of Despair in Higher Education during a Time of Insecurity* to highlight how the students being researched often differ from the students at AUM, especially BIS students, who are typically more diverse, nontraditional, and navigating higher education through different lived experiences. While each book and article may offer glimpses into students who resemble BIS majors at AUM and highlight common themes in higher education, I have yet to come across any specific research on the topic.

*College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life* (Nunn 2021) uses student experiences from a large, highly selective public 4-year university and from a medium-sized “more selective” religious private university to show how social, campus-community, and academic belonging shapes a student's experience in college. Social belonging can be found by participating in university clubs, organizations, religious groups, sports teams, and performance groups. (18). It is essentially finding a group of friends and being accepted by a group. This is different from campus community belonging. Campus-community belonging is feeling a sense of community in the campus environment. Nunn explains how each campus has a “particular campus environment and organizational structure.”. It is also important to note that students can feel social belonging but not campus-community belonging and vice versa (42). Lastly, the feeling of academic belonging is more than GPA, it is a sense

of academic competence individually as well as community wide (66). Academic belonging provides a feeling of acceptance in an academic setting. This could be acceptance by others in that class, major, or even by the professor. I have seen where BIS students have lost academic belonging due to faculty and staff. While I work more with students on an academic level, I have seen the struggle for BIS students to find social belonging. A large number of the BIS students take all of their courses online and work at the very least a part-time job. These students do not often have the time to even find social belonging at AUM. Nunn explains how first-generation students tend to struggle to find social belonging as it can be a daunting task with hundreds of clubs and activities on-campus (Page. 30). For AUM, there are not nearly as many clubs, and it has a much smaller campus compared to the public university. While it is easier to join clubs at AUM due to the size, as I mentioned previously, the BIS students I advise do not have the time or are even on campus to have the opportunity to find social belonging. While Nunn only touches on this, BIS students lose additional academic belonging when they are “forced out” of their original major. This being “forced out” can be due to poor academic progress, not passing certain testing requirements, or because they do not enjoy that major anymore. One interviewee, Isabella, found her a career she was passionate about and a major that was meaningful to her creating academic belonging. For BIS students, they lose that passion and that “work for a purpose” as Isabella describes (108). Isabella also mentions how she found social belonging a part of her academic belonging (Page. 110). Isabella was able to make friends with others in her major. Since BIS students take a variety of courses with a variety of people, they do not always know people in those courses. Currently BIS students only take IDSC4000 together in their final semester at AUM. BIS students at AUM center belonging around their academic major. When some



of these students lose that sense of academic belonging, the rest is lost too. They find their identity in BIS whether that is positive or negative. Although the institutions of Nunn research are very different from AUM, her research highlights the importance of belonging to first-generation students and in turn BIS students at AUM.

*Lower ED: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* gives us a first-hand look into the interworking and even predatory practices of two for-profit colleges. Tressie McMillan Cottom (2017) uses her own experience working as an admission counselor to show how and why for-profit colleges are on the rise the United States. The best thing about *LowerED* is how it was written by someone “on the front lines”. Tressie understands the ins and outs of those institutions. She understands the struggles of students and where things need to be changed. By interviewing actual students, she is able to find patterns of social and economic inequality among those who attend these *LowerED* institutions. This social and economic inequality is a common theme throughout other higher education research. These are middle to lower class first-generation students with little parental support, or they are adults themselves. These *LowerED* students’ goal is to get a job or better with this degree. This is true for many BIS students at AUM as well. Cottom talks about Janice and her educational journey at a for-profit college in nursing. It took her longer than she expected to graduate due to running out money. She had a job, a family to care for, and needed to choose a college that was “fast”. (Page. 168). This story is very similar to those of the BIS students I advise. Many of the BIS students have families, full time jobs, and need to “finish college fast.” While AUM is by no means a for-profit college, AUM does rely on credit hour production to function as a university. This pressure for credit-hour production has caused a desperate need for students so much so that it feels as though advisors, like

myself, are having to “sell” AUM to students or beg them to register. I have begun to see themes in LowerED that AUM is beginning to adopt.

*Paying for the Party*” *How College Maintains Inequality* takes us through the college life of several women in a large party university Midwestern University or MU. The authors use a pseudonym instead of directly naming the university. Each woman is on either on the party or mobility pathway. These pathways are used to describe the college journey of these women. The party pathway consists of upper to upper-middle-class students bound to be socialites or wannabes (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2015). The mobility pathway consists of students from the lower middle to the lower class. Through Armstrong and Hamilton’s research, they find that those on the party pathway are set up to succeed. The combination of upper-middle class status and parental support allows the women on the party pathway to be more likely to succeed throughout and after college (page. 211). These women graduated with little to no student loans as well as high career prospects or at least marital prospects (page. 211). While those on the mobility pathway have substantial student loans, graduated in 5 to 6 years, have realistic career plans or a job that does not require, and about half are living with parents (page. 214). Looking at AUM students, specifically BIS students, a majority are on the mobility pathways. These students tend to be first-generation graduates with substantial student loans, low GPAs, and take much longer than four years to graduate. Additionally, they have little to no parental support or are even parents themselves. Some are not even able to receive financial aid due to their GPAs. Like *LowerED*, *Paying for the Party* shows social and economic inequalities in higher education and those with money and status are more likely to succeed. Those with higher economic status like the students on the party pathway, can worry less about finances and instead can worry about where the next frat

party is. They also do not have to worry about their academics as they have a support system and resources to get through college. Additionally, they possess a sense of ease and confidence knowing the value and expectations of college. On the flipside many students at AUM are low income first-generation. These students statically end up on the less ideal pathways. While BIS students and many students in other majors cannot afford to have poor academic performance or no career prospects, these students still veer towards the mobility pathway. The authors do note that the students who found upward mobility by transferring to smaller regional colleges improved academically and financially (215).

*Aspiring Adults Adrift* interviews 80 graduated students from a variety of 4-year institutions who are interviewed to document life after college. The author does not provide a name or any descriptions of the institutions they graduated from. The authors conclude that high education institutions and students are a part of the issue of adults becoming adrift after college. The authors note that many institutions are prioritizing social attractions—such as football, Greek life, and other extracurricular activities—to appeal to high school graduates, often placing less emphasis on academic offerings. (Arum and Roska, 2014, page 120). By doing this, the institutions are supporting party culture rather than academics (page. 134). For the students, the authors believe they are choosing less rigorous academic programs and focusing on the social aspects of college compared to the academic. They attribute these things as well as general lack of critical thinking skill as to why these recent college graduates are not career or workforce ready. One limitation of this study is that these recent graduates were affected by the economic fallout of the Great Recession, which may have affected their career readiness and employment. Another limitation is that these graduates were also only interviewed two

years after graduating, which is a short time to have conclusive evidence of future success. Even with these limitations, I often see BIS students as adults adrift. There are many AUM students who change their major to BIS without understanding what the degree is or what career can be done with it. There are also students who choose BIS due to its “lack of academic rigor”. The authors also discuss these recent graduates as “emerging adults” or those who are becoming more independent and responsible (page. 84). For many of the AUM BIS students, they are already considered adults. I have students who already have full-time jobs, a mortgage, committed partners, and/or kids.

*In Degrees of Risk: Navigating Insecurity and Inequality in Public Higher Education*, examines how race, class, and other social factors shape students’ experiences of risk, inequality, and limited access to support and opportunities at “Commonwealth University” (CU). CU has about twenty times the number of students that AUM has but is very diverse. Silver (2024) begins with describing public universities as “ivory casinos”, meaning that investing in higher education is like gambling. Today, attending college does not offer a guaranteed pathway to a job but rather creates significant financial and personal risks, with no promise of success. Silver created four descriptions of the type of students he encountered at CU. These descriptions consist of *precarious pioneers*, *risk minimizers*, *opportunity maximizers*, and *insulated explorers*. First, the precarious pioneers consist of low-income, working-class first-generation (LIFGWC) students who live in a constant state of financial uncertainty. These students have little outside support and tend to avoid seeking student support services on campus. Additionally, these students find it difficult to navigate higher education bureaucracy leading to them feeling invisible (21). While the precarious pioneers face more challenges than the other student groups, there is also a sense of resilience and

determination in their educational journey (41). Second, the risk minimizers are students who may also come from a low-income working-class family but have a better support system. They often choose majors that are not as rigorous or considered practical and tend to avoid any extracurricular activities involved socially or academically. They also have the same financial insecurities as the precarious pioneers. This financial insecurity leads to them having to balance work and school. Third, are the opportunity maximizers. These students are a part of marginalized groups but are considered socioeconomically advantaged. Although they are relatively more advantaged, many students feel that if they don't do everything, join clubs, network, take internships, they risk missing out on the full value of their degree. This reflects their very real anxiety about navigating an increasingly competitive job market. This group will not be as notable in this thesis; it is not a common group at AUM. CU's larger size and significantly higher tuition suggest that students from diverse backgrounds who attend are more likely to come from higher socioeconomic statuses than those at AUM. Finally, insulated explorers have the flexibility, time, and resources to enjoy college and truly experience college life. The insulated explorers at CU are middle to upper-middle class with plenty of parental assistance. These would equate to "the party pathway" in *Paying for the Party*. The insulated explorers navigate through college with ease and are often involved with extra and co-curricular activities. (115). BIS students lean towards being more like precarious pioneers with a sprinkle of risk minimizers. I would call them Precarious Risk Minimizer. A large part of AUM's population consists of LIFGWC students. Like the Precarious Pioneers and Risk Minimizers, BIS students suffer from financial insecurity and often causing poor academic performance. Silver concludes by arguing that risk in higher education is unevenly distributed, with privileged students benefiting from financial

support and social advantages, while low-income, first-generation, and students of color face greater academic and financial pressures. These inequalities challenge the idea that college is a level playing field and show how public institutions often reproduce, rather than reduce, social inequities. Even though CU is much larger than AUM, these inequalities can be seen here as well.

In the article *“I’ve Learned to Love What’s Going to Pay Me”: A Culture of Despair in Higher Education during a Time of Insecurity*, author Pamela Aronson (2017) interviews students at a mid-size, commuter, university. They are seeing a change in the way these majority working-class students think about education. Because they are in the working class, they are worried about money, job insecurity, and rising college costs. Many students at this university feel like they cannot follow their passions or study what they truly love. Instead, they feel pressure to choose majors that are more “practical” or likely to get them a job, even if they don’t enjoy them. The authors call this shift in thinking a “culture of despair.” That means students are no longer hopeful or excited about their education. They are just trying to survive and make it through. This article shows how the college system is becoming more focused on getting jobs than on learning or personal growth. Aronson’s work connects to other research that talks about how money, social class, and college policies affect students. It also links to big ideas from thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu (1973), who wrote about how the working class’s values, goals, and way of seeing the world (shaped by their life experiences) don’t match the elite culture that schools value and reward, so they’re often excluded. To elaborate, higher education is mainlining inequality as it prepares students to become workers who accept unfair treatment and believe that success comes only from effort, even though the system mainly benefits the wealthy. Additionally, Bowles and Gintis (2011) explain the

disconnect these students feel from what they are learning because they are so focused on getting their degree done. This idea of “just getting the degree done” contradicts being able to reap the rewards of the higher education experience. Instead of being a place where students explore ideas and grow, it is turning into a place where they feel forced to make “safe or practical” choices because of fear and financial stress. This is very common for BIS students and AUM students as a whole. They choose practical degrees to graduate and get a job. This is also one of the only pieces of research that interviews students who look like AUM students at a college that looks like AUM. The only issue I have with this article is that staff are lumped in with faculty and administration. Her faculty and staff have the attitude that students just “do not want to learn, but overlook the inequalities of higher education and the economic conditions around them. I do not think AUM staff and faculty all believe this. They often see the privilege within higher education. There are staff who have been in the same place as some of the BIS students and have made it this far. There can be frustration with students and understanding at the same time.

In conclusion, these scholarly works are significant as they explore a range of critical issues within higher education. *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life*, *Lower ED: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*, and *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, *Degrees of Risk: Navigating Insecurity and Inequality in Public Higher Education*, and “*I’ve Learned to Love What’s Going to Pay Me*”: *A Culture of Despair in Higher Education during a Time of Insecurity*, explain the socio-economic inequalities of higher education. However, most of these works fall short in accurately representing institutions like AUM,

and the absence of BIS students' experiences in the existing literature reveals a significant gap in scholarly research.

### **Methodology**

A question I get, mostly from the freshmen I advise, is “why did you choose AUM?” I was a transfer student who planned to play volleyball at AUM, but when that didn’t work out, I chose it for the price and size. It was not my first choice as I received scholarships from other schools in Montgomery, but AUM was the cheapest. The size was also a draw for me as the other two institutions were similar in size. This was my third time transferring and I just wanted to finish my degree. While at AUM, I made the most of it and joined SGA and a sorority. I was pretty involved at AUM while also working a part-time job. After graduation, I worked for the state for a few years and then got a job as an administrative assistant. Within a year, I moved into the role as an academic advisor.

Over the years, I’ve personally lived through the many evolving versions of AUM, each one shaping my understanding of what AUM was and currently is. I was here during our highest enrollment in 2016, and now I see us facing real challenges in bringing students in. This is not just affecting AUM but, all universities in the United States. For some context, people are having less children in the U.S in turn less high school students are graduating. To remedy this, in 2021 AUM recruited about 500 graduate international students. Unfortunately, with today’s political climate, it is difficult for international students to get visas, and those students only stay at AUM for about two years, so they are all graduating. I have also been in the classes I advise students to take and, as an undergraduate student, dealt with the same financial struggles. Although I am considered



a middle class and a continuing generation student, I am the oldest of five kids and my family lives out of state. My parents made me work at least a part-time job and take out student loans. As an undergraduate student, I was lucky not to have to navigate every aspect of college by myself or with a family and full-time job. Now as a graduate student, I have a family and work full-time and it's hard, but I know I must do it for myself and for my family. I have also seen AUMs student activities, clubs, and events thrive. AUMs newest strategy to create and marketing fulling online degree to increase enrollment. I do see value in this, especially with the BIS student I advise. I also see value in our student activities. The issue is AUM really needs to pick what it wants to be. Are we an online campus or are we a traditional campus? Do we care about more enrollments or about student belonging? I say all of this to make it clear that I've experienced AUM from multiple sides. Drawing from my unique perspective as both a student and a staff member, this thesis primarily aims to highlight the experiences of BIS students at AUM, while also incorporating my own insights to provide context and depth.

I have been an academic advisor at AUM for about five years, and, this time, I have advised most of the majors we have at AUM. Since I have advised so many majors and have an extensive understanding of AUM academic policies, I was tagged to advise Interdisciplinary Studies students. Historically, the BIS advisor was a faculty member who also taught IDSC4000. When the faculty members left the university, there was realization that these students need an academic advisor who could spend time combing though their past coursework, who understands AUM academic policies, and handle graduation processes. These students also need someone easily available who can give them academic and student success advice. While faculty members are an excellent resource for students, many of them are teaching too many courses to be able to do these

administrative tasks. They also tend to only know the surface of these academic and institutional policies. As an academic advisor we do not just give students their classes, we bridge the gap between the student and the institution.

My main form of data collection is through student advising appointments. This method was chosen as it is part of my daily job and is normal for these students. The amount of BIS advisees varies. I have had anywhere between 75 to 100 in a semester. I also average 25 graduates every semester. My advising load is about 250 to 275 students as I advise for other majors as well. These advising appointments are non-formal interviews and names have been changed for ethical reasons. We discuss courses needed for graduation as well as things happening in their life that potentially affect academic progress.

The information I gathered from these advising appointments, I used to create journals. I started these journals about a year ago for an assignment in the sociology of higher education course I took in summer 2024. Over the course of approximately one year, I systematically documented advising appointments while critically reflecting on the challenges and complexities encountered in advising BIS students within the broader context of higher education. I also applied for an IRB to report results for the Thesis and it was approved.

When I began advising the BIS population, I quickly realized they were different from the others I had advised. This made me reflect on the many philosophies that shape how I approach advising students. There are three types of academic advising: prescriptive, developmental, and intrusive (proactive). Prescriptive advising is advisor-led and focuses on giving students clear instructions, like what classes to take.

Developmental advising is more student-focused and helps students plan their academic, personal, and career goals. Intrusive advising involves advisors actively reaching out to students, especially those who may need extra support. Since BIS students are all so different, I must use all of these. They want prescriptive advising but need intrusive advising, and I am trying to use developmental advising to be less reliant on me, which does not seem to be working. BIS students have also caused me to reflect on common characteristics of different majors. STEM majors have common personalities and interests as do Social Science or Liberal Arts majors. In contrast, BIS students are all different academically and socially. There are trends within this population like being older in age and having a lot of course credit either from AUM or from another institution. Another portion of BIS students were not progressing well in their previous major, so BIS was their “plan B “. I almost never have students start their AUM journey as an Interdisciplinary Studies major. Most of the time these students begin in another major and either are referred to me by another advisor that BIS could be a good fit for them. The BIS major is referred based on the amount or type of credit they have earned or because they cannot continue in that other major. Some of these with a lot of credit or unique types of credit are new transfer students or returning students. When I am referred to by another advisor, I reach out to that student to set up a face-to-face, zoom, or phone appointment. BIS is difficult to explain via email because of flexibility. For those who have never heard of BIS, the idea of a degree being so flexibility and without many specific degree requirements, can be hard to wrap their head around. Before the appointment I look at all the student's credits and some of these students have hundreds of hours from four different institutions, which takes a good bit of time to put into a degree plan. During the appointment, I go over how many hours they have left, what they

need based on the BIS requirement, how to use or even set-up their MyAUM page, how to register, and literally anything else they can possibly think of ask because as their academic advisor I am supposed to know everything. I honestly know a whole about the ins and outs of AUM but, my main job is teaching the degree requirements for graduation and getting them registered.

Even though this population of students can be challenging, many of them are working hard and trying their best. I value how their academic backgrounds reflect diverse experiences, and how resilient they can be. I love being able to play a role in their academic journey. I walked in the Spring 2025 graduation ceremony, and I only invited my husband since my family lives far away and it is just my master's degree. I knew I would not have as much cheering for me as others, but in the very front row was all of the BIS students. I walked to the front of the stage and all of the graduating BIS students cheered for me. This and watching them walk across the stage washed away any prior feelings of frustration.

## **Data**

I have divided my interview data into four different themes: The Finishing Degree, The Easy Degree, The "I'm Lost" Degree, and The Everything Degree. These themes have been used to describe the BIS degree by students whether that be directly or indirectly. First, "The Finishing Degree" has been used to describe BIS in terms of counting prior credit and non-academic credit. Second, "The Easy Degree" is used by students who "want to take the easiest courses". This has also been negatively coined due to how some students end up choosing this degree. Next "The I'm Lost Degree", was coined by me to decide. Finally, "The Everything Degree" is an inference I have made by

students who genuinely chose BIS because of the variety of courses they can take. This is the most positive description of the BIS degree. The students in the theme may fit into more than one of these categories or even all of them.

### **The Finishing Degree**

“The Finishing Degree” is a practical description of the BIS degree as it is a reason students choose it. As I have mentioned before, many of the BIS students have prior course credit either at AUM or from another institution so, they major in BIS to finish their undergraduate degree to use those credits. There are a few AUM athletes who fit this description. Ben, Tanner, Kelsey, and Amara are all transfer student athletes who started at AUM in one degree then due to credit loss, looked at the BIS option. Ben started out as a business major and realized due to the strictness of the degree plan that BIS may be a better fit. He did not really have a career in mind, majoring in Business either. Due to COVID, many student athletes were granted an extra year planning at the community college level. While this is great for playing, it was not great academically. AUM only allows 60 hours of community college credit to be counted towards an undergraduate. Ben had a good bit more than that. Tanner had this same issue. He started his time at AUM as a Kinesiology major with a goal of being a chiropractor. He realized the extra courses he was taking towards the kinesiology degree really were not needed to get into chiropractor school and he was losing a lot of credit he transferred in. Kelsey and Amara have a similar story. They transferred from a community college to a 4-year institution, then to AUM. The same issue as the other two students, they had a lot of credit. They both wanted to be elementary school teachers but did not know that every state has different teacher certification requirements. Kelsey and Amara would have had to tack on about 3 years just to complete the courses for the elementary education degree.

They also would have lost a lot of credit. Kelsey was fine with changing her major since where she plans to move to after college does not require teachers to have a certificate. Amara was more relieved as she had recently decided she did not want to be a teacher anymore. For student athletes, they only have many years of athletic eligibility and/or scholarships to complete their degree. This means they tend to want to finish it as soon as they can. While calling BIS a “finishing” degree can seem negative, these students benefitted from changing their degree. Tanner, who just recently graduated, was still able to apply for a chiropractor school. Kelsey and Amara are still at AUM and are doing great so far. Ben was happy about finishing his degree quicker but had some last-minute worries about the BIS degree and career opportunities. I will discuss this in another paragraph.

Several others have also benefited from the BIS degree because of its efficient credit transfer process, which allows students to make the most of previously earned credits. Max, Floyd, and Warren all had credit from the late 1980s to early 1990s. Max and Floyd needed to finish their degrees quickly to get the job they had lined up. When Max decided to come back to AUM, he did ask “what is the quickest degree?” and for him it was BIS. This can be seen negatively but, for Max, it was truly the fastest option. Max and Floyd were able to achieve this goal. Warren wanted to complete his degree as a goal for himself, but unfortunately, he has not yet achieved this goal.

The active military and ROTC students also benefit from this degree. Patrick and Aaron work on based ROTC. The flexibility of the BIS degree allows them to work and meet ROTC requirements. The goal for them is to finish their degree as fast as possible to commission. The BIS degree also accepts military course credit. Aaron had about two semesters worth of military credit that counts toward his earned hours for graduation.

BIS being called a “Finishing Degree”, has positive and negative aspects. It helps many students achieve their goals quickly. But being a student's only option can make students feel lost and seen as the “easy” way out.

### **The Easy Degree**

A common misconception about BIS is that this degree is an “easy way out”. I’ve even heard this attitude echoed by some faculty, who seem to suggest, “Since this student isn’t doing well in their current program, just send them to BIS—it’ll be easier.” This sends a discouraging and misleading message to students. On top of that, I often have students come in asking, “What are the easiest classes I can take?”, which only reinforces the perception some faculty promote. That said, my response to these students is always “what is easy for me may not be easy for you.” I believe the reason for the assumption that BIS is “easy” is due to the confusion of flexibility for ease. Most of the BIS students I advise take courses completely online. There are even students I have never met or live in Alabama. These students chose this degree for its flexibility, allowing them to take just about whatever they want and do it from their computer. For example, Lauren lives out of state and every semester is on my midterm call campaign. Essentially this means she is failing midterms. She is also one of those students who asks for “easy” classes. In a recent appointment, she asked why her degree was taking so long to complete, I explained to her that not passing courses delays graduation and I was sort of struck that she did not realize that. I ran into a similar situation with Karen, who gets great grades when she completes a course. Her issue is that as soon as it gets “hard” or her grade starts to dip, she drops it. Like Lauren, she asked me why her degree was taking so long. She even tried to argue that I miss advised her when in actuality she keeps dropping her classes. I explained to her that you do not get credit for withdrawing from a course you

took most of. She did not response to me after that. For Karen, I am unsure if she expects classes to be easier or what she expects. She is one of the more difficult students to talk to. There are also those who were “removed” from the academic program they were in and are suggested to change to BIS. These do necessarily improve academic as BIS majors, but there are so little requirements that they are able to coast through to graduation. Some may not even get that far. Jack was a CLASS major who could not pass a certain requirement to get to the “professional” part of the program. When he changed his major to BIS, he only had a semester or two left. He ended up extending that time by not passing multiple classes. This shows that BIS is not necessarily easier, but a more flexible way to get to graduation.

Overall, no degree is easy. The academic difficulties with students can stem from many different things. It can be a lack of motivation, personal hardships, working a lot, or other things. But, labeling a degree as easy does not help how students see their degree and how others do. This label devalues their hard work and undermines their achievement of earning a bachelors.

### **The “I’m Lost” Degree**

Something I have seen in many BIS students is a sense of being lost. These students are lost academically and sometimes in life. It is like they are hamsters in wheel and their degree is dangling in front of them but, they cannot seem to reach it.

As I have mentioned, BIS contains a large portion of older students. These students often work full time jobs or are retired and also need online courses. The issue with this is they are not computer savvy, which becomes difficult when your courses are online. I have spent hours with some of these students just explaining to them how to



register for classes then how to use Canvas. Then the next semester I do it all over again because they have forgotten. Henry is a great example of this. He is about 70 years old and is only a few courses away from graduating. He struggles every semester registering and doing his course work. He is quite smart but on top of the technological struggles, he also has a lot of health issues. It also does not help that although, I am “supposed” to know every process as AUM, I don’t. Henry has recently had some financial aid issues and that is one thing I only want to know at a bare minimum. The issue is that financial aid won't answer his calls, and it takes days for them to answer emails. I am the first to say that I prefer email because I like to have things in writing and because I have students in and out of my office most of the day. This issue is students will be dropped from classes if their financial aid is incorrect. Another student, Linda, also has these issues. She is a sweet lady with far more courses ahead of her than Henry. One thing I will say about these two is that they are resilient, they want badly to graduate. They are just going in circles to get there.

Many BIS students have, for lack of a better phrase, “dug themselves a hole” in terms of finances. Many of these “lost” students have either lost or run out of financial aid. It feels almost hopeless for the students who need several more courses but can only take 2 or 3 in a semester because that is all they can afford. I have several other students that just keep coming back to finish their degree and just cannot quite get there. It has taken Larry about two years to finish a biology course and a lab. He recently was given a scholarship to finish this one course then dropped the course and was able to keep the money. For the 2 or 3 semesters, he will call and ask about the scholarship and it's the same answer every time. He then will ask for more money which AUM is unable to give him. This is the same student that has a legislature call the Chancellor about how much

he owes to AUM. Another student, Marty, has taken classes at AUM for a long time. This student is difficult to get ahold of. When I was able to talk with him, he told me he did not know the academic calendar existed. Marty has been in and out of AUM for several years and I send it to every student I advise every semester. Paying for classes is a big issue for BIS students. Like many of the students above, they have lost their financial aid or have run out of it. Since AUM consists of a majority lower income students, they cannot afford a few thousands of dollars to finish their degree.

Since I have advised BIS for so long, I have a spiel explaining the degree requirements, what they need to graduate, the flexibility of the degree, and at that point I normally have them sold. Some ask me about careers with this degree but, often they do not worry about it because this is how they get out of AUM the “quickest”. What happens closer to graduation is that they start to panic. About two semesters from graduating, they start asking about internships, career options, or even worse “Is it too late to change my major to (insert major that will take them two more years to complete)?” Even though I try to discuss these things with them when they change their major, they are just not worried about it until the last minute. Remember Ben the student athlete from earlier, he and his dad began to worry about “how vague this degree is”. I explained to him that general business is just as vague and how most degrees are not one-for-one. Nursing and education are explanations of one-for-one degrees. You get a nursing degree, then you are a nurse. He was one semester away from graduating when he asked and at that point, I explained how a master’s degree is a better option. As an athlete he could work as a graduate assistant either at AUM or somewhere else. We also talked about the importance of utilizing the IDSC4000 capstone course. This course was created for the purpose of being able to articulate your degree and to have a portfolio to give to an employer. Ben

did decide to stick with BIS and graduate in Spring 2025. I am unsure what his future plans are but I hope to follow up with him.

There was a time when those who were not doing well in pre-nursing would be forced to change their major to BIS. This was not a great way to transition these students as it created a sense of academic loss. One thing about pre-nursing students is that they want to be nurses to help people, but they do not understand how rigorous the academic work is to get there. When they were forced into BIS, they did not understand why they were in a major they did not want to be in, and many of them stayed in BIS because it was easier. Some of these students have graduated, but most of them never returned to AUM at this point. These students felt lost and unsure of what career to do without nursing. Since the new pre-nursing advisor has created many plans for these students, they feel prepared for their new major. Some of these students still change to BIS due to our new healthcare administration concentration, but they choose BIS rather than feeling forced.

I speak for many academic advisors saying we have made ourselves sometimes too accessible. Students will just send me emails rather than googling or using the AUM website to find the answer. After an advising appointment, I will follow up with an email going over what we talked about, and they will ask something I put in that same email. My favorite question is “where is my PIN?”. My response is always the same, “It’s in Degree Works”. There are two things specifically that have become increasingly frustrating with the BIS students or type of students. The first issue is that, despite lengthy appointments that sometimes-last hours and multiple follow-up emails, students either do not register for classes at all or register but drop all their courses before or during the semester. The other thing is I will have some students for three to four

semesters, and we have our advising appointments and every semester they forget how to register, what their degree requirements are, and even what the name of their degree is. It tends to get exhausting and incredibly time consuming repeating myself over and over. I want to help students and be there for them, but I have over 200 hundred students. I often spend hours on just one student. I do not know if I am teaching these students poorly or they are truly not understanding.

Overall, the “I’m Lost” students are by far the most challenging. I feel as though I make myself as available as possible to help, I can only help so much. Students should also take some initiative to understand AUM policies and procedures, especially when they don’t change and I explain them every semester. There are also truly simple things they can do like Google “AUM academic calendar” or read their emails. In terms of feeling lost in their degree, I also

The concept of Interdisciplinary Studies at AUM and other institutions is a degree of multiple disciplines. It was created to be a degree for those who like all sorts of academic concepts. As you can see from the data above, the BIS degree at AUM does not always look like this. But there are some advisees who are genuinely interested in many different topics and utilize their degree to the fullest.

Kristy, one of BIS very best students, changed her major to BIS because she stopped enjoying her other major. Her goal was to attend a professional school after college but working in that field turned her away from that. She decided on a new career choice so, in her senior year, she changed to BIS. This student is not one of my current advisees but a recent alum who stays active at AUM. She has always said how changing her major was the best thing she ever did. Kristy is one of the countless BIS alumni who

have used what she learned in IDSC4000 and how to utilize what she learned through her BIS degree. A few other notable alumni are Lauren who is teaching overseas, and Allison who has worked for multiple state government agencies.

I also have had those students who started out being considered the “I’m Lost” student and moved to the “Everything” student. I inherited Eddie when I started advising BIS. Eddie was difficult to get ahold of, always on my midterm call campaign, and lost his financial aid. One day he started asking about prestigious internships and studying abroad. I thought nothing of it and assumed he would never do it. Then he started to get his grades up and landed a great internship in Montgomery. He is currently finishing out his last credits studying abroad. I am not sure what changed, but he is like a different person. It sounds bad but seeing students say over and over that they can do better and then don’t; it desensitizes you. I want to help my students and will help them or refer them to someone who can. They also have to work to help themselves and want to be helped. Eddie is a great example of someone who dug themselves out of that “hole” and used BIS for what it was intended to be.

The “Everything” BIS students tend to be the easiest to advise. Many of them already have courses picked out and really work to understand their degree. They utilize the capstone course and do the extra things necessary for their future. I also believe these students are the most likely to utilize their degree and go on to have incredible careers.

## **Analysis**

Recently, someone told me that BIS students are ground zero for the biggest challenges at AUM. This struck me because they are completely correct. BIS students at AUM reflect many of the core challenges facing higher education today, especially at

regional institutions serving first-generation and low-income students. This section analyzes their experiences through advising insights, institutional policy review, and existing literature. BIS students highlight both the strengths and shortcomings of AUM—particularly in flexibility, accessibility, and student support. Their journeys reveal key themes: BIS students' social and academic belonging, institutional policy support and the risks posed to BIS, the place of BIS in the broader landscape of higher education, and the hidden labor of academic advising. These themes are drawn from firsthand experience and higher education research, offering a deeper understanding of how BIS students both challenge and reflect the mission of AUM.

### **BIS Students' Social and Academic Belonging**

Most BIS students struggle with social and academic belonging due to needing to finish their degree quickly and needing the flexibility of being online. While the literature on belonging focuses on larger institutions, they can still apply for schools of AUM size.

Since the goal of many of the BIS students is “finishing”, they don’t take the time or often have the time to find a sense of belonging at AUM. More especially, they lack social belonging. Since so many BIS students take courses online, they do not attend campus events or clubs. Some do not even step on campus until graduation if they even attend graduation. There are the few athletes who have their athlete friends and those who made it a point to join clubs and make friends, but in large part this is not the case. In *College Belonging*, Nunn focuses on first-generation students at a large university, primarily traditional-aged students. While AUM also serves a significant number of first-generation students, it is a much smaller institution, and the BIS program specifically enrolls non-traditional students—those who are typically older, employed, and managing family responsibilities. I really do not think BIS students care about social belonging. I

have never asked, but I just do not think these students have the time. Recently, I attended an honors course on higher education where students read the same literature in this paper. They all said AUM is lacking social belonging. They also discussed how it is not all AUMs fault. Student attendance at events and club meetings is often low, which is understandable given that the largest majors on campus, such as the online programs and BIS, tend to attract students who are less likely to be physically present or available for extracurricular involvement. So, if our largest majors are not attending campus events, is it worth continuing to invest in? The other argument that Nunn makes as well as Silver, in *Degrees of Risk*, is that social belonging fosters engagement in other ways. Getting involved on campus and even off campus can create the cultural capital that low-income first-generation students are missing. Meeting people on campus and off creates connections. I guess it all boils down to what AUM should invest in.

The everything degree students tend to be able to find academic and social belonging better than the others. At AUM, the “everything” student is few and far between. Some previous literature approximates this type of student while others assume all students should be this way. BIS at AUM does not have the reputation for being a degree of prestige like at other universities. Many institutions, especially Ivy Leagues, only have multiple discipline degrees like BIS. While many BIS students at AUM lack that sense of academic belonging, there are also those students who felt it by changing their major to BIS. Kristy lost her sense of academic belonging in her previous major and gained it by changing to BIS. The BIS athletes tend to have social belonging by being a part of a sport or team. The few BIS honors students I advise have that community as well that brings social belonging. The BIS students I advise who are on-campus tend to have a better sense of belonging than those who do not come to campus. There are also

the everything student like Eddie who is never on campus, and I would say does not have a high sense of social belonging. I think he found academic belonging overtime through getting that internship though.

In *Paying for the Party*, those on the party pathway choose less rigorous academic majors to focus on the social aspects of college. These students also have high GPAs and jobs after college. The party pathway students only have to worry about college and “networking” i.e. partying, so it makes sense that those students do well. They are able to experience the more traditional social aspects of college. AUM is not known for being a “party school”. BIS students would not fall under this category of students. They would fall under the mobility pathway. Students on the mobility pathway can achieve upward mobility by transferring to regional institutions according to *Paying for the Party*, which becomes a practical alternative. For many, Auburn University is the preferred option; however, due to financial constraints or academic eligibility, they instead enroll at institutions like AUM. Starts the cycle of those on the mobility pathways. There are also those who transfer from Auburn or other larger institutions because they are not doing well on the party pathways. They are losing the academic belonging by focusing on the “party”. For many first-generation students, the best option is to choose AUM from the beginning. Smaller schools like AUM offer more accessible student resources and greater one-on-one support from faculty and staff.

I am only briefly mentioning *Aspiring Adult Adrift* because the authors suggest the “everything” student is the ideal. The “everything” students are rarely adrift being in BIS. Kristy and Eddie originally were, but they figured out a career path within BIS. Kristy, I know, has had a job since graduating. Eddie graduates soon. There are countless



other alumni who have utilized this “vague” degree and used it to find career opportunities.

*I’ve Learned to Love What’s Going to Pay Me’: A Culture of Despair in Higher Education during a Time of Insecurity*, is another example of accepting how students choose a major for practical reasons rather than choosing a major they love. Like students at this mid-sized commuter university, AUM students are choosing “practical” degrees even if they do not love what they are majoring in or for the social aspects. I see this in BIS students often. They choose it for flexibility and efficiency without loving the major itself or seeing its value. The lack of passion is evident in many of the BIS students I advise. The students who ask me “what classes are the easiest?” or “can you just tell me what to take?”, are not in college to learn. These students are at AUM for that piece of paper at the end. BIS students rarely care about the friends they make in college or how their major should be fun.

In *Degrees of Risk* each type of student lacks or finds academic and/or social belonging. As I mentioned previously, I see BIS students at AUM as a mix between risk minimizers and precarious pioneers. Like risk minimizers, they sacrifice academic and social belonging to finish their degree quickly and efficiently in hopes of getting a job. The “easy” degree and some of the “finishing” degree students would fall under this. The risk minimizers are perfectly described by *“I’ve Learned to Love What’s Going to Pay Me”*. Unfortunately, for BIS students this degree type can create unintended risks. A majority of the BIS students would fall under precarious pioneers. I see this a lot in the “everything” students as they tend to have the same insecurities, but more resiliency compared to the other groups I have described. The difference I see is that these students do tend to find some sort of social belonging. Kristy was heavily involved on campus

with no parental support and worked to pay for school. The “I’m Lost” students do not really fall under any of these groups. They have financial insecurity, do not get involved, and feel stressed to finish their degree. They lack social belonging like precarious pioneers without the resiliency found against that stress. It is important to note that the “I’m Lost” student is not described in any of the studies I have reviewed. This type of student may exist at other institutions, but they may be ignored by their institutions. AUM works to retain every student they can, so we are not able to simply ignore these students. We have decided it is too urgent not to.

### **Institutional Policy Support and Risks to BIS Students**

AUM’s institutional policies, such as grade forgiveness and repeat-to-replace options, are commonly used by students in the BIS program. While these policies can help students recover academically, they often lead to prolonged enrollment and increased student debt—without any guarantee of completing a degree. In an effort to improve retention, AUM has turned to strategies like cold-calling students who appear to be at risk of dropping out. However, these outreach methods can feel impersonal or intrusive, especially for students already facing academic or personal stress. Instead of fostering genuine engagement, cold-calling may reinforce feelings of disconnection or surveillance, particularly when not paired with consistent, meaningful support. The BIS degree at AUM continues to be both a risk and an opportunity. While it offers flexibility for nontraditional and academically diverse students, it is often criticized for its broad structure, the academic standing of its student population, and its perceived lack of prestige.

While *LowerED* illuminates the danger of for-profit colleges and not public universities, like AUM, there are certain similarities that cannot be overlooked. Tressie

explains how for-profit colleges see those who attend as those of “low status” often based on age but also based on socio-economic status (89). I do not see AUM as doing this. As someone who actively recruits older students for BIS, I recruit them based on their past credit or need for flexibility. Where I do see similarities between for-profits and AUM is in recruitment. While AUM does not intend to prey upon those of lower socio-economic status, this seems to be the population AUM attracts. We use the same cold-calling tactics as for-profits and even reach out to students who have lost or exhausted their financial aid “just in case”. I often feel uncomfortable doing this, but it is part of my job. I find incredible value in earning a college degree, but at what cost? Tressie explains the “rapid response” of the for-profit college from the time she applied for acceptance. This reminds me of the “dashboards” we have at AUM. We have a transfer and online program dashboard. After the first reach out, advisors have three days to reach out again. If we don’t then another office on campus reaches out to us. There has been a loss in balance between customer service and advising. I often feel like Siri or Alexa being asked “when does class start?” or “where is my PIN?” constantly by students. Due to the enrollment cliff, I would think traditional colleges are using many of the same recruitment tactics AUM is using. Additionally, she explains how at traditional college the students tend to have to deal with the bureaucratic system. At the for-profit college it is assumed that those students cannot do this. The enrollment officer at the for-profit college calls you and does so frequently if not enrolled. This also has caused a reliance on academic advisors. We help students navigate this system as best we can, but we have hundreds of students.

The article, *'I've Learned to Love What's Going to Pay Me': A Culture of Despair in Higher Education during a Time of Insecurity*, also briefly discusses the

“corporatizing” of college by again equating students as consumers and faculty as salespeople (391). This relates to *LowerED* and the change in higher education. The main idea of the article is students choosing “practical” degrees. BIS is practical in terms of flexibility and efficiency, but it is not a “one for one” degree. I like to equate BIS to business a lot of the time. Those who change their major from business to BIS, I always ask “what did you plan to do with a business degree?”. Most of the answers I receive are careers that you can do with a BIS degree. AUM is very good at “selling” the idea that if you get a degree, you will get a job. Changing to BIS adds perceived risk to this, but if these students were invested in the curriculum, some fears could be alleviated.

I would also like to note some institutional policies at AUM to help students continue their academic journey. We offer grade forgiveness in which a student gets 3 courses to forgive. We also offer repeat to replace which are unlimited. This means a student can fail a course 4 times and, on that 5th, time if the student passes those failing grades are replaced with the passing one. Research from Boise State University shows that STEM students' success improved using these policies. These students were more likely to enroll in more courses in the same subject area and graduation rates increased (Jiang, Xuan, et al.). The issue is that Boise State University is a much larger institution compared to AUM and BIS students are quite different from STEM students. The research does note the inequity in these policies as it causes students to stay in college longer and often not be able to afford to retake these courses (Jiang, Xuan, et al). This is a common occurrence with BIS students. I rarely see a BIS student who hasn't used one of our grade forgiveness policies, and persistency varies with BIS students. Some students utilize these policies and improve, and others use them and do not complete college. I believe these policies are helpful but also a way to keep students at AUM.

Today, investing in a degree is a risk. In *Degrees of Risk*, Silver uses the metaphor of an “Ivory Casino” to describe public education. I would not call AUM an “Ivory Casino” but rather a Bingo Hall. BIS students at AUM feel that the same risk in investing in higher education is like gambling. For example, risk minimizers choose a degree with the least amount of risk to get a job after graduation. BIS students do this as well, but jobs are not guaranteed anymore. Those who choose this degree do not always understand how to articulate to employers or even know where to start in terms of “what can I do with this degree?” even though I have explained it multiple times. There is an inherent risk in even working to finish a degree like the “finishing” student. This risk is enhanced with the older students who have either lost their financial aid or have run out of it. The “I’m Lost” type of student needs more attention compared to others. Silver believes that these students need more than a customer-service type of experience in college and that they need more than one size fits all approach. While I do have my qualms about being a customer-service representative instead of an academic advisor, what Silver doesn’t understand is how stretched thin staff and faculty are. One issue that arises with the “I’m Lost” student is the amount of course choices. I try to build this “guided pathway” that Silver believes in. That is much easier said than done as the “I’m Lost” student requires extra time and attention that often make my job more difficult. They become overwhelmed with choices. They often want that “prescriptive” advising, but that becomes difficult when trying to suggest courses. I do agree with Silver that policy changes are needed to provide a more equitable educational experience for students.

### **BIS and the Broader Landscape of Higher Education**

BIS students at AUM exist in a system that wasn’t designed for them, and in many ways, that system still favors traditional, full-time students from middle- or upper-

class backgrounds. By examining BIS through the lens of broader higher education debates, we can better understand how class, institutional structure, and academic expectations shape student experiences.

For-profit colleges are looked at as “easy”, but the difference is that they are set up that way. Tressie in *LowerED* explains how the course content at for-profit colleges is watered down and not as difficult. She also explains how course content does not tend to change from professor to professor. This is not comparable to AUM. As I have told many of my students, what is easy for me is not easy for you. In *LowerED*, an individual who also worked at a for-profit college explains how students are getting “degrees” but have no “soft skills”. She goes on to explain how they have no idea what to do in an interview or how they shouldn’t be late or bring their kids (104). I have seen this with BIS students as well. Some tend to have poor written and communication skills. They also have no idea where to start looking for jobs. She does not mention a solution to this. She explains the difficulties with gathering data on employment after graduation from for-profit colleges. Looking at BIS students at AUM, I know many alumni who have gone on to have amazing careers. AUM has two advisors with a BIS degree. I can also see how changing your major to something “vague” can be confusing and often difficult to articulate to an employer. Selling yourself and what you know is the name of the game with a BIS degree.

In *Paying for the Party*, those on the party pathway worry less about academics and more about the social aspects of college. Those on the party pathway tend to be middle to upper class continuing generation college students and choose fewer academic degrees. While I do not think any degree is “easy”, I can understand how people would think that. I believe BIS is seen as easy due to its flexibility and that it accepts those in a

less-than-ideal academic standing. Flexibility was created to help students succeed and graduate. Take the athletes for example; they felt relief in the flexibility and effectiveness of BIS. I like to say that BIS gives you the best bang for your past bucks—especially when you transfer in with 75 credit hours. People who call BIS “easy” also do not know the stories of the people in the major.

*Aspiring Adults Adrift* is the biggest culprit for labeling college as “easy”. The authors explain how academia has become a corporatized business for a variety of reasons which has in turn caused faculty instruction to falter. They go on to explain that universities are hiring more administrators and staffers over faculty and how they are catering to students as consumers rather than as academics (page 7). While I agree with them, it is also an incredibly elitist way to look at higher education. The U.S. looked quite different just 20 years ago. We’ve had a recession, inflation, a pandemic, and more inflation. 20 years ago, many of the older students I advise did not need a degree to go into the workforce. Now, a college degree is at a minimum, and many of these students have expressed how they are having to return to college to get a promotion or to change their career paths. Take Max, for example. He had a great career, but it was time for him to pivot to something else. He needed a degree to accomplish this. I understand academics are the reason for being in college, but there is so much more to it today. The authors also consistently blame students' social lives in college for lack of after-college success. They explain how being social is necessary in college, but “partying” leads to poor academic success. Looking at BIS students, this would not be the case as I have mentioned; most are balancing a personal, academic, and full-time work life. I do not think “college parties” are on that list. I do agree that students are not actively engaged academically. The authors are looking at traditional college students, not those who work

full-time and/or who have families. Additionally, the authors explain how major plays a role in their analysis (page. 133). BIS is not specifically named so, there is little data to show a correlation there. One thing I've noticed about BIS students is that they often come to me feeling 'adrift,' uncertain about their direction or goals. In *Aspiring Adults Adrift*, they discuss this as an issue throughout their academic journey. The issue is these authors are researching 20-something year olds only. BIS consists of mostly adult learners, shows how adults at every age are adrift. With little to no research on actual adults being adrift, we can assume that this is a result of the continued inequity of higher education. The authors would say this is the fault of the institution, but from this research, we know that it is due to the economic status of these students and the social disparities within higher education. Those who came from nursing or education particularly struggle with this. The elementary education majors specifically learn how quickly they can graduate and panic because they have no plans for after college.

*'I've Learned to Love What's Going to Pay Me': A Culture of Despair in Higher Education during a Time of Insecurity*, provides the most accurate examples of class and the inequalities represented in higher education. These students choose survival over passion if they even decide to attend college leading to a "culture of despair". This is evident in BIS students at AUM. Many BIS students find little joy in college and see it as a credential just to get a job. Lauren is a great example of this as she wants the "easiest courses" for a degree for a job that she is not sure of the kind she wants. BIS students have a short-term goal of graduating, but no long-term plans after graduation; the economic and even societal pressure of attending and finishing college hangs over them. There is this idea among first-generation students specifically that a degree equals a job. Which isn't wrong, but there is more to it that they truly do not know. The students in this



article as well as BIS students also worry about the financial struggles of getting a degree. They choose a practical degree as they see it as a better investment than a degree they may enjoy more. While I agree that higher education is built upon a hierarchical structure where administration and faculty reign, even at AUM. I would not put all staff in this category, especially academic advisors. The administration and faculty tend to expect students to be self-motivated and able to navigate the academic landscape of the institution. As we know for first-generation working-class students, this is not the case. It's more than they just do not know. At the institution in this article and at AUM, I have heard many times from faculty how “students do not want to learn anymore”. This may be true, but they are not looking at the underlying issues. Again, these students are just trying to survive day-to-day. They are juggling school, work, families, and do not have the time or energy to do more than what is required for a course.

*Degrees of Risk* reinforces this idea of inequality within higher education. The precarious pioneers and risk minimizers like other low-income first-generation students (LIFGWC) face more challenges than risk optimizers and insulated explorers. Silver concludes that these students are suffering from financial strains, unequal access to support services, gaps in academic preparedness, and uneven job outcomes. BIS students have experienced all of these things. Most struggle with financing college and rarely use the support services on campus. I constantly make recommendations for students to go to the tutoring or writing center, but they wait until it's too late or never go. There are significant gaps in academic preparedness for BIS students, especially for older students. Many have been out of high school or stopped attending college 10+ years ago, so everything is new for them. They also have to navigate gaps in technology as it changes constantly. I do not keep up with alumni as much as I should, so I cannot only moderately

Speak about uneven job outcomes. Finding a job is hard in today's economy and with some of my students not being able to articulate their degree, I worry about their future.

### **Hidden Labor of Academic Advising**

In the past decade or so, advising has evolved from faculty advisors to full-time academic advisors. The job has also evolved from just suggesting a few classes to an intrusive and proactive advising method. For those unfamiliar with our work, academic advising often appears as little more than handing out PINs, suggesting a few courses, and sending students on their way. At AUM, academic advising is much more than that. We bridge the gap between the students and every office on campus. We are also the dumping ground if another office doesn't know the answer to something. We are the people students go to when they are having issues in their personal and/or academic life. We are a one-stop shop for everything related to higher education. While being able to assist students through their academic career can be rewarding, advisors have become overly relied upon by students, faculty, and staff, which is causing burnout.

Most of the literature does not talk about academic advisors at all, nor does it discuss the frustrations of certain populations of students. Every piece of literature discusses what the faculty, staff and administration are doing wrong. The institutions in the literature are just too big to be able to provide more than a customer-service based experience that Silver in *Degrees of Risk* is against. The enrollment cliff is causing layoffs to faculty and staff. Even at smaller schools like AUM, we are being stretched thin. There are things faculty and staff at AUM are doing well. With small class sizes, faculty have the ability to get to know their students better. The office I advise fully believes in the student-centered experience but is often forced into the customer-service aspects of the job. Call campaigns and dashboards are a part of the job, but these could be

improved. Silver does note that things he suggests can overextend faculty and staff. He is correct in this statement. Offices like mine are overextended because we supply results. We increase retention then have more work put on us. It's like in a group project when one person is doing all the work and yet everyone gets a good grade. Our office also gets stuck doing the work of other offices on campus. We have to check other people's work, or they will just send an issue to us because they know we will handle it.

The literature also does not discuss the emotional labor of academic advising. We are like counselors listening but only giving out academic advice. I have heard many sad stories from students who are just trying to get a degree. I have been brought to tears by several of them. It becomes exhausting handling your work and personal life, plus having to comfort those who come to you with these stories. I am not good in these situations, and I honestly did not know this was a part of the job.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis is not intended to criticize AUM or the BIS program, but rather to shed light on the challenges faced by BIS students, their advisors, and the broader AUM community. My goal is to offer an honest look at what AUM is, both its strengths and its areas for growth, while emphasizing its potential to level the playing field for marginalized groups. I don't claim to have all the answers to the deep-rooted issues in higher education, but I have included practical suggestions for faculty, staff, and students that could make a meaningful difference at AUM. As the BIS advisor, I have worked to improve the program's culture and reputation by creating a semesterly newsletter that highlights alumni achievements and celebrates student success. Moving forward, I propose adding new courses like an introductory IDSC class to prepare students for

upper-level work and career development, reinstating a “University College Coordinator” position to provide consistent advising and support, and expanding faculty mentorship and staff collaboration to strengthen the overall student experience.

### **Why AUM?**

I began the methods section with why I chose AUM, and I think for most students, it is similar. Students choose AUM not because it is their first choice, but because of its size, proximity (for some), efficiency, and accessibility. BIS students are struggling with the same inequalities as those at other institutions. Socio-economic instability is creating a cycle of academic inconsistency among BIS students. AUM and higher education institutions cannot change social class and economic status in the US. But, I believe AUM specifically has the ability to alleviate a lot of the inequalities students face. We do not have the money, but we have a small enough campus that if faculty, staff, and the administration are all on the same page then we can provide a student-centered experience while also increasing retention. If AUM faculty and staff were focused on what is good for the student and not what is good for the institution. Then maybe academic advisors will be able to focus on our job rather than feeling as if we are having to be every other person on campus.

During the thesis defense, a professor noted how higher education institutions are burdened with the challenge of moving students into a different social class. I never thought of it that way, but we are. Faculty and staff especially at AUM are teaching students how to gain cultural capital, learn soft skills, expand their professional networks, and hopefully get a job. This is a lot in a 4 to 5 year timeframe. We as faculty and staff members do not have the bandwidth to ensure every student learns these things. We can

give them the tools, but students have to use them. We are also tasked with having to navigate the need for enrollment and getting students graduated, but also the ethical responsibility of being honest with students about their academic abilities and teaching them the importance of the power of knowledge. The concept of college has been lost for quite some time. College has shifted from being seen primarily as a place for intellectual growth and skill development to a pathway focused on securing employment. Where once the emphasis was on broad education and critical thinking, today many students pursue degrees for jobs.

### **Changing the Culture of BIS**

As the BIS advisor, I hope to change the perception and culture of BIS. I have created a semesterly newsletter that highlights alumni, congratulates the dean's list recipients, and recent graduates. Since BIS students are not on campus, I try to do little things to make them seem connected. Having BIS under University College was a huge step in giving BIS an improved identity.

I have created some suggestions as to how AUM's faculty, staff, and administration can better help students bridge the gap in higher education. I've also identified several actions that administration can take to help staff stay engaged and reduce the feeling of burnout. Along with practical steps students can take to enhance their academic experience and take ownership of their educational journey.

I will start with students since this is a quick note. These are things that students may have to be taught to explore on their own. Some of these are also wishful thinking. Students should read their syllabus. I sound like a faculty broken record. They should also answer their emails. Again, a broken record. With the assistance of staff and faculty,

students can research careers and how to use their major. This degree holds incredible value, and by helping students recognize that value, they will be better equipped to articulate what their degree represents and why it matters.

The administration should work to invest in BIS students. Micro-credentials and additional capstone type courses are just a few ideas. The new creation of the healthcare administration concentration with BIS will be great for BIS students as well. Incorporating faculty mentors and including more staff collaboration are additional ideas. BIS used to have a BIS coordinator position that was really just extra money for a faculty member. I propose reinstating and reimagining a position under the title of “University College Coordinator”. This revamped role would encompass responsibilities in recruitment, academic advising, and instruction, specifically teaching IDSC 4000 and any future courses added to the BIS curriculum. By combining these responsibilities, the position would foster stronger, more consistent connections between the academic advisor and students throughout their academic journey. It would enhance support for the BIS program and promote a more holistic approach to student development. Additionally, this position could extend to serve exploratory (undeclared) students, who are also housed within University College. These students often represent a sensitive and “lost” population, similar to many BIS students, and would benefit from dedicated advising and support. Including both academic advising and teaching—such as UNIV courses—ensures comprehensive engagement with this population. While this thesis specifically focuses on BIS students, the impact and relevance of this proposed role extends naturally to exploratory students, reinforcing the need for integrated and empathetic support across the college. I also propose introducing an additional IDSC course taken prior to IDSC4000. This course is meant to help students feel more prepared for IDSC4000 by

building their research skills, exploring career development opportunities, and encouraging reflection on purpose and character. When students have a clearer sense of purpose and a strong foundation of character, they're more likely to see the value in their degree and in higher education as a whole. Purpose and character also help students make more meaningful choices in their academic and career paths, and feel more connected to what they're learning. This course would also help older students who need additional technological support and create another opportunity to meet other BIS students.

Finally, it would be nice if faculty and staff could avoid calling BIS “easy”. No degree is easy. We should also consider changing the dialogue from higher education being a gateway to a job to the overall importance of higher education. Students deserve more than the “LowerED” standard of higher education. We should preach the importance of intellectual growth, critical thinking, and effective communication. Many of the soft skills that employers are looking for—like communication, adaptability, and teamwork—often get overlooked because so much focus is placed on just earning the degree itself. The idea that the diploma is the ultimate goal can sometimes overshadow the personal growth, purpose, and character development that higher education is really meant to support. This is again something the entire university has to buy into. As I have mentioned before, AUM is really unsure of what it wants to be. We are pulled in different directions, promoting two conflicting visions of higher education. With “Excellence as our Standard” as a core value at AUM, this commitment must extend to all BIS students. Regardless of their socio-economic background, every student deserves access to excellence in all aspects of their education.

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