

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS AND STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN SELECTED
FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS: A STUDY FROM THE
2006 NATIONAL SURVEY ON
FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS

by

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ABSTRACT

Matriculating to college is a critical time in the life of transitioning students. Students in their first year of college face change the transition to being independent and meeting people from diverse backgrounds. Colleges and universities recognize the first year of college as one of the most impressionable aspects of student life. Colleges and universities have created experiences designed around the concept of assisting in the integration of students in their first year of college. First-year experience (FYE) courses or first-year seminars (FYSs) were designed to provide students with tools and skills they needed as first-year students in college, as well to help students persist from one year to the next.

This study sought to determine which aspects of a FYS demonstrate the best approach to assisting students with successful integration to college, which can affect increased persistence to the sophomore year or increase persistence to graduation using secondary data from the 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars (NSFYS). Descriptive statistics and binary logistic regressions were employed to analyze the data and to answer the research questions. The sample used for this study included respondents who participated in the 2006 NSFYS and agreed to release their responses anonymously for research purposes. Results indicated course topics are a significant predictor of persistence to the sophomore year for moderate-selective institutions. When examining the persistence to graduation model, course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics are significant for low-selectivity institutions.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for all the sacrifices and support they have given me along the way. Also, this work is dedicated to my little one, who God is watching over. Although I lost you along this journey, you constantly served as my inspiration and your spirit lives on in my heart.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>FYS</i>	First-year seminar
<i>FYE</i>	First-year experience
<i>NRC</i>	National Resource Center
<i>NSFYS</i>	National Survey on First-Year Seminars

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Study

Matriculating to college is a critical time in the life of transitioning students. According to Astin (1993), “students are in a continuous state of growth and change” (p. 5). In his book, *What Matters in College*, Astin discussed how college affects students while they are in this continuous state of growth and change. In addition to an extensive body of literature on change during college and college impact, researchers have focused on the first year of college as the most influential (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students in their first year of college face various stages of growth and change as they transition to being independent, having new experiences, and meeting people from diverse backgrounds. Scholars in the field of higher education recognize these changes and continue to add to the literature. Research on the first-year experience (FYE) seeks to inform the higher education community to bring about change, which can have positive impact on students in transition.

With the first year of college being such a critical time in the lives of students, colleges and universities have focused on the first year of college as one of the most impressionable aspects of a student’s life. According to Barefoot (2000), over the past two decades, “higher education witnessed a grass-roots movement to improve the first year of college” (p. 12). Colleges and universities have created experiences designed entirely around the concept of assisting in the integration of students in their first year of college (Barefoot, 2000). In 1982, the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition ([NRC] n.d.c)

was established as a sounding board to support the initiatives of colleges and through the work of many individuals. At that time, the phenomenon known as the FYE gained worldwide momentum, providing an opportunity for college and universities to envision a foundation for matriculating freshmen; this foundation was known as the FYE movement (NRC, n.d.c).

From this movement came what is commonly known as the FYE course. Keup and Barefoot (2005) broadly defined first-year seminars (FYSs) as “both curricular innovations and programmatic tools designed to improve the transition experience for first-year students and yield higher rates of student retention and ‘success’” (p. 13). FYE courses were designed to provide students with the tools and skills needed as first-year students in college, as well to help students persist from one year to the next (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992). Tobolowsky, Cox, and Wagner (2005) described the changed nature of FYSs since the first publication of research in 1994 and provided evidence of the positive effect on first-year to second-year retention and graduation.

As part of her dissertation research, Barefoot (1992) investigated data from the 1991 National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programming with respect to the common forms of FYSs. Barefoot and Fidler (1992) relied on this research to help define the FYS typology and described the seminar typology in the monograph using some of the same terminology. In *Exploring the Evidence*, Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, and Roberts (1998) discussed FYE courses, and the creativity and flexibility that are often displayed in the course content. Barefoot et al. also discussed how these courses have a desired outcome to effect change in first-year students. Barefoot et al. invited institutions from across the country to share information pertaining to their own FYE courses and evidence of their effectiveness toward

success in college. This and other facets of research have helped to support the further development and growth of these courses and to encourage their continued presence.

Statement of the Problem

A statement that was often made to former college freshmen during college convocations was, “Look to the left and look to right. The person sitting next to you may not be sitting here next year” (Hunter, 2006, p. 4). The challenge of persistence is often ridiculed, but it can still be problematic on college campuses. There is some relevance to this predicament, but it cannot be viewed as a measurement for persistence. Schrader and Brown (2008) discussed how one in four college freshmen at 4-year universities did not return for their sophomore year. Because of the attrition problems that affect many colleges and universities, the need to implement some type of FYE program is apparent.

With the first year of college being a crucial transition period, colleges and universities must put forth efforts to assist college freshmen achieve success (Hunter, 2006). The phenomenon of the FYE efforts across college campuses gained tremendous momentum since the mid-1990s. The NRC (n.d.c) has collected years of data from research on FYE courses. For many years, colleges and universities have offered FYE courses to their freshmen students to assist them with integration into the college environment (Tinto, 1993). This course can range from a 1-credit-hour course that provide students with an extended version of orientation to a 3-credit-hour course that is discipline-focused in content (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Much research exists on FYE courses, from type of course to student outcomes. However, little use has been made of the national data on FYS course type and content to determine what combination increased student persistence in low- and moderate-selectivity institutions.

Significance of the Study

Extensive research exists on FYE courses or FYSs. Chapter 2 of this study reviews the literature. Institution leaders and researchers from across the country have discussed outcomes of FYE course or FYSs through studies conducted within their own institutions. This study looked at variables that may provide institutions with information that will assist them in evaluating the effectiveness of their FYSs or assist them in developing or implementing an FYS. Research indicating the effects of FYS content and characteristics on increased student persistence can help institutions identify the best model of course design, based on their institutional characteristics, or what course would best suit institutions that are classified as low- or moderate-selective admissions.

Purpose of the Study

For many years, colleges and universities have offered FYE courses to their freshmen students to assist them with integration into the college environment (Tinto, 1993). This course can range from a 1-credit-hour course that provides students with an extended version of orientation to a 3-credit-hour course that is discipline-focused in content (Barefoot, 2000). This study investigated which aspects of a FYS demonstrate the best approach to assisting students with successful integration to college, which can affect increased persistence to the sophomore year or increase persistence to graduation.

Specifically, this study focused on which characteristics of FYS courses affect increased persistence to the sophomore year or increased the persistence to graduation in low-and moderate-selectivity institutions. Through quantitative analysis, this study further described the data collected from the 2006 National Survey on First-year Seminars ([NSFYs] NRC, n.d.b, 2006) based on institutional model type. Results of this study will allow institutions to examine

the research while considering the characteristics of their institution, centered on the model types examined in this study. Results reported by Schryer, Griffin, and Tobolowsky (2008) revealed data by institutional selectivity. Institutional selectivity is determined by the survey respondent and is indicative of the admission selectivity of an institution. Institutions have the option to select low, moderate, or high; however, the low and moderate categories are combined in the NRC report, with only the high-selectivity category disaggregated (Schryer et al., 2008).

This researcher disaggregated the low- and moderate-selectivity institutional data in this study to provide institutions that are classified as either low or moderate selectivity an opportunity to use these data to assist them modeling a FYS for their institution type. This study used a quantitative research design to examine data collected by the NRC from the 2006 NSFYS to determine how course type, course objectives, and course topics affect increased student persistence in low- and moderate-selective institutions.

Research Questions

Research questions guiding the study were as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of first-year seminars in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions?
2. What course topics affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low- and moderate-selectivity institutions?
3. What course objectives affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
4. What other course characteristics affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?

5. What course topics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
6. What course objectives affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
7. What other course characteristics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?

Definition of Terms

First-year seminars (FYSs). Courses designed to assist first-year students with transitioning to college and improving their educational experiences. These courses also help to bring students closer to the college or university (NRC, n.d.c). The terms first-year experience (FYE) courses and first-year seminars (FYSs) are used interchangeably in this study.

Institutional selectivity. This term is referred to in the 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars ([NSFYs] NRC, 2006). Institutions were asked to rate their institution as low, moderate, or high selectivity relative to the level of entrance difficulty. This study focused on low- and moderate-selectivity institutions.

National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC). The NRC is recognized as the founder and leader of the FYE movement and has provided years of data and research on the FYE (NRC, n.d.c).

National Survey on First-Year Seminars (NSFYs). A national survey administered by the NRC to study FYSs in American higher education. The survey is administered triennially by the NRC. In 2012, the survey began the current 4-year cycle (NRC, n.d.b).

CHAPTER 2.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Persistence of First-Year Students

Alexander and Gardner (2009) wrote, “The first college year is central to the achievement of an institution’s mission and lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built” (p. 19). These first-college-year experiences are not only central to much of the research published about higher education since the 1990s, but also have become recognized as the foundation for the growth and development of the institution (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Recruitment and enrollment have become key issues that affect the success of institutions and ultimately make the difference for many institutions being able to maintain their financial stability (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Changing Demographics Among First Year Students

The *Chronicle of Higher Education 2011 Almanac Edition* reported more than 2 million students entered college for the first time during the 2010 school year (“A Profile of Freshmen,” 2011; “Enrollment by Race,” 2011). This number represents an increase of 6.8% from 1.997 million in 2006. Approximately 93% of the new enrollments were at 4-year colleges. Public institutions have been operating with budget cuts, yet enrollment has been growing (Ashburn, 2011). Private colleges appear consistent, but may eventually struggle to keep their enrollment up (Ashburn, 2011). Community colleges, however, achieved an 8.3% increase in enrollment of traditional-age students from 2006 to 2009, changing the overall pattern from 41.7% of

community college enrollment in this age group in 2006 to 44.5% in 2009. This trend by many first-year students to attend a 2-year college first shifted the nature of the first-year students who would have normally begun their first year of college at a 4-year institution.

Even though the average age of the first-year student has changed, freshmen across the country acknowledged that the recession affected their college choice (“A Profile of Freshmen,” 2011). According to Ishler and Upcraft (as cited in Upcraft et al., 2005), students age 25 years or older made up 28% of undergraduates before the recession. In 2008 and 2009, a declining economy meant that a growing number of adults were entering college for the first time to secure better financial stability and to seek better opportunities (“A Profile of Freshmen,” 2011). Many students who felt the pinch of the economy reported the decline in the economy not only had an impact on their college choice, but also on their emotional well-being. While the economy could have contributed to a decline in the number of students attending college, the limited job market contributed to increased enrollment, which affected students’ well-being (“A Profile of Freshmen,” 2011).

The demographic of students has changed. Upcraft et al. (2005) said it best when they asked,

Who are today’s first-year students? The myth of first-year students as primarily middle class, eighteen years old, single, fresh out of high school, studying full time, living on campus, enrolled in a four-year college, living away from home for the first time, meeting traditional standards of academic preparedness, and completing one-fourth of their courses in one year has been debunked for a least twenty-five years; yet that myth persists. (Upcraft et al., 2005, p. 13)

Freshmen-to-Sophomore Retention

The topic of first-year student persistence and retention has been a longstanding one of interest and concern among colleges and universities (Upcraft et al., 2005). A challenge often asked of college freshmen during college convocations is, “Look to the left and look to right. The

person sitting next to you may not be sitting here next year,” (Hunter, 2006, p. 4). Research indicates approximately 25% of first-year students do not move on to their second year at 4-year universities (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Schrader & Brown, 2008; Upcraft et al., 2005). The largest proportion of students who leave college do so during or after their first year and are unlikely to not return (Schrader & Brown, 2008). Some move on to other institutions, but many do not return at all, thus leaving institutions not only constantly looking for ways to either maintain or increase their retention rates, but also looking for ways to maintain their financial capacity (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft et al., 2005).

In 1989, Upcraft and Gardner wrote *The Freshman Year Experience*. In that book, Levitz and Noel (1989) focused on improving first-year to second-year retention. Levitz and Noel (1989) stated, “Fostering student success in the freshman year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence” (p. 65). Forrest (as cited in Levitz & Noel, 1989) remarked, “The single most important move an institution can make to increase student persistence to graduation is to ensure that students receive the guidance they need at the beginning of the journey through college graduation” (p. 79). Levitz and Noel expanded on this sentiment by writing that not only do institutions have a responsibility to provide optimum opportunities to help freshmen succeed, but also students who make it through the first year successfully will persist and therefore decrease the attrition rates considerably.

Levitz and Noel (1989) stated, “Efforts to improve freshman persistence, then, must focus on helping them make academic, personal, and social adjustments to college” (p. 71). Schrader and Brown (2008) also discussed that poor preparedness and a lack of awareness of campus resources can cause students not to return to complete their college degree. First-year students have to face an environment completely unlike what they encountered in high school.

First-year college students suddenly go from a teacher-directed environment in high school to a student-directed environment in college (Wratcher, 1991). Similarly, Kidwell (2005) indicated “the vast majority of first-year students enter college as dualists” (p. 253). As dualists, first-year students expect individuals to impart knowledge and their role is to only produce what is right or wrong, as in the professor-student relationship. First-year students do not see themselves as participants in the equation of teacher and student, but are there to simply receive knowledge. Such behaviors may ultimately contribute to student departures after the first year (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1993).

According to Schrader and Brown (2008), “students who do not successfully manage their first year stop-out or drop out entirely” (p. 314). This sentiment was also noted by Astin (1975) and Tinto (1993). Ultimately, helping a freshman make the adjustment early is a large determining factor to their success. Levitz and Noel (1989) believed that front-loading programs and services to help freshmen make the connection has a direct effect on their personal, social, and academic well-being. Hence, the freshmen year experience becomes a key factor in the whole movement toward increased retention, persistence, and graduation (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Institutional Attention

In 2013, President Obama released the College Scorecard as part of his continued efforts to hold colleges accountable for cost, value, and quality:

The College Scorecard—as part of President Obama’s continued efforts to hold colleges accountable for cost, value and quality—The Scorecard highlights key indicators about the cost and value of institutions across the country to help students choose a school that is well-suited to meet their needs, priced affordably, and is consistent with their educational and career goals. (Duncan, 2013, para. 3)

In mid-2014, it is even more important for institutions to realize that accountability has to be put into perspective regarding not only cost and value, but also quality of education. These key factors can have an impact on retention and persistence of students.

Over the years, institutions have changed their approach to first-year students (Upcraft et al., 2005). Some reasons for the changes have to do with the changing demographics, including more returning adult students, ill-prepared students, and an increase in students with diverse backgrounds. According to Gardner (as cited in Upcraft et al., 2005), “Attention must be directed to students’ needs as they adapt and adjust to their new environments” (p.29). According to Hayek and Kuh (2004), “What matters more to success in the first year, is what students actually do” (p. 11). It is not so much about the resources the institutions have, but the experiences the matriculating students have.

Common Variables in Determining Institutional Success

There are many variables or factors institutions use to determine success in the first year of college. While institutions may measure success using a variety of approaches, it is more important that the results translate into educationally purposeful activities for first-year students (Hayek & Kuh, 2004). To advance the study of first-year students and students in transition, the University of South Carolina established the NRC (n.d.c) in 1986. The NRC (n.d.a) is dedicated to the research and support of first-year students in higher education. According to the NRC (n.d.c) website, “The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was born out of the success of University of South Carolina’s much-honored University 101 course” (para. 1).

The University 101 course was created to bring together students and to connect students to the university. In later years, educators who had similar interests came together from across

the country to embrace the University 101 concept and their interests in first-year college students. The momentum created by these educators in the earlier years paved the way for the development of the NRC (n.d.c). The NRC created an impetus for an international movement to improve the educational experiences of first-year college students.

A better understanding of first-year students leads to better programs and services to facilitate their success. According to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008), most institutional models that focus on the success of first-year students contain variables such as precollege student demographics, student interactions, composition of the institution, student perceptions, and time devoted to educational activities. The works of Astin, Tinto and Pascarella, and Terenzini all considered aspects of student success and the variables affecting that success, with emphasis on the first-year student (Kuh et al., 2008). Astin's (1993) work focused on the quality and quantity of students' personal involvement in the academic and extracurricular life in college. Astin also presented a conceptual framework for studying student outcomes, referred to as the input-environment-outcome model. According to Astin (1993),

Inputs refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution; environment refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and outcomes refers to the student's characteristics after exposure to the environment. (Astin, 1993, p. 7)

Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) work was based on 20 years of research. Their book, *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), focused on the change and development of students in college. Their comprehensive research examined outcomes to determine what effect the changes had on a college student's development. Students experience a considerable amount of change during college. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), "Students not only make statistically significant gains in factual knowledge and in a range of general cognitive and intellectual skills; they also change on a broad array of value, attitudinal,

psychosocial and moral dimensions” (p. 557). It is evident that this research served not only as a basis for studying the development of college students, but also provided a foundation for studying first-year student development.

Tinto’s (1993) research also focused on the first-year student and his or her development, but from the perspective of student departure and retention. Tinto indicated that the amount and type of positive academic and social experiences contributes positively to the integration of students at the institution. According to Tinto, retention begins when students begin to adapt to the academic and social culture of the institution—the academic experiences provided by the institution and social interaction with peers and faculty. Tinto also stated the more integrated the student is with the institution, the higher are the retention rates. Institutions that focus on one model or aspects of any of the models developed by the premier researchers in the fields of student development as it relates to students’ FYE programs do so with the most comprehensive research designed to inform the higher education arena.

In 2000, the Higher Education Research Institute administered the first National Survey of Student Engagement ([NSSE] n.d.). The NSSE provided an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Many institutions administer the NSSE to collect data on the experiences of their first-year students and to study the demographics and variables associated with the experiences of their first-year students, and then compare experiences at their institution with those of other cohort institutions (NSSE, n.d.). Ultimately, assessing the student engagement of freshmen provides institutions with comprehensive research to help inform data-driven institutional decisions (NSSE, n.d.).

First-Year Experience Programs

As advocated by the NRC, the term first-year experience is described as a comprehensive and intentional approach to the first college year (NRC, n.d.c). It comprises both curricular and co-curricular initiatives. Hunter (2006) continued, “It is the sum of all experiences students have in their first year of college” (p. 6). Hunter (2006) claimed “attention to the first year of college has increased significantly since the 1980s” (p. 4). In 1984, findings of a study sponsored by the National Institute of Education on involvement in learning and American undergraduate education were published (Hunter, 2006). This report called for institutions to focus on first-year and second-year students, and to allocate resources and faculty to focus on the experiences of these students. This recommendation was perhaps the first time attention was given to the FYE on the national level.

The first year of college is a critical time in the life of a student. For years, colleges and universities have focused on the first year of college as the most important aspect to making a good impression on the student. A number of colleges and universities have implemented FYEs based on the concept that “early inclusion and success provide the foundation for retention and ultimately graduation” (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003, p. 378). According to Gardner (1986), “They represent a deliberately designed attempt to a rite of passage in which students are supported, welcomed, celebrated, and ultimately (hopefully), assimilated” (p. 266). In other words, universities make every effort to ensure they demonstrate what they can offer students and this demonstration is done before and during the first year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The FYE course was created to help students adjust to their critical freshman year of college. Tinto’s model of persistence is important to note because of the extent to which it relates to fit between the student and institution (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986). Engagement by

students on campus can lead to student success and create a positive outlook on their future success.

Barefoot (2000) described changing perceptions of students. When asked the question, “What’s wrong with the first year of college?” administrators tend to cite student attrition as the problem. So many colleges and universities are in competition for the market of college-aged students that with enrollment at the forefront, some institutions have become moderately selective and some even nonselective or offer open admissions, especially the tuition-driven institutions. When a faculty member is asked the same question, his or her answer tends to center around lack of motivation, disengagement, short attention span, or lack of ability. Twenty-first-century students enter colleges and universities with varying degrees of preparation for college or other real-life issues. Some are first-generation college students, returning adults, hold part-time or full-time jobs, or have physical or learning disabilities. In some instances, these students lack an understanding of the basic goal of higher education, not to mention skills in the areas necessary for success (Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001).

While the characteristics of college-goers have changed, the ideas on which the FYE courses were built have not. When these courses were created, most college-goers were of a traditional age and from White, middle-class families. In the 21st century, many college-goers are first-generation, minority, or adult-returning students (Barefoot, 2000). From the 1980s and continuing to the present, higher education in the United States has experienced a movement to improve the first year of college (Barefoot, 2000). FYE programs have been implemented to provide ill-prepared first-year students with the academic and life skills necessary to help them with success (Schrader & Brown, 2008).

First-Year Experience Program Background: History and Rise in Interest

FYE courses are one of the strongest predictors of students persisting from their first year to their second year (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). It is likely for students to enroll in their second year if they participate in a FYE course. FYE courses help bring together the part of academic and social integration needed for first-time college students. The FYE courses are directed toward improving the experiences of freshmen in college (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Since their inception, FYE courses have fostered the effective transition of college freshmen. Orientation courses can be traced to the late 1800s, when these preparatory-type courses were designed to assist students with transitioning (Lang, 2006). According to Schnell and Doetkott (2003), “In 1911, the Carnegie Foundation suggested that colleges and universities help freshmen students find themselves” (p. 378). By the early to mid-1900s, there were more than 100 institutions offering some type of course focused on helping freshmen. Cavote and Kopera-Frye (2004) remarked, “Following World War II, 43% of institutions surveyed reported offering a required orientation course” (p. 86). Over the years, the freshmen courses received criticism because they lacked “rigor” and many had disappeared by the 1960s (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). There was a resurgence of these courses in the 1970s as more nontraditional, first-generation students began to attend college, presenting a need for a course assisting students with developing skills to enhance their academic experience (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003).

Over the years, many researchers have offered their definition or purpose of FYE courses. These definitions are largely dependent upon the researchers’ or writers’ experience and/or knowledge of first-year students and FYE courses (Keup & Barefoot, 2005). According to Keup and Barefoot (2005),

First-year seminars are described in the higher education literature both as curricular innovations (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996) and as programmatic tools designed to improve the

transition experience for first-year students and yield higher rates of student retention and “success” broadly defined. (Keup & Barefoot, 2005, p. 13)

The purpose of the orientation course was to “emphasize personal adjustment and enhance the skills that first-year students need to successfully transition from high school to college” (Lang, 2006, p. 38). The FYE seminar, however, was different because “most first-year seminar courses focus on improving students’ writing and communication skills while developing their ability to think critically” (Lang, 2006, p. 38). For the purposes of the present study, the terms orientation courses and seminar courses are used interchangeably and are referred to as FYE courses or FYS courses.

Measures of First-Year Experience Outcomes

Students who participate in FYE courses have a better chance to move to the level of relativism, which has the potential to help them develop as continuing students (Kidwell, 2005). By the end of the freshman year, a profound transformation has begun to happen as students realize that opinions must be backed with reasons and evidence, and contrary opinions must be analyzed and evaluated, so they must be prepared to support their opinions as well as to be open to alternatives (Kidwell, 2005). At this point, the student has shifted from passivity to activity; college is no longer an environment in which others have the sole responsibility to provide information, but one in which the student has an equal responsibility to learn (Kidwell, 2005). These and many other factors are critical to expounding the research on first-year students.

Many first-year students enter college with unrealistic expectations. They expect to receive everything they need, like in high school, instead of the expectation of being responsible for seeking what they need (Kidwell, 2005). This same concept can carry over to other aspects of first-year students’ experiences, including their social development and transition to college (Kidwell, 2005). By the end of the first year, these same students will, quite often, emerge as

multiplists (Kidwell, 2005). At the stage of multiplicity, knowledge is no longer truth, but only opinion, answers are no longer right or wrong, but better or worse, and positions are simply a matter of theory, tantamount to mere beliefs (Kidwell, 2005). This stage is an important factor to consider when one examines the students who depart versus the students who are retained.

Types of First-Year Courses

Ryan and Glenn (2004) described the emergence of two types of FYs. Early models of FYs were learning strategy-focused, based on the work of cognitive psychologists. The central focus of the courses was based on reading and study skills. During the period of the 1960s and 1970s, as an influx of nontraditional students and those students who were underprepared to attend college entered college, the extended orientation-type seminar emerged. This type of seminar more or less was created in response to the facets of the political protests of the 1960s and early 1970s, and in response to the signing of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The Higher Education Act (1965) authorized the creation of additional educational opportunity programs to serve disadvantaged youth in the United States. As a result, more diverse populations of students began attending college, including low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Ryan & Glenn, 2004). It was apparent these students needed more than just learning strategies for success in college; they also needed to be integrated into the culture of college. They needed to have a better understanding of academia and how to better use the available resources at the university (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Ryan & Glenn, 2004).

Friedman and Marsh (2009) noted that seminars commonly referred to as extended orientation-type seminars constituted the majority of seminar types offered, but the seminars that are commonly referred to as academic seminars were not far behind. Academic seminars were further divided into two categories, one with consistency among all course sections and another

with different academic themes for each section. Seminars with the varied themes typically centered on a faculty member's specialty area or discipline.

Barefoot and Fidler (1996) were instrumental in developing the FYE typology to categorize the various FYE courses. This typology has evolved over the years, but most colleges and universities offer some type of FYE course based on one of these categories:

- Extended orientation seminars, sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, or student success: These seminars may be taught by faculty, administrators, and/or student affairs professionals. Content likely includes introduction to campus resources, time management, study skills, career planning, cultural diversity, and student development issues.
- Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections: These seminars may be either an elective or a required course, sometimes interdisciplinary or theme-oriented, or sometimes part of a required general education core. Primary focus is on academic theme, but they often include academic skills components such as critical thinking and expository writing.
- Academic seminars on various topics: In these seminars, specific topics vary from section to section, may evolve from any discipline, or may include societal issues such as biological and chemical warfare, urban culture, animal research, and environmental issues.
- Professional or discipline-linked seminar: These seminars are generally taught within professional schools or specific disciplines such as engineering, health sciences, business, or education. They are designed to prepare students for the demands of the major and the profession.

- Basic study skills seminar: These seminars are generally offered for academically underprepared students. They focus on basic academic skills such as grammar, note-taking, and reading texts.

Course objectives differ because institutions address the particular needs of their students. Goals include helping to ease the transition to college, assisting with career planning, offering a supportive community through peer and faculty support, and developing academic and social skills (Barefoot, 2000). FYE courses have helped to increase persistence into the second year of college, as well as help ease the transition from high school to college. As Hunter and Linder (2005) noted, “Research on FYE courses has also affected overall retention, grade point average, [students’] involvement on campus, and their attitudes and perceptions of college” (p. 288).

Barefoot (2000) identified and expounded on six research-based objectives critical to the construction of FYEs:

- Increasing student-to-student interaction: A large number of FYE courses focus on peer- to-peer experiences. Whether the seminar involves the extension of the FYE course into a learning community, where students are in all or most of the same classes, whether there is emphasis on more peer interaction or the integration of service learning or other experiential activities, peer-to-peer experiences can be an integral part of the FYE course. Barefoot (2000) indicated that over “70 percent of the U.S. colleges and universities that offer some type of FYE or seminar course have a goal of developing peer to peer [*sic*] relationships” (p. 15).
- Increasing faculty-to-student interaction: Faculty play a primary role in the life of a student. It is not only important for first-year students to understand the importance of knowing faculty, but also it is important that faculty understand that having positive

informal and formal interactions with first-year students has an impact on students. Providing opportunities for faculty-to-student interaction can also improve the academic and social integration of first-year students into their university community (Tinto, 1993).

- Increasing student involvement and time on campus: Engaging students into the campus community is another important component to the FYE course. Despite the forces of online education and commuting students, and the consequent changing culture and climate of student life, student involvement on campus is still a viable component of the class, so faculty should continue to include the out-of-class activities in the course design (Barefoot, 2000).
- Linking to the curriculum and the co-curriculum: Linking the in-class experience with out-of-class experiential learning is “one of the most exciting pedagogical tools. . . . Educating students for citizenship and public service offers students the opportunity to learn hands-on experiences which allows them to principles to practice” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 16).
- Increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement: This objective is sometimes demonstrated by the use of first-year reading experiences, whether or not attached to FYE courses. FYE reading experiences provide the opportunities to increase academic engagement of first-year students. In some cases, they can provide a springboard into the academic realm before students even begin their courses (Barefoot, 2000).
- Assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college: Barefoot (2000) stated, “Tinto’s concept of academic integration implies that students must

possess the requisite academic skills to do college work in order to engage in ongoing academic conversation and to feel validated as a member of the academy” (p. 17).

Many students come to college without the necessary skills. A study skills center or tutorial labs may provide the opportunity for the first-year student to gain the requisite skills (Barefoot, 2000).

Popularity of First-Year Seminars

Every three years for the last 10–15 years, the NRC (n.d.b) has conducted a national survey surrounding the FYE for both 2-year and 4-year institutions. In their 2009 survey, 890 of the respondents indicated that their representative institutions offered some type of FYE course (NRC, 2009). Additionally, 366 of those respondents indicated the extended orientation seminar type as the primary seminar type offered. Next, 143 respondents indicated the academic seminar with uniform content was the second most popular seminar type offered, and 137 respondents indicated the academic seminar type with various content as third highest. Combined, the two academic seminar types accounted for the second highest number of seminars offered at the institutions reported ($n = 280$). According to the NRC (2009), the hybrid seminar type followed just slightly behind the academic seminar, with various content course types ($n = 136$) individually reported, or third highest in terms of seminar types offered at institutions that responded to the survey. Historically, the extended orientation seminar type has been the most commonly found type of FYE courses offered at institutions (Barefoot, 2000). However, the academic seminar has a strong presence on college campuses, given the data reported by the NRC (2009).

The objectives that institutions formulate for the FYE courses can differ because each institution is addressing the particular needs of its students. Goals may include helping to ease

the transition to college, assisting with career planning, offering a supportive community through peer and faculty support, and developing academic and social skills (Barefoot, 2000). FYE courses have helped to increase persistence into the second year of college, as well as helped to ease the transition from high school to college. According to Hunter and Linder (2005), research on FYE courses has had some effect on overall retention, grade point average, campus involvement on campus, attitudes, and perceptions of college.

Types of First-Year Seminars

Two types of FYs are most commonly found at colleges and universities and have historically provided the foundation for the evolution of other types of seminars (NRC, 2009). The learning strategies model represents an attempt to teach students how to use active learning strategies, while the academic socialization models attempt to integrate students into the norms, values, and rituals of academia (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). The academic socialization model includes the extended orientation type, which is offered on a majority of college campuses (NRC, 2009). These two models, the learning strategy model and the academic socialization model, are further described and outcomes discussed later in this study report.

Learning Strategies Seminars

Learning strategy seminars are focused on the development of skills needed to be successful in college (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). They are designed to help students understand what they will encounter in college. Content typically includes study skills, time management, note-taking, test-taking, and textbook reading skills (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). According to Barefoot's (2000) typology, this seminar type can be categorized as a combination of the academic content seminar and basic study skills seminar type because, as described by Ryan and Glenn (2004, p.

7), “strategy instruction was carried out within the context of developing metacognitive skills and awareness, self-regulation skills, and the conditional knowledge.”

Research on Outcomes

In a study by Ryan and Glenn (2004), the learning strategy model and the academic socialization model were compared to determine impact on freshman retention and to improve one-year freshman retention rates. In keeping with a natural experiment method for the quasi-experimental study, students self-selected one of two types of FYSs. It was hypothesized that the academic socialization-based first-year course would be more effective in increasing retention for students who were more successful their first year, and the strategy-based seminar would increase retention for those students who were not as successful their first year (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). Findings indicated that the strategy-based seminar was more effective in retaining similar academically prepared first-year students than the socialization-based seminar. Ryan and Glenn concluded that in a natural experiment study conducted at a large public research university, the learning strategy-based FYS provides the support for students that had an impact on retention.

Hyers and Joslin (1998) conducted a study of the FYS at a small liberal arts college to determine if the FYS slowed the dropout rate of first-year students. The institution was experiencing a decline in enrollment and had to make several budget cuts. The researchers also wanted to determine if the FYS could predict who was most at risk of dropping out. The FYS was described as a “three-credit, one-semester course required of all traditional age (i.e., 17–20), first-year students” (Hyers & Joslin, 1998, p. 9). The course was also described as having a common syllabus, faculty from across disciplines, and co-curricular activities such as team building, cultural and recreational activities, and trips. Such characteristics represent an academic seminar with a common content seminar type. Results indicated that success in the FYS

correlated positively with retention. According to the researchers, “The FYS grade is an effective predictor of both achievement and persistence into the second and even subsequent years” (Hyers & Joslin, 1998, p. 24).

Similarly, Zimmerman (2000) studied a 1-credit-hour required seminar course taught at a branch campus of a university for students enrolled in 2-year technical programs to determine the relationship between the course grade and standards of academic ability and student success. The FYS was developed as a college success-type course patterned after the University of South Carolina 101 course, with some slight modifications. The course had a common syllabus across the sections and a journaling component. Given that the branch campus focused on horticulture and agricultural programs, the FYE course was designed to meet the specific needs of students in those programs. Results indicated that the “orientation course grade is strongly related to retention” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 35). Zimmerman (2000) indicated, “The higher the grade, the more likely the student was to persist to the second year and be retained” (p. 35). Conversely, the grade earned in the seminar course was not found to be significantly correlated with high school rank and ACT scores (two standard indicators of academic ability). Results indicated a high correlation between course grade and grade point average (GPA), indicating that the FYE course is a better indicator of student success and GPA than are most standard indicators of entering freshmen. Zimmerman (2000, p. 41) remarked that the results reported in this article were “very similar to those reported by Hyers and Joslin (1998).”

The FYSs discussed by Hyers and Joslin (1998) and Zimmerman (2000) were consistent with the learning strategies model, although both courses provided additional content related to social integration. Schnell and Doetkott (2003) observed the retention rates of students at a mid-sized Midwestern public institution over a 4-year period. Students in an academic skills seminar-

type FYE course were matched with students not enrolled, and retention rates were measured for both groups. The goal was to determine whether the students enrolled in a FYS were retained at a greater rate than were those not enrolled. The researchers described the seminar course as one that “highlights skills and techniques designed to ease the transition for students new to the institution” (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003, p. 379). This description is consistent with the learning strategies model type. Schnell and Doetkott (2003) also indicated, “The seminar introduces students to campus resources and governance and includes topics related to study techniques, time management, test taking, note taking, goal setting, wellness, stress management, and career orientation” (p. 379). Results indicated increased retention in the enrolled group over a period of four years. The number of students retained decreased year to year, as expected; however, those in the FYE were consistently retained at a higher rate than those who were not enrolled in the FYE course (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003).

Academic Socialization Models/Extended Orientation Seminars

The academic socialization models focuses on more than just learning strategies needed for success in college (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). This seminar type also addresses the need for first-year students to become integrated into the culture of college, to have a better understanding of academia, and know what university resources are available and how to use them. The extended orientation seminar is synonymous with this model. Some research may have also categorized this model as a social integration model because one typically finds more social integration components within the course and the basis of the course has a theoretical premise of social integration research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

Outcomes of Extended Orientation Seminars

Lang (2007) examined a FYE course, University of Buffalo 101 (UB 101), to assess the impact of the course on first-year college students using an experimental group and a control group. The two groups of students were sampled based on similar demographics, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test score and high school GPA. The control group was composed of first-year students who did not participate in the FYE course. After the groups were established, academic data were extracted for both groups; these data included GPAs and completion of credit hours earned over two years. Lang found the groups achieved similar mean GPAs and completed a comparable number of hours in their second semester at the university. Results also indicated that the number of students who completed degree requirements in five years were greater in the case of the students who took the UB 101 course, versus those who did not complete the UB 101 course (Lang, 2007). Ultimately, UB 101 had a positive impact on the overall first- to second-year retention and graduation rates at the university. Lang (2007) posited “that UB 101 completers may attain higher GPAs in their first semester; persist to their second, third, and fourth semesters; and graduate within four, five, and six years more often than their nonparticipant counterparts” (p. 19).

Crissman (2001) explored how FYE courses affect students’ perceptions or experiences. The study sought to compare the experiences of students enrolled in a FYS clustered with an academic course to those who were enrolled in only the FYS. According to Crissman (2001), clustering (sometimes called freshman interest groups) is also designed to help improve the retention rates of first-year students. The rationale behind clustering is that “groups of students, taking two or more classes together, will provide both social and academic support for each other and in doing so, enhance the classroom experience for all” (Crissman, 2001, p.71).

Crissman (2001) used a phenomenological approach to study the experiences of students who participated in clustered and nonclustered FYSs. In focus group interviews, both the clustered and nonclustered students had positive reactions to their FYS experience. The differences that emerged included satisfaction with the FYS, skills learned, peer support, and students' impressions of their professors (Crissman, 2001). While Crissman's study demonstrated positive results of clustered FYSs through the lived experiences of students, the highlight is the real importance of FYSs for first-time college students and how, in the case of the present study, building a supportive community helps to engage the student into the university environment. Crissman (2001) noted, "While the number, names, and look of first-year programs have grown dramatically over the years, the purpose has remained the same: to help new students adjust academically and socially to their new environment" (p. 86).

Maisto and Tammi's (1991) study looked at a subject-based FYE at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. They conducted two experiments, the first using 150 students in a 2x2x2 randomized factorial design. The study took into account student classification, housing location, and course participation. The second experiment included the same sample of students, but compared the GPA of the sample to the control group of 200 students. Results of the study indicated the seminar course, "influences the academic integration of the students as measured by their grade point averages" (Maisto & Tammi, 1991, p. 43). Maisto and Tammi found seminar students to have significantly higher GPAs than did nonseminar students. Seminar students also had significantly more informal social encounters with faculty members than did nonseminar students.

Starke et al. (2001) conducted a study at Ramapo College, where a FYS was introduced and designed to provide students with the information, expectations, and skills needed to succeed

in college. This longitudinal study followed eight cohorts of students from their first year until they graduated (up to seven years). Ramapo is a 4-year, liberal arts college located in a suburban area of New Jersey with approximately 4,500 students enrolled. Comparisons were made between students who were enrolled in the FYE course and those who were not enrolled. The study measured eight outcomes, including retention, graduation, student satisfaction, faculty interaction, extracurricular participation, students' self-reporting of progress, and academic performance. Results of the study indicated students enrolled in the FYS were retained and graduated at a higher rate than did students not enrolled in the FYS. In addition, students enrolled in the FYS attained significantly higher GPAs two to four semesters after FYS completion than did students who did not take the course. Starke et al. mentioned that students were not randomly assigned to the FYS, but the more high-risk students were required to enroll in the course. Despite this fact, the FYS students were still retained and graduated "in far greater numbers than their better academically prepared peers who did not take the seminar" (Starke et al., 2001, p.18).

Additional results of the study by Starke et al. (2001) revealed students who took the FYS contributed significantly to relationships with faculty, as compared to those students who did not take the course. The study revealed students who enrolled in the FYS "felt more comfortable approaching faculty members, interacted more with the faculty outside the classroom, and consulted more faculty members than their peers who had not taken the course"(Starke et al., 2001, p. 24). The study also revealed students enrolled in the FYS were more engaged in extracurricular activities, including attending campus activities and belonging to campus organizations.

Comparison of the Learning Strategies Model and Academic Socialization Model

In a study by Cavote and Kopera-Frye (2004) at the University of Nevada-Reno, first-year students enrolled in a subject-based FYE course were compared to students who were not enrolled in the course to determine effectiveness of a subject-based course. Findings indicated no correlation to student GPA or persistence based on enrollment in a subject-based FYE. Further, the authors reported, “Contrary to prior literature, results do not strongly support the implementation of FYE courses in this subject-based iteration” (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004, p. 95).

Wilkie and Kuckuck (1989) conducted a longitudinal study at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where they tracked freshmen who entered during the fall semester of 1984 for three years. The study consisted of students who were assigned to either the FYE course (the experimental group) or to no orientation course (the control group). Participants in the study met five criteria: traditional age, first-time freshman status, full-time student, predicted as high-risk, and in a 4-year degree-seeking program. Wilkie and Kuckuck (1989) described the course as, “a three-credit elective course offered during the fall semester of 1984. The course included three primary components: (a) learning skills; (b) college, personal, and social adjustment; and (c) career exploration” (Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989, p. 9). Results indicated participants in the FYE course demonstrated significantly higher mean GPAs than did those in the control group. The study also demonstrated a “positive impact on the grades that students achieved throughout their first three years” (Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989, p. 10). Further, the researchers found that students were better integrated into the campus and used university resources, including tutorial programs. This study supports the tenet of social integration, as outlined by Tinto (1993).

Weissman and Magill (2008) sought to determine if there was a relationship between FYE course type on first-year to second-year student retention and college GPA. They used a cluster analysis to develop a typology of student groups based on precollege characteristics. The goal was to better understand the fit between seminar and student type and how this correlation might optimize the development of first-year programs. This study took place at a large doctoral research-intensive university. The university offered two types of FYs: University 101 and a university inquiry course. The University 101 course was a seminar-type course. Course content was standardized and the courses were co-taught by either a faculty or staff member and peer leaders who were upperclassmen. The goal of the University101 course was to help ease the transition of first-year college students by promoting community building. The seminar topics varied from campus resources to time management. Alternatively, students could enroll in the university inquiry course, which was a disciplined-based seminar course. Taught by full-time faculty in the discipline, it was designed to assist students with the development and understanding of discipline area and the pedagogy of the field of study. Unlike the University101 course, the university inquiry course was used to satisfy a general education requirement. Both courses were voluntary.

Data from the student information system and the College Student Inventory were used in this study (Weissman & Magill, 2008). The student information system data used included student demographic information and characteristics of first-year students. The College Student Inventory was administered to first-year students during the orientation sessions prior to fall enrollment. According to Weissman and Magill (2008), “The [College Student Inventory] is a nationally normed survey designed to gather data on student attitudes and levels of motivation” (p. 71). Results of the study by Weissman and Magill (2008) indicated that participation in FYs

contributed to student success, with success defined according to GPA and student retention. While return rates were statistically significant for those students who participated in the FYS compared to those who did not, in contrast, there was no statistical significance in fall-to-fall retention in participants who took the FYS compared to nonparticipants (Weissman & Magill, 2008).

A number of studies on the effectiveness of first-year programs have compared the outcomes of participants to nonparticipants. Findings generally show that participation in a FYS has a direct effect on persistence (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Hyers & Joslin, 1998; Porter & Swing, 2006; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Starke et al., 2001). While it is important to contribute to the literature on FYE courses from individual research conducted from institution to institution, it is also important to collect and analyze national data. Porter and Swing (2006) conducted extensive research with more than 45 institutions and included 20,000 students who completed a FYS to determine which variables contributed more to persistence from an extended orientation-type FYS. The variables included study skills, college policies, campus engagement, peer connections, and health education. The study found that students indicated their intent to return on how effectiveness rated on each of these variables. As a result, students in this study rated the knowledge of college policies as the key variable that determined their intent to return (Porter & Swing, 2006).

Friedman and Marsh (2009) studied a 3-credit-hour college success transition seminar (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996) at Appalachian State University, on the verge of reorganization and change, for effectiveness in terms of 1-year retention rates, first-year GPA, and student perceptions of a course experience and outcomes. This study compared the existing college success/transition FYS course with a new thematic-based, academic FYS seminar to determine

which FYS was more effective in the following three variables: “ (a) one-year retention rates, (b) first-year grade point averages, [and] (c) student perceptions of the course experience and outcomes of that experience” (Friedman & Marsh, 2009, p. 33). Friedman and Marsh concluded there was no significant difference in the retention levels of students or first-year GPA in the already-established freshman seminar as compared to students in the experimental thematic-based academic seminar. However, results revealed significant differences in two factors related to student perceptions of their course experience and outcomes, which included out-of-class-engagement and campus policies. These factors were more consistent with seminar content related to the college success/transition FYS course (Friedman & Marsh, 2009).

Theories Guiding Institutional Action

Chickering and Reisser’s Vectors of Student Development

Student development theory has a great impact on student success in college. Understanding of theoretical framework that underpins decisions made to promote success in college is important because these changes have an impact on a student’s development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) remarked, “To be effective in educating the whole student, colleges must hire and reinforce staff members who understand what student development looks like and how to foster it” (p. 185).

In 1969, Arthur Chickering published his research on developmental issues facing college students. This research was conducted between 1959 and 1965. The research was based mostly on Chickering’s work at Goddard College, although he collected data from other small colleges. His research remains highly regarded and widely used by many researchers and in student affairs practice (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Chickering (1969) developed what he termed *vectors* to describe the paths students take toward discovering their individuation.

Chickering (1969) identified seven vectors that focused on identity development. These seven vectors served as maps to help determine where students were and which way they were heading: (a) developing competence, (b) managing emotions, (c) autonomy towards interdependence, (d) developing relationships, (e) establishing identity, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity. Chickering described a vector as having direction and magnitude, and these vectors can work at different rates. The vectors take into account emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual aspects of development (Chickering, 1969). Although the vectors are not meant to be sequential, they build upon each other, and movement can occur at different rates, allowing vectors to interact with the other vectors.

Chickering's (1969) theory was later revised by Chickering and Reisser (1993) to reflect the societal changes and incorporate the work of other theorists. Chickering's original study was conducted in the early 1960s and concentrated on predominantly White traditional-aged male college students. Chickering and Reisser revisited the seven vectors with the following revisions:

- developing competence, including intellectual competence, physical competence, interpersonal competence;
- managing emotions and thereby recognizing and accepting emotions, appropriately expressing and managing emotions;
- moving through autonomy toward interdependence with self-direction, problem solving, moving away from need for reassurance, affection or approval, aware of interconnection with others;
- developing mature interpersonal relationships by developing a sense of self, appreciation and tolerance for differences, being able to develop long-lasting and meaningful relationships;
- establishing identity by finding comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, clear self-concept, self-acceptance;
- developing purpose with clear vocational goals, meaningful commitments to personal interests and goals, strong interpersonal commitments, stay with decisions; and
- developing integrity by humanizing values, personalizing values, developing congruencies. (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, pp. 38–39)

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), “traditionally aged students typically explore the first three vectors during their first years of college, while upper-class students

wrestle with vectors four, five, and possibly six” (p. 13). The first three vectors help to frame the context of the experiences of first-year students, which also correlate with development of FYE courses. For this reason, I focused on the first three vectors.

The first vector, developing competence, entails developing intellectual, physical, and manual competence, as well as interpersonal competence. First-year students may encounter the intellectual aspect of this vector through the development of skills from classroom experiences and gaining an understanding of content (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students can develop physical and manual competence through their talents and using these talents in extracurricular activities and other nonacademic areas. Interpersonal competence is developed as students begin to explore alternative ways of communicating and working collaboratively, whether in a group setting, on a project, or on a student involvement activity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), “Students’ overall sense of competence increases as they learn to trust their abilities, receive accurate feedback from others, and integrate their skills into a stable self-assurance” (p. 46). This premise presents components of setting the foundation for FYE courses. Chickering (1969) stated that these components of the first vector are part of the encounter students have in their first year. Colleges that help students achieve readiness and help them perform to the best of their ability contribute to developing the groundwork for the first vector, developing competence, including intellectual, social, and physical competence. Participation in extracurricular activities and personal achievements encountered in the first year of college can lead to a student developing confidence in his or her own ability (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

In the discussion on the second vector, managing emotions, Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that typically students will not escape college without going through some type of

change of emotions. This change can range anywhere from anger, disappointment, hurt, and anxiety to fear, boredom, desire, or guilt. Chickering and Reisser indicated one of the first steps in mastering this vector is to allow the emotions to emerge, so they can be acknowledged instead of being disregarded. For example, allowing the emotion of frustration to show, but then learning that it will help the student build a better emotional state of mind and perhaps perform better while experiencing the particular frustration is the challenge students face (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). When a student encounters one or more of the emotions at this level and effectively learns how to manage that emotion or self-regulate the emotion, this student has learned to manage his or her emotions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Finally, the third vector, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, according to Chickering and Reisser (1993), is the next step for students to learn responsibility with some self-sufficiency. According to Chickering and Reisser, moving through this vector requires the presence of emotional and instrumental independence and then later recognition and acceptance of interdependence. Chickering and Reisser related emotional independence to having freedom from reliance upon emotional reassurance from others, which may include parents or individuals in the student's life. Students moving through this aspect of the third vector accept that others, such as their peers, can also provide a level of self-reliance for them (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The aspect of instrumental independence is the student's ability to become organized in his or her problem-solving ability and become more self-directed. Chickering and Reisser believed that students should be able to think more critically and self-direct as students without the reliance on hand-holding or detailed instructions. Finally, students develop interdependence or dependence on others in a healthier fashion after having encountered their self-reliance and balanced independence within their relationship circle (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Astin's Theories of Student Involvement and Input-Environment-Output

Astin (1977) conducted extensive research on college impact and students' development. Astin's model, the input, environment, and output (I-E-O) model, is referred to as a common-sense approach to help researchers and administrators design a learning environment conducive to student development (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). The model has been used for many years to study college student development and institutional factors contributing to an individual student's development. According to Astin (1977), "The basic purpose of the model is to assess the impact of various environmental experiences by determining whether students grow or change differently under varying environmental conditions" (p. 7). Simply put, college has an impact on students in many ways. Astin posited that studying student development using the I-E-O model could help researchers and educators understand how desired outcomes can be achieved.

In the I-E-O model, input refers to a set of characteristics students possess prior to their entry into college, some of which influence views and perceptions about college (Astin, 1977). Astin (1977) presented 146 precollege input variables in his model, including age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, parental income, high school grades, reasons for attending college, and admissions test scores. Astin (1977) believed these variables helped offer a better understanding of the stimulus of backgrounds and characteristics to a student's capacity to persist. The second component of the I-E-O model is the environment, which denotes institutional characteristics and resources to which students are exposed and to which they interrelate in college, resulting in the student's actual experience (Astin, 1977, 1993). Astin (1993) used 192 environmental measures in this study, which included areas related to institutional characteristics, students' peer group characteristics, faculty characteristics, curriculum, financial aid, major, residence, and student

involvement. The final component of the model, outcomes, “refers to the student’s characteristics after exposure to the environment” (Astin, 1993 p. 7).

For Astin (1977), student involvement was essential. Astin defined involvement as actions representing what individuals do or how they conduct themselves. For students, involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychosocial energy invested into the academic experience. Astin postulated that an involved student is one who invests time and energy in academic and social pursuits, is active on campus, and interacts with faculty and peers. This involvement could be as specific as a student spending time to study for a math test or as general as spending time in the student center with peers (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Astin contended that involvement occurs along a continuum; students demonstrate varying levels of commitment to different purposes at different times based on interest. The amount of learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological investment by the student. Chickering and Reisser (1993) offered a similar contention related to the vectors, given their belief that students move through each vector along a continuum and there are environmental factors that may influence how the students move through each vector. This explanation also applies to Astin’s (1977) I-E-O model.

Astin (1977) sought to understand how undergraduate students were affected by their college experiences in the 1970s. Nearly 20 years later, Astin (1993) looked at changes to attributes that affected college students in the 1990s. This latter research, much like that of the former research, was a longitudinal study of 20,000 students using data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute and Cooperative Institutional Research Program. Astin (1993) concluded that college benefits students; however, for students to gain from the experience and develop as individuals, they have to take full advantage of what college has to offer. Astin's

(1993) theory provides the framework to influence construction of institutional policy, which guides admissions standards, creates academic expectations, and helps create student support mechanisms, such as FYE programs.

Both Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Astin's (1977) theories are part of the compendium of student development theory. Their work provides a context for how important it is to consider the set of characteristics students bring with them to college, the experiences students encounter during college, how they manage those experiences, and what outcomes exist in the students' development as a result of these experiences. Understanding these experiences can assist the student with his or her future growth and development for the remainder of the student's matriculation.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure recognizes that students enter college with different traits, abilities, and commitments. The model explains why some students persist while others leave. Tinto agreed that effective retention programs share three principles: community, commitment to students, and commitment to education. In his theory, Tinto posited that the level of student integration into academia and the social community influences whether the student will leave or stay. Tinto elaborated that students come to college with individual characteristics that include family background (e.g., parental educational level, social status), individual attributes (e.g., ability, race, gender), skill level (e.g., intellectual, social), financial resources (or the lack thereof), dispositions (e.g., motivations, intellectual, political preferences), and precollege experiences (e.g., a student's high school record). As first-time freshmen in college, these characteristics contribute to whether or not students stay in college and persist to the next year. Individual student characteristics influence a student's initial commitment to the institution,

the goal of college graduation, as well as the decision to depart, which in turn affect the student's degree of academic and social integration.

Ultimately, the academic and social communities that make up the institution create an environment of their own, with their own set of values and behavioral requirements. Comfort, alignment, and congruence with these requirements ease the transition and foster integration into the community (Tinto, 1993). Experiences within the institution can foster continuance at that institution. Institutional experiences include interactions with faculty, staff, and other members of the college, including other students. Tinto surmised that positive interactions, which further one's social and academic integration, increase the likelihood of persisting to obtain a college degree. Conversely, a lower degree of academic and social integration is likely to cause a student to leave the institution. Tinto further elaborates that each of these attributes affects the departure decision by indirectly influencing the student's intentions and commitments towards his or her education. Intention refers to the level and type of education desired by the student, and commitment indicates the dedication to goal attainment as well as institutional loyalty.

Tinto (1993) acknowledged that external commitments alter a student's intentions (plans), goals, and institutional commitments throughout the student's college career. These commitments can include anything from working to influences from the family they have left at home. As a result of these commitments, departure is still a possibility, even in situations where the student is succeeding and is having a positive college experience.

Student Engagement

Hayek and Kuh (2004) asked, "What would you say if someone asked you about the experiences of first-year students on your campus?" (p. 11). According to Hayek and Kuh, the answer to this question focuses on student engagement. Student engagement has two key

components. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities and experiences associated with the outcomes that constitute student success. The second is how the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities (Hayek & Kuh, 2004). Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices (Kuh, 2005).

Hayek and Kuh (2004) believed that the time and energy students spend in activities should be assessed and then this information should be used to inform institutional decisions. No matter who the students are or where they go to college, what matters most is what they do during college towards what they learn and whether or not they persist (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Thus, student engagement in college is the key to getting students to persist and graduate (Kuh et al., 2005). Kuh et al. (2005) indicated that “nearly one out of five 4-year institutions graduates fewer than one-third of its first-time, full-time, degree-seeking first-year students within six years” (p. 7). Kuh et al. (2005) believed that to improve the persistence and graduation rates of students, institutions must improve the quality of student learning and engagement. This belief correlates with Tinto’s (1993) theory in that the more a student is integrated into campus, the more likely he or she will persist. Thus, student engagement and persistence have a direct relationship.

Kuh et al. (2005) compared NSSE results of 20 institutions. Defining student success “to include academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational

objectives, and post college performance,” Kuh et al. (2008, p. 541) noted that most student success models focus on five variables:

- student background characteristics including demographics and precollege academic and other experiences;
- structural characteristics of institutions such as mission, size, and selectivity;
- interactions with faculty and staff members and peers;
- student perceptions of the learning environment; and
- the quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities. (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 541)

These five variables have been the building blocks to a blueprint used by many colleges and universities in the 21st century to help them better apply the theoretical perspective behind student engagement in developing programs designed to contribute to the student success model (Kuh, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2005).

Kuh et al. (2005) suggested that in-class and out-of-class experiences are essential to promote student learning. These and many other components are important to consider as part of comprehensive first-year programming and development and content of FYE courses. Student engagement is at the core of student success and persistence (Kuh et al., 1991), which is an essential component to actively engaging first-year students (Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Summary of Literature

There is considerable literature on FYEs and the specific seminar typology. As indicated by the research, there are a variety of seminar types offered at colleges and universities across the country. Many of those seminar types focus primarily on assisting students with developing the skills necessary for them to be successful in college. These seminars include a focus on developing the metacognitive skills or on how students’ learning will have an impact on their success in college (Ryan & Glenn, 2004). There are other seminar types, for example, the

extended orientation type and the basic skills type, which assist with the integration and socialization of first-year students into the college culture (Barefoot, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). It is well recognized that FYs can have a great impact on student persistence and assist colleges and universities in minimizing their attrition problems (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992, 1996). The literature also suggests that FYs are guided by several theoretical perspectives, but specifically the research of Astin (1977, 1993), Tinto (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and Kuh et al. (2008) all provide a basis for FYs. In conclusion, the FYs and the experiences of college freshmen continue to have significance in colleges and universities in the 21st century.

Remaining Questions

Although there has been extensive research conducted on outcome variables such as social integration and retention, little research has focused on seminar types, course content, and their effectiveness with certain outcomes. As the research has indicated, many institutions have adopted the model of the extended orientation type, and many institutions offer FYs with more than one type or a combination of seminar types, similar to a hybrid type. However, there has been little research to disaggregate the outcome variables related to course characteristics and objectives specific to each seminar type. Further, there is little research on how a seminar type may vary based on institutional type from the perspective of national survey data.

The analysis of literature has demonstrated extensive research at the institutional level on FYs, but there is a gap in the literature on national survey data. Disaggregating national data to provide colleges and universities a broader perspective on FYs course delivery, course objectives, and course topics that affect student persistence is needed, especially with regard to analyzing national data that were previously collected from low- and moderate-selectivity type

institutions. These and other questions were answered in this study to further the research on FYs.

CHAPTER 3.

RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology used in conducting the research study. The research questions of the study are presented, followed by the organization of the chapter, which includes the following sections: research design; rationale for study; assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; population data analysis; instrumentation validity and reliability; history; procedures; statistical analysis; and conclusion. This study used a quantitative research design to examine data collected by the NRC (2006) to determine the effects of course type, course topics, course objectives, and institutional selectivity on the institutionally assessed outcomes of persistence to the sophomore year and graduation.

Research Design

The transition to college continues to be the focus of research, articles, and books in the higher education arena. According to Hunter and Linder (2005), “student development and retention theorists (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993) suggest a positive correlation between student learning and a student’s involvement and engagement in the learning process” (p. 276). FYSS have come under scrutiny over the years for their seeming lack of emphasis on academic rigor and seem to be held to a higher standard as it relates to assessment (Upcraft et al., 2005). According to Upcraft et al. (2005), “There should be evidence of their effectiveness, evidence that is gathered as a result of a comprehensive assessment

program based on well-designed and controlled assessment studies, systematically and continuously conducted” (p. 469).

The NRC (n.d.c) was founded as the leader of the FYE movement and was established from the creation of the FYE course, “designed to help bond students to the institution and transform undergraduate learning” (para.1). Since 1988, the NRC (n.d.d) has conducted research on “high-impact practices at the institutional level on student learning, development and success and how the institutions gauge student learning” (para. 1). Within this scope, the NRC (n.d.d) has created and conducted national surveys on FYSs since 1988 to advance the research on the FYE movement. According to Fowler (2014), “The purpose of a survey is to provide statistical estimates of the characteristics of a target population, some set of people” (p. 8). Fowler also indicated,

One fundamental premise of the survey process is that by describing the sample of people who actually respond, one can describe the target population. A second fundamental premise of the survey research process is that the answers people give can be used to accurately describe characteristics of the respondents. (Fowler, 2014, p. 8)

A cross-sectional study of the FYE course or FYS was conducted of ex-post-facto research retrieved from the NRC (2006). Babbie (2010) defined quantitative research as, “the techniques by which researchers convert data to a numerical form and subject it to statistical analyses (p. 396). Quantitative methods of frequencies and regressions were used to describe FYSs at these institutions. The resulting findings provided evidence for the effectiveness of elements of course design and implementation.

Rationale for the Study

The National Survey of First-Year Seminars is administered every four years to provide “cross-sectional evidence on how institutions are utilizing high-impact practices to support student learning, development and success” (NRC, n.d.b., para. 1). The rationale for using survey

research in this study is because this approach offers an economical way to gather attributes of a cross-section of data from a larger population (Creswell, 2014). Also, surveys have the advantage of eliciting a quick response in the data collection process (Creswell, 2014). Fowler (2014) remarked, “Surveys have been part of American life since the 1930s and they provide important data to help fill in information gaps about a particular population” (p. 3).

The focus of the study was to examine FYSs from a national perspective. While there is extensive literature on FYSs and outcomes for a single institution, very little research existed at the national level, especially extensive analysis of a cross-section of data retrieved at the national level. Conducting this study adds to the literature on FYSs, but also provides constituents at the institutional level with additional research that can assist them with FYS course design, implementation, or changes.

This study examined a cross-section of data and this researcher recognized the advantages of studying a cross-section of the survey data that were collected at one point in time (Creswell, 2014). For this study, cross-sectional secondary data were used to determine the effects of course delivery, course topics, course objectives, and institutional selectivity on the institutionally assessed outcomes of persistence to the sophomore year and graduation at 4-year institutions.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to answer the overall research question of how FYS course type, course topics, and course objectives affect the selection of the institutionally assessed outcomes of persistence to the sophomore year and graduation at low- and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions. Additional research questions were as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of first-year seminars in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions?
2. What course topics affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
3. What course objectives affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
4. What other course characteristics affect persistence to the sophomore year assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
5. What course topics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
6. What course objectives affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?
7. What other course characteristics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?

Assumptions

This study was based upon the assumption that pre-existing data were correct. This premise included the assumption that the responses by institution representatives on institutionally assessed outcomes on persistence to the sophomore year and persistence to graduation were correct. It was also assumed the respective individual who provided the survey response was a qualified individual at the respective institutions and was directly involved with the FYSSs, in terms of overseeing the administration of the courses.

This study was also based on the assumption the institutions whose representatives responded to the questions understood the meaning of each question and responded accordingly.

It was also assumed the participants who responded to the evaluation section of the survey understood their response to the evaluation portion of the survey correlated with the assessment and evaluation of the FYS course. It was also assumed the institutions were self-reporting their assessment of the FYS and, from this assessment, they indicated the FYS led to increased student persistence to the sophomore year and/or graduation.

The researcher assumed the data collected by the NRC (2006) used in this study were consistent with reliability and validity as published by the NRC (Schryer et al., 2008; Tobolowsky, 2005).

Limitations

Some limitations to this study observed by the researcher included the use of secondary data, the age of the dataset, availability and anonymity of the data, responses to survey items and details regarding the survey instrument. The use of secondary data as a dataset was a limitation, given the researcher did not perform the data collection. However, the data collected were collected for the purpose of expanding the research on FYSs, and the administration of the national survey was collected by the NRC (n.d.c), an organization that serves this specific purpose.

Next, the age of the dataset used for this study was a limitation. The dataset (NRC, 2006) used in this study provided the researcher with national data from colleges and universities, which was the focus of the research. In addition, the researcher analyzed data on seminar types; according to Saunders and Romm (2009), the hybrid seminar type was added to the 2006 survey administration because it was consistently mentioned in previous survey administrations. Using the 2006 dataset lent itself to providing a foundation for analyzing national data at a point when the survey included other aspects of FYSs as well as the hybrid seminar type, the use of an

online component, and delivery of FYSSs online. While this limitation did not constrain the research, the 2006 dataset was not the most recent data collected by the NRC, but research on this dataset provided a foundation from which additional comparative research can be conducted by others.

The researcher also suggested that the anonymity of the respondents was another limitation. The dataset available for external researchers was limited to the respondents who indicated their responses could be shared, so not all survey respondents were available to the researcher. The researcher contacted the director of research services of the NRC to determine if information was available on the actual individual who responded to the survey for each respective institution. The researcher was informed that “such information could be used to individually identify respondents. As a result, we have omitted that variable from the public use dataset” (D. Young, personal communication, April 14, 2014). Also, the NRC has enforced the anonymity of the institutions or respondents for the use of the dataset for external research. While this limitation did not hinder this study, having the institutional information could have allowed the researcher to conduct additional analysis using specific data on retention and graduation using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Anonymity of the institutions did not constrain results.

Respondents were asked to respond to some survey items where they could select one response or more than one response. Although not all respondents responded according to the directions for each survey item, the questions not answered did not hinder the results of the data analysis, given all respondents responded to the particular questions that were included in the data analysis. The incomplete response to the initial questions did not constrain the results.

Finally, there was little information related to the actual design of the survey instrument or any pilot testing that may have occurred prior to the first administration of the survey (NRC, n.d.b). Similarly, there was little information on the survey reliability and validity. However, the NRC (n.d.c) is the leading nonprofit organization dedicated to research and service to inform national research on FYs and students in transition. Given the proven history of the NRC, its reputation as the leading research center, and dedication to this specific research on FYs, the researcher argued for the expertise of the NRC and its survey administration. This limitation did not constrain this study. The researcher considered the NRC had consistently conducted this survey every three years since 1988 and, based on the literature and reviewing past surveys, there were modifications and enhancements to the survey questions, indicating the NRC was assessing its process and making continuous improvements.

Delimitations

The researcher recognized the use of secondary data in the study; therefore, data were already delimited by the institutions that agreed to share responses with external researchers. The study was delimited to 4-year institutions due to the institutional selectivity variable typically indicative of 4-year institutions. Descriptive analysis of all seminar types was conducted, but aspects of the data were delimited by seminar type, how institutions responded to survey questions, or how questions were worded. Because of how the assessment and evaluation survey question was worded, some institutions did not respond if their assessment results of the FY did not show improvement in a particular outcome (see Appendix). According to Griffin and Tobolowsky (2008), “because of the wording of the question, only those institutions that had both assessed the particular outcome and found an improvement would have selected a specific response” (p. 91). Further clarification was sought by the researcher, who contacted the director

of research services at the NRC. The director of research services at the NRC indicated “the assessment and evaluation question was aimed at retrieving information from respondents who indicated they had conducted an assessment of their FYS. The responses describe what respondents learned from assessing and evaluating the FYS” (D. Young, personal communication, April 15, 2014). Therefore, data were delimited only to those institutions that indicated a response.

Data were also delimited to those institutions that did not require all students to take a FYS. The researcher was willing to accept this boundary, given the gap in the literature that existed on the analysis of national survey data. There is extensive literature on outcomes of FYSs at the institutional level (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Hyers & Joslin, 1998; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Schnell & Doetskott, 2003; Starke et al., 2001). This study provided an analysis of data on FYS courses and how course topics, course objectives, and institutional selectivity affect persistence from a broader perspective versus institution-specific research.

Population

The institutions identified for the 2006 NSFYS survey were regionally accredited institutions, not-for-profit and undergraduate-serving institutions listed in the 2007 online version of the Higher Education Directory (HED), which was released in October 2006 (Burke, 2007; Schryer et al., 2008). The HED is a publication containing a listing of accredited, degree-granting postsecondary institutions (Burke, 2007). It provided the most comprehensive information on accrediting agencies and accredited postsecondary institutions sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Postsecondary Education (Burke, 2007). Approximately 2,646 e-mails were sent to chief academic officers or chief executive officers who were listed in the HED. If neither

of these individuals were listed, then the e-mail was sent to the chief student affairs officer (Schryer et al., 2008). According to Schryer et al. (2008),

The names in the 2007 electronic version were compared to the 2006 Higher Education Directory available in hard copy. Institutions that were not in the 2006 directory (Burke, 2006), but were in the 2007 electronic directory, were omitted from the study for the purposes of consistency. Only United States institutions or those located in U.S. Territories were included. (Schryer et al., 2008, p. 9)

Approximately 968 institutions responded to the 2006 NSFYS survey (NRC, 2006). Of this number, 821 institutions indicated they offered some type of FYS (Schryer et al., 2008). From 821 institutions, there were 699 respondents included in this study. This number excludes the institutions that requested to be excluded from research (Schryer et al., 2008). Names of survey respondents were omitted from the source of the data the researcher received from the NRC (2006); however, other identifiable information, such as institution type, was available. The institutions that allowed their data for further research were selected from the population provided by the NRC (2006). The researcher's interest in using national data for this study provided the basis for using this population.

Instrumentation

The survey data used for this study were from the 2006 NSFYS, which was developed and administered by the NRC (2006). The 2006 NSFYS was a 47-item survey instrument (see Appendix). The survey was pilot-tested by the NRC and the results of the pilot test were used to improve the clarity and readability of the new and revised survey questions (Tobolowsky, 2005). This improvement led to the decision of the NRC to administer the survey via the Internet (Tobolowsky, 2005). Categorical scales were used to measure the responses to the survey items. There were also closed-ended questions that required only a yes or no answer. However, for most questions, if the respondent answered "yes," the respondent was then prompted or directed to provide additional details regarding the "yes" answer. In a web-based survey, this process is

referred to as logic, meaning with an affirmative response to a question, the computerized programming prompts the next question based on the response (Tobolowsky, 2005).

The 2006 NSFYS results consisted of the following content sections: (a) Background Information, (b) Types of Seminars Offered, (c) Specific Seminar Information, (d) Evaluation Results, and (e) Survey (Schryer et al., 2008). Specific Seminar Information included the following subsections: (a) Students, (b) Instructors, (c) Course, and (d) Administration. The Survey section included a demographics subsection that contained questions such as institution type, institution selectivity, enrollment headcount, and number of first-year students.

The 2006 NSFYS was administered online (Schryer et al., 2008). One of the advantages of administering a survey via the Internet is the rate of return. Some Internet surveys can yield a response rate as high as 70% (Fowler, 2014). It is common for education web-based surveys to yield a response rate of 25% (Schryer et al., 2008). The response rate on the 2006 FYS survey was 36.6% (Schryer et al., 2008). Other advantages of the Internet survey include low cost, speed of return, the ability to use computer-aided complex questioning or logic, which allowed for skip patterns, and the ability for computer-aided recognition of inconsistencies (Fowler, 2014). Schryer et al. (2008) indicated the response rate for the 2006 NSFYS survey was good; however, the small number of respondents was a limitation, although there was an increase in the response rate for the 2006 NSFYS (36.6%) over the 2003 NSFYS (23.7%). Conversely, Fowler (2014) identified challenges to this form of data collection, including being limited to individuals who use the Internet, gaining cooperation from the population, and the need for comprehensive address information. Schryer et al. (2008) indicated survey respondents reported frustration with the message in the first e-mail sent to respondents, which may have affected the low response rate.

History of the National Survey on First-Year Seminars

To discuss validity and reliability of the NSFYS, a historical basis is provided for the past surveys administered. The NRC conducted its first national survey in 1988 and then its second survey in 1991. The 1991 survey was the first to include the options for institutions to select the type of FYS. The 1988 version of the survey was designed to collect information on the extended orientation seminar type only. In 2000, the survey maintained the same consistency in administration as the previous years (Schryer et al., 2008).

In 2002, the NSFYS underwent major changes compared to surveys conducted in previous years (Tobolowsky, 2005). Tobolowsky (2005) wanted to initially revise the survey for reorganization of questions, but sought feedback from NRC staff and former directors to explore additional avenues, including using an Internet-based survey and questions related to online FYSs. The 2003 NSFYS underwent pilot testing by the NRC with faculty and staff from around the country.

In 2006, the NRC conducted its seventh triennial NSFYS. According to Tobolowsky (2008), “The 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars remained relatively unchanged since its major overhaul in 2003” (p. xi). The 2006 NSFYS was outsourced to be administered via the Internet. Since the 2006 NSFYS was conducted, the NRC has conducted the 2009 and the 2012 NSFYSs. According to the NRC (n.d.b) survey cycle, the survey prior to 2012 was administered every three years, but the survey cycle was changed to a 4-year cycle; therefore the next survey will be administered in 2016.

The NSFYS is considered valid because it can be used to “draw meaningful inferences from scores on the instruments” (Creswell, 2014, p. 160). The 2006 NSFYS was organized into six sections: (a) Types of Seminars Offered, (b) Specific Seminar Information, (c) Students, (d)

Instructors, (e) Course, and (f) Administration. These sections focused on the content of understanding every aspect of the FYS from seminar type to when the seminar was offered and how individuals were trained to teach it. Content validity has been established because the survey items were designed to measure the content that was intended (Creswell, 2014). Also, content validity has been established “through its construction and repeated use and refinement between the first administration in 1988 and its seventh administration in 2006” (D. Young, personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Construct validity was established in the 2006 national survey in that the items measured constructs (Creswell, 2014). The scores of the items had positive consequences in that the NRC used the data collected via the survey for the purposes of advancing student learning, development and success, and institutional-level research (NRC, n.d.b). Further, the instrument demonstrated construct validity due to “successfully described different seminar types, characteristics, and features that are related to other constructs (e.g., differences in distribution of seminar type based on institutional characteristics such as control, level, and size)” (D. Young, personal communication, April 14, 2014).

The NRC has measured the reliability of the national survey based on “past use of the instrument” (Creswell, 2014, p. 160). For the 2003 NSFYS, Tobolowsky (2005) indicated the survey had been administered every three years since 1994. Results from the last three administrations of the survey in 2000, 2003, and 2006 demonstrated consistency with the rate of responses. For the 2003 and 2006 national surveys, the HED was used to determine the participants for the survey, which further measured reliability (Schryer et al., 2008; Tobolowsky, 2005). Even for the earlier years of the survey (1988–1994), there was consistency for the pencil-and-paper format and the analysis of the survey items. Further, the director of the NRC indicated

“reliability has been established in that there has been a consistent measurement of characteristics and features of first-year seminars over time” (D. Young, personal communication, April 14, 2014). While these measures of reliability and validity of the NSFYS may have been informal, they demonstrated a level of consistency the NRC provided in its publications of survey results and its current practice.

Procedures

During the fall semester of 2013, the researcher submitted an application to the NRC requesting permission to use data collected from the 2006 NSFYS. In addition, the researcher submitted to the NRC her curriculum vitae, the Institutional Review Board approval for research project, agreement for use of data, research proposal outline for data access, and security pledge for data access. The researcher contacted the NRC via e-mail to inquire about the use of data which took approximately two weeks for approval and access. Prior to this process, the researcher discussed in person with the associate director of research for the NRC the time frame for data requests (D. Young, personal communication, October 19–20, 2013).

The dataset approved by NRC for this study was provided to the researcher and was imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for statistical analysis and determination of how FYS course delivery, course objectives, and course topics affect persistence in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. SPSS is equipped to customize data for statistical analysis and to present data in a reader-friendly graph and chart format.

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using various statistical techniques. Each of the methods used was discussed in the context of the seven research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to explain the characteristics of the sample and the research variables used in the analysis.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of first-year seminars in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions? This question was answered by computing and reporting descriptive statistics. To examine Research Question 1, frequencies and percentages were calculated on the characteristics of FYs in the low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions. The four characteristics included type of seminars offered, primary seminar type, special sections offered, and who taught the FYs.

There were seven different possible responses for type of seminars offered, and participants were able to select all types that were offered. The types of seminars included extended orientation seminar, academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections, academic seminar on various topics, preprofessional or discipline-linked seminar, basic study skills seminar, hybrid seminar, and other. Primary seminar offered had each of the seven seminar types, but respondents were only able to select the seminar that had the highest total student enrollment. The special sections offered had 12 different possible selections, with participants being able to select all that applied. The possible selections were (a) no special selections offered, (b) academically underprepared students, (c) honors students, (d) international students, (e) learning community participants, (f) pre-professional students, (g) student athletes, (h) students residing within a particular hall, (i) students within specific major, (j) transfer students, (k) undeclared students, and (l) other. Lastly, who taught the FYs was examined.

Possible responses included (a) faculty, (b) graduate students, (c) undergraduate students, (d) student affairs professionals, and (e) other campus professionals, with participants being able to select all responses that applied. Table 1 outlines Research Question 1 and the descriptive statistics used for data analysis.

Table 1

Data Directory for Research Question 1

Selectivity	Fields	Options	Analysis
Low- or moderate-selectivity.	Various FYS types	Extended orientation seminar Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections Academic seminar on various topics pre-professional or discipline-linked seminar Basic study skills seminar Hybrid seminar Other (selection of more than one type).	Frequency distribution
Low- or moderate-selectivity	Primary FYS types	Extended orientation seminar Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections Academic seminar on various topics Pre-professional or discipline-linked seminar Basic study skills seminar Hybrid seminar Other (selection of one primary type)	Frequency distribution
Low- or moderate-selectivity	Special sections of FYS	No special selections offered Academically underprepared students Honors students International students Learning community participants Pre-professional students Student athletes Students residing within a particular hall	Frequency distribution

Selectivity	Fields	Options	Analysis
Low- or moderate-selectivity	Who teaches FYS	Students within a specific major	Frequency distribution
		Transfer students	
		Undeclared students	
		Other	
		Faculty	
		Graduate students	
		Undergraduate students	
Student affairs professionals			
		Other campus professionals	

(table continues)

Research Questions 2, 3, and 4

Research questions 2, 3, and 4 addressed which course topics, course objectives, or other course characteristic affect the persistence to sophomore year outcome assessed by the institutions for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. The binary logistic regressions were conducted in blocks, with Block 1 addressing Research Question 2, Block 2 addressing Research Question 3, and Block 3 addressing Research Question 4. One binary logistic regression was conducted for low-selectivity institutions, while the second was conducted for moderate-selectivity institutions. Binary logistic regression was the appropriate analysis to conduct because the goal was to assess if a set of continuous or dichotomous independent variables predicted a single dichotomous dependent variable when the predictor variables were entered into the regression model in blocks (see Table 2; Pallant, 2010; Stevens, 2009; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

The set of 11 course topics was the dichotomous independent variables or predictor variables used in Block 1 of the analysis. The topics were coded as 0 = *not selected in top three* and 1 = *selected in top three*. The 11 topics included (a) academic planning/advising, (b) career exploration/preparation, (c) campus resources, (d) college policies and procedures, (e) critical

thinking, (f) diversity issues, (g) relationship issues, (h) specific disciplinary topic, (i) study skills, (j) time management, and (k) writing skills.

In Block 2 of the analysis, the set of nine course objectives were the dichotomous independent variables. The objectives were coded as 0 = *not selected in top three* and 1 = *selected in top three*. The nine objectives included (a) create common first-year experience, (b) develop academic skills, (c) develop support network/friendships, (d) improve sophomore return rates, (e) increase student/faculty interaction, (f) introduce a discipline, (g) provide orientation to campus resources and services, (h) self-exploration/personal development, and (i) encourage arts participation (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Directory for Research Questions 2, 3, and 4

Variable	Objective options	Variable type	Analysis	Description
Outcome variable	Persistence to sophomore year	Dichotomous	Logistic regression	Self-reported outcome of FYS based on each survey respondent
Block 1: Course topics (predictor variables)	Academic planning/advising Career exploration/preparation Campus resources College policies and procedures Critical thinking Diversity issues Relationship issues (e.g., interpersonal skills, conflict resolution) Specific disciplinary topic Study skills Time management Writing skills	Dichotomous	Logistic regression	Course topics that compose the content of the FYS
Block 2: Course objectives	Create a common first-year experience Develop academic skills	Dichotomous	Logistic regression	Course objectives for the FYS

Variable	Objective options	Variable type	Analysis	Description
(predictor variables)	Develop support network/friendships Improve sophomore return rates Increase student/faculty interaction Introduce discipline Provide orientation to campus resources and services Self-exploration/personal development Encourage arts participation			

(table continues)

Variable	Objective options	Variable type	Analysis	Description
Block 3: Other course characteristics (predictor variables)	Hybrid seminar type	Dichotomous	Primary seminar type is hybrid or not	Logistic regression
	Length of FYS	Dichotomous	Offered for one semester or other than one semester	Logistic regression
	Number of credit hours for FYS	Continuous	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6+	Logistic regression
	Teacher of seminar	Dichotomous	Taught by faculty or not	Logistic regression

In Block 3 of the regression, six different course characteristics were the predictor variables (see Table 3). Hybrid seminar type were coded as 0 = *not hybrid* and 1 = *hybrid*. How long the seminar was offered was coded as 0 = *one semester* and 1 = *longer than one semester*. Credits the seminar carried were a continuous variable from 1 credit hour to 5 credit hours and also more than 5 credit hours. Teacher of the seminar was coded as 0 = *not taught by faculty* and 1 = *taught by faculty*.

The logistic regression assessed if the set of independent variables found in each block affected the institutions’ selection of increased persistence to the sophomore year as an assessed outcome. The dependent variable in the regressions was selection of higher persistence to sophomore year, measured by whether or not the participant selected “higher persistence to sophomore year.” One regression was conducted for low-selectivity institutions and one regression was conducted for moderate-selectivity institutions. Significance for the individual predictor variables was assessed in the final block of the model, using all three sets of variables.

Research Questions 5, 6, and 7

Research questions 5, 6, and 7 asked which course topics, course objectives, or other course characteristics affected the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. The binary logistic regressions were conducted in blocks, with Block 1 addressing Research Question 5, Block 2 addressing Research Question 6, and Block 3 addressing Research Question 7. One binary logistic regression was conducted for low-selectivity institutions, and the second was conducted for moderate-selectivity institutions. All three questions were included in the two binary logistic regressions on low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions (see Table 4). A logistic regression was the appropriate analysis to conduct because the goal was to assess if a set of continuous or dichotomous independent variables predicted a single dichotomous dependent variable when the predictor variables were entered into the regression model in blocks (Pallant, 2010; Stevens, 2009; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

Table 3

Data Directory for Research Questions 4, 5, and 6

Variable	Variable name	Variable type	Analysis	Description
Outcome	Persistence to	Dichotomous	Logistic	Self-reported outcome

Variable	Variable name	Variable type	Analysis	Description
variable	graduation		regression	of FYS based on each survey respondent.
Block 1: Course topics (predictor variables)	Academic planning/advising Career exploration/preparation Campus Resources College policies and procedures Critical thinking Diversity issues Relationship issues (e.g., interpersonal skills, conflict resolution) Specific disciplinary topic Study skills Time management Writing skills	Dichotomous	Logistic regression	Course topics that composes the content of the FYS.
Block 2: Course objectives (predictor variables)	Create a common FYE Develop academic skills Develop support network/friendships Improve sophomore return rates Increase student/faculty interaction Introduce discipline Provide orientation to campus resources and services Self-exploration/personal development Encourage arts participation	Dichotomous	Logistic regression	Course objectives for the FYS.
Block 3: Other course characteristics (predictor)	Hybrid seminar type Length of FYS	Dichotomous Dichotomous	Primary seminar type is hybrid or not Offered for one semester	Logistic regression Logistic regression

Variable	Variable name	Variable type	Analysis	Description
variables)			or other than one semester	
	Number of credit hours for FYS	Continuous	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6+	Logistic regression
	Teacher of seminar	Dichotomous	Taught by faculty or not	Logistic regression

(table continues)

For Question 5, the set of 11 course topics were the dichotomous independent variables used in Block 1 of the analysis (see Table 3). The topics were coded as 0 = *not selected in top three* and 1 = *selected in top three*. The 11 topics included (a) academic planning/advising, (b) career exploration/preparation, (c) campus resources, (d) college policies and procedures, (e) critical thinking, (f) diversity issues, (g) relationship issues, (h) specific disciplinary topic, (i) study skills, (j) time management, and (k) writing skills.

For Question 6, the set of nine course objectives were the dichotomous independent variables used in Block 2 of the analysis (see Table 3). The objectives were coded as 0 = *not selected in top three* and 1 = *selected in top three*. The nine objectives included (a) create common FYE, (b) develop academic skills, (c) develop support network/friendships, (d) improve graduation return rates, (e) increase student/faculty interaction, (f) introduce a discipline, (g) provide orientation to campus resources and services, (h) self-exploration/personal development, and (i) encourage arts participation. The binary logistic regression assessed if selection of the three most important course objectives for FYSs affect increased persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome.

For Question 7, the selection of six other course characteristics was the predictor variables used in Block 3 of the analysis (see Table 3). Hybrid seminar type were coded as 0 = *not hybrid* and 1 = *hybrid*. How long the seminar was offered was coded as 0 = *one semester* and 1 = *longer than one semester*. Credits the seminar carried was a continuous variable from 1

credit-hour to 5 credit-hours and also more than 5 credit-hours. Teacher of the seminar was coded as 0 = *not taught by faculty* and 1 = *taught by faculty*.

The logistic regression assessed if the set of independent variables found in each block affected the selection by the institutions of increased persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome. The dependent variable in the regressions was selection of increased persistence to graduation, measured by whether or not the participant selected the response of increased persistence to graduation. One regression was conducted for low-selectivity institutions and one regression was conducted for moderate-selectivity institutions. Significance for the individual predictor variables was assessed in the final block of the model using all three sets of variables.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 described the research methods and methodology for this study to determine characteristics of FYSs and how aspects of course topics, course objectives, and institutional selectivity affected increased persistence to the sophomore year and increased persistence to graduation in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. Chapter 3 also outlined the research questions, as well as assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Because this study used secondary data, the source of the data was identified. Finally, the statistical analysis section discussed the variables and the various statistical analyses that were conducted.

CHAPTER 4.

PRESENTATION OF DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine which aspects of FYs at low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions affected increased persistence to the sophomore year or increased persistence to graduation. Specifically, this study considered what course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics of FYs at 4-year institutions affected the selection of increased persistence to the sophomore year or increased persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome. In addition, this study used predictor variables including course topics, course objectives, primary seminar type, seminar length, credit hours to predict the assessed outcome variables, perceived persistence to sophomore year, and perceived persistence to graduation from the 2006 NSFYS.¹ This chapter presents the results of the quantitative data analysis, starting with a description of the population. Next, the results of other descriptive statistics and regression models are organized by the research questions and the models themselves.

Demographic Data

A total of 699 respondents took part in the study. In regard to institutional selectivity, 312 respondents were at low-selectivity institutions, while 387 were at moderate-selectivity institutions. For institutional type, 292 respondents were at public institutions and 407 were at private institutions. There were 269 respondents from private moderate-selectivity institutions

174 respondents from public low-selectivity institutions. Table 4 displays the characteristics of the respondents. Table 5 displays these characteristics by institutional selectivity.

Table 4

Demographics of Respondents

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Institutional selectivity		
Low selectivity	312	45
Moderate selectivity	387	55
Total	699	100
Institutional type		
Public	292	42
Private	407	58
Total	699	100

Table 5

Demographics of Respondents by Institutional Selectivity

Characteristic	Moderate selectivity (<i>n</i> = 387)		Low selectivity (<i>n</i> = 312)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Institutional type				
Public	118	30	174	56
Private	269	70	138	44
Total	387	100	312	100

When asked about the course objectives of FYs, the majority of respondents at both moderate-selectivity and low-selectivity institutions indicated that it was to develop academic skills (253, 65%; 193, 62%, respectively). At low-selectivity institutions, most respondents (214, 69%) also said the objective was the provide orientation to campus resources and services (190, 49% at moderate-selectivity institutions). Respondents at both types of institutions also believed that the course objective was to develop a support network and friends (136, 35% at moderate-selectivity; 98, 31% at low-selectivity), and self-exploration development (128, 33% at

moderate-selectivity; 148, 47% at low-selectivity). At moderate-selectivity institutions, respondents also believed the objective of the seminar was to improve student-faculty interaction (129, 33%).

Respondents were also asked to indicate the course topics of the seminar. At low-selectivity institutions, the majority of respondents indicated the topics of the seminar were academic planning and advising (134, 43%), campus resources (156, 50%), study skills (171, 55%), and time management (117, 38%). At moderate-selectivity institutions, the majority of respondents indicated that the course topics included academic planning and advising (139, 36%), campus resources (135, 35%), critical thinking (162, 42%), and study skills (148, 38%).

At moderate-selectivity institutions, 110 respondents (28%) indicated increased persistence to sophomore year was an outcome of their assessment and research; 37 respondents (10%) indicated increased persistence to graduation was an outcome. At low-selectivity institutions, 86 respondents (28%) indicated increased persistence to sophomore year was an outcome, and 41 (13%) indicated increased persistence to graduation was an outcome. These frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Frequencies and Percentages for Course Topics, Objectives, and Persistence

Variable	Moderate selectivity (<i>n</i> = 387)		Low selectivity (<i>n</i> = 312)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Course objective				
Create common first-year experience	160	41	85	27
Develop academic skills	253	65	193	62
Develop support network/friendships	136	35	98	31
Improve sophomore return rates	103	27	85	27
Improve student-faculty interaction	129	33	61	20
Introduce a discipline	28	7	21	7
Provide orientation to campus resources and services	190	49	214	69

Variable	Moderate selectivity (<i>n</i> = 387)		Low selectivity (<i>n</i> = 312)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Self-exploration development	128	33	148	47
Encourage arts participation	7	2	4	1
Other	39	10	22	7
Course topic				
Academic planning and advising	139	36	134	43
Career exploration/preparation	63	16	73	23
Campus resources	135	35	156	50
College policies and procedures	53	14	56	18
Critical thinking	162	42	90	29
Diversity issues	45	12	22	7
Relationship issues	66	17	41	13
Specific disciplinary topic	63	16	27	9
Study skills	148	38	171	55
Time management	108	28	117	38
Writing skills	93	24	30	10
Other	60	16	26	8
Outcomes of assessment and research*				
Increased persistence to sophomore	110	28	86	28
Increased persistence to graduation	37	10	41	13

Note. * Respondents could select more than one response.

Several additional course characteristics were examined. At both low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions, the majority of respondents indicated the seminars were one semester in length (237, 76%; 296, 76%, respectively). Additionally, most respondents reported that the seminars were between 1 and 3 credit hours (345, 88% at moderate-selectivity; 281, 89% at low-selectivity). These frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Frequencies and Percentages for Additional Course Characteristics

Characteristic	Moderate selectivity (<i>n</i> = 387)		Low selectivity (<i>n</i> = 312)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Length of time seminar is offered				
One semester	296	76	237	76
One quarter	14	4	26	8
One year	36	9	15	5
Other	32	8	29	9
Credit hours				
1	118	30	85	27
2	94	24	76	24
3	133	34	120	38
4	25	6	8	3
5	2	1	4	1
6+	10	3	12	4

Results**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was, “What are the characteristics (type of seminars offered, primary seminar type, special sections offered, and who teaches the first-year seminars) of first-year seminars in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions?”

To examine Research Question 1, frequencies and percentages were conducted on the characteristics of FYs in the low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions. The four characteristics included type of seminars offered, primary seminar type, special sections offered, and who teaches the FYs.

The majority of respondents in both low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions reported that an extended orientation was one type of seminar offered (216, 69%; 217, 56%, respectively). Additionally, in moderate-selectivity institutions, 119 respondents (31%) indicated that academic seminars with generally uniform content across sections were offered; 108 (28%)

reported that academic seminars on various topics were offered, and 94 (24%) indicated that a hybrid type of seminar was offered. In low-selectivity institutions, 100 respondents (32%) reported that a basic study skills seminar was offered; 76 (24%) reported that an academic seminar with generally uniform content across sections was offered. In both low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions, the highest enrollment was in extended orientation seminars or primary seminar type (104, 33%; 92, 24%, respectively).

Most respondents reported that there were no special sections of seminars offered (130, 34% for moderate-selectivity institutions; 121, 39% for low-selectivity institutions). In moderate-selectivity institutions, 80 respondents (21%) reported seminars offered for academically underprepared students, and 120 (31%) reported seminars offered for honor students. In low-selectivity institutions, 77 respondents (35%) indicated seminars offered for academically underprepared students.

In both types of institutions, the majority of seminars were taught by faculty members (362, 94% at moderate-selectivity institutions; 265, 85% at low-selectivity institutions) or student affairs professionals (185, 48% at moderate-selectivity institutions; 151, 48% at low-selectivity institutions). These frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Frequencies and Percentages for Course Characteristics

Characteristic	Moderate selectivity (<i>n</i> = 387)		Low selectivity (<i>n</i> = 312)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Types of seminars offered				
Extended orientation	217	56	216	69
Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections	119	31	76	24
Academic seminar on various topics	108	28	31	10
Preprofessional or discipline-linked seminar	57	15	51	16
Basic study skills seminar	67	17	100	32
Hybrid	94	24	54	17
Other	16	4	10	3
Highest enrollment seminar type				
Extended orientation	92	24	104	33
Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections	43	11	33	11
Academic seminar on various topics	43	11	9	3
Preprofessional or discipline-linked seminar	7	2	4	1
Basic study skills seminar	8	2	29	9
Hybrid	35	9	18	6
Other	6	2	2	1
Special sections offered*				
None	130	34	121	39
Academically under prepared students	80	21	77	25
Honor students	120	31	38	12
International students	13	3	13	4
Learning community respondents	79	20	54	17
Pre-professional students	28	7	15	5
Student athletes	37	10	24	8
Students residing within a particular residence	16	4	4	1
Students within a specific major	72	19	57	18
Transfer students	38	10	8	3
Undeclared students	43	11	25	8
Other	38	10	33	11
Teacher of seminar*				
Faculty	362	94	265	85
Graduate students	32	8	7	2
Undergraduate students	43	11	13	4
Student affairs professionals	185	48	151	48
Other campus professionals	121	31	79	25

Note. * Respondents could select any responses that applied.

Research Questions 2, 3, and 4

Research Question 2 was, “What course topics affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?” Research Question 3 was, “What course objectives affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?” Research Question 4 was, “What other course characteristics affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

To assess research questions 2 through 4, binary logistic regressions were conducted with course topics, course objectives, and characteristics predicting persistence to sophomore year as an assessed outcome for moderate-selectivity and low-selectivity institutions. For moderate-selectivity institutions, course topics significantly predicted persistence to sophomore year as an assessed outcome, $\chi^2(12) = 21.88, p = .039$. However, the addition of course objectives in the second block did not have a significant impact on the model, $\chi^2(10) = 11.59, p = .314$, and the addition of other course characteristics in the third block also did not have a significant impact on the model, $\chi^2(4) = 1.70, p = .791$. The overall model was not significant ($\chi^2(26) = 35.16, p = .108$), thus, individual predictors were not examined.

For low-selectivity institutions, course topics did not significantly predict persistence to sophomore year, $\chi^2(12) = 11.91, p = .453$. The addition of course objectives in Block 2 did not have an impact on the overall model, $\chi^2(10) = 10.80, p = .373$, and the addition of course characteristics in Block 3 also did not have a significant impact on the model, $\chi^2(4) = 8.89, p = .064$. Again, the overall model was not significant ($\chi^2(26) = 31.60, p = .207$) and the individual predictors were not examined. The results of the binary logistic regressions for each block are

presented in Table 9. The beta coefficients for the individual predictors in Block 3 are presented in Table 10.

Table 9

Logistic Regression Results for Each Block Predicting Increased Persistence to Sophomore Year

Step	Moderate selectivity			Low selectivity		
	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
Block 1: Course topics	21.88	12	.039	11.91	12	.453
Block 2: Course objectives	11.59	10	.314	10.80	10	.373
Block 3: Characteristics	1.70	4	.791	8.89	4	.064
Overall model	35.16	26	.108	31.60	26	.207

Table 10

Logistic Regression, Block 3 Prediction of Increased Persistence to Sophomore Year

Source	Moderate selectivity			Low selectivity		
	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>
Course topics						
Academic planning and advising	-0.15	0.18	0.86	0.95	4.24*	2.59
Career exploration/preparation	-1.32	7.59**	0.27	0.47	0.76	1.60
Campus resources	0.34	0.72	1.40	0.78	2.53	2.18
College policies and procedures	-0.33	0.51	0.72	-0.46	0.66	0.63
Critical thinking	0.01	0.00	1.01	-0.22	0.22	0.80
Diversity issues	-0.16	0.09	0.86	0.74	1.02	2.10
Relationship issues	0.24	0.26	1.27	0.33	0.35	1.40
Specific disciplinary topic	0.22	0.23	1.25	0.24	0.09	1.27
Study Skills	0.15	0.14	1.16	0.73	2.57	2.08
Time management	-0.20	0.26	0.82	0.41	0.72	1.50
Writing Skills	-0.66	1.85	0.52	0.84	1.50	2.31
Other	-0.76	2.10	0.47	0.12	0.02	1.13
Course objectives						
Develop academic skills	-0.13	0.12	0.88	0.10	0.05	1.11
Develop support network/friendships	-0.35	0.72	0.70	-0.23	0.28	0.80
Improve sophomore return rates	0.23	0.36	1.26	0.71	2.76	2.04
Increase student-faculty interaction	0.73	3.52	2.07	0.69	2.48	1.99
Introduce a discipline	0.47	1.56	1.60	0.12	0.06	1.12
Provide orientation to campus resources and services	0.03	0.00	1.03	-0.69	0.69	0.50
Self-exploration/personal development	0.58	2.08	1.78	-0.19	0.14	0.83
Encourage arts participation	0.55	1.85	1.73	0.53	1.57	1.71
Other	-1.72	2.05	0.18	-0.74	0.24	0.48

Source	Moderate selectivity			Low selectivity		
	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>
Characteristics						
Hybrid	-0.05	0.01	0.96	-0.13	0.02	0.88
Taught by faculty	0.11	0.12	1.12	1.24	5.59*	3.46
Offered more than one semester (vs. only one)	-0.36	0.38	0.70	-0.05	0.01	0.95
Contact hours	0.22	0.38	1.24	-0.36	0.61	0.70

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

(table continues)

Research Questions 5, 6, and 7

Research Question 5 was, “What course topics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

Research Question 6 was, “What course objectives affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

Research Question 7 was, “What other course characteristics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

To assess research questions 5 through 7, binary logistic regressions were again conducted with course topics, course objectives, and course characteristics predicting persistence to graduation for moderate-selectivity and low-selectivity institutions. For moderate-selectivity institutions, course topics did not significantly predict persistence to graduation, $\chi^2(12) = 16.14$, $p = .185$. The addition of course objectives in the second block did not have a significant impact on the model, $\chi^2(10) = 11.82$, $p = .298$, and the addition of course characteristics in the third block also did not have a significant impact on the model, $\chi^2(4) = 6.14$, $p = .189$. Because the overall model was not significant ($\chi^2(26) = 34.09$, $p = .133$), individual predictors were not examined.

For low-selectivity institutions, course topics did not significantly predict persistence to graduation, $\chi^2(12) = 18.67$, $p = .097$. The addition of course objectives in Block 2 did not have an

impact on the overall model, $\chi^2(10) = 12.93, p = .227$, and the addition of course characteristics in Block 3 also did not have a significant impact on the model, $\chi^2(4) = 7.28, p = .122$. In this case, the overall model accounting for all predictors was significant ($\chi^2(26) = 38.88, p = .050$) and thus, the individual predictors were examined. Academic planning and advising was a significant predictor of persistence to graduation, $p < .05, OR = 3.17$): For every participant who identified academic planning and advising as a topic of the FYS, the odds of persisting to graduation increase by a factor of 3.17. The topic of campus resources was also a significant predictor of persistence to graduation, $p < .05, OR = 4.17$, suggesting that for every participant who identified campus resources as a topic of the FYS, the odds of persisting to graduation increase by a factor of 4.17.

Additionally, study skills were a significant predictor of persistence to graduation, $p < .05, OR = 3.97$. This finding indicates that for every participant who identified study skills as a topic of FYSs, the odds of persisting to graduation increase by a factor of 3.97. Finally, self-exploration/personal development was a significant predictor of persistence to graduation, $p < .05, OR = 0.28$, indicating that for every participant who identified self-exploration and personal development as a course objective of first year seminars, the odds of persisting to graduation decreased by a factor of 0.28. This finding suggests that if the participant identified self-exploration and personal development as a course objective, the odds of *not* persisting to graduation increased by a factor of 3.57. The results of the binary logistic regression for each block are presented in Table 11. The beta coefficients for the individual predictors in Block 3 are presented in Table 12.

Table 11

Logistic Regression Results for Each Block Predicting Increased Persistence to Graduation

Step	Moderate selectivity			Low selectivity		
	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Block 1: Course topics	16.14	12	.185	18.67	12	.097
Block 2: Course objectives	11.82	10	.298	12.93	10	.227
Block 3: Characteristics	6.14	4	.189	7.28	4	.12
Overall model	34.09	26	.133	38.88	26	.050*

Note. * $p \leq .05$.

Table 12

Logistic Regression, Block 3 Prediction of Increased Persistence to Graduation

Source	Moderate selectivity			Low selectivity		
	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>
Course topics						
Academic planning and advising	0.58	1.16	1.79	1.15	4.72*	3.17
Career exploration/preparation	-1.49	2.67	0.23	1.06	3.16	2.89
Campus resources	-0.31	0.26	0.73	1.43	5.55*	4.17
College policies and procedures	0.49	0.56	1.63	0.63	0.86	1.88
Critical thinking	-0.08	0.02	0.92	0.50	0.73	1.66
Diversity issues	1.22	3.37	3.39	0.63	0.39	1.89
Relationship issues	-0.25	0.12	0.78	-0.01	0.00	0.99
Specific disciplinary topic	-0.26	0.13	0.77	0.46	0.21	1.59
Study skills	-0.79	1.67	0.45	1.38	5.65*	3.97
Time management	0.36	0.38	1.44	0.79	2.04	2.21
Writing Skills	-0.24	0.13	0.78	-2.32	1.91	0.10
Other	-1.23	1.84	0.29	-0.86	0.49	0.42
Course objectives						
Develop academic skills	-0.05	0.01	0.95	0.25	0.21	1.28
Develop support network/friendships	0.65	0.82	1.91	1.04	3.83	2.83
Improve sophomore return rates	0.12	0.03	1.13	-0.07	0.02	0.93
Increase student-faculty interaction	0.71	1.28	2.04	0.53	1.14	1.70
Introduce a discipline	-0.23	0.13	0.79	0.40	0.57	1.49
Provide orientation to campus resources and services	-19.34	0.00	0.00	-1.15	1.34	0.32
Self-exploration/personal development	-0.11	0.03	0.90	-1.26	4.28*	0.28
Encourage arts participation	-0.53	0.56	0.59	0.14	0.08	1.15
Other	2.29	2.45	9.83	0.01	0.00	1.01

Source	Moderate selectivity			Low selectivity		
	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	χ^2	<i>OR</i>
Characteristics						
Hybrid	0.24	0.28	1.27	0.43	0.59	1.54
Taught by faculty	-1.65	5.19*	0.19	1.57	3.17	4.80
Offered more than one semester (vs. one)	-0.50	1.02	0.60	0.72	1.64	2.06
Contact hours	-0.04	0.04	0.96	-0.25	1.66	0.78

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

(table continues)

Summary

This chapter provided the results of the data analyses conducted to answer the seven research questions in this study. Descriptive statistics were analyzed to determine the characteristics of FYs for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. These data indicated the extended orientation seminar type as a majority seminar type and faculty members primarily teach FYs for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. Binary logistic regressions were conducted to determine what aspects of course characteristics, course objectives, and other course characteristics affect the selection of persistence to sophomore year as an assessed outcome or persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome in 4-year low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions.

For moderate-selectivity institutions, there was significance in the course topics predictor variable; however, the persistence to sophomore year model was not significant with all three variables included. For low-selectivity institutions, significance was found in the persistence to graduation model. These findings included the course topics of academic planning/advising, campus resources, and study skills. The course objectives included self-exploration/personal development. The next chapter is a presentation of findings and conclusions from the data analyses, followed by recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

CHAPTER 5.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This research study sought to examine aspects of FYSs at low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions that demonstrate the best approach in assisting students to successfully integrate into college culture, persist to their sophomore year, and increase persistence to graduation. Specifically, this study considered what course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics of FYSs at 4-year institutions affect the selection of increased persistence to the sophomore year or increased persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome. This study employed a quantitative research design to examine data collected by the NRC (2006) NSFYS to determine how course type, course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics affect increased student persistence in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. In part, the rationale of this study was derived from the dearth of literature on FYSs at the national level.

This research contributes to the knowledge base by examining aspects that can contribute to the development of a FYS that low-selectivity or moderate-selectivity institutions can use as a model. Chapter 5 begins with a summary and discussion of research findings. Next, this chapter

provides conclusions drawn from the findings. Finally, this chapter presents recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

This study included seven research questions. The findings reported from the data analysis in Chapter 4 addressed which predictor variables (course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics) affect the outcomes of persistence to sophomore year and persistence to graduation. The results of Question 1 are discussed to provide a framework of the characteristics of FYs for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions. Questions 2 through 4 are presented with respect to the outcome variable of persistence to sophomore year for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions with the discussion on the significant findings in the persistence to the sophomore year model. Questions 5 through 7 are presented with respect to the outcome variable of persistence to graduation for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions with the findings discussed with respect to the persistence to graduation model.

Summary of Results

Data from 699 respondents were included in the study. In terms of institutional selectivity and institutional type, 55% of the respondents were from moderate-selectivity institutions and 58% of respondents were from private institutions. Specifically, 70% of the moderate-selectivity respondents were from private institutions, while 56% of the low-selectivity respondents were from public institutions.

Discussion of Findings

Question 1 was, “What are the characteristics (type of seminars offered, primary seminar type, special sections offered, and who teaches the first-year seminars) of first-year seminars in low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions?” When considering the types of

seminars offered at low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions, 433 respondents reported offering the extended orientation type of seminar more than any other type. Although respondents could select more than one type of seminar as a response, 61% of the respondents reported offering the extended orientation type seminar as at least one of their seminar types. This finding supports the literature indicating extended orientation seminar types are the majority seminar type FYS (Barefoot, 2000; Friedman & Marsh, 2009; NRC, 2009). Although only 433 (62%) of the respondents indicated a response for the seminar type with the highest enrollment, the majority still indicated the extended orientation type as the seminar type with the highest enrollment, with 45% responding. This finding agrees with previous findings, indicating the extended orientation seminar is the most commonly found FYS type (Barefoot, 2000; Friedman & Marsh, 2009; NRC, 2009).

Respondents indicated offering special sections of their FYS. Respondents could select more than one type of special section, but selected special sections for underprepared students (157), honor students (158), and learning communities (133) were reported more frequently than were other types of special sections. These special sections of FYSs can provide institutions with a more strategic focus as it relates to the individual needs of the students. Schrader and Brown (2008) indicated students who do not manage their first year of college have the potential to drop out completely, especially if they are ill prepared. FYSs for underprepared students provide students with the life and academic skills necessary for success (Schrader & Brown, 2008). Conversely, FYSs for honor students or linked to learning communities or clustered courses can provide additional academic and social support, enhanced learning experiences, and even outside learning experiences for first-year students. FYSs for honor students can provide challenging opportunities for students, which enhances the students' integration (Tinto, 1993). The finding

that FYSs are linked to learning communities or clustered courses is consistent with integration as well, because the students are connected to the same FYS that are also connected to the same additional academic courses (Crissman, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

Instructors for the FYS formed another important characteristic. Respondents indicated faculty as instructors of FYSs more frequently than they did other higher education professionals. Although respondents could select more than one type of instructor, faculty members accounted for the highest frequency, including 362 from moderate-selectivity institutions and 265 from low-selectivity institutions. There was also a high number of respondents who selected student affairs professionals as teachers of FYSs. Historically, FYSs have been taught by faculty members, and this finding is aligned with the typology, especially for the extended orientation type seminar (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). This finding is also consistent with research that notes FYSs taught by faculty members and also research that emphasizes the importance of faculty interaction (Weissman & Magill, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) remarked that faculty who interact with students early in their integration to college contribute to students persisting and not leaving college. Weissman and Magill (2008) indicated in their study the FYSs typed as extended orientation were co-taught by a faculty member and a student affairs professional, while their discipline-based seminar was taught solely by faculty. Weissman and Magill found significance in the return rates of students who participated in either seminar. Although a significant number of respondents indicated their seminars were primarily taught by faculty, the seminars taught by nonfaculty offered some contribution to outcomes.

Research Questions 2, 3, and 4

Research Question 2 was, “What course topics affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

Results of the analysis indicated the selection of course topics significantly predicted the selection of persistence to the sophomore year as an assessed outcome for moderate-selectivity institutions. However, for low-selectivity institutions, there was no significance related to course topics and the selection of persistence to sophomore year as an assessed outcome.

Research Question 3 was, “What course objectives affect the persistence to the sophomore year outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

As it relates to course objectives, there was no significance in either moderate-selectivity or low-selectivity institutions in terms of course objectives and the selection of persistence to sophomore year as an assessed outcome.

Research Question 4 was, “What other course characteristics affect persistence to the sophomore year assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

As was the case for the other course characteristics, there was no significance in either moderate-selectivity or low-selectivity institutions or the selection of persistence to the sophomore year as an assessed outcome.

Persistence to Sophomore Year Model

The persistence to sophomore year model included course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics of FYs. For moderate-selectivity institutions results, indicated

course topics were a significant predictor of the assessed outcome of persistence to sophomore year. Course topics included academic planning/advising, career exploration/ preparation, campus resources, college policies and procedures, critical thinking, diversity issues, relationship issues (e.g., interpersonal skills, conflict resolution), specific disciplinary topic, study skills, time management, and writing skills. This finding is consistent with previous research that indicated course topics such as study skills, time management, note-taking, and reading skills are essential to the content of FYs with the persistence to the sophomore year outcome (Ryan & Glenn, 2004).

This finding also aligns with student engagement. The topics that comprise FYs are significant because the content of the course or course topics are an important aspect of student engagement and persistence (Kuh, 2005). For students to persist, engagement in educationally purposeful activities and active learning must exist (Kuh et al., 2005). The addition of course objectives and other course characteristics did not have a significant impact on the model.

For low-selectivity schools, this finding was not the case. For low-selectivity schools, course topics did not significantly predict persistence to sophomore year. The addition of course objectives from Block 2 and course characteristics from Block 3 did not have a significant impact on the model. Again, the overall model was not significant, so the individual predictors were not examined.

Research Questions 5, 6, and 7

Research Question 5 was, “What course topics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

Results of the analysis indicated no significance in course topics for either moderate-selectivity or low-selectivity institutions in terms of the selection of persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome.

Research Question 6 was, “What course objectives affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

As it relates to course objectives, there was no significance in either moderate-selectivity or low-selectivity institutions and the selection of persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome.

Research Question 7 was, “What other course characteristics affect the persistence to graduation outcome assessed by the institution for low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions?”

There was no significance in either moderate-selectivity or low-selectivity institutions or the selection of persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome.

Persistence to Graduation Model

Considering all three predictor variables (course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics), results of the analysis indicated significance in the persistence to graduation model for low-selectivity institutions. Results indicated the course topics of academic planning and advising, campus resources, and study skills were all significant predictors of the assessed persistence to graduation outcome at low-selectivity institutions. For every respondent who endorsed academic planning and advising, campus resources, and study skills as topics of FYSSs, the odds of the selection of persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome increased significantly. The course objective of self-exploration/personal development, however, was a significant predictor of not selecting persistence to graduation as an assessed outcome for low-

selectivity institutions. For every respondent who endorsed self-exploration/personal development as a course objective for FYs, the odds of selecting the persistence to graduation assessed outcome decreased significantly. Each finding is discussed in greater detail below.

Academic planning and advising involve assistance in selecting a course of study and scheduling of courses that align with the course of study. Academic planning and advising is a major component of academic adjustment for students because students are learning to engage in the process of academic planning and embrace a concept with which they may be unfamiliar. This finding is consistent with research indicating course topics are significant factors in FYs and contribute to overall student engagement (Kuh, 2005). Kuh et al. (2005) indicated that for first-year students to persist to graduation, institutions must improve the quality of student learning and what they do to engage students. Engaging first-year students in academic planning and advising while taking a FY is an important factor for low-selectivity institutions to consider for the persistence to graduation outcome. Barefoot and Fidler (1996) also described academic planning as part of the content of the extended orientation type FY in their typology. This study revealed the extended orientation type of seminar was prevalent among low-selectivity institutions. Thus, the significant finding indicating the course topic academic planning and advising demonstrates consistency with previous research.

Second, results also indicated the course topic predictor of campus resources contributed to the persistence to graduation model. Researchers have found that exposure to campus resources is important to the transition of first-year students (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). Barefoot and Fidler (1996) also described this predictor as characteristic in their typology on the extended orientation-type FY. The extended orientation type of seminar was previously discussed as significant among low-selectivity institutions. Exposure to campus resources

contributes significantly to the persistence to graduation outcome and supports the theoretical framework on student engagement because engaging first-year students in the availability of resources in college provides them with understanding how campus services can assist them throughout their college career. Again, this finding further supports the premise of student engagement (Hayek & Kuh, 2004; Kuh, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005).

The course topic of study skills was indicated as a significant predictor of the assessed outcome of persistence to graduation in the model. Study skills, a topic associated with learning strategies seminars, was highly endorsed by those at low-selectivity institutions as significant. Because many students come to college without the necessary academic skills, study skills as a topic of FYs, as well as study skills and tutorial centers, are places for first-year students to gain requisite skills (Barefoot, 2000). These precollege characteristics are also consistent with the theory outlined by Astin (1977, 1993). These precollege characteristics, as they relate to Astin's (1977, 1993) theory, indicate the input or what characteristics exist already in first-year students. Having study skills opportunities and tutorial centers represents the environmental influence over the input characteristics, which can lead to output of a better prepared student. Those at low-selectivity institutions may be less prepared academically than those at moderate-selectivity institutions, perhaps indicating why those at low-selectivity institutions chose study skills as significant to persistence to graduation, whereas those at moderate-selectivity institutions did not. Low-selectivity institutions should consider what Astin (1977, 1993) outlined in his theory and also consider the importance of inclusion of specific course topics such as study skills, which affect persistence.

Schrader and Brown (2008) observed that ill preparedness on several levels can cause students not to return to complete their college degree. Academic ill preparedness is a large part

of this problem. Furthermore, students are often not prepared to see themselves as and become active participants in their own learning. Students often enter college as dualists, seeing their role as offering knowledge that is correct or incorrect; they see themselves as passive, empty receptacles to be filled (Kidwell, 2005). Study skills as a topic of FYSs may help students to become more academically prepared, as well as help them adjust to becoming multiplists, the stage at which they realize that knowledge is no longer right or wrong, but better or worse, and that positions are simply a matter of theory supported by argument and evidence (Kidwell, 2005). Research has shown the content and, in some cases, the purpose of FYSs was central to students' development of the study skills necessary for them to ease into higher education (Barefoot, 2000; Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Ryan & Glenn, 2004).

This finding also supports the theoretical framework on student departure (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) indicated that the more integrated a student is in the academic and social aspects of college, the more likely he or she will persist and not depart. Tinto elaborated that students come to college with variety of individual attributes that can include varied skill levels. FYSs that include a study skills component can assist these students with developing the skills they need as freshmen to persist to graduation.

Finally, there was one course objective that had significance in the persistence to graduation model. The selection of self-exploration/personal development as a course objective was significant among low-selectivity institutions in the persistence to graduation model. However, the selection of self-exploration/personal development had a negative impact on persistence to graduation model, meaning respondents who selected this predictor variable did not select the outcome variable of persistence to graduation. Although this predictor had a

negative impact on the model, the theoretical implication offered by Chickering and Reisser (1993) provides insight on self-exploration of first-year students.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicated that students who are in their first year of college should move through the first three vectors, which are (a) developing confidence, (b) managing emotions, and (c) moving through autonomy towards interdependence. The third vector, as outlined by Chickering and Reisser, is consistent with the course objective of self-exploration/personal development because this theory supports the rationale that first-year students need this type of development. However, students may not encounter this vector during their first semester. Although the finding is significant because it offers a negative relationship, it would not have a basis for inclusion as a course objective when the outcome of the FYS is persistence to graduation. Conversely, researchers have indicated that FYSs that assist students with becoming more self-aware of their development contribute to the success of these students and persistence (Weissman & Magill, 2008).

Conclusions

Several conclusions emerged as a result of the findings in this study.

Conclusion 1

The primary conclusion is that course topics are significant to FYSs for moderate-selectivity institutions. Findings from this study revealed course topics affect the persistence to sophomore outcome for moderate-selectivity institutions. Careful consideration of course topics for FYSs can contribute not only to the success of the course itself, but also contribute to outcomes. Respondents to the NSFYS (NRC, 2006) from moderate-selectivity institutions were primarily private institutions and the extended orientation type seminar was the significant seminar type.

Although individual predictors were not examined in the model, more moderate-selectivity institutions indicated certain course topics more than did low-selectivity institutions. For example, critical thinking had a higher response rate from moderate-selectivity institutions than from low-selectivity institutions. This finding could be due, in part, to institutional selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions may be focused on increasing their selectivity with the result of more of their graduates going to professional and graduate schools, which would require more emphasis on critical thinking. Institutions must examine the aspects of all the variables. This finding is meaningful in the sense that course construction should not be taken for granted. Institutions should consider the findings from this study in analyzing course topics because predictors bear some significance to intended outcomes.

Conclusion 2

The second conclusion reached from this study is that FYs at low-selectivity institutions benefit the persistence to graduation model. What is evident for low-selectivity institutions is this: by definition, low-selectivity institutions have less stringent admissions requirements than do the moderate-selectivity institutions. By virtue of this definition, students may enter these colleges less-prepared. Therefore, inclusion of course topics such as academic planning and advising, campus resources, and study skills can contribute significantly to the persistence to graduation outcome. So, to assist these students not only in transition to college, but also to persist year to year until graduation, institutions should examine the persistence models presented in this research, which can assist them with a more strategic development of a FYs.

What is also apparent from the findings of this study is the relevance of the persistence to graduation variable today. As recently as 2013, President Obama released the college scorecard to hold colleges more accountable (Duncan, 2013). Institutions now have even more

responsibility to find strategic ways to offer quality education and contain costs. As institutions make decisions on how to accomplish this requirement, the findings from this study can offer them the data needed to support their decisions, especially surrounding FYs and their effect on persistence to graduation, which is central to the College Scorecard (Duncan, 2013).

Conclusion 3

The third conclusion reached from the findings of this study is that FYs can provide long-term results related to persistence to graduation. Assisting students' integration into college culture during their first year has shown to be highly significant to students' success and their retention (Barefoot, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) linked integration and retention with students having positive academic and social experiences. FYs contribute to successful integration because they are typically part of the students' first term or first year of college, but the outcomes of these seminars can contribute to long-term results in relation to persistence to graduation. Inclusion of course topics such as academic planning and advising, campus resources, and study skills has a significant effect on the persistence to graduation outcome. These course topics engage the students and they affect the integration of students into the college environment (Kuh, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Not only are course topics an important factor when designing a course, but specific course topics should be carefully considered relative to persistence.

The findings from this study also indicate most FYs are one semester long, focus on academic socialization of first-year students, and are primarily typed as extended orientation seminars. Primary course topics that were found to have a significant impact on positive outcomes included academic planning and advising, campus resources, and study skills. Significant findings in this study indicated FYs achieve long-term results relative to in the

persistence to graduation model. This connection demonstrates how important FYs are in the transition of first-year students to college.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the results of this study, course topics are a significant predictor for the assessed outcome of persistence to the sophomore year for moderate-selectivity institutions and thus contribute to the persistence to sophomore year model. When examining the persistence to graduation model, course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics are significant for low-selectivity institutions. The following recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are offered.

Findings of this study revealed that aspects of FYs lend themselves to the persistence outcome. This conclusion is evidenced by the consistency in characteristics found at low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity institutions and the typology outlined by Barefoot and Fidler (1996). Findings also indicated that moderate-selectivity institutions are primarily private institutions that have more selective admission than do low-selectivity institutions. FYs at private institutions are primarily taught by faculty members and they offer a high number of special sections for honor students. Moderate-selectivity institutions that find themselves in a position of considering whether or not to continue to offer FYs, or if they are in the revamping process, should review the findings from this study to help inform their decision. Private institutions may struggle to maintain enrollment, although they appear to remain consistent (“Students’ Characteristics,” 2011). Whether enrollment increases or decreases, lawmakers are continuing to enforce quality (Duncan, 2013). The persistence outcome has been measured in much of the literature on FYs (Porter & Swing, 2006; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Starke et al., 2001). The literature and the findings from this study have relevance, given the increased accountability

imposed by law makers (Duncan, 2013). Policy makers and law makers should consider the findings from this study and other research and allow institutions ample opportunity to enhance the quality of education in FYSSs without the added pressure of accountability and budget constraints.

The research suggests ways for practitioners—college administrators and student affairs officials—to consider the selection of types and topics of FYSSs. Practitioners in higher education must continue to use research to make institutional decisions. FYSSs are essential to the transition to college for new students, but more assessment of these seminars is needed. FYSSs have a proven success record and, from this study, appear to affect persistence. Practitioners who assess their FYSSs can offer invaluable addition to the research, especially in responding to the NSFYS.

Institutions should take institutional characteristics under consideration as they develop or enhance the content of a FYSS. Institutions must first create a seminar that is consistent with institutional characteristics and not necessarily what is popular. One size does not fit all as it relates to FYSSs, which is evident in the typology created nearly 20 years ago (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). There are many types of seminars that have different, yet similar, characteristics and these characteristics are important to compare and contrast with institutional characteristics.

Finally, practitioners must consider the importance of participating in national surveys to contribute to a national dataset. While this study used the population from the national dataset, not all respondents wanted to include their institution for outside research (NRC, 2006). If more institutions would not only participate, but also agree to use their responses for research, then more research could be conducted using national data, especially for researchers who seek to expand the knowledge base on FYSSs.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should be conducted on course characteristics of FYs with a larger population. The present study revealed findings that indicate significance in course topics and the persistence to sophomore outcome as part of the model, but the overall model was not significant. A more streamlined study may be required with fewer predictor variables or one with a larger population to accommodate the current number of variables. Having the current number of variables may have had an adverse impact on the study. Fewer variables might yield more significant results. Topics might also be reduced by first somehow determining those more relevant for study than others. For example, course topics were shown to be significant predictors for those at moderate-selectivity schools, but because the overall model was not significant, the individual predictors were not examined.

Course topics are central to course instruction because institutions have to consider the intended audience, purpose of the course, objectives, success, and so on. The NRC (n.d.d) provides an opportunity for researchers to use the national dataset for research, but some institutions choose to not include their institution in the dataset for research. If more institutions agreed to make their data accessible, then a larger population of respondents would be available for future research, specifically targeting course topics.

A qualitative study should be conducted to review descriptive responses about FYs from national survey data. Future qualitative studies should be conducted with the national dataset. The NSFYS (NRC, 2006) posed several qualitative questions. Respondents were asked to describe responses to some questions. Researchers should explore these responses to determine if there are themes related to FYs course characteristics that institution representatives described

on the survey. This type of research can add to the knowledge base on national data, especially from a qualitative perspective.

Concluding Thoughts

Entering into college is an intense time of transition for students. It is a critical time in students' lives, and the first year of college is highly influential and precarious. Students' first-year college experiences often weigh heavily in their returning for sophomore year. A study by Schrader and Brown (2008) indicated that one in four freshmen at 4-year universities did not return their sophomore year. The present study contributes to the literature on FYSs and student persistence. Specifically, this study explored FYSs at low-selectivity and moderate-selectivity 4-year institutions and how course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics affect the outcome of persistence to sophomore year and persistence to graduation.

Student persistence and retention is a serious matter for colleges (Tinto, 1993). The FYS is an important component in ensuring a positive and successful transition to college culture. The extended orientation type seminar is predominantly offered on college campuses. It focuses on different kinds of knowledge, strategies, and skills students will need to progress to their sophomore year and successfully through college. Yet, despite the success and prevalence of FYSs, students and institutions still encounter challenges. The varying backgrounds of students in general and of the increasing number of nontraditional students pose challenges for issues of integration and retention, as do the varying levels of student preparedness and competency. Ultimately, course development of FYSs should be a strategic process and institutions should not simply follow the latest trend. Evidence-based research, institutional characteristics, and intended audience (first-year students) are important aspects to consider when developing FYS courses.

If the goal or outcome of the course is persistence to graduation, low-selectivity institution should consider the persistence to graduation model. This model includes course topics, course objectives, and other course characteristics, as outlined in this study. Low-selectivity institutions should also consider institutional characteristics and how national policy changes for higher education can affect this long-term outcome. Another challenge, one that this study sought to address in part, involves generating more data on the role FYs play in student integration and retention on a national level.

Higher education practitioners should use this research to inform their decision making, especially those who work with first-year students. This research found that course characteristics do affect persistence and it is important to consider institutional characteristics as well. Institutions should start or continue to assess their FYs because assessment is important to drive decision making in the higher education arena. This project sought to address, in part, generating more data on the role FYs play in student integration and retention on a national level.

Endnote

¹ The original research using this dataset was conducted by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The author was granted special permission to use the dataset for independent research. The analysis and opinions presented in this dissertation are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

NATIONAL SURVEY ON FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS, 2006

This survey is dedicated to gathering information regarding first-year seminars. The survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. You may exit the survey at any time and return, and your responses will be saved. The survey will reopen on the first page. If you would like a copy of your responses, you will need to print each page of your survey before exiting. Your responses are important to us, so please respond by December 31, 2006. Thank you.

Background Information

Name of Institution: _____

Your Name: _____

Title: _____

Department Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Telephone: _____

First-year seminars are courses designed to enhance the academic skills and/or social development of first-year college students.

Does your institution, including any department or division, offer one or more first-year seminar-type courses? Yes No

Mark the appropriate categories regarding your institution:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Two-year institution | Public |
| Four-year institution | Private |

Institution selectivity (entrance difficulty level):

High

Moderate

Low

What is the approximate undergraduate enrollment (head count) at your institution? (Only numeric input, please.) _____

What is the approximate number of entering first-year students at your institution? (Only numeric input, please.) _____

What is the approximate percentage of first-year students who participate in a first-year seminar course? (Only numeric input, please.) _____

Types of Seminars Offered

Approximately how many years has a first-year seminar been offered on your campus?

Two years or less

Three to 10 years

More than 10 years

Select each discrete type of first-year seminar that best describes the seminars that exist on your campus. (Select all that apply.)

Extended orientation seminar. Sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, college transition, or student success course. Content likely will include introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues.

Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections. May be an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented course, sometimes part of a general education requirement. Primary focus is on academic theme/discipline, but will often include academic skills components such as critical thinking and expository writing.

Academic seminar on various topics. Similar to previously mentioned academic seminar except that specific topics vary from section to section.

Pre-professional or discipline-linked seminar. Designed to prepare students for the demands of the major/discipline and the profession. Generally taught within professional schools or specific disciplines such as engineering, health sciences, business, or education.

Basic study skills seminar. Offered for academically underprepared students. The focus is on basic academic skills such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts, etc.

Hybrid. Has elements from two or more types of seminar.

Other

If you selected 'Hybrid,' please describe the type of first-year seminar. _____

If you selected 'Other,' please describe the type of first-year seminar. _____

Specific Seminar Information

If you offer more than one first-year seminar type, select the type with the highest total student enrollment to answer the remaining questions.

That seminar type is:

Extended orientation seminar

Basic study skills seminar

Academic seminar with generally uniform content

Hybrid

Academic seminar on various topics

Other

Pre-professional or discipline-linked seminar

Please indicate the approximate number of sections of this seminar type offered in the 2006-2007 academic year. (Only numerical input, please.) _____

Please answer the remaining questions for the seminar type with the highest student enrollment.

The Students

What is the approximate class size for each first-year seminar section?

Under 10 students

10–15

16–20

21–25

26–30

Over 30 (Specify approximate size below.)

Which students, by category, are required to take the first-year seminar? (Select all that apply.)

None are required to take it.

Honors students

Learning community participants

Provisionally admitted students

Student athletes

Students in specific majors

Undeclared students

Other _____

If you selected 'Students in specific majors,' please list the majors. _____

What is the approximate percentage of first-year students required to take the first-year seminar?

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| None are required to take it. | 79–70% |
| 100% | 69–60% |
| 99–90% | 59–50% |
| 89–80% | Less than 50% |

Are special sections of the first-year seminar offered for any of the following unique sub-populations of students? (Select all that apply.)

No special sections are offered.

Academically underprepared students

Honors students

International students

Learning community participants

Pre-professional students (i.e., pre-law, pre-med)

Student athletes

Students residing within a particular residence hall

Students within a specific major

Transfer students

Undeclared students

Other _____

If you selected 'Students within a specific major,' please list the majors. _____

The Instructors

Who teaches the first-year seminar? (Select all that apply.)

Faculty

Graduate students

Undergraduate students

Student affairs professionals

Other campus professionals (Describe below.)

If undergraduate students assist in the first-year seminar, how are they used? (Select all that apply.)

They teach independently.

They assist the instructor, but do not teach.

They teach as a part of a team.

Indicate the approximate percentage of sections that are team taught.

No sections are team taught.

74–50%

100%

4925%

99–75%

Less than 25%

Please identify team configurations if they are used in your first-year seminar courses.

Are any first-year students intentionally placed in first-year seminar sections taught by their academic advisors?

Yes No

If 'yes,' give the approximate percentage of students placed in sections with their academic advisors.

For faculty, how is teaching the first-year seminar configured for workload? (Select all that apply.)

As part of regular teaching load

As an overload course

Other _____

For student affairs or other campus professionals, how is teaching the first-year seminar configured for workload? (Select all that apply.)

As an assigned responsibility

As an extra responsibility

Other _____

If taught as an overload or extra responsibility, what type of compensation is offered for teaching a first-year seminar? (Select all that apply.)

Stipend

Release time

Graduate student support

Other _____

If you selected 'Stipend,' please indicate the amount. _____

If you selected 'Release time,' please indicate the amount. _____

If you selected 'Graduate student support,' please indicate the number of students/hours per week. _____

Is instructor training *offered* for first-year seminar instructors?

Yes No

If 'Yes,' how long is instructor training?

Half a day or less

1 day

2 days

3 days

4 days

1 week

Other _____

Is instructor training *required* for first-year seminar instructors?

Yes No

The Course

This first-year seminar is offered for:

One semester

One quarter

One year

Other _____

How is the first-year seminar graded?

Pass/fail

No grade

Letter grade

How many total classroom contact hours are there per week in the first-year seminar?

1 2 3 4 5 6+

Does the first-year seminar carry academic credit?

Yes No

If 'Yes,' how many credits does the first-year seminar carry?

1 2 3 4 5 6+

How may such credit apply? (Select all that apply).

As an elective

Toward general education requirements

Toward major requirements

Other _____

Do any sections include a service-learning component (i.e., non-remunerative service as part of a course)?

Yes No

If 'Yes,' please describe the component. _____

Are any sections linked to one or more other courses (i.e., "learning community"—enrolling a cohort of student into two or more courses)?

Yes No

If 'Yes,' please describe the section. _____

Do any sections incorporate online components?

Yes No

If 'Yes,' please describe the online components. _____

Are there any online-only sections?

Yes No

If 'Yes,' please indicate the approximate percentage of online-only sections. _____

Select the three most important *course objectives* for the first-year seminar.

Create common first-year experience

Develop academic skills

Develop support network/friendships

Improve sophomore return rates

Increase student/faculty interaction

Introduce a discipline

Provide orientation to campus resources and services

Self-exploration/personal development

Encourage arts participation

Other

If 'Other,' please describe the course objective for the first-year seminar. _____

Select the *three* most important topics that compose the content of this first-year seminar.

Academic planning/advising

Career exploration/preparation

Campus resources

College policies and procedures

Critical thinking

Diversity issues

Relationship issues (e.g., interpersonal skills, conflict resolution)

Specific disciplinary topic

Study skills

Time management

Writing skills

Other

If 'Other,' please describe the topics used to compose the content of the first-year seminar. _____

Please list up to *three* elements or aspects of your first-year seminar that you consider innovative or especially successful. _____

The Administration

What campus unit directly administers the first-year seminar?

Academic affairs

Academic department

First-year program office

Student affairs

Other _____

If you selected 'Academic Department,' please specify the academic department. _____

Is there a dean/director/coordinator of the first-year seminar?

Yes No

If yes, is this position:

Full-time (approximately 40 hours per week)

Less than full-time

If you selected 'Less than full time,' does the dean/director/coordinator have another position on campus?

Yes No

The dean/director/coordinator's other campus role is as a/an:

Academic affairs administrator

Faculty member

Student affairs administrator

Other _____

Evaluation Results

Has your first-year seminar been formally assessed or evaluated since fall 2003?

Yes No

What type of evaluation was conducted?

Focus groups with instructors	Yes	No	I don't know
Focus groups with students	Yes	No	I don't know
Individual interviews with instructors	Yes	No	I don't know
Individual interviews with students	Yes	No	I don't know
Student course evaluation	Yes	No	I don't know
Survey instrument	Yes	No	I don't know
Use of collected institutional data	Yes	No	I don't know

If other than the types of evaluation listed above, please describe. _____

Did your institution create a survey instrument?

Yes No

Did your institution use an established instrument?

Yes No

If you used an established instrument, please identify. (Select all that apply.)

- First-Year Initiative (FYI)
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
- Your First College Year (YFCY)
- Other

If 'Other,' please describe the survey instrument used. _____

What were the outcomes of your assessment and research? (Select all that apply.)

Improved grade-point average

Improved peer connections with peers

Increased academic abilities

Increased level of student participation in campus activities

Increased out-of-class student/faculty interaction

Increased persistence to graduation

Increased persistence to sophomore year

Increased student satisfaction with faculty

Increased student satisfaction with the institution

Increased student use of campus services

Other

If 'Other,' please describe the outcomes of your assessment and research. _____

Survey Responses

It is our practice to make available to all requesting institutions specific and general information gathered from this survey. Please select the appropriate response.

You may share my survey responses.

Please do not share my survey responses.

APPENDIX B:

IRB LETTER



April 11, 2014

Jennifer Wycoff
ELPTS
College of Education
The University of Alabama

Re: IRB # EX-14-CM-047 "First-year Seminars and Student Persistence in Selected Four-Year Institutions: A Case Study From the 2006 National Survey of First-Year Seminars"

Dear Ms. Wycoff:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your protocol has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.101(b) (4) as outlined below:

(4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your application will expire on April 10, 2015. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closure Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of FORM: Continuing Review and Closure.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



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