

A Field-Based Study of Adult Learning in Higher Education

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Author Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Overview

Name of the Institution and Type

Indiana Institute of Technology (Indiana Tech) is a private, not-for-profit university located in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Originally founded in 1930 as Indiana Technical College, the institution was rechartered as a nonprofit in 1948 (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Indiana Tech offers instruction through both traditional on-campus programs and fully online programs delivered through its College of Professional Studies (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a).

Funding

Indiana Tech, a private not-for-profit institution, funds itself primarily through tuition, an endowment of around \$165.9 million as of 2025, institutional and external scholarships, and federal and state financial aid—including military and veterans' benefits, grants, and loans (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). The university also offers an installment tuition-payment plan and participates in the Federal Work-Study program, enabling eligible students to earn wages for educational expenses through on- and off-campus jobs (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a).

Products or Services

Indiana Tech provides degree and certificate programs through four colleges: Arts & Sciences, Business, Engineering and Computer Sciences (Talwar College), and Professional Studies, which includes online and evening options (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Degree levels range from undergraduate certificates to doctoral programs. Fields of study include communication, business administration, engineering, computer science, criminal justice, psychology, and health sciences (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a).

Length of Programs

Program lengths vary by credential level (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Undergraduate certificates are short—most are done in under a year. Associate degrees take about two years.

Bachelor's degrees require 120 to 121 credits and are typically completed in four years. The Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Communication, central to this study, fits that standard.

Master's programs are the exception to the typical 15-week semester. Courses instead run in fast 6- to 8-week blocks, a format built for working adults balancing school against everything else. Graduate certificates consist of 12 credits, about half of the 30 credits needed for a master's degree, and are designed to be directly added to a master's program. Doctoral programs are entirely online with mandatory annual on-campus residency weekends. A Pathway to PhD option additionally enables Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates to transfer 15 credits directly into the PhD in Global Leadership.

Faculty experience with the 6-week format varies. The instructor interviewed said these courses often wrap up just as students and the instructor are finding their rhythm together. She would rather see 8 weeks for undergraduates. Even foundational content, like universal design in a user-experience course, is hard to cover well in six (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Certification Status

Indiana Tech is regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026b). Beyond this institution-wide accreditation, several programs carry additional specialized accreditation: the Biomedical, Computer, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering programs are accredited by ABET (formerly the Accreditation Board for

Engineering and Technology), through its Engineering Accreditation Commission; ABET's Computing Accreditation Commission accredits the Computer Science program; the College of Business, including its graduate and doctoral programs, is accredited by the International Accreditation Council for Business Education; and the Health Information Technology and Health Information Management programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026b). The Communication program, the focus of this study, falls under the university's general accreditation and does not carry a separate specialized accreditor (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026b).

Status of Learners and Educators

Enrollment at Indiana Tech is predominantly voluntary, but students' course paths follow a chosen degree plan, with little flexibility for those on financial aid, since federal rules restrict aid to courses counting toward a declared program (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Regardless of enrolled program, most students take at least one communication course. For non-majors, it satisfies a general education requirement (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026). Faculty are paid, and the university employs approximately 544 academic staff across full-time and adjunct roles (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a).

Teaching and Learning Approaches

SoftChalk and Canvas are the platforms used for course delivery (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026). Course design follows Quality Matters (QM) standards. QM is a nonprofit, peer-reviewed rubric system that sets research-based benchmarks for online and blended courses. These benchmarks cover course overview, measurable learning objectives, alignment between objectives and assessments, accessibility, and consistent navigation (Quality

Matters, 2024). While subject matter experts collaborate with instructional design staff to develop these courses, the extent of an individual instructor's involvement in the QM process varies by their specific role in course development (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026).

Evaluation Approaches

All Indiana Tech courses include end-of-course student evaluations, and these evaluations are highly encouraged but voluntary (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026). I asked directly whether those evaluations formally tie into accreditation-reporting requirements. The instructor interviewed said she is not directly involved with Indiana Tech's accreditation process—her direct experience was with Purdue Fort Wayne's, over a decade ago. Therefore, her knowledge is limited (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026). The gap portrays that the link between classroom-level evaluation and institutional accreditation reporting may not be clearly communicated to the people actually teaching.

Entry and Exit System

Undergraduate admission at Indiana Tech operates on a rolling basis, with no application deadline. Admission requires a 2.0 cumulative GPA, and standardized testing is optional (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Graduate admission requires a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution. The GRE is not required. Two of the graduate programs—the MBA and the Master of Science in Management (MSM)—specifically require two years of professional work experience (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a).

Transfer students follow a similar rolling admissions process, though they face additional rules. Indiana Tech defines a transfer student as anyone who has attempted college credit after high school, not counting the summer immediately following graduation. No more than 90 credit

hours from a transfer program can be applied toward a bachelor's degree, and no more than 45 credit hours toward an associate degree. Transfer students are capped at 25% of the credits required for a certificate. Indiana Tech further restricts transfer students under 21, or with fewer than 60 earned credits: those students must live on campus if they live outside a 50-mile radius of the university (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026c).

Indiana Tech defines good academic standing differently by enrollment level (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Undergraduates must complete at least 67% of attempted credits and meet GPA standards tied to their aid status. Graduate students face a tiered scale—2.5 for the first two semesters, 3.0 after that (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Federal financial aid rules add another layer on top: aid eligibility is tied directly to a student's declared program and approved degree plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

A capstone course exists in the Communication program, but it is optional, not required. Completion requirements otherwise vary by course: senior-level courses typically end in a final project, while lower-level courses run on a point threshold rather than one defined assignment (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Learning Atmosphere

Learning atmosphere is independently reviewed by students. These reviews should be tempered with data from other sources, though—review platforms often involve small sample sizes and a tendency for self-selection. The trend in reviews often highlighted small class sizes, personalized faculty attention, and flexible scheduling. These aspects of the learning atmosphere appeared to suit working adults, especially in online programs (Niche, 2026). Nonetheless, student reviews questioned whether some faculty fully understood what best supports student learning. This aligns with standardization tensions noted throughout the study (Niche, 2026).

Faculty raised similar concerns about standardization. Wight has taught in the program since 2011 and pointed to assignment design as the clearest example: in her current courses she cannot build her own assignments, only choose from a small set of pre-approved options—something she did not face when she was the subject matter expert building courses from scratch. At Purdue Fort Wayne, by contrast, a course had only a few fixed requirements—group project, informative speech, persuasive speech, written assignment—and instructors kept full discretion over how those got met and in what order material was taught (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Comparisons

Chosen Program

This study focuses on the Communication B.A. at Indiana Institute of Technology. Sharon Wight is an adjunct faculty member who has taught in this program since 2020 (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026). Wight's credentials include a master's in professional communication and a master's in instructional design. Her background gives her a unique perspective and shapes how she approaches course structure and course instruction. In addition to her two master's degrees, Wight worked as an academic advisor for many years, helping students navigate adult education outside of the classroom (S. Wight, personal communication, June 14, 2026). Her combined experience leaves her well positioned to evaluate and speak to this particular program.

Known Issues

Three key issues emerged from the interview. First, the program has become more standardized over time. The faculty member noted that in 2011, there was more instructional freedom and more opportunity for critical thinking compared to the current, more rigid structure.

Wight believes this has limited instructors' ability to bring their own approach into the classroom and respond to individual needs (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026).

Standardization, in her account, moves responsibility for adapting instruction away from the person actually teaching the course. An instructor with more autonomy could adjust in the moment, responding to what a student needs right then. A standardized course shell moves that responsibility to whoever designed it instead. The disconnect between the level where a course gets designed and the level where it actually gets taught means adaptation has to be anticipated in advance, rather than happening in response to a real need in a real classroom.

The Communication program chair has a doctorate and formal authority within the department, but that authority does not extend to approving course changes independently. She can identify courses that need review in a given year, but the final decision on course structure and updates belongs to the Office of Continuing Studies. This independent office oversees course revisions across the university, not just within the Communication department. Because the office sits apart from the daily realities of instruction, curriculum changes happen slowly. Once they do happen, it takes even longer for them to actually work—decisions made from the top are not made in the moment of instruction, so they depend on a feedback loop making its way back up before anything improves (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Wight explained that one student, like many others, faced consequences due to rigidity. The student resisted a mandatory video-recording assignment in an online communication course, where recorded presentations are necessary. Wight attempted to support the student within her limits, but the course's structure still left some needs unaddressed. This rigidity also caused issues for the student in multiple courses. This example illustrates how a standardized

requirement can become an ongoing obstacle rather than a one-time challenge (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

The second main concern is that the platform for instruction determines accessibility accommodations in the online course shell. This leaves instructors with little flexibility beyond verifying captioning and clear audio on recorded content (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026). Accessibility needs are not homogeneous across a single class, let alone across every section of a standardized course. Access runs across more than one dimension—physical and sensory, psychological, systemic and navigational. Captioning is the default most likely to be treated as sufficient, since it is visible and easy to automate. It often falls short even on its own terms. There is often a lag with automated captions. Audio or text fail to align with a speaker's mouth movements, which undermines their usefulness for learners who rely on lip-reading or precise timing (Esser et al., 2025; Romero-Fresco & Fresno, 2023).

Moreover, even where captioning works as intended, it does nothing for a learner whose barrier is psychological, like hesitancy to ask for help, or systemic, like not knowing an accommodation process exists in the first place. This pattern is not unique to this program. Faculty in health professions education face the same problem. Gray et al. (2025) found the same pattern in accommodation decisions more broadly—they fall to individual instructors because institutions have not built the training or systemic support to handle them at an organizational level. Together, these sources point to institutions' tendency to invest in the most visible, easiest-to-automate barriers. This leaves quieter ones to whoever happens to be teaching.

The third issue is that courses are built to Quality Matters standards without appropriate and comprehensive training for subject matter experts building them. This creates uneven familiarity with the framework driving course design (S. Wight, personal communication, July

23, 2026). This is a structural pattern, showing up consistently, not a one-time gap. Subject matter experts usually enter course-design partnerships as content specialists, and instructional design training is layered on top of that role rather than built into it from the start (Stefaniak et al., 2020). Quality Matters is a peer-reviewed design standard. It assumes whoever builds the course understands the rubric, not just knows it exists. A subject matter expert working from general awareness can check every box on the rubric without ever grasping why those boxes are there.

The instructor interviewed described a firsthand experience with this disconnect. As a subject matter expert, she had to finalize entire course structures before defining assignments or assessments. She reflected that this order was the opposite of what effective instructional design looked like, in that it would be more effective to start by setting assessments to clarify course goals. Additionally, she mentioned that although the program claimed to use Quality Matters, she was never provided with a detailed explanation of its functional requirements—only that the framework needed to be followed. This created genuine challenges for her in course design, and she believes the courses became less effective as a result (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Elements, Factors, and Approaches

Instruction is delivered through SoftChalk and Canvas. Courses are built around Quality Matters, and effectiveness is measured through end-of-course student evaluations. Wight was uncertain how this evaluation connects to Indiana Tech's accreditation reporting (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Lin (2024) describes ChatGPT functioning as a kind of virtual tutor for adult learners working asynchronously online—helping them set goals, track down resources, and reflect on

how they are doing. Those are the same tasks a standardized online course shell already leaves students to handle mostly on their own.

Program faculty offered additional, if unsettled, context on AI specifically at Indiana Tech. The university introduced a “no AI” policy early on. However, it never clearly defined what counted—whether that meant work written entirely by AI, or extended to AI-based accessibility tools, which the instructor considers two fundamentally different things. Fully AI-generated writing was technically forbidden, but instructors were given no real mechanism to act on it beyond zeroing the assignment. Indiana Tech uses Turnitin for detection. She described the institution's informal benchmark, around 25%, as accounting for reference lists and data-rich fields that can inflate similarity scores. Her own personal threshold sits closer to 30%, a flag for when she looks more closely. She considered this tension more pressing at the graduate level than the undergraduate level, and noted she has not taught in the classroom in the past six months—a period she described as one of rapid change in AI use—limiting her ability to speak to the current classroom climate with confidence (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Learners are uniquely positioned to understand their own needs. Even when they do not, they understand what is landing and what is not. When they can make changes to accommodate that, it helps them create better learning outcomes. Often, this looks like adult learners connecting topics to their own life experiences, much like I have done through this course. That is really a core assumption of andragogy. However, when instructors are left to use only standardized course shells to meet a metric, this gains measurability. At the same time, it decreases student outcomes, because it is built around homogeneity, with little room for adaptation to any one person's specific experience, context, or needs (Bierema et al., 2025).

Alignment with Course Readings

The tension between a standardized curriculum and instructor flexibility shows up throughout the self-directed learning research too. Robinson and Persky (2020) argue that fostering independent learners requires educators to shift roles—from being the main source of information to facilitating and supporting a student's own autonomy. A highly standardized course can promote consistency. It does far less to support a student's actual progress toward self-direction. Rigid structures leave instructors little room to adjust content or pacing to what a specific student needs—and that kind of adjustment is central to andragogical practice (Bierema et al., 2025).

This same standardized structure runs into Morris's (2019) fourth dimension of self-directed learning too: context. Morris argues that a learner's environment is not just background—it is a precondition for whether self-direction is even possible. A standardized online course shell is a huge part of that environment for Communication B.A. students. If the shell offers little flexibility, it limits contextual support no matter how motivated or capable a given learner is. Morris also names responsibility as a separate, fourth dimension—learners have to actively build meaning toward their own goals, a genuinely cognitive task. However, putting all the responsibility on the learner ignores how much the environment shapes what is possible for them and treats self-direction like something a person has or does not, instead of something the learner and the environment build together.

UDL's core principle is that flexibility gets built into a course from construction — it is not added simply as an individual accommodation (Selseleh et al., 2024). The shell described here only partially lives up to that. Captioning and clear audio cover representation, one of the

UDL dimensions. However, they do nothing for the framework's broader goals around flexible engagement and expression.

Neurodivergent learners may feel this gap most. Cognitive load increases in a poorly structured digital environment, even when captioning and other basic accommodations are technically present (Le Cunff et al., 2024). The deeper problem is not individual features. The deeper problem is who is responsible for building them. When institutions fail to invest in training or systemic support, accommodation decisions land on individual faculty instead of being built into the program itself (Gray et al., 2025; Bryson et al., 2025).

This is the reverse of how UDL should work. Flexibility is meant to be a shared institutional responsibility. It should not be an add-on by instructors onto an already standardized shell. This program could support learners with executive functioning challenges if flexibility were designed into the standard. The interview suggests something else happened—standardization moved toward consistent content delivery without structural flexibility (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

This finding is consistent with the faculty member's own published work. In a 2022 presentation, she argued that adult education spaces often fail to account for sensory needs not commonly recognized as disabilities, and that real accessibility means designing for those needs proactively rather than waiting for a student to ask (Wight, 2022b, September 23). That is the same design-first logic this program's course shell falls short of—its accessibility features are preset at the platform level, not built around the specific learners in a given section.

The faculty member's own scholarship offers a further point of alignment. Her presentations at the International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative use her own lived experience—including a shared medical diagnosis with her father and her later experience

navigating a hysterectomy, workplace accommodation disputes, and disability advocacy—as primary material for academic inquiry (Wight, 2022a; Wight, 2025). This autoethnographic approach treats personal, embodied experience as a legitimate source of knowledge — adult learning theory has long done the same (Lindeman, as cited in Michelson, 2020). Michelson (2020) adds a caution: leaning on experience as a foundation for learning can go unexamined, missing its own blind spots. Her narratives function as structured, peer-reviewed inquiry into how culture, disability, and institutional systems shape lived experience, not simply personal storytelling.

AI tools only work as well as the prompts a learner gives them, and students often need direct instructor guidance before ChatGPT meaningfully supports self-directed learning (Lin, 2024). A more standardized, less flexible program has fewer chances to offer that guidance. That tension could widen the gap instead of closing it.

Lin (2024) breaks self-directed learning into five tasks: setting goals, finding resources, doing the learning activities, tracking progress, and reassessing strategy. Since materials and sequencing are built into a standardized course shell, they handle execution well. The impact on goal-setting, resource discovery, monitoring, and reflection is more of a challenge—they all require a learner to define and judge their own progress. Lin (2024) suggests AI could help build a foundation to lessen the impact of those weaker spots. Pair a standardized shell with real instructor guidance on using AI as a tool for goal-setting and reflection, and that gap starts to close.

Personal Impressions

Insights

Standardization and accessibility are often treated as separate, competing concerns, but they are not. They are two parts of a whole learning experience. Course shells built for uniformity across sections limit how much freedom instructors have to tailor materials to individual students. That is usually right where accessibility gaps open up, and learning outcomes suffer as a result (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026; Selseleh et al., 2024).

The use of AI aligns with this insight. When used properly, tools like ChatGPT can support UDL's aim for flexible engagement by adjusting pacing, format, and explanations to each learner. These advantages depend on learners already having sufficient self-directed learning skills to use the tool effectively, though—and that is not guaranteed. Those skills vary among adult learners (Lin, 2024).

Wight is an adjunct professor, a communications professional, and a political candidate. Teaching expertise follows her into every one of those roles—she uses plain, accessible language no matter whom she is talking to (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026). I feel like this echoes my own educational philosophy—that we are teaching when we are learning just as much as we are learning when we are teaching, and that learning happens whether we mean to teach or not. Wight brings clarity and accessibility to the forefront of her daily interactions. During this study, I had the opportunity to observe her content and this shows up in how she presents information in her classroom, to her constituents, and to others in her professional and personal life. Her time with constituents feeds back into her classroom in that same feedback loop (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026).

There is also a subtler connection between Wight's work at Edlio and adult learning principles more broadly. Although Edlio does not market itself as an educational product, its core

function—communicating information to parents through multiple channels, including website, mobile app, text, email, voice, and social media, with built-in translation—is itself an act of informing adult learners. Often, we forget that parents and guardians are adult learners too. They need timely, relevant, accessible information to make real decisions about their children's education. Edlio meets families where their needs are and through the most accessible way for them to absorb information. Their use of multiple means of representation and engagement is UDL in practice (Selseleh et al., 2024). Wight's day job in communications design and her work as an adult educator are not separate things. They are different applications, aimed at different audiences, of the same core principles.

This is consistent with how Wight frames her political platform publicly. Her campaign identifies “Leading with Empathy” as its central theme, explicitly defining that commitment around ensuring every constituent can access what they need—a principle she extends beyond disability accommodation to include language access and resources for new immigrants (Wight, n.d.). The same accessibility-first instinct evident in her classroom practice and her advocacy for sensory-supportive spaces is stated outright as a governing value in her public platform.

Suggestions

This study surfaces one clear suggestion: give instructors explicit guidance on helping students use AI tools like ChatGPT to support self-directed learning. Right now, that is left to chance—the assumption seems to be that students will figure out how to use these tools well on their own (Lin, 2024).

Educators should rethink discussion boards, and their utility to learning, entirely. Interviews in this case study revealed that in many courses, participation does not measure understanding or engagement. Because they often focus on word count, discussion boards are

often just a box being checked. Allowing a little looser engagement and more flexibility would fuel more active discussion and, therefore, understanding. Open forums, where students just show up and talk to their classmates and instructors, would meet the accreditation attendance standards discussion boards are generally trying to meet. However, they would shift the focus from providing information to enhancing understanding and learning (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Short course formats could use more time, but not for cramming in more content. That extra time is actually for the things short classes never have room for. Building rapport, assessing needs, and expanding topics for better understanding benefit learners and educators alike (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

She also wants flexibility in how students show understanding. In courses where she has had authority as subject matter expert, she has built in format choices. Building in flexibility, where a student can submit a written paper instead of a recorded video, would allow learners to show what they learned and whether they understand the material well enough to apply it outside of the classroom. Right now, the assumption is that one assessment format fits every learner equally well (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Strengths

A strength of the Communication B.A. at Indiana Tech is the program's use of Quality Matters rubrics—a consistent baseline of course quality no matter which instructor is teaching. That consistency helps students moving between sections or instructors, and it helps students re-entering the class after a withdrawal too (S. Wight, personal communication, July 23, 2026).

Indiana Tech's program has real flexibility in how students join and leave. Admissions run on a rolling basis, with no fixed deadline. Entry testing is also optional. That lowers the

barrier for adult learners and anyone juggling work, family, and school (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a). Even the capstone is optional so students have some say in how they finish instead of everyone funneling through the same final requirement (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026). There is choice within the major too—journalism and broadcasting, sports media, graphic design—room to steer toward whatever professional track actually fits (Indiana Institute of Technology, 2026a).

Weaknesses

The same standardization of QM that provides consistency also limits instructor flexibility. That means less ability to respond in real time to what an individual learner actually needs (Robinson & Persky, 2020).

Instructor capacity is part of the problem too. Standards existing is not the same as anyone being trained to meet them. One-off workshops and short orientation sessions do not produce lasting pedagogical change. Job-embedded collaborative learning does—peer observation, coaching cycles, co-teaching (Bryson et al., 2025). This gets to the heart of the Quality Matters training gap identified earlier in this study. Subject matter experts brought general awareness of the rubric and the content, but they did not have direct, sustained training. This is exactly the kind of one-off exposure this research says simply is not enough. Building the capacity to design genuinely accessible, flexible courses is not a singular task. It takes ongoing, collaborative investment at all levels.

A different kind of weakness shows up in how the program supports instructors when something goes wrong at the ground level. There is an assumption built into the structure: the person actually teaching the course can handle whatever comes up, because they are the one closest to it. But that assumption is not backed by anything. Instructors are not given the

technical tools or institutional flexibility to actually handle hard cases when they land in their lap.

This tension was really visible in an example Wight provided. She was teaching a course that had been overenrolled. Aside from the overloaded enrollment, the coursework itself was highly technical. One student began submitting assignments that missed the prompt entirely—not just poor writing, but poor understanding, as she described it. Her efforts to raise concern and get the student support were largely ignored, and she was told to handle it herself. The course had its own strain built in already, separate from enrollment numbers or any individual student's struggles—required software with no alternative. Wight ended up failing the student, in more ways than one: she gave the student a failing grade, but she also feels she failed to give that student the support they needed. I would argue this is part of the system she is working in. The course format was never screened against whether it actually fit this learner. Nobody backed her up once she flagged the problem, either (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Improvements

Hierarchical course design fails students when the people deciding what a course needs are not the ones actually living the learning. Something always ends up falling off course. Students and instructors both need a direct hand in shaping course structure and content—not just a voluntary feedback survey students may or may not fill out, and not a one-way report that goes straight up the chain with no room to ask a clarifying question or push back.

A workable version of this: once a year, after fall, spring, and summer terms have run, pull together a small sample of students who recently took the course, the instructors who teach it, and whoever actually holds the authority to approve changes. Put them in an actual room, or workshop, together. Disability and accommodation services should have a permanent seat at that

table too—they are sitting on an ongoing, real-time record of which accommodations students actually need most, which means they are positioned to help build those needs into the course structure itself, instead of leaving them as something a student has to request after the fact.

This multi-level course design is more than conjecture. Both engagement and learning outcomes benefit when programs treat students as active partners in course design, not passive recipients of a finished product (Craig et al., 2025). The people actually living a course are best positioned to say what is working and what is not.

That annual workshop shapes what a course contains, but it leaves instructor skill untouched. A single Quality Matters orientation at onboarding will not build that. A community-of-practice model might—instructors meeting regularly to share strategies, observe each other's courses, and work through design challenges together (Bryson et al., 2025). Ongoing, peer-driven structure beats one-time training in the capacity-building literature. It spreads responsibility across the whole teaching community instead of resting on any one instructor.

The clearest improvement to emerge from this study comes directly from program faculty, drawing on a model she experienced firsthand at Purdue Fort Wayne. In that structure, courses were built around a small number of fixed, mandatory elements—for example, one required group project, one test, and two papers—while instructors retained full discretion over how those elements were taught, in what order, and through what specific assignments, provided they met course objectives set at a higher level. This model kept the consistency standardization is meant to provide. It did not erase instructor judgment, or the ability to adapt to a specific group of students. Faculty interviewed for this study clearly preferred it over the more fully standardized shells in use now (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Wight applies this principle to her grading method. Even working from a fixed rubric, she is not checking for exact wording. She is looking for evidence that a student understood and applied a concept. She gives credit to their own words instead of penalizing them for straying from an expected phrase. This flexibility allows Wight to both meet students where they are and maintain the measurable standard (S. Wight, personal communication, July 26, 2026).

Conclusion

During this field-based study, I had the opportunity to explore an academic institution and how it implements learning theory in its programs. This project has helped me grow as an educator by making me look closely at the tensions that run throughout academia. In my role as both a learner and an educator, I sometimes see each of these tensions sitting in its own box, rather than connected to the others. What this study has helped me commit to is finding a way to balance standardization and flexibility, because they are not opposites. They are parts of the same whole. When they get treated as opposites, there are negative outcomes at every level of a program—institutional governance, course design, accessibility, evaluation, and general learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are always the result, even when they were never the defined objective. Throughout this course, I have held to a single philosophy: that learning happens whether we mean to teach it or not. That feels more apparent to me now than it ever has.

This study only dove deeply into one program at one institution. My own experience in education and government service, though, leads me to believe this same throughline shows up in far more places than just this one.

This project set out to test theory against reality, to sharpen my ability to evaluate an institution honestly, and to challenge whatever assumptions I walked in with about adult learning facilities. It did all three. Indiana Tech's Communication B.A. gave me a real, specific place to

see where theory holds up and where it doesn't—and it challenged something I might have otherwise assumed: that standardization and flexibility have to be at odds with each other in the first place.

As a learner with accessibility needs, I often frame the educator role through that lens. I recognized through this study that I had become biased in how I addressed course structure and implementation. This study helped reground me in the fact that individual needs are not about the singular student. They are about building options that meet multiple, individualized needs.

Looking forward, I have to think about the opportunities I will have to apply this understanding in my own future course design. What I learned from studying Indiana Tech will help me present new structures for course design in my current working roles—structures that may produce better-trained, more ready personnel, people who can move beyond just critical doing into real critical thinking.

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