COMMUNITY COLLEGE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSES AND PERSISTENCE TO DEGREE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF GRADUATING STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE COMPONENTS

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ABSTRACT

As access to higher education has continuously risen, community college student success has not kept pace. Within this climate, institutions look to cost-effective initiatives and programs to encourage student success in order to produce more certificate and degree earners. While many first-year experience community college programs appear to increase institutional retention and student success, first-year seminars are best poised to provide academic and social support to community college students with varying levels of academic and social preparedness.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine which first-year seminar course components graduating community college students perceived as most important towards encouraging student persistence. Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model and Taxonomy of Significant Learning guided the study. The participants included 21 students who reflected the site institutions’ diverse population and had filed an intent to graduate.

Data were derived using critical incident and semi-structured interview questionnaires. Using pragmatic qualitative research, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the data. Four themes emerged from thematic data analysis: increased writing efficiency is paramount; competence and confidence; campus integration and support; and responsibility and motivation.

Participants perceived that many cognitive and affective aspects were important. However, the first-year seminar instructor as a facilitator of foundational knowledge and a source of support was perceived as the most important first-year seminar course component.
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CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION

Nearly half of all students that begin their collegiate studies at community colleges fail to enroll the following year (Wild & Ebbers, 2002; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). Community colleges have earned the title of democracy’s colleges for their ability to provide access to higher education for students that may suffer from academic preparedness, fiscal constraints, or family responsibilities. Today’s comprehensive community colleges, which feature numerous degree and certificate pathways, are the descendants of Joliet Junior College. Created in 1901 by University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper, Joliet Junior College was founded to relieve the University of Chicago from the responsibility of teaching underclassmen so they could focus more attention instructing upperclassmen, and professors could devote more time to their research (Thelin, 2011). Harper’s vision created a uniquely American fixture in higher education that currently enrolls more than 13 million students in over 1,100 institutions around the country (Juszkiewicz, 2014). For much of the twentieth century community colleges have been governed by a driving principle that higher education should be accessible to all (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

By the 1920s, higher education enrollments doubled, and this transition has been described by late University of California, Berkley, Professor Martin Trow as “the transition from elite to mass Higher education” (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011, p. 55). Between the end of World War I and America’s entry into World War II, the burgeoning junior college movement helped higher education practitioners meet demand needs for students of all skill
levels. Altbach, Gumport, and Berdahl (2011) called the period between 1945-1975 the “most tumultuous in American history” due to such large numbers of returning veterans entering higher education, many of which were unanticipated. Leading to further tumult, community colleges across the country experienced massive enrollment increases during the early 1970s (Loss, 2012). To quantify such a surge, traditional age college student enrollments rose from some 15 to 45% in the three decades following World War II (Altbach, Gumport, & Burdahl, 2011).

As access to higher education has continuously risen throughout the second half of the twentieth century, student success has not kept pace. Since 1975, students have turned to community colleges in greater numbers because of increased tuition rates at four-year institutions, and a growing number of underprepared students view community colleges as a better initial option. Underprepared students entering higher education have reached an all-time high, with over 70% of all first-semester community college students requiring at least one remedial course (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). The conflict between access and success has reached such a zenith that, in 2011, the American Association of Community Colleges launched a new initiative with goals to produce five million more community college degree and certificate earners, some 50% more, by the year 2020 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). The commission called for unprecedented action, stating that new visions, collaborations, and courage were necessary to transform our community colleges in order to produce more degree and certificate earners.

In recent years, however, increased scrutiny of community colleges for low retention and graduation rates has fueled calls for increased institutional accountability (Nguyen, 2015). Further complicating the issue, many institutions use retention and graduation percentages to define institutional effectiveness, rating themselves on how effectively students are retained, and
not on the quality of instruction provided, even though there is a growing body of evidence that suggests this is not an appropriate criterion (Bahr, 2009; Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). For much of the twentieth century, the United States led the world in higher education but, in recent years, graduation rates have fallen behind a dozen other countries (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011). Concurrently, the demand for more certificate and degree earners grows, state and federal investments shrink. In this climate, institutions look to cost-effective initiatives and programs to encourage student success in order to produce more certificate and degree earners.

In order to compensate for students’ varied levels of academic and social preparedness, many postsecondary institutions have instituted first-year experience programs to encourage student success (Bers & Younger, 2014; Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). Community college students enter higher education, however, with different barriers to success than do students attending four-year institutions. The most common first-year experience programs in community colleges include first-year seminars, orientation programs, learning communities, early alert systems, and academic advising. These initiatives produce varying levels of success (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bers & Younger, 2014; Crisp & Taggart, 2013); however, in an age of limited state and federal funding and increased accountability, first-year seminars appear best poised to provide positive support for academically and socially underprepared community college students (Porter & Swing, 2006).

**Statement of the Problem**

The genesis of first-year experience programs was at the University of South Carolina in 1972 (Messineo, 2012; Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot, 2005; Strange, 2007). Now called University 101, this academic course was designed to ease the student’s transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Along with encouraging a seamless transition for
students, the other primary objective of University 101 was to increase institutional retention (Mayo, 2013). Since their inception, most first-year experience programs have been modeled and implemented with four-year institutions in mind (Messineo, 2012).

While studying factors that encourage retention amongst developmental education students, Pruett and Absher (2015) argued that first-year seminars achieve the highest levels of retention when they engaged students in a variety of ways including cognitive and affective components. Mayo (2013) stated that, “A first-year program, which includes cocurricular (affective) and curricular (cognitive) components, develops strong relationships both in and out of class and increases persistence to graduation” (p. 765). Although increased retention is one of the foremost desired outcomes of first-year seminars, in order to keep academic standards high retention alone should not be the only measurement tool assessing their value. Furthermore, without qualified faculty and staff, “first-year efforts will inevitably suffer a kind of second-class citizenship in the academy” (Barefoot et al., 2005, p. 388).

Although two-year institutions encounter academically at-risk students in much greater percentages than do four-year institutions, most community colleges fail to make FYE programs mandatory (Mayo, 2013), even though an overwhelming number of studies promote their utility (Lotkowski, Robbins, Noeth, & ACT Inc., 2004). Many researchers further note that an underprepared student’s first semester is an especially critical time in their academic career (Astin, 1993; Astin, 1999; Feldman, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, 2001; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Much research is focused on student participation in first-year seminars at four-year institutions, and some at two-year institutions, but virtually no studies take student perceptions
into account in order to discern which first-year seminar course components are most critical from students’ perspective. However, prior study of student participation alone in first-year seminar courses informs stakeholders of their utility, but does little to instruct faculty and administrators as to which course components are most important to sustained student success. If students do not consider first-year experience courses as relevant, then they are less likely to gain any long-term academic benefits. Taking into account which course components best create significant learning environments will allow faculty and administrators to make knowledgeable and informed decisions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand and explain students’ perceptions in their first-year seminar courses, and to decipher which course components were most critical to their persistence until certificate or degree completion. The study sought to gain a holistic understanding of a community college student’s perceptions in their first-year seminar course. The study accomplished this by empowering students’ own voices through use of a critical incident and semi-structured interview questionnaires. Soliciting student voice provided a deeper understanding as to which course components were most impactful towards student persistence.

**Research Questions**

To accomplish its purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which first-year seminar cognitive course components do graduating students perceive as being most important in encouraging persistence to degree completion;

2. Which first-year seminar affective course components do graduating students perceive as being most important in encouraging persistence to degree completion; and
3. What other aspects of the first-year seminar course do graduating students perceive as being important in encouraging persistence to degree completion?

**Significance of the Study**

Retention is a critical topic currently throughout higher education. It is especially key in community colleges across the nation as institutional funding models are often based on school’s ability to retain their students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). State and federal education officials as well as higher education practitioners have declared the need for more college graduates even at a time when funding expenditures are cut and student needs grow (Moltz, 2010). Acknowledging that community college students arrive to campus with vastly different levels of preparedness, first-year seminars appear best poised to provide academic and social support to large numbers of underprepared students (Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Cho & Karp, 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mayo, 2013), as well recognizing the fallacy that a one-size fits all approach that benefits four-year institutions will maintain relevancy at two-year institutions (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Wild and Ebbers (2002) have contended that the majority of research on student persistence is focused on traditional-aged students attending four-year intuitions. Because first-year experience programs first emerged on university campuses, and much more resources are provided to these institutions, first-year experience programs such as first-year seminar courses have been neglected research topics. There currently exists a dearth of literature detailing community college students’ perceptions in first-year seminars, as well as which course components are most critical towards supporting student success (Boylan, 2002). In this study, the emphasis on course content from students’ perspective may inform faculty and administrators concerning which cognitive and affective course components are most critical to students, and allows for more pragmatic and relevant course design. Specifically, this study contributed a
deeper exploration of students’ experiences in a community college first-year experience course through the use of students’ voices rather than quantitative or survey research methods.

**Philosophical Assumptions and Research Paradigm**

This researcher was guided by certain epistemological philosophical assumptions. Researchers attempt to get as close to their research and participants as possible. Furthermore, researchers bring a set of subjective beliefs from prior investigation or experience in an area. The researcher is further guided by a particularly pragmatic worldview. Pragmatists believe that reality is determined by individuals and how they make meaning from a set of experiences. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) noted that “Knowledge may be discovered by examining the usefulness of theory in practice” (p. 56). This approach was more useful than quantitative or survey research methods. Thus, pragmatic researchers do not believe that one single method may explain the unique circumstances of human emotion, behavior, and how one understands and makes meaning of a set of experiences. Researchers often use multiple procedures of data collection and are not bound by one sort of methods. Pragmatists see multiple versions of truth, and believe that truth is what helps them best fulfill and answer research questions at that given time (Creswell, 2009). Thus, students’ reality and their truth better inform stakeholders as to which FYE course components are most practical. Ultimately, pragmatism is most appropriate when one seeks to understand a unique set of human experiences in order to inform further research and practice because “It offers a practical and matter-of-fact approach to assessing situations or solving problems” (Savin-Baden & Major, p. 61). Given community college students’ diverse backgrounds, pragmatism takes into account each student’s diversity and allows the researcher to take each participant’s perceptions into account in order to most appropriately answer the study’s research questions. Thus, two students may encounter the same
Pragmatic research, then, allows the researcher to analyze the difference in meaning-making made by students who come to different conclusions even when encountering the same situations. Therefore, pragmatism is the most appropriate form of qualitative research for this study.

**Limitations**

In this study, the researcher analyzed student perceptions of one institution’s first-year seminar course, and specifically, which course components were most significant in encouraging student persistence to certificate or degree completion. The first-year seminar is taught by over a dozen faculty members from various departments at the site institution, all of which used a standard course template, complete with identical course objectives, content, assignments, and grading scale. While each new faculty member undergoes a semester-long training program, it is impossible to ensure that each course was taught exactly as were others with similar levels of instructor engagement and time spent on various course units. This potentially influenced one’s perceptions of their first-year seminar course.

Another limitation was the small sample size of participants. The researcher used critical incident and semi-structured interviews as data collection procedures, which uses a smaller sample to more thoroughly analyze collected data. The researcher was the primary data collection and analyses tool, which limits the study based on his skills as a researcher. This was a limitation because some researchers may code and interpret data more effectively and efficiently than others. Finally, another limitation was the credibility of the participants. Because the study participants were students that had filed an intent to graduate, they perhaps remembered their perceptions more fondly than they originally did while enrolled in their first-year seminar, as graduation tends to a joyous occasion which may positively distort one’s memories.
Delimitations

The study was delimited to a group of participants that had successfully completed the institution’s first-year seminar course and had filed an intent to graduate. Because the study selected participants that had filed an intent to graduate, it did not include students who were “unsuccessful.” The researcher selected a diverse sampling of participants intended to mirror the site institutions’ student demographics. Therefore, the results of this study may not be relevant to other institutions with different Carnegie classifications.

Operational Definitions

Academic success: Academic success is defined as completion of a course with a grade of 70 (C) or higher.

Associate’s degree: Associate’s degrees are degrees that usually require 60 semester hours, and are awarded to students completing the first two years of a baccalaureate degree as Associates of Arts or Associate of Science degrees, and to students who complete career and technical degrees as Associate of Applied Science degrees.

At-risk: For the purposes of this study, students are considered at-risk if they fall into one of several broad categories include being, academically or socially underprepared for college level coursework, low income, or first-generation college students.

Certificate program: Certificate programs are a set of courses that traditionally require one year of coursework. The researcher’s institution offers a one year, as well as a short-term certificate, with the primary difference being the addition of academic courses in the one year certification.

Drop out: This study refers to drop outs as those that formally and informally withdraw or stop attending classes before completing their intended program, and do not return.
First-Year Experience (FYE) Program: First-year experience programs refer to a number of initiatives designed to ease students’ transitions into higher education in order to increase student persistence and institutional retention. This study does not claim to acknowledge all first-year experience programs employed in higher education today, only those most commonly utilized including first-year seminars, orientation programs, learning communities, early alert systems, and academic advising.

Nontraditional: Nontraditional students are those that delayed entry into higher education after high school, earned a GED or other high school equivalency, attends less than full-time, work full time while enrolled, have dependents other than a spouse, or are single parents.

Open admissions college: An open admissions college includes institutions that do not selectively base admission based on student’s preparedness or college entrance exam performance.

Persistence: Persistence refers to an individual student remaining enrolled in concurrent semesters, regardless of part-time of full-time status, until a degree or certificate is earned.

Remedial: Remedial describes a set of pre-college courses designed to compensate for students’ academic under preparedness. Students are not awarded college credits and are assessed on a pass or fail basis at the research site.

Retention: Retention refers to institutional measurements of students that were enrolled in concurrent semesters regardless of part time of full time students.

Student success: This study defines student success based on a broad set student definitions of success, including, but not limited to: persistence to degree and, student grade point average.
Underprepared: This study defines underprepared as students who, at the point of admission, were considered to have below average academic and/or social skills that could inhibit them from achieving collegiate success.

Chapter Summary

During the course of the 20th century, community colleges emerged as uniquely American intuitions designed to bring opportunities and access to higher education to many Americans who previously would not have had the chance to earn a college degree for a variety of reasons. As such, the community college’s effectiveness is more frequently being measured by student persistence and academic success (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Middaugh, 2007; Zumeta, 2001). In recent years, calls from leading higher education practitioners, as well as the White House summit on community colleges (The White House, 2011), to increase community college certificate and degree earners by five million awards by the year 2020 will require community colleges to design and implement effective programs to retain more students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; The White House, 2010).

Researchers agree that the first year of college is the most critical in a student’s academic career and, likewise, much attention is given to programs designed to retain greater numbers of students. The program best poised to effectively retain the greatest number of community college students may be the first-year seminar courses. While we know that participation in a first-year seminar produces positive retention, the literature on first-year experience programs generally, and first-year seminar courses specifically, does not indicate which course components are most critical to prolonged student persistence until certificate or degree completion (Porter & Swing, 2006). Therefore, this qualitative dissertation will interview students who successfully completed a first-year seminar course and have filed an intent to graduate at one medium-sized, rural
community college in the southeast in order to discern which course components are most critical, from a students’ perspective, in encouraging persistence until certificate or degree completion.
CHAPTER II:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Through the first decades of the 20th century, a major population shift took place in the United States. By 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas for the first time in the nation’s history (Shi & Tindall, 2016), and that geographic transformation had far-reaching implications in many sectors of American daily life. One such change occurred in the area of higher education. In 1901, Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois was founded as a means to reduce the number of students from attending the University of Chicago, many of whom were not prepared to succeed academically at such a prestigious university (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper believed that, without the burden of educating freshman and sophomore students, the university could attend to the business of teaching more serious upperclassmen, and faculty could invest more time to research. Whether or not the origins of the American community college are noble or not, the junior college model created at Joliet has since transformed into a uniquely American institution, the comprehensive community college.

Today’s community colleges continue serving academic transfer students, but firmly established their place in higher education by offering numerous vocational degree programs and certifications to students unable to attend or begin their academic careers at four-year colleges and universities (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). While many celebrate the utility and function of American community colleges as open access institutions available to all, some have criticized
community colleges for their student’s low transfer rates (Clark, 1960), and the belief that community colleges systematically lower student expectations (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Recent scrutiny over low graduation rates and other success measures have fueled calls for increased student success in order to maintain the pace of student access (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012).

To achieve greater levels of student success, research suggests that first-year experience programs generally, and first-year seminar courses specifically, positively encourage student success Mayo, 2013; Porter & Swing, 2006). An overview of the most frequently used first-year experience programs will be analyzed, along with specific attention to the most popular, first-year seminars. Next, cognitive and affective course components within first-year seminars will be summarized before evaluating the most common at-risk student behaviors, characteristics, and ways faculty may mitigate negative influences. Next, faculty expectations for students, student expectations of faculty, and ways the two may better align their expectations of each other will be examined. A literature synthesis will be provided with specific attention given to gaps in current literature that the researcher hopes to address, before concluding with the theoretical framework guiding the study, and a chapter summary.

First-Year Experience Components

The following section of this literature review will analyze the history of first-year experience programs, trace their growth, and evaluate the most popular currently employed FYE program components. Sections will include a review of first-year seminars, orientation, learning communities, early alert systems, and academic advising. Each section reviews literature across the postsecondary spectrum with specific attention given, to the extent available, to program
components within community colleges. Furthermore, a discussion of the utility, implementation, and feasibility of each component is presented.

**First-Year Seminar**

A review of the literature suggests that the most popular FYE component is the first-year seminar (Porter & Swing, 2006). First-year seminars are intended to ease the academic and social transition for new college students at all levels of postsecondary education. Tobolowsky (2005) reported that community colleges are less than half as likely (21.5% compared to 46%) to require that students complete a first-year seminar as are four-year institutions. Furthermore, community colleges are also more likely not to require that any students complete a FYE seminar (30%) than are four-year institutions (19%). In most cases, this appears to be the result of the transient nature of many community college student populations. Differences in seminar types, names, and structures at the community college level reflect the diversity of institutions’ demographic compositions. Bers and Younger (2014) contended that, presently, there is little research measuring the linkage between first-year experience seminars, or success courses, and student success. They added that the overwhelming majority of the information that does exist is on an individual institutional basis, and seldom takes academic and non-academic course components into account when analyzing student success. Some research on multiple-institutions suggests that first-year seminars have positive effects on elements such as retention and persistence (Cho & Karp, 2012), student intent to persist (Porter & Swing, 2006), and successful academic progress (Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005). In their seminal research *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that

The weight of evidence indicates that FYS participation has statistically significant and substantial, positive effects on students’ successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college.
on a considerable array of other college experiences known to be related directly and indirectly to bachelor’s degree completion. (p. 403)

However, the aforementioned studies do not take community colleges and their students into account. While studies focusing on first-year seminars in community colleges more recently are appearing in greater numbers (Porter & Swing, 2006; Mayo, 2013; Bers & Younger, 2014), institutional focus is still largely predicated upon four-year institutions. No matter the institutional size or mission, or student’s academic ability, studies indicate that all students positively benefit from participation in first-year seminars with regard to academic progress and persistence (Cuseo, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Miller, Janz, & Chen, 2007). As Porter and Swing (2006) articulated, there is still little research at all institutional levels designed to identify which aspects of first-year seminar courses positively encourage student success and persistence. What is clear in the literature review on first-year seminars is that the most successful courses employ cognitive and affective components and, due to such diverse student populations at community colleges, institutional culture should foster and promote both components during course execution (Cho & Karp, 2012). A further discussion of first-year seminar course curriculum will follow later in of the literature review.

Learning Communities

In the broadest sense, learning communities are structures used to link two or more courses to emphasize learning goals and to create a cohort of students with shared experiences (Schnee, 2014). Bailey and Alfonso (2005) contend that learning communities have the greatest positive impact on persistence of any first-year experience program. Many such designs seek to create a sense of unity amongst students and faculty, bridge interdisciplinary boundaries, and ultimately, create a substantial support system for its students (Schnee, 2014).
In their seminal study of learning communities, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) and Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) listed a number of positive benefits to students including increase critical thinking skills, creates supportive engagement from classmates and faculty members, students become more invested into their institution’s culture, and perhaps most importantly, they increase retention and persistence. Tinto (1998) noted that learning communities vary in size and scope, and are at times difficult for some institutions to coordinate because they require block scheduling. Tinto further described how some learning communities are linked by common topical themes, while others are designed specifically to provide enhanced student supports throughout all of their courses.

There has also been recent attention given to building learning communities in online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Proponents of online learning communities cite many of the same desired outcomes and objectives as those in traditional course formats such as fostering an environment conducive for collaborative learning and personal growth. In *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for Building Learning Communities*, Palloff and Pratt detailed some of the major shortcomings of many current online course delivery formats, and they believe learning communities are an effective way to mitigate the impersonality of online education.

There is also a sufficient body of evidence that emphasizes the positive results produced by learning communities tutoring students when attached to developmental education courses (Bettinger & Long, 2005, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010). Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levy’s (2006) research directly challenged other studies arguing that student participation in remedial courses contributed no negative impact towards student persistence and degree attainment, even for those severally academically underprepared students taking multiple remedial courses.
Bettinger and Long (2005, 2009) found that placement in remedial learning community courses increased persistence rates among similar academically placed students not required to take remedial learning community courses. These studies have concluded that the lack of success achieved by students in remedial learning community courses is ultimately the result of the student’s academic under-preparedness and not placement into the learning communities.

Results on the effects of learning communities on community college education appear to be mixed and often misleading. Scrivener, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, and Sommo (2008) purported in a recent report from Kingsborough Community College, a national leader in the study and implementation of learning communities, that the institution’s Opening Doors Learning Communities program creates positive short-term benefits including increased student engagement and navigation through remedial English courses. However, after two years, the report suggested that the learning communities had little effect on student persistence when compared to persistence among students who did not participate in the learning community. Despite the national attention they are currently gaining, learning communities are often introduced on a single-institution basis with little research being published on successes or failures of singular institutional designs (Bloom & Sommo, 2005; Price, 2005). Price (2005) noted that testing a standardized learning community model across multiple institutions would provide the best data in order to inform stakeholders. However, there exists such wide variation between learning communities at two-year and four-year institutions, it does not appear feasible that such a study will be conducted.

In the final analyses, documentation of learning community effectiveness has proven inconsistent at best (Schnee, 2014). The very nature of community colleges and their diverse student populations also may have created difficulties in implementing learning communities.
into the community college curriculum. Bers and Younger (2014) stated that the most common difficulties include the management of faculty compensation and adjusted teaching load requirements, recruiting and convincing students to enroll in learning communities, and the integration of course material and pedagogical faculty training. Tinto (1998) also noted that learning communities require block scheduling and this may present further difficulties for some community college students. Again, despite their national attention and popularity, current literature leads one to assume that community colleges aimed at increasing student persistence, retention, and success would be well served to invest time, energy, and money in other, more proven first-year experience program components (Bers & Younger, 2014; Price, 2005; Schnee, 2014).

**Orientation**

New student orientation varies at all levels of postsecondary education. Some of the major differences include length, content, and the role of faculty and staff members representing academic affairs and student affairs (Bers & Younger, 2014). Porter and Swing (2006) suggested that most institutions use enrollment records as an indication of their orientation program’s success. However, due to the transient nature of community college students, the authors asserted that enrollment records may not be the best indicators of orientation program success. Orientation length, subject matter, as well as faculty and staff involvement depend primarily on institution size, mission, and student demographics. For example, community colleges are more likely to limit student orientation to a half-day or less and to being attached to specific programs, while most four year institutions require two days or more and are required of all first-time students (Upcraft et al., 2005).
Although there exists a limited literature assessing the value of orientation programs on student success, multiple studies report a positive correlation between orientation length and student persistence (Forest, 1985; Gardner & Barefoot, 2011). Forest’s (1985) research set control variables measuring student’s entering academic ability and concluded over 30 years ago that institution’s employing the most comprehensive orientation and advising programs yielded higher graduation rates, and other studies since support the author’s claims (Upcraft et al., 2005; Gardner & Barefoot, 2011). Particularly at community colleges, orientation programs focus mainly on integration into specific programs that require application and admittance into their programs, as they attempt to orient students specifically to the demands, challenges, and culture of their area (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (2005) analyzed 190,000 students at over 530 institutions and found that 87% of students participated in some sort of institutional orientation program. According to the report, students demonstrated increases in diversity activities, maintained greater impressions of campus support and inclusivity, reported that they themselves developed greater academic skills during their first year, and described higher levels of student satisfaction with faculty and their first-year experience. (NSSE, 2005).

In their seminal work on college’s effects on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that orientation programs have a limited impact on student success. However, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Gardner and Barefoot (2011) proposed that the longer the orientation program, the better with regard to student success and persistence. Gardner and Barefoot stated that this is true for students in two-year as well as four-year institutions. The authors also suggested that community colleges’ diverse student populations strongly benefit from the social integration achieved in many orientation programs.
There appears to be a lack of breadth on the effects of orientation on student persistence at all levels of postsecondary, but particularly at community colleges. While many schools assess the effectiveness of their programs, there is no incentive for institutions to publish negative findings in single institution studies (Bers & Younger, 2014). In a three-year study of baccalaureate granting institutions, Reason, Cox, McIntosh, and Terenzini (2010) determined that the length of the orientation program, its structure, and the involvement of a student’s family contributed positively towards increased student engagement.

Much of the current literature agrees that the “longer is better” method is most beneficial in regards to orientation programs, and that institutions with more diverse student populations benefit the most from orientation (Gardner & Barefoot, 2011). The lack of research focused on community college orientation mirrors the lack of community college research in comparison to that of four-year institutions more generally in most all first-year experience programs. So, while orientation at all levels of postsecondary helps acclimate new students and ease their transitions into higher education, little current literature does not indicate which aspects or program components are most beneficial, nor does it properly differentiate between institutional size and mission (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Early Alert Systems**

Early alert systems are mechanisms allowing institutions to identify and intercede on the behalf of students demonstrating at-risk behaviors. Such systems rely heavily on early student learning assessments (Bers & Younger, 2014). New students transitioning into college life are frequently overwhelmed by unanticipated academic responsibilities and social pressures, and early low-stakes assessments are one of the most popular ways in which faculty and administrators can identify at-risk students (Meer & Chapman, 2014). Meer and Chapman
argued that low-stakes assessments build confidence, and that a positive correlation is identified through increased student confidence and a number of early alert system indicators such as study skills, knowledge of campus terminology, and student’s initial social adjustment period. What appears to affect many at-risk students is a lack of motivation. As motivation wanes, low-stakes assessments become less valid and reliable (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Swerdzewski, Harmes, & Finney, 2009), which also serves as another affective early alert indicator.

The most successful early alert system initiatives measure academic and non-academic student characteristics. In their attempt to identify the most critical components, Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004) found that retention rates are highest when both academic and nonacademic components are fostered through an institutional commitment of developing each student holistically. The authors concluded their report by suggesting that the most successful retention efforts include early alert system initiatives encouraging the academic, social, and personal development of each student, and have support systems in place to help each student progress (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth).

Bers and Younger (2014) believe the most effective early alert systems contain academic and personal alert triggers. Of these, the most common alerts include multiple absences and consecutive tardiness, failure to complete or submit assignments in a timely manner, low academic performance, and noticeable personal issues. Other early alert initiatives focus attention on the aforementioned characteristics, but also place great import on student’s academic preparedness and their possible status as an at-risk student from an underrepresented group (Bridges, Buckley, Hayek, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2006).

An institution’s size and availability of resources often determine their commitment to early alert system initiative implementation and sustainability. Tampke (2013) reported that
administrators, faculty, and student perspective is necessary during development stage. Tampke further described how most initiatives at large four-year universities use integrated web-based systems to assist their early alert systems. Such institutions often have the resources to utilize web-based technology, whereas small liberal arts institutions and community colleges usually rely on teams or committees to oversee their early alert systems (Chappell, 2010; Wasley, 2007). The community colleges that do use web-based technology to implement their initiatives mostly use preexisting campus technology systems (Chappell; Hobsons, 2008), and these are often ill-suited to meet program needs. The early alert system initiative at Hanover College, a small liberal arts institution, uses a committee of campus employees to monitor student’s academic and social behavior. With an enrollment of around 1,000 students, the institution is able to provide more faculty and staff support in order to ensure it retains as many students as possible; thus, the institution achieves a high level of faculty support for such initiatives (Wasley, 2007). Pitt Community College in North Carolina found they had to modify the delivery of their early alert system due to a lack of faculty support, and Frederick Community College in Maryland reported that an early alert system initiative should not be too laborious so faculty will remain inclined to support (Chappell, 2010).

The research on early alert systems in community colleges remains limited at best. What research has been published suggests that early alert systems improve retention and student success (Chappell, 2010) and are especially effective for at-risk student populations (Price, 2010). This research supports previous studies suggesting that at-risk populations such as those served by TRiO programs benefit from built-in early alert system initiatives (Bridges et al., 2006), and the reinforcement of these system initiatives creates positive dividends in student self-confidence, and student’s social networks (Kuh et al., 2005). As current literature is clear that
early alert systems encourage retention and persistence at two-year and four-year institutions alike, (Chappell, 2010; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Tampke, 2013; Wasley, 2005), Rudmann (1992) reported that full-time and part-time students benefit equally also. The research on community college early alert system initiatives indicates that two-year colleges should individually measure their level of resources, fiscally and physically, before undertaking such initiatives (Chappell, 2010). Even the community colleges that employ web-based technology must have designated individuals to contact and follow-up with early alert advisees, as well as maintain the technology systems. While the scant literature on early alert systems in community college education suggests positive results in regards to retention, as with other first-year experience program components previously reviewed, the utility of such programs is unknown compared to the inherent challenges of program design, implementation, and sustainability.

**Academic Advising**

Academic advising is a critical element contributing to student success at all levels of postsecondary education. However, academic advising takes on greater significance for first-year at-risk and academically underprepared students at community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Kramer & Associates, 2003). Many community colleges nationwide are moving to mandatory intrusive advising models. Some large community colleges are experimenting with virtual intrusive advising using preexisting web-based technologies (Jones & Hansen, 2014).

Tinto (2004) believes that academic advising positively affects retention and student success when advisors fully address the needs of undecided, underprepared and at-risk students. He adds that effective academic advising should encompass more than registering students for a new set of classes. Furthermore, Tinto (2014) asserted that state and federal initiatives making community college attendance free for all students, as Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam
proposes, should be praised. Yet, access alone does not translate into academic success for many community college students unless they receive proper guidance and advice, especially during their initial transition period into higher education. Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) stated that 75% of community colleges use a centralized advising method, one that employs professional advisors instead of a decentralized method, one that utilizes faculty as advisors. What is often the case, however, is that professional advisors meet students in orientation platforms, and students are assigned departmental faculty member advisors thereafter. The centralized academic advising method has proven effective in increasing first semester and second semester student grade point average, and first-year to second year student retention (Chiteng Kot, 2014).

Somewhat contrary to the central advising method, Scrivener and Coghlan (2011) believe that enhanced academic advising is successful in the short-term, but long-term success is not sustained. In a study of 628 students at a large four-year university, who advised students and how mandatory their academic advising sessions were directly relate to retention and student satisfaction within the overall institution (McFarlane, 2014). Furthermore, students that perceive they had “good” or “excellent” advising are more likely to interact with faculty, and take part in their campus culture, as some believe that academic advising is the greatest indicator of student satisfaction (Kuh et al., 2005; NSSE, 2005).

Burton Clark’s (1960) influential study of access and achievement in higher education argues that it is the duty of the counselor or advisor to guide underprepared students into fields and career paths suitable for their mental and physical acumen. Several studies contradict Clark’s original assertions. Specifically, Bahr (2008) found fault with Clark’s “cooling out” theory, and contended that academic advising is “actively beneficial to students’ chances of
success” (p. 704). Current research also finds that students’ academic advising needs depend upon their plan of study, and transfer goals. Allen, Smith, and Muehleck (2013) surmised that community college student pre-transfer and post-transfer advising needs are quite different, and that systems should be in place on an institutional basis to address the needs of each student (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Academic advising is an integral part of the first-year experience at two-year and four-year institutions alike. The current literature purports that academically underprepared and at-risk students benefit from academic advising disproportionately more than do academically prepared and non-risk students (Chiteng Kot, 2014). As underprepared and at-risk community college student populations continue growing, it is critical that community college practitioners and first-year experience programs include mandatory academic advising models into their curriculum, but stakeholders should remain mindful that if used alone, academic advising models are unlikely to meet student’s diverse needs. Academic advisors in first-year experience programs should be competent in not only registration procedure, but also qualified to meet any one of a number of first-year student needs (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Summary

This section of the literature review analyzed the most popular first-year experience program components; namely first-year seminars, orientation, learning communities, early alert systems, and academic advising (Barefoot, 2000). While all first-year experience program components promise positive results, first-year seminars appear best poised to positively encourage student persistence in community colleges (Porter & Swing, 2006). The following section will further analyze academic and non-academic components within first-year seminar courses.
First-Year Seminar Cognitive and Affective Components

Current literature is clear that first-year experience programs generally (Bers & Younger, 2014), and first-year seminars specifically (Porter & Swing, 2006), have positive effects on student persistence and retention. Barefoot (2000) argued that the sole purpose of first-year experience programs is to increase institutional retention rates. Porter and Swing (2006) added that institutional focus on retention rates is multifaceted, and campuses create first-year programs to satisfy internal and external pressures. They added that much of the research on first-year seminars is conducted on the overall courses, not which components encourage persistence. O’Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009) noted that, in community colleges across the country, the names of first-year seminars vary as widely as do their content. Boylan (2002) stated that an ever-growing number of community college students are required to remediate; however, remedial courses do not explicitly address non-academic behaviors. Community college students are more likely than their four-year student counterparts to remediate, and spend longer amounts of time in remedial courses (Wirt et al., 2005).

Although their research is a cross-institutional study of 45 colleges and universities, Porter and Swing (2006) efficiently categorized first-year seminars into five distinct course structures. The two models seen most in community colleges are transition theme and remedial theme. Transition theme courses are defined as, “Courses focus on topics that ease the transition to college, develop skills needed for academic success, and encourage student engagement in the full range of educational opportunities” (p. 94). Remedial theme courses are defined as, “Courses are offered for students at high risk of dropping out or having low academic success and usually include intensive focus on study skills and life management” (p. 94). So, while the literature is clear that participation in first-year seminars result in positive outcomes, there is little, if any,
evidence signifying which components of these courses are most important in achieving said outcomes.

As detailed in the previous section, at the present time, there is no clear consensus as to which academic and non-academic components are most significant towards increasing student persistence and retention (Porter & Swing, 2006). Porter and Swing asserted that this is due to an overwhelming focus on single institution studies and a research focus measuring the utility of success courses overall as opposed to which components are most beneficial. Bailey and Alfonso’s (2005) research supported Porter and Swing’s (2006) findings arguing that student supports are limited at four-year institutions, and are much scarcer at two-year institutions. They added that over the last two decades, a distinct shift has occurred in community college education, marking a transition from mere student access to an institutional focus on student success. To assess this shift, regulators and accrediting agencies analyze student persistence and retention measures, many of which are implemented through first-year experience programs generally, and first-year seminars specifically (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). In their synthesis and critique of first-year seminars, Crisp and Taggart (2013) maintained that the three most universal first-year experience programs throughout current literature are learning communities, first-year seminars, and supplemental instruction. The authors’ further stated that 11 of the 12 quantitative studies they analyze found a positive correlation between first-year seminar completion and increased student persistence and retention, yet the authors’ critique is unable to pinpoint which course components within their respective programs encourage persistence and retention. Rather succinctly, Crisp and Taggart (2013) summarized this position stating, “We appear to have a descriptive understanding of the characteristics of each of these student success programs as well as evidence to suggest that each of these programs are related to student success. However, we
have less empirical evidence that demonstrates best practices…” (p. 124). Thus, researches and practitioners have recognized the benefit of first-year seminars, but have been unable to pinpoint the most effective components.

Other research states that course completion and earning a grade of C or better (C represents transferable college credits) is an accurate predictor of student persistence and future success (Raymond & Napoli, 1998), yet this still does not identify the course’s most effective components. Karp (2011) asserted that academically vulnerable students benefit from non-academic support. The research categorizes non-academic support mechanisms, several of which actively promote student engagement. In other research, non-academic supports are encouraged in collaboration with remedial coursework and first-year seminars to augment learning outcomes (Boylan, 2002). In recent years, greater accountability on institutions coupled with limited state resources creates incentives for higher education practitioners and researchers to identify effective success course components (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005); however, no studies currently do so.

Although there is no consensus concerning which course components are most critical towards encouraging student persistence and retention, most community college first-year seminars address students’ academic, social, and personal transition into higher education (Mayo, 2013). Mayo noted that because community colleges encompass a wide variety of academic and technical programs, and have exceedingly diverse student populations, first year programs are often delivered quite informally. Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007) claimed that college under-preparation is traditionally interpreted only with regard to academic skill deficiency. However, many community college students are equally underprepared to confront their personal and social transitions. Mayo (2013) reviewed common academic and
non-academic success course components in community colleges and found the five most common components all attempt to foster, in a variety of ways, increased student engagement. These five components include student-to-student interaction and activities; faculty-to-student interaction, both inside and out of the classroom; increased student involvement with campus activities; linking curriculum and co-curriculum; and increasing academic expectation and engagement. Tinto (1982) stated, “the more time faculty give to their students, and students to each other, the more likely are students to complete their education” (p. 697). Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) declared emphatically that faculty are the most important resource that students encounter during their success courses. Faculty engagement leads students to become engaged in other areas and with other services across their respective institutions. As aforementioned, there exists much ambiguity surrounding first-year seminar components. The following discussion will attempt to isolate and analyze the most common academic and nonacademic first-year seminar components.

Because the literature assessing useful academic and non-academic first-year seminar course components is scarce (Boylan, 2002; Mayo, 2013), this literature review analyzes McGraw Hill, Pearson, and Cengage, three of the largest textbook publishers in the United States’ first-year seminar textbooks in order to isolate common academic and nonacademic course components. Two of the three textbooks are designed specifically for community college students, and an additional text is designed for faculty teaching first-year seminars. The three textbooks are Choosing Success in Community College and Beyond (Atkinson & Longman, 2012); The Community College Experience, 4th ed. (Baldwin, Tietje, & Stoltz, 2016); and Focus on College Success, 4th ed. (Stanley, 2015). The text designed for faculty teaching first-year success courses reviewed in this study is Teaching First-Year College Students, (Erickson,
Peters, & Strommer, 2006), and published by Jossey-Bass, a leading publisher in higher education. The following analyses will compare and contrast academic and non-academic components employed in each student success course textbook in addition to the text designed to teach faculty how to structure and design their success courses in order to ascertain what the leading higher education publishers conclude are important course components.

**Cognitive Components**

Each of the three success course textbooks have quite similar academic components. The most common academic components employed in all the three textbooks include increased reading skills, listening and note-taking skills, writing strategies, and effective study and test-taking strategies. Atkinson and Longman (2012) encouraged students to “read actively” by developing a system in which they annotate and make notes when they read. The authors stressed to students that they will be expected to analyze and comprehend academic textbooks and assigned readings in different ways. Similar to Atkinson and Longman’s strategies, Baldwin, Tietje, and Stoltz (2016) suggested for students to create a reading log in order to differentiate and recall large amounts of information that otherwise would require rote memorization. Baldwin, Tietje, and Stoltz made a distinction between discipline specific reading assignments, as well as ways in which students should skim certain reading assignments. All three textbooks employ a variance of the SQRRR five-step method (survey, question, read, recite, and review). The system was first developed by Francis Robinson in 1946 and is common in virtually all success course texts (1978).

Listening and note-taking skills appear prominently in all three success course textbooks. As with reading skills, listening and note-taking skills require active student engagement and are not passive exercises (Baldwin et al., 2016). Each textbook focuses on student’s learning styles,
discipline specific note-taking suggestions, shorthand abbreviations, and varied note-taking strategies in order to match student’s learning styles. Each success course textbook includes a list of common terminology used in class discussions and lectures that, if not understood, may inhibit a student’s ability to properly comprehend and follow faculty during class. Each source strongly encourages students to work ahead as much as possible and, to be actively engaged with their faculty members and assignments. Stanley (2015) stated, “If you want to get a head-start on developing good academic habits in class, then start before you get there” (p. 215). The success course textbooks pair reading with listening and note-taking skills chapters in order, it appears, to reinforce the correlation of preview studying with reading comprehension.

Another academic component in which two of the three textbooks feature substantially (Baldwin et al., 2016; Stanley, 2016) and the other incorporates within other chapter discussions (Atkinson & Longman, 2012) is clear and concise college-level writing guides. Each source is clear in its declaration that students should expect to write in every course, not only English and literature courses. The writing guides they include, however, teach students more about terminology used by faculty than about effective writing strategies. Stanley (2015) described writing as a process, complete with a formulaic set of tasks and timeline in which students should use. Stanley’s writing instructions are as thorough as any, yet they offer little instruction for producing better writers, and places more emphasis on producing methodical writers. Atkinson and Longman incorporate increasing writing skills with a discussion of note taking and test-taking, and urge students to utilize campus resources such as visiting their campus writing center, as many community colleges are implementing writing centers on their campuses as a tool to improve student outcomes (Brandon, 2013).
Of all academic components addressed in the success course textbooks, effective study and test-taking strategies are featured most prominently and similarly by their authors. As with their discussions on increased writing competencies, the success course textbooks offer thorough discussions of common terms used on exams as well as descriptions of types of exams used in certain academic disciplines (Atkinson & Longman, p. 191-196; Baldwin et al., p. 190-197; Stanley, p. 307-312). Within their analysis, the authors of each textbook emphasize the importance of students’ physical and mental preparedness. Atkinson and Longman titled a subsection in their chapter on studying and test-taking “Choices for Exam Success” (p. 191); Stanley stated, “We can only begin to grasp the rich complexities of memory by understanding it as a process” (p. 288), thereby assuming that one increases their ability to take tests. Similarly, Baldwin et al. encourage students to study actively. The studying and test-taking processes recommended in each textbook, as well as the nature of their wording, indicates that the primary key to student success rests in the student finding an effective study system.

In *Teaching First-Year College Students*, Erickson, Peters, and Strommer (2006) reinforce the teaching of the aforementioned textbooks’ academic components. In the preface Erickson et al. claim that “Although we draw on the research and theory of learning, our emphasis throughout is on practical application of these insights in the classroom” (p. xii). Their insights, gained from classroom experience, include active study practices (group and singular); active reading across disciplines; increased writing proficiency; critical thinking exercises; and assessing student learning styles. Erickson et al. emphasized both academic and non-academic components used in the success course textbooks. As the following discussion suggests, the student textbooks and the faculty text place greater emphasis on non-academic components than they do academic components.
Affective Components

The success course textbooks utilize present non-academic components. The most common non-academic components used in all of the sources include college culture adjustment, goal setting and motivation, time management, college major and career planning, and the use of technology in higher education. There is, however, more variance amongst the books regarding non-academic components than there is about academic components. Atkinson and Long (2012) devoted entire chapters to personal finances and health and wellness, while Stanley does the same for personal wellness. Baldwin et al. (2016) included specific chapters on stress anxiety, on institutional and social diversity. Each text discusses college culture adjustment. Adjustment topics include appropriate student behaviors, common terms likely to be heard, and what a new student can expect during their general transitional period into higher education. Baldwin et al. devoted a large percentage of their college transition chapter to exploring one’s institutional culture, and uncovering “the unwritten rules of college culture and the campus” (p. 17), which all three success course textbooks appear to do in varying degrees.

Chapters on goal setting and motivation are found in all three textbooks. An underlying theme within each discussion of goal setting and motivation involves how students react in various negative situations. Stanley (2015) urged students to consider their personal motivation and educational path in a longitudinal fashion based on challenges, (personal) reactions, insight (gained), and actions (taken). Atkinson and Longman (2012) offered practical advice by laying out certain pragmatic steps. The authors challenge students to identify goals, and, keeping their focus on systematic approaches, they utilize the acronym S.M.A.R.T.E.R. (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-sensitive, evident, and recorded) to help achieve them.
Time management is given much attention in all of the success course textbooks. Each text discusses how properly managing one’s time in college enables students to become successful (Atkinson & Longman, 2012; Baldwin et al., 2016; Stanley, 2015). They each provided sample daily planner charts, discussions based on how to best schedule one’s study time, examples of how to balance professional, personal and academic responsibilities, and thoroughly analyzes procrastination and how to avoid it.

Selecting a major and career planning are non-academic components covered in all three success course textbooks. Baldwin et al. (2016) considered these to be such major topics that they discussed them in two adjoining chapters focused on degree planning and preparing for one’s career and life. While all three success course textbooks present topics such as degree options, course selection, and workplace professionalism, two of the three textbooks encourage more specific career planning activities such as building resume portfolios and professional networking (Baldwin et al.; Stanley, 2015). Each textbook uses future earnings as the primary extrinsic motivator in its career planning chapter. One source goes as far as containing the phrase “GET PAID” at the top of each new chapter’s heading (Baldwin et al., 2016).

Lastly, each text emphasizes the utility of integrating technology into all aspects of students’ educational pathways. Each includes coverage of what students can expect in online courses, as well as the responsibilities associated with online instruction. Stanley (2015) went further than others by introducing students to online research materials, and current applications (apps) for media devices designed to assist students. In two chapters, Atkinson and Longman (2012) discussed online course etiquette, and technology integration/digital citizenship. Each text concludes its discussion of online instruction and technology by placing the onus upon students to know which course delivery method best fits their learning styles.
The overarching theme within all of the chapters on non-academic components is how one efficiently and effectively employs study systems and processes to achieve college success. The analyses and instruction of both academic and non-academic components within the student success course textbooks and the faculty textbook support Robles’ (2002) research, which found that participation in a success course does not impact student grade point average, yet does positively influence student retention rates. The student textbooks and the faculty text each spend a majority of their pages dealing with non-academic components. This could be explained by the fact that many first-year seminar faculty report academic components (study skills) being their least liked units to teach (Mayo, 2013). Downing’s (2017) On Course: Strategies for Creating Success in College and Life is uncommon in the sense that it isolates non-academic components in part one, and groups academic components, albeit in a much shorter section, in part two. In fact, over 75% of Downing’s success course textbook is dedicated to non-academic components.

The data is in affirming that participation in a first-year seminar increases student persistence and retention (Crisp & Taggart, 2013), yet current literature is unable to isolate which course components are most critical in accomplishing these goals. While the attention on non-academic components does not suggest which components are most important, it does, however, emphasize where the vast majority of attention in success course literature is focused. As many institutions expand their first-year experience programs, they would be well served to outline an institutional retention definition and identify the goals and objectives of their first-year experience programs (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Community colleges serve diverse students that enter with a variety of goals (Bailey, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2005), all of which do not include degree completion and academic transfer.
As indicated by the reliance on both academic and non-academic course components in the student textbooks, O’Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009) and Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007) recommended expanding course requirements, and making success courses mandatory for all entering community college students. Often, part-time students with little connection to institutional resources are given the choice and chose not to take success courses. O’Gara et al. (2009) and Mayo (2013) both declared that, to gain maximum utility, success courses should be taken during student’s first semester in college. O’Gara et al. (2009) stated, “Not surprisingly, students who take student success courses later in their college careers feel less positively about, and appear to gain less from, the class” (p. 216). Zeidenberg et al., in their study of student life skills (SLS) courses in Florida’s community colleges, claimed that many two-year students come to college without a proper understanding of college demands. They conclude by calling for more research deciphering which aspects of the courses are most important to improve student success because, as the review of student textbooks and the faculty text demonstrates, no two first-year seminars are the same.

Summary

This section of the literature review analyzed the most popular academic and non-academic course components in transitional and remedial themed first-year seminars. To accomplish this goal, the section reviewed success course textbooks from the three largest textbook publishers in the United States. Research suggests that course participation yields positive results, but is unable to specify which course components are most responsible for increasing student persistence (Bers & Younger, 2014; Porter & Swing, 2006). It appears, however, that no current studies have clearly identified which course components are most
beneficial towards prolonged student success. Finally, calls for expanding course requirements to all incoming community college freshman students, full-time and part-time, are documented.

**At-Risk Student Triage**

Often-times, when institutions determine which students are not likely to persist in higher education, the time for successful interventions has past. Much attention is given to the academic success rates of various student demographic groups in hopes that increased success for certain students will translate into increased success for all. However, considerably fewer studies focus on identifying academic as well as non-academic at-risk student behaviors. In his widely praised book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain suggested that, if institutions want to know how students feel about various issues and circumstances, they should ask them (Bain, 2004). In a study of 739 participants enrolled in two-year and four-year institutions, Cherif, Movahedzadeh, Adams, and Dunning (2013) identified the most significant indicators, behaviors, and markers of student failure. The authors present several overarching categories leading to student failure which include motivation, study habits, instruction, academic preparation, external factors, attitudes, and relevancy issues.

This section of the literature review analyzes the topics of motivation, study habits, academic preparedness, and relevancy issues as a lens through which to identify and assist at-risk students. Discussion of various instructional and student attitudinal characteristics are incorporated into the aforementioned sections. External factors such as the cost of student tuition, student illness, incarceration, and family tragedies are outside the control of faculty and institutions. Therefore, external factors are not included in this review. Understanding which behaviors, as opposed to student’s likelihood of failure related to their demographic affiliations, indicate at-risk status will enable faculty and staff to target students before they are too far
behind, and inform administrators to make knowledgeable decisions as to the sort of programs, courses, and instruction that best fits their student body (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012).

Motivation

Within the breadth of current literature on at-risk student populations in higher education, student motivation appears to be the single greatest indicator of student success (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Pickens, 2007; Pickens & Eick, 2009). Martin, Galentino, and Townsend asserted that community college students who enter college with clear motivational goals and a strong sense of self-empowerment are able to mitigate traditional predictors of student failure such as academic under-preparedness. Along with a clear sense of motivation, “It seems that having a well-defined college plan was the productive factor in community college student success” (Galentino et al., 2014, p. 236). Self-motivation is lowest amongst at-risk community college students due to their unfamiliarity with the culture of higher education (Petty, 2014). Students without self-motivation, the ability to do what needs to be done without outside influence from other people or situations, maintain low intrinsic motivation, behavior that is driven by internal decisions, as well, which is a common indicator of at-risk student behavior (Baars & Arnold, 2014).

Many faculty and staff members understand that one of the primary barriers to community college students realizing success is academic under-preparedness. However, personal academic deficits can be overcome with proper motivation. Martin et al. (2014) contended that students who possess a well-defined college plan and sustain self-empowerment and motivational qualities are the most likely overcome academic under-preparedness.

Current literature supports the notion that institutions generally, and faculty and staff specifically, play a pivotal role in fostering, encouraging, and sustaining community college
student motivation. Morrow and Ackerman (2012) argued that students’ sense of belonging coupled with motivation, both of which are increased by institutional and faculty outreach efforts, are the two prime indicators of first to second year student retention. Other studies assert that institutions have an overt responsibility to instill extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in students, especially those they perceive to be at-risk (Petty, 2014). These efforts can be strengthened by the early introduction of bridge programs linking secondary and postsecondary institutions, and many states are currently broadening their dual credit course offerings. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) studied how at-risk first generation minority students are able to overcome familial obstacles through self-empowerment and motivation. Their research concludes that teachers often serve as unofficial mentors who encourage and motivate at-risk first generation minority students to persevere during their academic careers. The mentors often fill a void in the student’s family, and may positively sustain their self-empowerment to finish school against perceived unsurmountable odds.

Published in 1998, the highly influential Boyer Commission report offers ten recommendations intended to change the structure of undergraduate education at research universities. Jessup-Anger (2011) commented that the Boyer Commission (1998) notices and praises the benefits that first-year seminars have on student populations, and for this reason, the Commission recommends that similar seminars be offered on every college and university campus. Several of the Boyer Commission’s recommendations include ways to build relationships between faculty and students. As part of the first-year seminars, the Boyer Commission stated that it is the job of the “professor to imbue new students with a sense of excitement…” (p. 20). If the Boyer Commission expects such standards of faculty at research
universities, surely such responsibilities translate to faculty and at-risk students in community colleges as well.

**Study Habits**

Within the range of literature on first-year college student study habits, many studies include mention of study skills and time management. A poor understanding of postsecondary curriculum and the different ways in which faculty assign work and graded assessments leave new students, and especially those that are at-risk, deficient in study skills and personal time allocation (Vargas, 2004). Cherif, Movahedzadeh, Adams, and Dunning (2013) elaborated on students’ academic skill deficiencies, suggesting that students who are at-risk based on lack of study skills also will likely lack personal time management skills and will not be able to appropriately gauge the amount of time needed to properly prepare for postsecondary academic work.

Schnell and Doetkott (2003) compared student cohorts over a four-year period between those that enrolled in a study skills course and those that did not. This longitudinal study did not assign students based on placement scores or previous grade point averages. Rather, it analyzed students who registered for the course voluntarily. The study reports that persistence rates were higher for those enrolled in the study skills course, leading one to believe that participation in such courses are beneficial not only for at-risk students, but for all. Even though current literature affirms the importance of study skills in college, Karp et al. (2012) found that not all first-year seminars teach them. The authors claim that lack of study skills is one of the hardest at-risk indicators to detect, as well as being one of the greatest contributors to student failure. Frequent low stakes assessments aid faculty in targeting students with underdeveloped study skills before they are too far behind in their coursework. Increased focus on pragmatic study
skills should be equally as important as teaching institution-specific college resources. Increased attention on study skills rather than college resources will, according to Karp et al., lead to positive long-term results.

Terenzini et al. (1994) led focus group interviews with 132 students entering institutions ranging from community colleges to research universities. Several themes emerge from the interviews and student experiences. However, the themes most pertinent to community college students are that early validation is a central component of the transition into higher education and, that faculty plays a vital role in new student orientation programs, teaching such components as academic study skills. Early validation occurs when students become empowered and positive reinforcement from graded assessments, and is most important for community college students when achieved as the result of academic validation, especially for someone who has been identified as skills deficient. This research reinforces previous studies, informing faculty and administrators of the potential long-term student success benefits of using study skills as a barometer to measure student preparedness. However, as important as study skills are, Hanlon O’Connell (2015) stated that student motivation is key towards predicting which students will or will not gain the necessary skills needed in order to succeed. In her retrospective quantitative dissertation, Hanlon O’Connell measured student will (motivation), skill (preparedness), and self-regulation as predictive characteristics as a part of a study skills inventory. The results indicated that will (motivation) is the most important predictive characteristic of developmental community college student’s study skills acquisition.

**Academic Preparedness**

A major obstacle facing at-risk freshman college students is the ways in which college faculty introduce assignments and exams requiring multiple forms of analyses. At-risk students
who are academically underprepared do not ask for help until they are too far behind in their coursework and have few other options remaining but to withdraw or fail. Compounding this effect, many faculty members believe that it is not their responsibility to teach basic academic skills, or that students should be able to think, read, and write critically upon entering their course. However, if students fail to grasp these skills early, their likelihood of achieving success is quite low (Grimes, 1997). The most obvious under-preparedness indicators to use in identifying academically skill-deficient students are placement scores and students’ high school grade point average (Choy, 2001). Nonetheless, Choy insisted that course rigor and academic standards should not be compromised to accommodate underprepared students because, even though they may be underprepared, this characteristic does not prohibit them from achieving academic success. Nearly all community colleges in the United States require some sort of student placement exam, and institutions will be well-served to remember that not all students perform well on standardized exams (Choy, 2001), or should be permanently labeled due to one exam.

A growing body of literature promises positive results for academically underprepared and college-ready students who enroll in pre-college academic skill building and transitional theme programs (Perna, 2002). Such programs help close social capital gaps for academically underprepared and college-ready students. As a result of these positive outcomes, and considering very few academically underprepared students have the opportunity to enroll in pre-college programs, Gullat and Jan (2003) proposed expanding the basic concepts of pre-college programs to include vulnerable students in first-year experience programs. This belief appears to be gaining momentum among higher education practitioners (Vargas, 2004), as academically underprepared students are not likely to understand and comprehend the differences in
postsecondary curricula, especially reading, writing, and critical thinking. Therefore, extending successful pre-college programs into the developmental education curriculum promises positive benefits. However, any program expansions are usually met with administrative concerns over funding issues. Rather succinctly, Atherton (2014) made specific recommendations concerning how institutions can incorporate positive outcomes from pre-college programs into their first-year experience curriculum in order to target at-risk students before they fall too far behind. He writes, “Additionally, first-year programs can assist the transition to college by providing academic resources (tutors, study labs), as well as resources aimed at broader social capital issues, such as student involvement” (p. 828). It seems that the most practical approach is, as Atherton suggests, to include the goals of pre-college programs in the first-year experience curriculum.

A major challenge is for institutions to provide for all ranges of student needs while maintaining high academic standards (Grimes, 1997). Personal development should remain at the core of any academic program, and should be introduced as part of all first-year experience programs. Higher education practitioners should be mindful of how student demographics are changing. Over the past two decades, as record numbers of middle-aged workers return to college to earn skills for a changing workplace (Ehienrich, 2005), institutions should consider these shifts when determining new definitions of “at-risk.” Bulger and Watson (2006) proposed expanding the at-risk moniker to include those students that are technologically underprepared. Academic preparation is influenced by student’s self-efficacy. Miranda (2014) contended that the most substantive indicator of academic preparedness is one’s self-efficacy, or the belief in their ability to succeed or accomplish goals. Through in-depth student interviews, Miranda details the seven most common psychosocial false beliefs from academically underprepared
students. These include student perceptions that absences do not hurt their grades; that grades do
not matter as much as degree completion; that grades are based as much on effort as substance;
that community colleges are less rigorous than four-year colleges and universities; the only
benefit of a college degree is that it necessary to obtain a good-paying job; multi-tasking during
class is an acceptable behavior; a wide disconnect exists between professors and students that
cannot be overcame. To combat negative perceptions, the author suggests that academically
underprepared students should discover academic “truths” as early as possible, preferably in their
first-year experience program. Academic under preparedness does not only pertain to skills
deficits.

A major at-risk identifier is student fear. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) detailed the most
common types of student fears including “performance-based anxiety, fear of failure, fear of
being laughed at, and cultural components of fear that impact learning” (p. 32). The authors
asserted that faculty should help students manage fears, especially for academically under-
prepared students, because student fear will thwart student engagement, and greatly decrease
performance. First year experience programs are uniquely positioned to confront the challenges
of increased numbers of academically under prepared students at all levels of higher education,
and especially so in community colleges (Grimes, 1997).

**Academic Relevancy**

The ways in which students make meaning of and experience their course curriculum is
largely dependent upon their perceptions of the material’s academic relevancy. Growing research
suggests that the more students perceive outcomes assessments as relevant towards their overall
academic success, the more likely they are to persist. Low achieving students who experience
outcomes they deem relevant are even more likely to persist than students that do not deem their courses relevant to their future success (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002).

Academic relevancy is a fairly new term in higher education literature. However, many studies have focused on similar themes in the past, and have been used to show causal correlation in education. Cosijn and Ingwersen (2000) noted that the term “relevance” is not well understood. In the field of Information Retrieval, Cosijn and Ingwersen coined the term situational relevance to describe the relationship between the various stimuli and how the individual makes meaning of the information at hand. In this model, if one’s information is considered useful, their motivational relevance increases leading to positive outcomes. Simons, Vamsteenkiste, Lens, and Lacante (2004) augmented previous studies with their research on utility value, which can best be summarized as one’s perceptions as to how beneficial a current task is in relation to their future self. Other research posits that personal academic advancement is largely the result of the individual learner’s relevancy (Means, Jonassen, & Dwyer, 1997). Furthermore, Means et al. contend that extrinsic relevance enhancing strategies produce greater motivation than do intrinsic relevance strategies.

While relevance concepts have been applied to education outcomes, within the past two decades, more research focuses directly on educational and academic relevancy (Crumpton & Gregory, 2011). While surveying 220 students in English courses taught by three separate instructors, Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, and Akey (2004) found that students’ perceptions of course curriculum are key to personal (intrinsic) motivation, which ultimately leads to future academic successes. Andriessen, Phalet, and Lens (2006) proposed that when students are able to establish a course’s academic relevancy within their program of study, such relevancy mechanisms serve as a deterrent against disengagement for all students, and encourage at-risk
students to persist. Other research confirming these previous studies suggests that when students become bored in class and fail to see a course’s relevancy, they are not motivated to learn, and find little inherent value in education (McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, & Van Etton, 1998). Ultimately, students are more likely to be motivated and achieve long-term academic goals if they discover academic relevancy in their coursework.

Summary

This section of the literature review analyzed the most common reasons for student failure, and addressed including ways in which these reasons may be mitigated. Common at-risk themes include lack of motivation, poor study habits, lack of academic preparedness, external factors, and student perceived academic relevancy issues. A proper understanding of which student behaviors and characteristics lead to failure can help faculty target at-risk students before it is too late, and can advise administrators of the most beneficial initiatives to better serve their student body. Each theme suggests that student motivation is key for overcoming educational, behavioral, and social obstacles. Motivation does not necessarily improve student grade point average, but it does directly influence student persistence, which ultimately yields more certificate and degree earners (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014).

Faculty and Student Expectations

The final section of this literature review compares faculty expectations for students, and first-year student expectations upon entering postsecondary institutions. Research suggests that often-times, faculty and first-year student expectations do not align (Koslow Martin, 2010), and at-risk students with unclear, and especially unrealistic expectations, are less likely to persist (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). In fact, Bork and Rucks-Ahadiana (2013) argued that role ambiguity (misunderstandings) between faculty and students leads to frustration, confusion, and
failure. The effects of role ambiguity are multiplied for at-risk students in their first semesters. While students are motivated by earnings potential and expect to gather the skills necessary to enter the workforce as quickly as possible, faculty maintain broader expectations for students including the development of skills such as reading, writing and critical thinking. Faculty also expect students to exhibit a number of “soft skills” that are equally germane to success that students do not perceive as important as “hard skills.” In the past 40 years, a growing number of high school graduates and non-traditional returning students expect to attend college and earn degrees (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001), yet as access to higher education continues to grow, success has not always followed. Thus, this section will focus on the following topics: faculty expectations of students; student expectations of their faculty, institution, and purpose in higher education; and ways in which the two groups may better align their expectations.

**Faculty Expectations**

Faculty expectations of their students in two-year institutions are frequently influenced by institutional academic policy implementation (Ellerbe, 2015). General or college-wide outcomes, program outcomes, and course specific outcomes, which all must fit within an institution’s strategic plan, direct faculty as to the kinds of assessments utilized in their courses. Since many programs and certifications at two-year institutions are closely aligned with local business interests, community college administrators often rely heavily on standardized assessments to report to local employers, which directly influences faculty instruction. Assessment standardization has become the new norm as institutions seek ways to prove their worth amidst reports that suggest otherwise (AAC&U, 2002).

Koslow Martin (2010) claimed that faculty expectations are implied through curricular design, which is conveyed to students in their syllabi. Studying in high school and in college
mean different things, and students are often misinformed. College faculty use the terms homework and studying interchangeably, whereas in high school the two terms mean different things. Homework and studying in high school require submitting nightly or weekly assignments, while college studying and homework is mostly completed independently (Karp & Bork, 2012).

There is a large disconnect between which learning assessments high school teachers and college faculty value in their courses (Koslow Martin, 2010). This disconnect is highlighted in the 2002 Association of American Colleges and Universities report which calls for faculty to create environments where students are “empowered, informed, and responsible” (p. 33). The report adds that faculty should seek “a rich and desirable diversity of approaches to education and a shared commitment to high standards” (p. 39). Because of unclear expectations, community college students’ academic preparedness, especially in their first year, rarely aligns with faculty expectations (Koslow Martin, 2010).

Brown (2003) claimed that almost 90% of all faculty teaching first-year seminars believe that teaching higher order thinking skills is the primary objective of the course. Furthermore, they state that the best way to teach these skills is through general education and liberal arts curriculum. Faculty should remember that not all students progress or develop cognitive competencies along the same pathway (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), yet expectations for students primarily deal with academic preparedness measures. Koslow Martin (2010) advised that faculty expect students to acquire key academic skills such as the ability to read, think, and write critically before entering their courses. However, it appears as if high schools are not properly preparing their graduates, as more than 40% of community college and university
bound students enroll in some form of remedial writing course during their first semester of college (AACC, 2012).

Some faculty expectations are unintentionally misconstrued by those they are intended to assist. Similar to Ellerbe’s (2015) mention of faculty expectations being determined by institutional academic policy, Levin, Kater, and Wagoner (2006) argued that faculty are pressed into using technology in their classrooms, which can modify their expectations of student work, as well as dictate which faculty are assigned to teach certain courses in their respective programs (p.63). Cohen and Brawer (2008) reminded faculty and practitioners that it is important that technology in the classroom be accessible and fit the diverse groups of students it is intended to serve. Traditionally, community college faculty are encouraged to engage new technologies, however, “Financial issues affect the community colleges’ capacity to provide instructional resources for students and faculty” (Cohen & Brawer, p. 191). Hassel and Lourey (2005) noted that faculty expect students to spend six to nine hours per course per week studying outside of class on course work, yet students rarely report that much out-of-class effort. Schilling and Schilling (1999) noted that homework is rarely collected, giving students a false sense that they have nothing to do or prepare. If students are not clearly instructed on how and what to prepare, Schilling and Schilling suggested that the best instructional strategies are all for naught. The authors claim that the best way to increase greater numbers of successful students is to align expectations.

In his widely praised and influential book *What the Best College Students Do*, author Ken Bain (2012) noted that many faculty place a high premium on both hard and soft skills. Technology necessitates that employees must be able to not only maintain the academic and skills requirements necessary to fulfill their positions, but should also be able to effectively
communicate and interact with diverse groups in a changing economy (Robles, 2012). One approach in community colleges designed to foster student’s soft skills are learning communities. As previously discussed, learning communities are often designed for groups of academically underprepared students in which the same group takes two or more courses together per semester (Bers & Yonuger, 2014; Schnee, 2014). Jaffee (2007) noted that the single most important aspect of a learning community is a network of peer support, and many faculty in community colleges use such collaborative learning approaches to build hard and soft skills in these courses (Robles, 2012). However, faculty should be mindful of unintended outcomes of collaborative learning exercises which include the formation of groups that are “often more of a social than learning community” (Jaffee, 2007, p. 69). Of the top 10 soft skills often identified by employers, Robles’ (2012) study found communication, integrity, and courtesy to be most important. A major challenge facing faculty is to implement such soft skills into their curriculum, and present their subject in a relevant manner in order to encourage student motivation (Bain, 2004; Robles, 2012).

In addition to developing academic and interpersonal skills, faculty expect students to use various campus resources at their disposal (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Although faculty expect students to arrive at their courses with the ability to critically think and write, many students are not taught to do so in general education courses. Increased writing assignments and mandatory use of campus writing centers guarantees that all participants have the opportunity to increase their skills (Kuh, 2005, p. 185). Faculty should not simply expect first year students to seek these resources out on their own. Rather, their curriculum should encourage the constant use of campus resources (Kuh, 2005, p. 192). Expectations have the tendency to confuse students, however, when there is no clear understanding of what constitutes high quality
teaching or professional scholarship (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995). The lazy use of student course surveys does little to assess good teaching strategies (Blackburn & Lawrence). Kuh, Kinzie, Whitt, and Associates (2005) argued that the best faculty create environments in which they expect their students to seek help outside of class during their office hours. These faculty expectations for students undoubtedly are intended to assist students during their transition into higher education. Confusion occurs, however, when faculty expectations for students are misunderstood, or do not align with student expectations of faculty and their institutions. Bain (2004) succinctly states that the best teaching is based on outcomes, and enables students to develop holistically.

**Student Expectations**

Students expect to attend college, but few maintain unrealistic grade expectations (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Reynolds and Pemberton further stated that one’s socioeconomic status affects expectations more so than other personal characteristics. As community colleges continue expanding access, it is quite likely that confused student expectations will continue growing as well. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) studied students’ social and academic expectations of their first year of college, and deduced that student expectations rarely align with their first year experiences. While student expectations are not necessarily significant persistence indicators, students with unrealistically high social or academic expectations received the lowest grade point averages at the end of their freshman year (Smith & Wertlieb).

Astin (1993) argued that students report the greatest levels of satisfaction with courses in their majors. Most academic courses in community colleges, however, help fulfill general education core requirements that students are likely to be less satisfied with. Astin further
described other activities with which students report low satisfaction in areas such as faculty-student advising. Satisfaction is enhanced and molded into expectations as more frequent and positive interactions develop over time.

Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) and Kuh (2005) reported that, generally, college is not as hard as students expect. Students’ misjudged expectations may lead to a lack of motivation and effort. Many entering freshman hear extreme examples of challenges and study difficulties by others, and come to expect similar challenges routinely. Kuh, Gonyea, and Williams (2005) and Smith and Wertlieb (2005) claimed that student expectations rarely align with their first year experiences regarding to the amount of studying, reading, and writing they perform. Kuh (2005) reinforced previous studies arguing that many students report less difficulty in their first year of college than expected; however, even when seemingly positive overrated expectations do not equal their experience, students fail to perform as expected. Schilling and Schilling (1999) found that university-bound students expected to spend 30 to 40 hours per week on homework and studying outside of class, yet few did so. Neff (2005) argued that, while 54% of first-year university students expect to make a B+ average, less than 11% do so. Schilling and Schilling (1999) stated that students must undergo a significant change in academic preparedness if they are to meet their personal expectations.

Hassel and Lourey (2005) claimed that out of 1100 university students surveyed, 67% report studying fewer than four hours per week per three-hour credit course. The authors suggested that negative student behaviors including apathy and absenteeism are to blame for poor performance. Students must display, Hassel and Lourey purported, increased personal responsibility for their successes and failures. Faculty expectations should be clearly articulated to students, and it is the students’ responsibility to comply. Their research calls for the
elimination of the extra credit model as a safety net for students who think they can escape certain coursework by doing the bare minimum necessary to receive passing grades. With increased attention to personal accountability, student expectations are likely to change during their undergraduate careers (Koslow Martin, 2010).

Keup’s (2007) qualitative study using in-depth student interviews highlighted several complexities of the freshman year myth. The interviews were conducted at three stages during students’ first year transition – prior to beginning classes, during their first semester of coursework, and at the end of their first year of coursework. Although the study involved students attending a small, liberal arts university, the report suggests that any students with strong familial support networks overwhelmingly adjust the best. These findings highlight the importance of first year seminars at community colleges, as many underprepared community college students are the first in their families to attend college and do not receive family support, or have family members that simply do not know how to properly support them while in school. In essence, their first-year seminar may serve as a de facto support network for some under-prepared students.

Ken Bain (2012) studied the relationship between college students and faculty, and he believes that current college students “face enormous pressures that many… never endured, or at least not to the same degree” (p. 258). Bain described these pressures, namely social and economic worries, which necessitate that students earn their degrees as quickly and cheaply as possible. Bain stated that students today “emphasize making money over every other goal in life, and fear for their future if they don’t” (p. 258). Reinforcing Bain’s research, Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995) tested Vincent Tinto’s theories on student expectations while studying 263 first-year freshman students at various four-year colleges and universities, and drew similar
conclusions, stating that student experiences fall into one of three categories, including career readiness, social, and academic expectations. Their report suggests that students expect career preparation and readiness training, which directly influences their perception of their social and academic experiences. The more career ready they feel, the greater they perceive their social and academic experiences. Other research specifically seeks to find the difference in student and faculty expectations regarding first-year seminar courses. Brown (2003) found a divergence between the two groups, with student expectations much more focused on work and career preparation. Brown continued that students perceive their college experience as an investment towards position and earnings in their future careers. Levin, Kater, and Wagoner (2006) affirmed this student expectation within their study of college faculty. They submitted that because many community colleges are beholden to other resource providers (i.e., students), faculty must ensure that the “customers” receive the instruction they desire. Workforce and career preparation is one student expectation not likely met by adjunct faculty that have not been properly trained in proper pedagogical strategies (Levin, Kater, & Wagoner, 2006).

In one of the largest intergenerational studies ever produced, Twenge (2006) discussed how student college and career expectations are greater than in previous generations, while achieving college success and getting a job is more difficult. Twenge also discussed growing student consumerism attitudes, which addressed students through customer service models. Students exhibit consumer values as they shop for majors, ultimately attributing to misguided student expectations as they expect to earn good grades simply because they paid tuition. In contrast, Bain (2012) stated the best students are lifelong learners, those that immerse themselves in their academic studies and view education as a never-ending journey, not as an end destination in which one achieves short-term gratification through grade reinforcement. Research also
indicates less student accountability compared to previous generations. Hassel and Lourey (2005) suggested that many students expect their grades to be unaffected if they miss class, mainly because they are paying for it. As consumer models indicate, they believe that they have the right to attend or not. Students further expect extra credit opportunities to be standard operating procedure in all courses as a way and means to make-up work.

Adelman (2005) tracked a cohort of students from across the nation during their transition from high school into postsecondary education, and sought to find which student experiences contribute to baccalaureate degree completion by their mid-20s. Student expectations and experiences varied greatly in this national sampling. However, the author found that the best indicator of future baccalaureate degree completion was the academic rigor of the high school curriculum. Thus, Adelman’s nationally representative study suggests that student expectations are important, but they must be grounded in previous experiences, and informed by future experiences in order to achieve positive outcomes (in this case degree conferment). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) noted that students expect, and greatly benefit from, faculty that express genuine interest in their academic and career development. Kuh et al. stated that one of the most important aspects of first-year seminars and other new student programs is establishing student-faculty relationships as early as possible. Bain (2012) noted that even the best college students need and expect supportive faculty mentors and advisors. When these occasional failures occur, the best students, stated Bain, “saw occasional failure or setbacks as events that helped them to understand themselves, seek new opportunities, or refine their goals” (p. 259).
Aligning Faculty-Student Expectations

Faculty and students expect college experiences to be rewarding and fulfilling, both academically, socially, and one day, financially. At a time when community college enrollment is at an all-time high, these institutions often claim they have something to offer all students, yet Cohen and Brawer (2008, p. 445) noted that “they fail to examine the obvious corollary question: Access to what?” The authors maintained that those who believe in the mission and premise of community colleges laud their educational and philosophical purposes, and their role as exemplars of American democracy providing access to underrepresented populations. Therefore, it is vital that they not only survive, but thrive. One of the most important tasks of first-year seminars, then, is to ensure that students well understand what Cohen and Brawer asked, “Access to what?” The most effective way to do so is by aligning faculty and student expectations as quickly into a student’s academic career as possible. Bork and Rucks-Ahidiana (2013) stated that role ambiguity between faculty and students in online courses is a major reason for student failure, yet role ambiguity often occurs in the traditional classroom setting, too. This is especially true for underprepared and at-risk students. Faculty expect students to be self-motivated and, while many students agree, they also expect engaging assignments. To better align both stakeholders’ expectations, the authors propose improving student readiness, and increasing faculty professional development to make each participant aware of the other’s expectations for the course. Others report that faculty and student expectations diverge greatly regarding social expectations. Students’ social expectations include making friends and identifying with certain groups, while the faculty’s social expectations for students center on making informed and purposeful civic minded decisions (Koslow Martin, 2010).
Some believe that the best way to align the two groups’ expectations is for faculty to explicitly address career preparation in order to maintain student motivation (Brown, 2003; Robles, 2012). Robles especially believes this to be true regarding the development of students’ soft skills through academic coursework. Faculty should be aware, however, that student’s technological deficiencies may limit them as severely as academic deficiencies (Ellerbe, 2015). Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, and Alisat (2000) believe the greater the complexity of an entering student’s expectations, the greater the chances are for their smooth transition into higher education. Furthermore, those with more complex expectations report lower levels of stress than those with simpler expectations. To compensate for the ever-increasing numbers of underprepared community college students, institutions should create assessments in first-year seminars to better align expectations and predict to students what they can expect in their first year.

Simply assuming that faculty and student expectations are aligned because faculty members told the students what to expect, or because course expectations are outlined in the syllabus is not an effective strategy moving forward. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and associates (2005) noted that the best schools have clear structures, and program initiatives designed to “show students what to expect and what success looks and feels like. In short, they create structures and practices that help students bring meaning to their college experiences” (p. 109). To provide excellent instruction and learning opportunities, students should be “socialized” as early as possible. However, faculty cannot expect to socialize students to high academic standards without providing appropriate levels of support and motivation. Levin, Kater, and Wagoner (2006) argued that, although some believe the future of community college course delivery is moving towards more online formats (p. 121), it will be much more challenging to
align faculty expectations with severely at-risk community college students in strictly online course formats.

In their seminal report, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) argue that student preparation has not kept pace with student access in postsecondary institutions. Thus, student expectations are unrealistic and not aligned with faculty expectations of students. The breadth of literature on faculty and student expectations suggests creating a centralized institutional structure designed to mitigate students’ academic and social under-preparedness.

Many believe that the first year seminar is the best option for aligning the two groups’ expectations. Unfortunately, many secondary institutions focus on surface learning – teaching to standardized exams – which encourages rote memorization, and creates a false sense of learning (Bain, 2012). Adelman (2005) believes that an entirely new approach to retention research is warranted, one that focuses not on institutional retention, but on student persistence. The author believes that the stories of faculty and students are key to measure expectation alignment. Hossler (2006) asserted that faculty, administrators, and other practitioners should understand that there is no single initiative, intervention, or magic approach to align faculty-student expectations. It seems inequitable for faculty to penalize students for breaking rules or not preparing for something of which they are unaware. While Hossler believes that the rigor of one’s high school curriculum is the most important indicator of future college success, first year seminars are the best approach in community colleges in order to mitigate an underprepared student’s confusion, and better align the critical element of faculty and student expectations of one another (Koslow Martin, 2010).
Summary

The final section of this literature review analyzed faculty expectations for students, student expectations of faculty members, their institutions, and purpose in higher education, and concludes with a discussion on ways in which to align faculty-student expectations. Research suggests that underprepared students enter college unaware of the differences between high school and college, and unintentionally break rules they never knew existed (Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013). Outlining course expectations and reading a syllabus on the first day of class are not enough to properly align expectations of and for one another (Kuh, Kinzie, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). In many cases, years of shallow and surface learning strategies must be forgotten if students are to develop higher order thinking skills (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Such bold plans call for thoroughly developed first-year seminar courses to target underprepared community college students, and to meet the need of increased enrollments of the most vulnerable student populations.

Literature Review Synthesis and Study Contribution

To be sure, students enter community colleges with vastly different levels of preparedness and expectations than do their four-year college and university counterparts (AAC&U, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Currently, a major challenge for community colleges across the nation is retaining greater numbers of students and producing more graduates. This is a difficult proposition, as increased student access has translated into more at-risk students entering community colleges (AAC&U, 2002). One way that many colleges and universities are assisting their students is through a variety of first-year experience (FYE) programs designed to ease their transitions into postsecondary education. However, the size and shape of such
programs, as well as course content, is likely dependent upon an institution’s student body and resources.

Not until recent years, though, have FYE programs begun to receive as much attention at community colleges as they have historically at four-year colleges and universities. Implemented at four-year institutions in the early 1970s, much FYE content is based on the needs of students at such institutions (Bers & Younger, 2014). The intent of FYE programs at four-year and two-year institutions is to accomplish the same goals, which include increasing student persistence, institutional retention, and academic success. As many community colleges look for easily identifiable markers of success such as retention and graduation rates, such assessments, while easy to obtain and analyze, may not be appropriate indicators of success, and have, unfortunately, become a cornerstone of institutional effectiveness measurements in two-year colleges across the country (AACC, 2012).

Even though FYE programs emerged at community colleges much later than at four-year colleges and universities, the attention, the size, and the scope of such initiatives are continuously growing (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). The contemporary FYE program model began at the University of South Carolina in 1972 (Massine, 2012; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Strange, 2007). University 101 is an academic course designed to ease student’s transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Along with encouraging a seamless transition for students, the other primary objective of University 101 is to increase retention. Community colleges operate under a different set of parameters than their four-year colleagues, even though both seek to accomplish the same results. Currently, the majority of the research on first-year experience programs is written in the context of student participation at four-year institutions (Mayo, 2013).
Messineo (2012) stated that currently “84 percent of campuses have some form of first-year programming, including freshman seminars, summer transition programs, leadership programs, living learning communities, freshman interest groups (FIG’s) and more” (p. 68). However, the literature suggests that the most promising FYE program in community colleges is the first-year seminar (Porter & Swing, 2006).

Mayo (2013) stated that “A first-year program, which includes cocurricular (cognitive) and curricular (affective) components, develops strong relationships both in and out of class and increases persistence to graduation” (p. 765). While studying factors that encourage retention in developmental education, Pruett and Absher (2015) argued that remedial and student success courses achieve the highest levels of retention when they engage students in a variety of ways using cognitive and affective factors. Much research has been conducted on participation in first-year seminars, but there is a void of research on which course components positively affect success. Increased student retention is one of the most desired outcomes of first-year seminars, but in order to keep academic standards high, retention alone should not be the only measurement tool assessing their value. Furthermore, without qualified faculty and staff, “first-year efforts will inevitably suffer a kind of second-class citizenship in the academy” (Barefoot et al., 2005, p.388).

Two-year institutions encounter academically at-risk students at much greater rates than do four-year institutions. However, most community colleges fail to make first-year seminars mandatory (Mayo, 2013) even though an overwhelming number of studies promote their utility (Lotkowski, Robbins, Noeth, & ACT Inc., 2004). The literature is also quite clear in its assertion that the first year generally, and the first semester specifically, is a critical time in a new college student’s life (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1999; Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, 2001; Wild &
Such research necessitates that institutions seeking to improve retention offer programs to assist new, at-risk students.

Research suggests that faculty and student expectations rarely align during students’ first semester of college (Koslow Martin, 2010). If students are academically underprepared or at-risk, they likely are unaware of other key faculty expectations for students (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Faculty expect students to come to class prepared, and seek to develop higher order thinking skills, while students main focus solely rests on career preparation and training (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Bain, 2012). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) stated that student preparation has not kept pace with student access. Although there is no magic solution to achieve these goals (Hossler, 2006), one place to begin is aligning faculty and student expectations of one another.

The overwhelming majority of literature on first-year seminars yields information on challenges to retention rather than which course components and experiences encourage persistence (Bers & Younger, 2014). Furthermore, much attention is given to student participation as opposed to identifying the most pragmatic cognitive and affective elements contained in first-year seminars (Boylan, 2002). The research that does analyze first-year seminar curriculum is virtually always conducted at four-year college and universities, so the findings are not particularly applicable to community college student experiences and demographics (Porter & Swing, 2006). So, while community colleges concentrate on ways to increase degree earners, one specific approach is expanding first-year experience programs, albeit, with a clear understanding of course components (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, this study hopes to fill a substantial gap in the literature on community college first-
year seminars by examining which course components graduating students deem most critical in contributing to their success as students.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is L. Dee Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model and Taxonomy of Significant Learning, which allow instructors to greatly improve student learning by providing opportunities for significant learning experiences. Fink’s model is quickly becoming a standard in higher education literature with its emphasis on expanding teaching and learning quality. Fink stated that most college courses are plagued by two problems. The first is a scenario in which faculty teach in a manner in which they present information to students and expect them to memorize material and regurgitate it on exam day. Other authors refer to this approach as surface learning, and are critical of it (Bain, 2012). The second problem is that many faculty only use traditional lecture and discussion formats, two instructional strategies that only reach academically prepared students.

Fink’s (2013) ICD Model contains five key components that help faculty design courses. These include (a) situational factors; (b) learning goals; (c) learning activities; (d) feedback and assessment; (e) and integration. This study specifically relies on Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning to identify which course components successful community college students perceive as most important in first-year seminars. Fink’s Taxonomy includes six types of learning goals:

1. *Foundational knowledge*: Students’ mastery of basic facts and concepts deemed relevant to the course;

2. *Application*: Students’ ability to apply foundational knowledge;
3. **Integration**: Students’ capacity to appreciate the application of foundational knowledge in other coursework;

4. **Human dimension**: Students’ ability to perceive the value of integrating foundational knowledge for oneself;

5. **Caring**: Students’ reassessment of personal perceptions about a subject based upon a deeper understanding and application of the foundational knowledge; and

6. **Learning how to learn**: Students’ having the ability to continue learning about a subject and using foundational knowledge learned in a course even after the course has ended.

Fink (2013) contends that significant learning may occur when instructors introduce students to all six types of learning goals.

**Use of Fink’s Model in the Current Study**

Thus, this study was generally guided by Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model, and specifically by the Taxonomy of Significant Learning including his six learning goals. The Taxonomy of Significant Learning guided the researcher in creating the critical incident and interview questionnaires. The researcher was also able to locate student perceived course components within Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning in order to determine if significant learning experiences took place within the first-year seminar. Ultimately the researcher sought to determine which first-year seminar course components were most important in encouraging persistence until degree or certificate completion.

**Literature Review Summary**

The purpose of this study was to discover which first-year seminar course components graduating community college students perceive as most important in contributing to their
persistence to the award of a degree or certificate. This chapter began by discussing the history of community colleges in the United States, and first-year experience programs as a means to transition and retain students in higher education. The growing number of underprepared students enrolling in community colleges, and the need for expanded transition theme courses and programs were also discussed.

The most common first-year experience programs were described, with specific attention given to first-year seminars, orientation, learning communities, early alert systems, and academic advising. After determining that many institutions employ a variation of the first-year seminar, an analyses of the three most commonly used success course textbooks was conducted in order to isolate common cognitive and affective course components. Next, specific at-risk student behaviors were discussed, as well as triage systems to identify and assist students who display these behaviors. The most common at-risk indicators included lack of motivation, poor study habits, lack of academic preparedness, and student perceived academic relevancy issues. The next section of the chapter discussed faculty expectations for students, and student expectations of faculty and their institutions, and concluded with literature supported notions of ways in which the two may better align their expectations of one another. A chapter synthesis was then provided in which significant gaps in literature were identified that the current study seeks to fill. Lastly, the theoretical framework governing this research was analyzed. Chapter III introduces the study’s methodology. Chapter IV contains data analysis, including a discussion of the emerging themes. Chapter V presents the findings of the study, recommendations for practice, research recommendations, and researcher reflections.
CHAPTER III:

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In conducting this study, the researcher explored which first-year seminar course components are most critical to sustained community college student success. While much is written about first-year experience programs and first-year seminars at four-year and two-year-year institutions, virtually all research is conducted on the basis of student participation, and not which course components directly contribute to student success (Boylan, 2002; Mayo, 2013; Porter & Swing, 2006; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Therefore, this study gives voice to graduating community colleges students in an attempt to understand their perceptions of course components in first-year seminar courses. This research was guided by L. Dee Fink’s (2013) Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses, in which he offers an Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model and a Taxonomy of Significant Learning complete with six learning goals.

In this chapter, I will discuss the study’s research methodology. It will begin by restating research questions. Next, it will contend why the specific research methods were chosen, and then it will describe why it uses a pragmatic qualitative research design. It will then describe the research setting, and discuss why the research site was chosen. Then, it will discuss participant selection, followed by how data will be collected, stored, and protected. The chapter will then discuss the study’s data analysis procedure, why it uses two forms of data coding, and how the
data sets will be analyzed. The chapter will conclude with ethical considerations, and research positionality.

**Research Questions**

To accomplish the goals of this study, the research questions were employed as follows:

1. Which first-year seminar cognitive course components do graduating students perceive as being most important in encouraging persistence to degree completion;

2. Which first-year seminar affective course components do graduating students perceive as being most important in encouraging persistence to degree completion;

and

3. What other aspects of the first-year seminar course do graduating students perceive as being important in encouraging persistence to degree completion?

**Method Selection**

Qualitative research was selected for this study because of its unique set of characteristics that differentiate it from quantitative research. Creswell (2009) described multiple traits that set it apart. For example, qualitative research takes place in a natural setting. Observing and interacting with participants within their context is a vital hallmark of qualitative research. The researcher is the key instrument of data collection and analyses. This personalizes the research and adds meaning as they do not often use other researchers’ instruments. Qualitative research uses multiple forms of data such as interviews, observations, and document analyses in order to provide a well-rounded and deeper understanding of the phenomena at hand. Inductive data analysis allows qualitative researchers to modify themes within their data sets with participant’s opinions to provide a more well-rounded set of findings and themes. The interpretative nature of inductive analysis allows researchers freedom to interpret participants’ perceptions of events and
experiences. Qualitative research uses emergent designs which allow the researcher to modify
data collection and interview questions to better suit the participants’ meanings (Savin-Baden &
Major, 2013). This allows the researcher much flexibility when attempting to make meaning
from participants’ perceptions of their first-year seminar courses, particularly when they find
different truths within similar experiences. With such emphasis placed on participants’
perceptions and meanings, qualitative research often uses a theoretical lens in order to create a
set of parameters to guide the research (Creswell, 2009). Another characteristic of qualitative
research is its use of interpretative inquiry. Interpretative inquiry enables researcher, participant,
and reader interpretations to be considered in order for multiple perceptions to emerge. Lastly,
qualitative research encourages a holistic account, taking into consideration multiple
perspectives, data sources, and factors to more fully understand and interpret a given
phenomenon. The researcher has selected qualitative methods because this research seeks to
empower a group of students to allow their perceptions of first-year course components to be
heard by a larger audience, and no previous studies target this population with similar research
methods and design.

In conducting this study, the researcher employed pragmatic qualitative research.
“Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that asserts that truth may be interpreted in terms of the
practical effects of what is believed and, in particular, the usefulness of these effects” (Savin-
Baden & Major, 2013, p. 60). Pragmatists concern themselves with methods and approaches that
work, and see dualities, or multiple, version of truth (Creswell, 2009). These dualities of truth
exist when participants with similar experiences encounters and perceive different versions of
truth. As this study examines students’ perceptions, understanding and exploring multiple
versions of perceived truth will enable the researcher to more appropriately answer the research
questions. Pragmatic research is ultimately designed “to link theory and practice” (Savin-Baden & Major, p. 60) in an attempt to better inform later practice. The central focus of pragmatism is the research questions, as the researcher uses a variety of data collection procedures in order to fully answer the research questions. Pragmatic research unfolds into practice when researchers have the freedom to pursue multiple collection procedures in order to ultimately help inform practice. The best research is not conducted at one time. Rather, it is informed by constant inquiry to better address the research questions.

**Research Design**

The research design relied on qualitative methods to understand how first-year seminars influence students, and which first-year seminar course components are most critical towards encouraging student persistence until certificate or degree conferment. Qualitative research allows each individual, researcher, participant, and reader, to interpret events and analyze outcomes to construct their own meanings (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods best suits this research for its ability to study real-world situations in their natural setting as they unfold, and the ability to use open-ended research questions within emergent design to modify the data sources as necessary to better understand and make meaning of a phenomena (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As the researcher seeks to understand students’ perceptions of course components in first-year seminars, and determine which course components are most critical to success, qualitative research best allows the researcher to provide a holistic account of the students’ perceptions in a first-year seminar course.

Pragmatic design allows the researcher to develop an understanding of an event as experienced by its participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). One of its major intentions is to draw theory from practice in order to inform later practice, which is quite similar to this study in
that it seeks to understand students’ past perceptions in first-year seminars in order to inform faculty, administrators, and practitioners of the most critical course components. Pragmatism encourages researchers to use open-ended questions which allow researchers to reconstruct one’s lived experiences. Pragmatic design encourages multiple data sets, such as this study’s use of critical incident questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The researcher believes that pragmatic methods more appropriately fit this study design than other types of qualititative research such as case study because pragmatic qualitative research “marks the meeting point of description and interpretation, in which description involves presentation of facts, feelings, and experiences in the everyday language of participants, as interpreted by the researcher” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 172). This explanation of pragmatic qualitative research, one in which this study accepts, takes a more centrist position than previous qualitative research that has viewed pragmatism as more objective (Merriam, 1998) or subjective (Thorne et al., 1997). The subjective nature of the study’s critical incident and the objective nature of the semi-structured interviews best align with Savin-Baden and Major’s (2013) definition of pragmatic qualitative research. The study’s pragmatic philosophical paradigm informs the researcher’s view of reality, and assumptions surrounding the research methods. The researcher believes that individuals perceive and experience reality, and that knowledge may be gleaned from theory within practice, and ultimately used to inform practice (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Ultimately, pragmatic qualitative research coupled with a pragmatic philosophical paradigm allowed the researcher the flexibility to thoroughly answer the study’s research questions.

The researcher believes that general pragmatic research best suits the research questions, which focus on students’ perceptions in first-year seminars. Moreover, the researcher’s
pragmatic philosophical paradigm allowed him to utilize Fink’s Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model and Taxonomy of Significant Learning along with a pragmatic philosophy. The researcher collected written data through critical incident questionnaires. As soon as participants completed the critical incident questionnaire, the researcher filed it, and began each interview. The researcher employed holistic and in vivo coding methods, and analyzed the data using thematic analyses. Thematic data analyses assisted the researcher during initial coding, and specifically during thematic construction.

**Research Setting**

The setting of this study is a medium sized, rural, two-year institution in the southeastern United States. The institution offers Allied Health, Career and Technical Education, and General Academic transfer programs.

In recent years, the institution has increased its emphasis on first-year experience programs with specific interest given to its first-year seminar course, ORI 105. A major initiative at the college, *Get the Tassel!*, initiated a campus-wide collaboration in order to increase the college’s number of certificate and degree earners. An instructional administrative initiative designed to increase the number of successful students improved retention efforts leading the institution to become the fastest-growing community college in its state during the 2013-2014 academic year (Cook, 2016). The institution’s administration, faculty, and staff foster a culture of caring and support, where much attention is given to the students’ perceptions of their surroundings and interactions with the institution. This culture is intended to create an environment of inclusivity in which students felt invested and a part of their campus community, and in turn, creates greater motivation for students to persist until certificate or degree completion.
The campus is set within an attractive cluster of architecturally consistent buildings surrounded by long-standing oak trees, and the campus quadrangle provides an appealing space for students to congregate and study. Because of the rural nature of the area, the institution is a major draw for quite a diverse group of student. The medical industry is a major job provider in the area, and as such, nearly 50% of all students are or intend to enroll in a nursing or Allied Health program. As students’ partner with area hospitals and other medical agencies, the institution’s brand-recognition is well represented throughout the area, which instills a greater sense of campus pride into the institution’s culture.

Participant Selection

The study participants were selected from the institution described above. The college’s Institutional Effectiveness department provided a list of currently enrolled students who successfully completed the college’s first-year seminar course, and have declared an intent to graduate. The researcher emailed all students who met these criteria, and of those that responded to the researcher’s email, 21 students were selected that reflected, as closely as possible, the college’s diverse student population. A sample email is included as Appendix A. If students did not respond within two weeks to the researcher’s original inquiry, he resent the original request. Once students indicated their willingness to participate in the study, the researcher sent a confirmation email along with the participant’s informed consent form. The participation email request confirmation is included as Appendix B. When the researcher gained the desired number of diverse participants, additional participants were placed on an alternate list, and were notified through email. The participation request email alternate is included as Appendix C.

The institution has an enrollment of approximately 5,000 full-time and part-time students. Of those, 34% are male, and 64% are female students. During the fall 2014 semester, 46% were
full-time, and 53% were part-time, while during the same time, 64% were white, 31% black, 2% Hispanic, and less than 3% were represented by other ethnicities. The institution’s diversity was greater than that of its county and service area during the same period of time (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Fifty-six percent of full-time and 46% of part-time students were retained from fall 2013 to fall 2014, while 15% graduated, and 17% transferred within 150% of normal time to program completion. Also, 64% of students were twenty-four years of age or under, and 36% were twenty-five years old or older. The institution is well known for its Health Sciences programs, as 48% of students have or plan to enroll in one of these programs; roughly 30% have declared a major in a Career and Technical Education program, and 22% seek a degree in General Academics. Thus, the institution is of adequate size, scope, and diversity to provide a platform to investigate the study’s research questions. Pseudonyms were given to protect the identity of each participant.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The researcher used two distinct instruments to collect data in order to answer the research questions. One tool used by the researcher was critical incident questionnaire (Flanagan, 1954). The researcher also used semi-structured descriptive interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each instrument is included in the appendices as noted below.

**Critical Incident Questionnaire**

The critical incident technique was first popularized by Flanagan (1954) as “A set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles” (p. 327). Flanagan first used critical incident first to study the experiences of World War II aviators, but the technique has since been used by researchers in a host of areas including
qualitative educational research (Chell, 1998; Ellinger, Watkins & Bostrom, 1999; Fris, 1992; Kain, 2004; Kain, Tanner, & Raines, 1997; Rahilly & Saroyan, 1997). Chell (1998) argued that critical incident technique allows a researcher to probe into participants’ experiences, events, incidents, or issues in order to understand the incident from the individual’s perspective. According to Woolsey, “Critical incident technique is an exploratory qualitative method of research… generating a comprehensive and detailed description of a content domain” (1986, p. 242). The ultimate emphasis is on incidents that participants consider critical. Contemporary researchers who employ critical incident technique virtually all agree with Flanagan’s (1954) original assertion that an incident may be considered critical if it enables one to more fully understand the issue at hand.

In his seminal text, Flanagan (1954) suggested three stages of data collection and analysis. These three stages include creating a frame of reference, the creation of categories using inductive analysis, and determining the specificity of data reporting. Leading educational researchers who commonly use the critical incident technique adhere to Flanagan’s original data collection and analysis protocol (Chell, 1998; Hughes, 2007; Kain, 2004; Kain, Tanner, & Robbins, 1997). Ultimately, the data should be beneficial, and should lead to a greater purpose. It is the researcher’s duty to ensure the coding, analysis, and reporting of data is organized and presented in a useful manner (Flanagan, 1954).

The researcher was interested in which aspect or moment in the participants’ first-year seminar course they perceived as most critical to their sustained success. Fris (1992) used this approach investigating how principals handled conflict in their high schools, and Kain, Tanner, and Robbins (1997) used similar methods exploring the perceptions of secondary education teachers who recently transitioned from roles as students to teachers. Miles and Huberman
(1994) argued that critical incident technique provides substantive data which are “nested in a real context, and have a ring of truth that has strong impact on the reader” (p. 10). They also detailed that critical incidents are an effective data tool for their ability to uncover complex meaning within a set of participants’ perceptions.

The critical incident questionnaire in this study was completed prior to students’ interviews. In it, participants were asked to describe in essay format the most significant moment they encountered within their first-year seminar. Completion of the critical incident questionnaire was not timed. The questionnaire is included as Appendix D.

**Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire**

Once the researcher collected the students’ critical incident questionnaires, the interviews were conducted. Each interview consisted of fifteen questions and lasted roughly one hour each. The interviews were conducted during early spring semester 2017 in a mutually agreed upon location on the campus at the institution. The researcher reminded each student that their identities are anonymous and that their names would be changed. The researcher also reminded each student that their responses were being audiotaped in order to ensure the accuracy of their comments, as well as their tone of voice.

The interview instrument addresses two main research questions designed to explore which course components students perceive as most important in their first-year seminar. The first research question examines cognitive course components, and the second research question examines affective course components (Fink, 2013). These two research questions were explored through multiple interview questions, modeled on Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning. The researcher was then able to probe deeply into participants’ perceptions of their first-year seminars, and between which course components, cognitive or affective, were
most important to their sustained persistence until certificate or degree conferment. The interview protocol is included as Appendix E.

In conducting this study, the researcher utilized Kvale and Brinkman’s (2009) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, to structure the study’s interview questions. Specifically, the authors’ seven stages of an interview inquiry guided the entire interview process from grouping thematic conceptions to organizing themes, to ultimately reporting the findings in chapter four of this study. Because this study sought to understand students’ perceptions of course components in first-year seminars, interviews were the most logical primary data source. For example, Kvale and Brinkman noted that “The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 2). Furthermore, interviews helped facilitate the development of emergent design qualitative research in its ability to potentially revisit the data collection and analysis procedure through multiple interview sessions. Kvale and Brinkman illustrated common types of interview questions that often emerge in qualitative research, as well as examples of each and suggestions to facilitate the researcher. These interview question descriptions and analyses were invaluable to the researcher in helping him create effective interview questions, address research participants, and interpret the data.

Taken together, critical incident and interview questionnaires allowed the researcher to explore how students perceive the usefulness of their first-year seminar course, and specifically, which course components were most important towards their persistence until certificate or degree completion. Creswell (2003) noted that thick and rich descriptions help convey research authenticity within the study. Both of these qualitative research tools facilitate this process by
empowering student voices in order to fully explore and understand their own perceptions. This researcher believes that critical incident and interviews are the best data collection tools in order to explicate which first-year seminar course components are most critical to sustained student success.

**Data Collection Process**

During completion of this study, data collection occurred sequentially. The researcher and participants met at mutually agreed upon locations at the site institution. The researcher began by reviewing the study’s informed consent page, answered any questions, and asked participants to sign the informed consent page. The researcher then described some of the language used in this study regarding course components. This was done to ensure participants were able to discern between cognitive and affective course components. To further accomplish this, the researcher asked participants to review the first-year seminar course manual, which contains power point presentations of course units and other pertinent course specific information in order to reacquaint themselves with the course. Once participants felt confident, they completed the critical incident questionnaire. As soon as participants completed the critical incident questionnaire, the researcher filed it away, and the interview began.

**Data Transcription and Storage**

As soon as each critical incident was collected, and the interview was transcribed, the researcher began coding and analysis. The researcher stored each critical incident and interview transcription within password protected files on his computer, and backed up on an external hard drive. Both hard drives were password encrypted, and locked in his office at the study site. The participants’ identities were protected by referring to research participants only by pseudonyms.
Data Analysis Procedure

While conducting the study, the researcher began coding and analyses after each critical incident was collected and interview was transcribed. The researcher assigned initial codes to each participants’ data instruments in order to identify and differentiate between their perceptions of cognitive and affective components. The researcher listed all first cycle codes on a dry-erase board, and noted the frequency in which certain cognitive and affective codes were repeated. The researcher was then able to group initial holistic codes into categories based upon whether or not they were perceived by participants as cognitive or affective components, or some other aspect of the course that was important. These categories formed the genesis of the original coding construction of the study.

During second cycle coding, the researcher used in vivo coding in order to further analyze participants’ perceptions of course components. The fluidity of in vivo coding allowed the researcher the range to code salient words, phrases, and passages described by participants. By using participant quotes, the researcher was able to give specific meaning and voice to the data. The researcher also listed in vivo codes on the same dry erase board. Through multiple readings and pairings, he was able to assemble the first cycle and second cycle codes into manageable units for analysis. Using thematic data analysis, after multiple readings, the researcher created concepts from the codes. Next, concepts were grouped into categories, which ultimately led to the creation of themes presented in Chapter IV.

The data analysis in this study relied heavily on Saldaña’s (2013) The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (2nd ed.). Saldaña (2013) stated that a code is a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Two coding cycles were employed in order for
each data set’s codes to translate into categories, which then became the genesis of the next chapter’s data themes. Specifically, this research employed holistic and in vivo coding to analyze its interview transcript data. Coding qualitative research is not a science. Rather, it is a skill one nurtures and hones over time. Thus, the researcher used two coding methods in order to decipher emergent themes.

During the first cycle, exploratory methods, the researcher utilized holistic coding. Holistic methods were chosen because of their ability to tackle large of amounts of data, and because of their efficiency, once the researcher had a general idea of what or where to investigate. Holistic methods are often used in order to establish a framework for more detailed methods (Saldaña, 2013), and this study also used this approach. The researcher coded participants’ perceptions of cognitive and affective components using holistic codes. One or a few word themes often represented large chunks of data, and allowed the researcher to formulate baseline student experiential assumptions, which proved helpful when comparing and contrasting with second cycle coding methods.

The researcher first coded each participant’s critical incident and interview questionnaire using holistic codes. The use of “tentative labels as the data are initially reviewed” is a hallmark of qualitative emergent design research, and gave the researcher a clearer picture of the study’s thematic construct. During first cycle holistic coding, the researcher identified 13 cognitive codes, and 17 affective codes within the study’s data collection instruments. The researcher took notice of the frequency of recurring cognitive and affective codes. The intensity of the most frequent recurring codes assisted the researcher during thematic construction.

During the second cycle, descriptive methods, the researcher utilized in vivo coding. Descriptive coding primarily identifies topics within transcripts, but is not intended to interpret
content (Saldaña, 2013). In vivo coding was selected because it allowed the researcher to create codes based on direct participant quotes. In vivo coding was particularly useful while the researcher analyzed data transcripts for important cognitive and affective course components as perceived by the research participants. In vivo coding does not subscribe to a fixed number of codes per line or within a chunk of transcribed text. Rather, in vivo coding allowed the researcher a degree of flexibility to interpret data and determine which text was worthy of receiving coding.

The researcher focused his attention during second cycle in vivo coding on identifying and prescribing codes to important participant perceptions of cognitive and affective course components, as well as other important aspects of the course such as desired learning outcomes. Additionally, the researcher utilized Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning during second cycle in vivo coding. In vivo coding allowed the researcher the flexibility to code significant moments that stood out to participants. Often, these moments helped the researcher aggregate codes into eventual themes. The study’s data collection instruments encouraged participants to thoroughly describe their experiences and perceptions of course components. The researcher often assigned in vivo codes to participants’ direct quotations. Quoting participants in their own words aided the researcher while determining how course components fit into Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning. As Saldaña (2013) noted, “Sometimes the participant says it best” (p. 94). In these instances, and in the case of this study, in vivo coding, which emphasizes general topics, was best suited to give voice and provide thick and rich descriptions of participants’ perceptions.

The researcher’s pragmatic philosophical paradigm allowed him to analyze the data instruments with his central focus being on approaches that allowed him to answer the research
questions. Data analysis began as soon as the first critical incident and interview questionnaires were coded. The researcher determined that thematic data analysis best organized and made sense of data after it were coded. Thematic data analysis involved immersing oneself in data in order to make sense and recover emergent themes within transcripts (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Initial categories were formed and through multiple readings of the data, the researcher was able to locate key categories and identify emerging themes. Meriam (1998) believes the creation of categories to be an “intuitive process” (p. 179). The researcher used intuition to create categories from first and second cycle codes, which eventually led to thematic construction. Qualitative coding employs an emergent design, and for this reason, the researcher used these methods during multiple readings, coding, and analyses.

This study is grounded in Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model generally, and his Taxonomy of Significant Learning specifically. The use of thematic analysis will allow the researcher to highlight which course components participants’ perceive as most important, use these codes, concepts and categories to create themes, and ultimately answer the study’s research questions. While describing pragmatic validity, Kvale and Brinkman (2013) stated that “truth is whatever assists us to take action that produce the desired results” (p. 256). The researcher’s pragmatic construct finds certainty and truth in these coding and analysis methods.

**Ethical Considerations**

All participant data were stored on a password encrypted external hard drive in a lock drawer located in the researcher’s office. This study’s research was based on participants’ given consent. The researcher thoroughly informed potential participants that the study’s findings would only be used to more effectively and efficiently inform first-year success course design
and structure. In the initial email sent to potential participants, students were made aware that participation in the study was voluntary. Participant privacy was given utmost importance, and was ensured by giving all participants pseudonyms to protect their identities and ensure, to the best of the researcher’s ability, confidentiality and anonymity were achieved.

**Research Positionality**

The researcher is employed at the site institution. The institution was selected because the researcher has access to participants and a vested interest in the study findings. The site institution offers unique first-year seminars based on students’ entering placement scores. The researcher serves as the director of the Humanities, Behavioral, and Social Sciences division, of which the Freshman Studies department belongs to. The researcher has taught multiple first-year seminars for many years. Thus, he holds certain assumptions and beliefs about their role and students’ perceptions of first-year seminars. The researcher has advised other institutions in the state system concerning their first-year seminar course design and implementation, and in the final analyses, he has professional concern regarding students’ perspectives in order to structure a more relevant and pragmatic first-year seminar experience for a greater number of students at the site institution.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness and validly of the study, the researcher relied on well-documented and proven qualitative research methods. Furthermore, the researcher employed triangulation and peer validation to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. Creswell (2007) contended that the best qualitative research compares evidence collected from different sources. Triangulation occurred by comparing participants’ critical incident and interview questionnaires to “provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). The researcher identified similar cognitive and affective codes in each participants’ critical incident and
interview questionnaire. Furthermore, peer validation was used to establish credibility. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) affirmed that peer validation occurs when “The Researcher’s interpretation’s presented to peers among researchers for discussion about their validity” (p. 326). Two of the researcher’s colleagues at the site institution who teach the first-year seminar and are well acquainted with the course and the institutions’ students reviewed the study, posed questions, and offered suggestions to the principal researcher. Based on their experience, the researchers’ colleagues are highly qualified to offer recommendations and criticisms regarding the study’s findings. These two validity measures increased the credibility of the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the methodology, research questions and setting, participant and method selection, research design, data collection and analyses procedure, ethical considerations, research positionality, as well as trustworthiness and credibility concerns. Although much research is based on student participation in community college first-year seminars (Bailey & Alfonso, 2008; Bers & Younger, 2014; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Mayo, 2013; Porter & Swing, 2006), to the best of this researcher’s knowledge, no study has assessed students’ perceptions of which course components are most important in encouraging student persistence until certificate or degree completion. Because we do not know if first-year seminar course components are important from students’ perspectives, this study gives voice to graduating community college students who completed the site institution’s first-year seminar.

Qualitative research was selected because of its unique set of characteristics, among which are its emphasis on participant’s meanings and interpretations, its use of multiple forms of data, its use of emergent themes, and its focus on providing a holistic account of an experience, taking into account multiple perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2009; Savin-Baden &
Major, 2013). Specifically, the researcher utilized pragmatic qualitative research. Pragmatists often see dualities of truth, in which researchers use multiple data sets and interpret truth dependent upon a given situation. Pragmatists link theory and research in an attempt to inform later research, and employ emergent designs in order to concern themselves with the best methods and approaches to fully answer one’s research questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Data were collected using critical incident and interview questionnaires. Data were coded and analyzed by the researcher, and stored in his office at the research site. The researcher coded the critical incident and interview questionnaires using holistic and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013). These coding methods identified cognitive and affective course components within the data transcripts, and gave voice to participants by assigning codes to their direct quotations. Further coding using Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning then occurred. Categories were formed based upon initial coding, and the researcher employed thematic data analysis to identify emergent themes within the data. In Chapter IV, the researcher will present the study’s findings.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS OF THE DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore which first-year seminar course components community college students who had filed an intent to graduate perceived as most important to their persistence until certificate or degree attainment. In conducting this study, the researcher used critical incident and semi-structured interview questionnaires as data collection tools. All participants completed the critical incident questionnaire in which they detailed what they perceived to be the most important and impactful moment within their first-year seminar. After the critical incident questionnaire was completed, the researcher filed it away, and began the interview questionnaire. A co-researcher interviewed participants taught by the primary researcher. This chapter presents the research data collected from the critical incident and interview questionnaires.

First-Year Seminar Course Background and Overview

The site institution’s first-year seminar course is a three credit-hour course. The study’s participants completed the course in a traditional format, meeting two days per week for 75 minutes. The course is designed to familiarize students with specific campus resources, and acclimate students to postsecondary education. Faculty use a standardized course syllabus with identical course objectives. New faculty are provided with a list of departments and individuals on campus that deliver presentations to first-year seminar students. Instructors maintain the
flexibility to schedule guest presentations and lecturers at their prerogative. An abbreviated reference syllabus is included as Appendix F.

The first-year seminar’s syllabus contains five course objectives. They include the following:

1. Students will utilize the college’s academic advising service by locating, scheduling, and meeting with their assigned advisors;
2. Students will demonstrate the ability to access and manage electronic college resources as it pertains to student email, Blackboard, and the student portal;
3. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the campus resources and student success skills;
4. Students will develop beginning college level writing skills; and
5. Students will exhibit life skills through completion of daily course assignments.

These intended outcomes seek to support students’ cognitive and affective development. Faculty employ a number of learning activities and assessments to measure the intended objectives.

Many different sorts of learning activities are used during the first-year seminar. Nearly all learning activities require students to apply foundational knowledge. This is often conducted through a number of formative and summative writing assignments. Students regularly complete in-class writing assignments designed to reflect on that day’s material and discussion. These activities are identified as daily grade assignments. Students also complete topical article summaries as well as midterm and final essays that require reflecting on course materials. Other learning activities involve students familiarizing themselves with various campus departments and their resources offered. These activities include a myriad of different assignments from tracking one’s weekly schedule to planning future course schedules. Each course contains ten
units designed to orient students to the resources available at the institution. Every unit contains an introduction from a pertinent individual, power point presentations, and audio lectures offering further discussion of each unit. The power point presentations are included in the course manual, and the audio lectures are hosted on the course’s Blackboard page. The overarching emphasis on all of the first-year seminar learning activities is application.

Learning activities are assessed through a variety of means. Forty percent of one’s final course average is based on successful completion of daily grade assignments. These learning activities are typically assessed on a pass/fail basis, and faculty are encouraged to provide substantive feedback on each daily grade assessment. Students’ summative writing assignments are assessed using what faculty perceive as a low-stakes grading rubric. Students are assessed based on topic sentence and thesis statement development, and proper essay formatting. Each resource unit has a corresponding five to ten question quiz hosted online through Blackboard. Students are allowed to use their course manuals during the quiz, and are allowed multiple attempts.

The single greatest faculty expectation is student attendance. This is conveyed during the initial class meeting. Almost half of one’s final course average is determined by daily grade assignments which cannot be made-up. Faculty stress the importance of regular attendance to students during each class meeting. First-year seminar faculty are encouraged to build personal relationships with students, and encourage them to visit outside of class during office hours.

**Demographics**

The researcher emailed 88 students that successfully completed the site institution’s first-year seminar, and had filed an intent to graduate in spring 2017. A representative group of students was selected that mirrored the site institution’s diversity as closely as possible. Thirty-
one students responded indicating their willingness to participate in the research study. Out of the 31 who responded, the researcher invited 21 students to participate who most closely mirrored the institution’s diversity. A summary of this information is included as Table 1. Out of the 21 participants, 14 were females and seven were males. During the spring 2017 semester, 13 participants were enrolled under full-time status, and eight were enrolled under part-time status. Fourteen participants were White, five participants were Black, and one participant was Hispanic. The average age of the participants was 24.4 years of age. Fourteen participants were under the age of 24, and seven participants were over the age of 24. Seven participants majored in a Health Sciences program, five majored in a Career and Technical Education program, and nine were General Academic Transfer students.

All participants successfully completed the site institution’s first-year seminar, and at the time of the interview had filed an intent to graduate for spring 2017. To thoroughly familiarize readers with the participants, the researcher provided a profile of all 21 participants. Each participant profile was created based upon the critical incident questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and informal discussion prior to the interview session. Participant profiles are presented in Table 1. All names referenced throughout the study are pseudonyms.
Table 1

*General Demographic Information of Participants*

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
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<th>Program</th>
<th>FT/PT</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
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</table>

**Participant Profiles**

**Beth**

Beth is a 20-year-old student who maintains, perhaps, the strongest internal sense of direction and motivation out of any of the study participants. Beth has goals that she bases nearly every academic, personal, and professional decision upon. She is graduating with an Associate in
Arts degree in spring 2017 and hopes to begin the Physical Therapist Assistant Program in fall 2017. When she began her college career, she worked part-time in service retail, but as she has progressed through coursework, and the time needed to successfully complete her studies has increased, she stopped working and is supported solely by her parents. She does not have the disposable income she once had, but she believes this helped her formulate long-term goals, and kept her motivated to achieve them.

**Frieda**

Frieda is a lighthearted and carefree 21-year-old student majoring in General Studies. For the past two years, she has been in no immediate hurry to graduate. Along with core courses, Frieda took several special topics courses in history, art, and literature in order to broaden her horizons. Frieda grew up in a community close to the site institution, so she and her classmates often spend free time on campus studying and working on extracurricular projects. Presently, Frieda intends to enroll in a neighboring four-year university beginning in fall 2017 and plans to continue taking courses towards a bachelor’s degree in general studies until she decides upon something more specific.

**Michelle**

Michelle is a non-traditional student in every sense of the term. She is a 47-year-old first generation Mexican-American and will be the first in her family to graduate from college with an Associate in Arts degree. Michelle’s parents immigrated in the early 1960s, and she was the first of her siblings to be born in the United States. Michelle contemplated attending college for many years, but something always seemed to prevent her from moving forward. For most of her life, she has been beholden to raising her six children and working in a number of physically demanding jobs most recently including restaurant server. She attributed her desire to begin
studies in higher education at an advanced age to lifelong aspirations, and her inability to continue performing labor-intensive jobs. She has enjoyed her newfound success as a college student, but is still unsure of a future goal or major she wants to pursue, mainly because she has had to maintain part-time enrollment status while working part-time to support her family. Before graduation, she plans to meet with a career counselor from student services to gauge employment options.

**Alaina**

Alaina is a determined and ambitious 20 year-old student, recently married and mother to one child. Alaina lives approximately 30 minutes from the site institution, which is roughly halfway in between its main campus and satellite campus. She chose to attend the main campus because of its Health Sciences reputation. Alaina is on schedule to graduate with an Associate in Sciences degree, but wishes to gain admittance into the institution’s Radiologic Technology program. She applied once previously and was denied entry; however, she has not given up on her goal. Alaina completed the site institution’s first-year seminar during her fourth college semester, and she credits her orientation instructor with informing her of other options in case she was denied entry into the RAD program, and with motivating her to continue. She stated, “If I didn’t know what to do or have a plan B when I didn’t get in last year, I may have given up and probably wouldn’t be graduating now.” Alaina described a stark contrast between the course’s cognitive and affective components, and she perceived that she benefitted much more from the affective ones.

**Angela**

Angela is a resilient student whose time is stretched thin. As a 41-year-old single mother of teenage boys, she had difficulties even scheduling a time to complete the study’s interview.
Angela’s personal responsibilities necessitated that she reduce her course load to part-time status. While she notes that this took longer, and presented more challenges, her grade point average in the Physical Therapist Assistant program improved once she began taking fewer courses. She attributed this decision to one of the campus counselors’ presentation, and their suggestion to take fewer courses in order to stretch financial aid packages through the summer semester. The counselor’s message resonated with her, and Angela decided that she would be better served by spending an extra few semesters completing her degree and attending to her family responsibilities rather than allow her personal life and academics to falter. Although still as busy as ever, Angela is positive despite her hectic schedule. She acknowledged that her first-year seminar instructor was key in her developing certain affective course component characteristics that allowed her to persist until degree completion.

Emily

Emily is a shy 23-year old who hopes to advance her family business by gaining a degree in Engineering Graphics and Animation. Emily’s father and uncle own and operate a local homebuilding company, and she plans to enter the family business and, in her own words, “bring them into the current century.” She has chosen a concentration in Architectural Graphics and will gain advanced certification. She has always been associated with the family’s construction business, and completion of a graphics course in her high school career center encouraged her that this could be an ideal career choice. Emily is excited to introduce new technologies to her father and uncle in hopes their business will become more efficient. Emily says that while they are well known for their artisanship, sometimes their greatest strength is their worst economic downfall. Emily has attended school mainly in the evening, as she works full-time hours to support herself.
Matthew

The most appropriate way to describe Matthew’s pursuit of a degree in Computer Information Science is that he finally found his “academic home.” Matthew began his collegiate career at a neighboring four-year university, but was unable to select a major. His indecisiveness led to haphazard attendance, he eventually withdrew from college, and several years passed by before ultimately deciding to pursue a degree in CIS. As a 26-year-old, Matthew appreciated many of the affective course components and expressed repeatedly that, while beneficial at any age, they would have greatly helped him during his initial attempt in college. As an independent adult, Matthew has maintained part-time enrollment status in order to support himself. He is excited about beginning his upcoming career after graduation.

Jacob

Jacob is an outgoing and rather entertaining 22-year-old majoring in Business Technologies with a concentration in Supervisory Management. Jacob plans to use his concentration area to launch a career in sales. He is very much a people person, and believes he has found a career path suitable for his talents. Before he settled on this program, Jacob described his past education ventures as missed opportunities. Without clear direction, he was not committed to any one goal. He credited many of the affective course components in his first-year seminar for motivating him to persist once he had decided to pursue the Business Technologies program. Jacob has fluctuated between part-time and full-time enrollment status, but because he has completed all of the General Education core requirements for his degree, he has recently maintained part-time status while completing his Business Technologies core requirements.
Janis

Janis is a motivated and outgoing 21-year-old part-time student who lives 45 minutes away from campus in a neighboring state. She attends the institution because of its outstanding Health Sciences reputation. Janis is majoring in Physical Therapist Assistant and upon graduation, plans to remain in her hometown and work in a health-care facility. The commute to campus and the time away from her family has not been easy. Janis relied on multiple campus services for assistance during her studies. She credits much of her success in college thus far to the foundation she gained during enrollment in her first-year seminar course. Janis perceived that the intrapersonal assignments made her consider what she wanted in life, demonstrated what success looked like, and presented an avenue for how to obtain it. Janis was exceedingly complimentary in her perceptions of the first-year seminar course, mainly because she maintained a connection with her instructor and academic advisor.

John

John is 20-year-old student from a small town, roughly an hour away from the site institution. Although his mother attended college, she did not earn a certificate or degree, and John will become the first member of his family to graduate from college. He admits that he came to college without a clear path of what he wanted to do, or how he was going to obtain a certificate or degree. During his first few weeks on campus, his first-year seminar course went on a campus tour, and he was shown the institution’s Criminal Justice department, which included its new simulators and forensics lab. From that moment, John knew that he wanted to pursue a career in Criminal Justice. Currently, he plans to apply for a job after graduation with several city police and county sheriff’s departments. After working for an undetermined period, John can foresee himself returning to school to pursue another degree to advance his career.
Kayley

Kayley had no immediate plans to attend college after high school. She was raised in a small town close to the site institution, and while she was familiar with the college, she never assumed she would attend college because of her self-described poor performance in high school. The year after she graduated high school, her grandmother experienced several health complications, and Kayley volunteered to stay with her at night. Her grandmother succumbed to her illnesses shortly after, but Kayley’s experience as a caregiver motivated her to attend college and pursue the Medical Assisting program. Three years later, at 21 years old, Kayley is on track to graduate with her degree, and she hopes to complete further certification to become a Certified Medical Assistant. Kayley wants to make a difference, and provide care for patients the way she did for her grandmother. She was influenced much by her first-year seminar’s focus on goal setting, and believes many of the affective course components helped her maintain balance as a student and adult.

Kellie

Kellie is a 31-year-old student who began college later in life. As a military wife, she has routinely dealt with unexpected circumstances, and put her personal, academic, and professional goals on hold. Kellie and her husband have three children and she said she waited until they were at suitable ages for her to devote enough time to her studies. Kellie chose to become a Respiratory Therapist Assistant because she assumed it would be easier to gain employment in Health Sciences than other programs no matter where her family is stationed, and because she does not care for some of the “unpleasant” and gory aspects of some Health Science programs. She attended school part-time, which allowed her to better navigate her life’s many responsibilities. Kellie is extremely motivated and is eager to enter her career. She believed that
she sacrificed much for her family, and said that college rejuvenated her entire life. She recognized that for the first time in a long time, while on campus, “it’s all about me.” Kellie longs for the day when she and her family can return to their hometown in Alaska with her college degree and career in hand.

**Marcus**

Marcus is an extremely busy 23-year-old student who lives in a nearby town, which is home to another comprehensive community college. In addition to commuting nearly an hour each way to the site institution and maintaining a full-time course load, Marcus works 20 to 40 hours on average per week between two local fast-food chain restaurants. Marcus transferred to the site institution after less than a month of attending the community college in his hometown due to an event he was hesitant to discuss. Marcus openly credited his first-year seminar with encouraging his persistence in college. The components of his first-year seminar course that have maintained the longest-lasting impact deal primarily with personal affective course components that seek to support students holistically. Marcus believes this support has helped him persevere until degree completion, and gain admittance into the Associate Degree Nursing program in fall 2017.

**Riley**

Riley is a 27-year old female completing the Associate Degree Nursing program. Riley spent four years in the army immediately following high school, and with some time away from school, she was required to remediate in several subjects. After struggling with initial academic coursework, Riley was admitted to the Associate Degree Nursing program on her third try. Her time in the army and her devotion to service persuaded her that a degree in the nursing field was
“The perfect way to serve others. Now I just wear a different uniform.” Riley plans to begin her career at one of the local hospitals, and hopes to begin a family soon.

**Autumn**

Autumn is a 19-year-old student athlete attending the site institution on a softball scholarship. Her hometown is several hours away in a neighboring state, and she admitted the reason she chose the institution was softball. Autumn stated that she and the majority of her teammates were unsure of degree options during their recruitment, and most, like Autumn, chose to major in General Studies. While she desires to play softball at a transfer institution, she does not think it likely. During the interview, Autumn acknowledged that she was not as serious about academics as she should have been during her first semester. Her parents never attended college, and did not encourage her to attend. Due to scheduling obstacles during her initial semester, she was required to complete the first-year seminar during her second semester. Autumn credited her instructor with motivating her to persevere. She described that she was not happy when the softball advisor placed her in the first-year seminar, but in hindsight, she recognized that it was crucial to her college success.

**Bridget**

Bridget is a rather shy and soft-spoken 20-year old student completing an Associate in Sciences degree with plans to transfer to a neighboring four-year university to begin studies in their nursing program. She is transferring because she will qualify for greater financial aid and scholarship packages based on her dependent tax status. Bridget dually enrolled for three semesters during high school as a part-time student, and took the institutions’ first-year seminar during her fourth college semester. Therefore, she admits, “I already knew about the site institution because I had been here for three semesters already.” Bridget’s ultimate goal is to
become a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist. She also perceived that she benefitted from the affective course components much more so than she did from the cognitive course components. Bridget perceived the affective components to be much more significant to her sustained persistence and success.

David

David is a determined 19-year-old baseball player who is taking the site institution’s first-year seminar in his third and final semester at the college. David began his college career in a neighboring state, but transferred after his first semester because he was given an athletic scholarship. In fall 2017, David plans to transfer to the University of Florida to major in Civil Engineering. He is highly motivated, as evidenced by his course schedule, which includes 19 hours this semester. David says he is, “Trying to take full advantage of my scholarship while it lasts.” Because he is in his last semester at the site institution, David professed to benefit more from the course’s affective components rather than its cognitive components.

Hannah

Hannah is a 22-year-old single mother to a two-year-old girl. Because of her familial obligations, she has maintained part-time enrollment status since her daughter’s birth. Hannah’s mother and father support her financially and keep her daughter while she attends class two nights per week. Hannah tried to maintain full-time status immediately after giving birth by enrolling in two online courses. She admits now, however, that online classes required a level of commitment and time management that she was not prepared for at that point in her life. After graduation, Hannah plans to enroll at a neighboring four-year university to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Psychology and/or counseling. She hopes to one day counsel unwed mothers and
provide support for those going through the hardships of adolescence while balancing multiple roles and responsibilities.

**Jim**

Jim is a reserved 20-year-old student, that when asked to share his perceptions of his first-year seminar course became energetic. Surprisingly, Jim’s interview lasted longer than any other. Jim is graduating with honors this semester and hopes to pursue a degree in English with hopes of teaching at the college level one day. Two weeks into his second semester, he recalls sitting in an Anatomy and Physiology course and by the end of class, deciding that he no longer wanted to pursue a degree in Nursing. He attributed his change of major to several lectures in his first-year seminar, and the inspiration he derived from his instructor. Jim perceived greater benefits from the affective course components, and contends their focus on personal responsibility helped transform him into the honors student he has become.

**Jojo**

Jojo is a confident and energetic 26-year-old general studies major who has gained an increased sense of worth during his college career. Jojo dropped out of a local high school due to legal and substance abuse issues, and has proudly been sober for nearly three years at the time of this study. Early in his recovery, he enrolled in the institution’s free General Education Development (GED) courses. Once he successfully earned his High School Equivalency certificate, he took advantage of the free course initiative and enrolled in English 101. Although unsuccessful during his initial college semester, the following semester Jojo became a full-time student, enrolled in the institution’s first-year seminar, and devoted all of his time and energy into being a college student. From there, he credits much of his college success to the cognitive and affective course components learned during that course. Upon graduation, Jojo plans to take
advantage of a neighboring four-year university’s academic merit and achievement scholarship available to all graduating community college students who meet a predetermined grade point average. While Jojo has not decided on a major, he is confident that he will pursue higher education for as long as he can.

**Mya**

Mya is an outgoing 27-year-old student majoring in Child Development. Because she was required to remediate in several subjects and changed her major after completing much coursework, Mya has attended the site institution for almost four years. During this time, she has become well acquainted with many of the people and departments on campus. She volunteered with several student organizations and clubs during her time, and was even a cast member in the Theater Department’s spring 2016 production. Mya found value in both the cognitive and affective course components within the site institution’s first-year seminar. She perceived that both components were integral to her sustained success. Mya is engaged to a former student she met during her first year at the site institution. They both plan to attend a neighboring four-year university and complete bachelor’s degrees.

**Emerging Themes Derived from the Qualitative Data**

Research participants were asked to explain their perceptions of which first-year seminar course components were most important in supporting their sustained success until degree or certificate completion at one medium-sized, rural community college in the southeast. During the spring semester 2017, the researcher collected participants’ critical incident questionnaires and interviews, transcribed the interviews, then analyzed and coded both data collection tools. The researcher was then able to draw comparisons and make connections between the collected data
and the study’s research questions using Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design Model and Taxonomy of Significant Learning to guide research analysis and identify emergent themes. The critical incident questionnaire asked participants to detail the most important or most impactful aspect or moment they perceived during their first-year seminar course. This prompt allowed each participant to detail, in their own words, which course components they perceived were most critical. In research question one, I sought to understand which first-year seminar cognitive course components were most important in encouraging student persistence to degree completion. Further interview questions sought to explore the impact of cognitive components and whether participants found these course components to be important. In research question two, I sought to understand which first-year seminar affective course components were most important in encouraging student persistence to degree completion. Further interview questions sought to explore the impact of affective components and whether participants found these course components to be important. In research question three, I sought to understand if other aspects of the first-year seminar course were important in encouraging degree completion. The researcher used thematic data analysis in order to identify and analyze themes within the research data. Because the study sought to understand students’ perceptions of events that often occurred two or more years ago, thematic data analysis allowed the researcher to use intuition and interpretation during the coding process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Thematic data analysis also allowed the researcher to analyze large amounts of data produced by the critical incident and interview questionnaires into smaller, more manageable units for analyses.

The following themes emerged from coded data regarding research question one: (a) increased writing efficiency is paramount; and (b) competence and confidence. The following
themes emerged from coded data regarding research question two: (a) campus integration and support; and (b) personal responsibility and motivation.

**Theme 1: Increased Writing Efficiency is Paramount**

Each participant in this study identified some element of the course’s writing assignments as a critical cognitive course component. Students discussed how they were unaware of the large amount of writing included in all college courses. Moreover, this theme emerged from participants’ perceptions from a variety of writing assessments. In addition to the courses’ writing units, participants perceived the unit on essay formatting and plagiarism was crucial in their development as better writers. Increased writing efficiency was critical to participants’ short-term and long-term academic success and was a key confidence builder for writing success in future coursework.

**Practice essays, midterm essays, and final essays.** Several participants categorized the practice, midterm, and final essays in their first-year seminar as critical cognitive course components. Many perceived the slow and deliberate pace at which their instructors taught essay units promoted a less stressful environment in which students were allowed the flexibility to ask questions and take chances without fear of complete failure. Hannah acknowledged that

The essays were difficult at first. When we started the practice essay, I didn’t think I’d ever be able to pass. But my teacher didn’t move too fast and helped everybody that needed it. I guess I didn’t realize how specific essay instructions are. It was actually really tough, but it helped me in all my other courses.

John had similar perceptions to Hannah’s. He believed that the writing skills he honed during his orientation course enabled him to be successful in later coursework, and especially during his English composition courses. John stated that

When I was writing my first paper for ENG101, other students were worried but I really wasn’t. I had already been here before, I thought to myself. Formal papers were not an intimidation for me, because I had written so many already in the first-year seminar class.
I know I keep harping on it, but those writing assignments were so influential to my future success at the college.

Mya echoed the others’ perceptions by saying:

I thought I was going to write an essay, make it sound good, look pretty, and turn it in. I guess I thought it was going to be more of a pass/fail type of grade. My instructor focused on thesis statements and structure in our essays, and showed everyone in class one on one how they could do better. My first semester the essays in orientation helped me more than anything else I did in any course. We wrote more in orientation than in my remedial English class.

Students perceived the midterm and final essay-grading rubric as less detailed and intimidating as opposed to essays in other courses. The first-year seminar essays did not focus on grammar and content development. Rather, the grading rubric identified thesis statement and topic sentence development and proper use of Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting as primary concerns. Riley acknowledged,

For me, personally, I’d been out of high school for over four years before I came back to school because I was in the army. It’s crazy how quick you forget a lot of the stuff you learned in high school. I remember being more comfortable with the practice essay because it was in an orientation course.

Other participants believed that the low-stakes nature of the midterm and final essay-grading rubric helped them excel and develop a knack for writing. Bridget said,

The orientation essays were not stressful like they often are in other courses. Our class felt more relaxed because we knew from day one that our teacher wasn’t going to nit-pick every grammar error we made in the essay. We went over how they were going to be graded in class several times which helped make sure everyone was aware. I guess the biggest thing is in orientation, it was okay to make mistakes on the essays without really fearing failing the paper. I am taking English 271 this semester, and my teacher counts off for every error or wrong word phrasing we make. I definitely think for many students that had never written much before college, the essays are the most important thing they do in the whole class.

Students specifically discussed the value of learning how to create effective outlines that were not as formulaic and detail oriented as they had been in high school. Janis stated, “When my (first-year seminar) instructor taught us how to do outlines for our essays, something about it
clicked for me. It just all started to make sense.” The specific attention given to thesis statement and topic sentence development was an important first step for many students.

Participants in career and technical programs tended to perceive the practice, midterm, and final essays most favorably. One in particular revealed that a key reason why he pursued a degree in automotive technologies is that he “was never a good student in high school, and didn’t think he would be able to pass a lot of academic courses.” Other nontraditional students majoring in general studies believed that the essay assignments were beneficial as a refresher before they began content-driven essays in later courses. The low-stakes grading rubric and the slow pace at which the writing units built upon one other were less intimidating to students of all programs, majors, and academic preparedness.

**Article summaries.** Many participants indicated that the article summaries greatly contributed to their success. Instructors in each course section were tasked with selecting topics that were germane to first-year college students. Most participants had difficulty remembering specific article summary topics. However, even those that could not recall particular readings discussed the assignment’s instructions and its benefits in later coursework. Students were required to read and summarize instructor-selected articles outside of class, and were then required to discuss and sometimes debate their perspectives with peers during class discussions. Participants noted that while instructors assigned similar work in other classes, they were not properly prepared to succeed on those tasks. One student perceived that the article summary assignment enabled him to be successful on similar assignments in later coursework. Jojo noticed that, “The article summary in orientation was a lot like the reflection paper in my Western Civilization course. They (history instructor) just called it something different. The orientation article summary helped me know what to do on the reflection paper for sure.” One participant
discussed how the article summary assignments enabled her to develop her own voice as a writer. Hannah described this development as well as the value of being able to paraphrase another’s writing in a concise manner.

The assignment that required reading and summarizing a journal article was very impactful. I was required to use articles for research on other essays and speeches. Being able to summarize those in my own words made me know what I was talking about. Sometimes you can make stuff up during a class discussion or short-answer question. But when you have to write a whole summary on a topic, you really need to know what you’re talking about or the teacher will know in a hurry.

Others found that the article summaries helped them identify and distinguish major and minor themes within course readings. John echoed other participant’s comments adding,

The article summary and the class discussion were both helpful. I think the first article summary was on budgeting your money. Everyone had to read the article, write a summary, and we all discussed it in class. Everyone knows that budgeting is important while you’re in college, so being able to pick out points in the article that you know were right was good practice.

Mya’s instructor assigned an article summary assignment on racial divisions in America that she, an African-American woman engaged to a white man, found especially poignant. She did not expect to cover such topics in her first-year seminar, and she perceived that this assignment sparked her academic curiosity and encouraged her to attend all class meetings in order to see what topics would be covered in subsequent classes.

Modern Language Association essay formatting and plagiarism. Several participants described their difficulty understanding essay formatting instructions in other courses before covering the Modern Language Association (MLA) and plagiarism units in their first-year seminar. While most participants indicated that they had been introduced to MLA formatting, a common complaint was that other instructors did not properly describe assignment instructions,
and expected them to already know the rules governing MLA formatting. Michelle discussed how important this unit was in her writing development.

Before my (first-year seminar) instructor taught us how to format and cite essays using MLA, I always spent too much time worrying that my paper was set-up wrong. Our teacher taught us how to do a MLA paper in the computer lab and we all saved it on a flash drive to use in the future.

John reiterated Michelle’s perceptions. He believed that, “Other classes and teachers just assumed we all knew how to do our papers before we even started. Our teacher walked us through everything and made sure everyone knew what to do.”

Understanding what constituted plagiarism and academic misconduct was another topic that many students perceived as critical. For example, John acknowledged that he misunderstood some of the nuances in regards to what was considered plagiarism, mainly because it had never been properly explained to him. He did not understand the general nature of paraphrasing someone else’s work, and he did not understand that one must provide citation for other’s ideas, as well as their words. Among the participants that indicated that the plagiarism unit was critical, more students perceived citing someone’s ideas as the greatest challenge in avoiding plagiarism.

Again, participants discussed the unhurried pace in which their first-year seminar instructor taught this unit as a significant element of its importance. Janis admitted that, to the best of her memory, her remedial English instructor taught plagiarism and academic misconduct at or near the same point in the semester as did her first-year seminar instructor. The major differences, however, was that her first-year seminar instructor was able to spend a greater amount of time answering students’ questions, and discussing their citation assignments in a relaxed and non-intimidating environment.

Several students noted assignments associated with the MLA and plagiarism units that required them to cite, paraphrase, and use direct quotes during timed exercises. Riley said that
while this was intimidating at first, “If you know you have to do something like that and it is
timed, it makes you learn whatever it is you’re doing, and be sure to pay attention. We actually
did two assignments like that. One was at the beginning of class and the other was at the end.”
After joking at how poorly she and most of her classmates did on the initial assignment at the
beginning of class she added, “After we all did so bad on the first one, it really made me pay
attention during the unit, and pay attention to what we were doing.” These in-class assignments
taught students valuable writing skills, and encouraged their confidence in their own writing
abilities.

**In-class writing.** Students completed a number of in-class writing assignments that
typically followed guest lecturer presentations or other content specific instructor-led
presentations in which students were required to write and reflect. The writing assignments
required students to internalize the presentation’s message, and consider ways in which they may
benefit from it. Hannah described how the notes she took during the dean’s welcome lecture and
the in-class writing assignment that followed made her think about the material in his lecture
more deeply. Riley added that, “The in-class writing after the dean’s lecture gave me more time
to think about my own past, and what I wanted for my future.” Out of all of the guest lecturers in
her first-year seminar, Riley perceived the dean’s lecture and the corresponding in-class writing
assignment as a vitally critical cognitive course component. During his lecture, the dean
discussed his experience in the military and returning to college later in life to begin work on an
advanced degree. This point specifically resonated with Riley, as she too, served for a number of
years in the military before returning to pursue a degree in higher education. Their shared
experiences made Riley more susceptible to the tangible study habits he discussed, and she
believed she was more likely to take what he said seriously once their connection was established.

As was the case with the article summary assignments, many times students were unable to recall the exact details from their in-class writing assignments. However, many perceived the practice of completing timed writing exercises in class, many of which were unannounced, required students to maintain involvement and focus during class. Alaina confirmed this perception stating,

Sometimes I had trouble staying interested in some topics of the course. Some presentations are great if you’re a freshman, but I didn’t take orientation in my first semester, so sometimes I was bored. But I always had to pay attention in class because of the threat of the writing assignments.

Alaina’s tone of voice did not indicate that she perceived the in-class writing assignments as a threat. She may have more appropriately used the word vigilance to describe the need for constant attention in the event the instructor planned an impromptu in-class writing assignment. These assignments were not most participants’ favorites. Beth stated that the possibility of in-class writing assignments in the form of daily grades that could be assigned at any moment convinced her to be prepared for all class meetings, and be attentive during all class lectures and presentations. Ultimately, students perceived short-term and long-term benefits from the many in-class writing assignments.

Self-assurance. Within each cognitive course component writing category categorized by study participants, there existed a clear sense of determination in their tone of voice. Their self-assurance increased while describing their successes on a variety of writing assignments in the first-year seminar. This enhanced self-assurance was attributed to several criteria. Students perceived the unhurried and methodical pace of the various assignments, as well as the low-stakes grading rubric critical towards supporting and encouraging their success. Students of all
ages, programs, majors, and enrollment status expressed levels of increased self-assurance after successfully completing these assignments. While a few participants recognized the significance of some units over others, all participants that identified an element of writing in their first-year seminar course as an important cognitive course component referred to some aspect of the unit relative to their increased self-assurance. Some participants made overt references to increased self-assurance while others were more subtle. For example, Mya declared that her instructors’ use of the T-1-2-3 essay model was vital to her success. Mya perceived that successful use of this outline model was the first step in increasing her writing confidence.

Others were admittedly nervous as to whether or not they would be able to pass college level courses that required considerable amounts of writing. Jojo insisted that while he was an adequate writer in high school, he was anxious attempting college-level writing. Students frequently discussed their fears associated with writing. Jojo expounded on his perceptions stating:

My high school was really small, so everyone knew each other. Whether you were in advanced classes or not, you took the same teachers for the most part every year. So once you had a teacher, you really knew what to expect. Coming to college was like beginning high school all over again. You had to learn what to expect. The orientation course was good writing practice, but it was also a good introduction to the other courses at (site institution) too.

Participants detailed a number of writing assignments designed to increase students’ writing skills as critical cognitive course components. Within these categories emerged the theme of increased writing efficiency. Confronting students’ writing fears immediately during their first-year seminar was critical to their sustained success. Few, if any, students perceived that they experienced insurmountable challenges in comprehending and completing the first-year seminar writing units. What challenges did arise were the result of inherent student fears dealing with the process of writing.
Theme 2: Competence and Confidence

Participants described multiple course components that encouraged their short-term and long-term academic success. These cognitive course components included categories such as note taking, active reading, and critical thinking. These components were intended to hone each participant’s cognitive skills, and aid their transition into higher education. Upon further analysis of each category, the theme, competence and confidence, emerged from within the data. While many of the participants discussed how they profited from the study skills learned in the various units, they also indicated a significant increase in self-confidence once they successfully applied these skills in other coursework. The successful application and use of each study skills unit was fresh in the minds of most participants during the interview process.

It is well documented that many community college students are not equipped with the cognitive skills necessary to conduct college-level work during their initial semester (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mayo, 2013), and others purport that first-year seminar courses appear best poised to support the cognitive and social development of underprepared students (Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Cho & Karp, 2012; Mayo, 2013). Thus, it was assumed that successful students would find value in several of the course’s cognitive units. What emerged as unique was such increased confidence in participants’ own abilities when applying these skills in other coursework. The cognitive course components categorized by students below helped produce competent and confident students.

**Note taking.** Multiple interviewees perceived proactive note taking as one of the most vital cognitive course components that encouraged their short-term and long-term academic success. Students acknowledged that, while they took notes in high school and some in previous coursework, it was not until they incorporated a system into their note taking routine that they
began seeing positive increases on their major course assessments. Participants described how learning the difference between study notes and lecture notes was critical in their cognitive development, and others described personal note taking systems they developed during participation in the first-year seminar.

Janis described her experiences with taking notes before and after she began using a structured system.

Before I took orientation, I just tried to write down everything every teacher said in class. That is what I did in high school and it was all I had ever done. I took orientation in my second semester at (site institution) and had never thought about a different way to take notes. My orientation instructor described to the class how this was not the best method because all you do is read over incomplete notes to study. There really is no way to write everything down your teacher says.

Later, Janis discussed several suggestions that her orientation instructor encouraged students to use during in-class reading and writing assignments.

My orientation teacher talked about developing a personal style of note taking. She taught shorthand, which is really your own style. She explained how the abbreviations had to make sense to you personally so you would remember what you were talking about. In every other class we were taking, she made us list several abbreviations for things and topics our other instructors were talking about that week in class.

Some participants also described helpful tips that their instructors suggested during their first-year seminar’s note taking and reading unit. Hannah developed a system to organize, identify, and compare notes with her peers. She and other students formed small study groups and together, transformed their lecture notes into study notes. Hannah stated that she and other students were able “to piece together our lecture notes and create better study notes. When several of us that were concerned with doing well in the class studied together, we were able to create effective study notes.” The study group allowed the students to eliminate some information they had recorded during the haste of the lecture that, together, they decided was not as crucial as had been originally perceived. John discussed how he had never considered the
difference between lecture notes and study notes. He admitted to studying by reading over his notes several times the night or two before an exam. He added, “…the note-taking components really helped me adjust from high school where I didn’t have to take many notes.”

Returning to school after several years away, Riley described how her orientation instructor taught students to make effective flashcards using their lecture notes. As a nursing student who is required to memorize many terms and definitions, Riley explained how she used flashcards before taking the institution’s first-year seminar course, albeit unsuccessfully most often. She recalled making flashcards for every term or idea her nursing instructors covered during class, and when it came time to study for exams, she became overwhelmed with information. It was not until her orientation instructor taught her how to prioritize and distinguish key information that she realized the full potential of using flashcards to study. She explained,

I have always cared about school, and tried to do my best. I always attended class and studied. I am older than all of the other nursing students, but when I was in high school, a lot of people used flashcards to study, so I guess that came natural to me. There is so much information to remember in nursing classes that I got to the point that I could not keep up with it all. My orientation teacher spent a whole day (class period) teaching us how to make flashcards from our lecture notes. We watched a video and took notes on the video. Then we discussed what the main points were. It was interesting how some students had really different things written down. My teacher showed us her list that she had previously made and discussed why she selected those points. We did the same daily grade assignment several times in class with different subjects to get used to taking notes and picking out the main points from lecture notes.

Kellie had a similar experience to Riley during her first semester. While attempting to maintain full-time status by taking online courses, she discussed the difficulty she experienced taking notes during her instructor’s online lecture videos. As a freshman student, Kellie admitted, “I was not prepared to do well in college. I never took notes or had to do too much in high school to make decent grades. I tried listening to my instructor’s videos, but there was so much stuff it was
hard to know what was most important.” Quickly, she became overwhelmed and ultimately withdrew from her two online classes during her initial college semester. At the suggestion of a staff member in the college’s admissions and records department, Kellie enrolled and successfully completed the institution’s first-year seminar course the following semester. During the course of her interview, she repeatedly acknowledged that one of the single greatest factors encouraging her future academic success was her newfound ability to take effective notes.

Kellie’s orientation instructor taught students how to take notes based upon the subject being taught. Hannah shared these perceptions and explained in detail:

> Sometimes it was easy to know what topics were most important, but probably one of the best course components we discussed in class was how to take notes in different classes. My teacher told us to look for key ideas and topics in some courses, and in others, we should look for more facts. Then, in courses like math, we should try and write down concepts and only jot down a few examples. When you try and write everything a teacher says or puts on the board you can never stay caught up. This really helped me. I felt like I was more prepared for whatever course I was taking.

Although not everyone subscribed to a specific method, virtually all participants agreed that, before being taught this unit, they had perceived note taking as a passive byproduct of class attendance instead of being an essential skill that successful students perform.

**Active reading.** A common perception among participants was that, upon entering college, they felt unprepared for the amount of reading they were expected to complete. Similarly, many were not prepared to process what they read, and make connections between multiple course readings. This study’s participants described how they had previously only passively scanned assigned readings, and were unable to remember much of the information instructors expected them to process and retain. A majority of the participants suggested that while the course’s unit on reading had a positive short-term impact, the true value of the unit was realized later, during more difficult coursework. Much like the unit on note taking, students
employed strategies that fit their learning styles and needs for the majority of their intended majors’ coursework.

While she had been assigned textbooks in high school, Hannah, somewhat shyly, admitted to only reading select passages required to complete homework assignments. Hannah revealed that

I did not know how to study, and I had never really read a textbook before beginning college. If I had not learned how to do this in my first year, I am sure my grades in future courses would have been much lower.

Mya had similar feelings. She described how her teachers in high school assigned readings in their textbooks, but did little to assess students’ reading comprehension other than monitor completion of what she perceived as busy work. Mya stated, “This sounds crazy, but I never thought about how a textbook is used to study. I always used textbooks more like a dictionary – something I could look up words or get definitions from.” Mya described the importance of certain course readings in her first-year seminar that were used in exercises to teach active reading skills.

As an African-American woman, I was really interested in the article we read about current race issues in America. The article talked about the police and really just racism in America and how a lot of people think racism is a thing of the past, but a lot of laws still target black people and other minorities. For me, as an African-American woman, and someone who is engaged to a white man, I guess we both deal with racial issues all of the time. I remember being very interested in the article, so it was easier to take notes, annotate key points and themes in that article, and compare with others in class during our class discussion. My orientation teacher also showed us his notes and what he thought was important. So, it showed us what to look out for from the teacher’s point of view.

Mya is convinced that she remained engaged during the note taking and reading annotation exercises that followed because the article was personally relevant.

Additional students told similar stories. Bridget discussed how she, as a dually enrolled high school honors student, completed whatever readings her teachers assigned. However, her
first-year seminar instructor was the first person to teach her how to properly annotate texts when reading. Other students repeated these perceptions, discussing how their instructor taught them the importance of annotating texts by using a structured system. By each student creating their own personalized note taking system, they became less likely to carelessly underline or highlight passages without considering why each were important. Bridget said her instructor brought his own notes from college to show the class how he annotated what he read as a student. She fondly remembered that day’s exercise, describing it in detail:

My teacher brought stacks and stacks of yellow note pads to class to teach how he took notes in college. Each pad represented a certain course he had taken. He also brought a few of his books to show the notes in them too. He warned us about underlining and highlighting books. He said that underlining and highlighting is good, but if that’s all you’ve done, when you study you are just rereading the book again. That is time consuming and not very effective. Our teacher showed us how he underlined key passages in the books, and how he decided what was important. The important part was on the legal pads though, where he paraphrased important sections and wrote down page numbers. He explained to everyone that it was a lot easier to review the key passages than it was to review the whole chapter in the book.

Students stressed the importance of employing a personal study system taught by their instructors. Michelle’s first-year seminar instructor taught her class an active reading strategy used in many first-year seminar courses called the SQ3R, which stands for survey, question, read, retrieve, and review. Because she had been out of school for so long, she used this formulaic approach to ensure she covered all of her bases. She explained the SQ3R method stating:

This really helped me. It was my new way of scanning the chapter to find the most important parts of the readings, answering questions, reading the chapter, retrieving what I read by asking myself questions about the chapter, and finally reviewing what I read. This tactic improved my grades by two letter grades. I still use this method to study for all of my course work.

It is evident that this method reinforced her confidence in her ability to retain what she had read.
Critical thinking. Study participants described a variety of course activities and assignments, as well as acquired skills, that increased their ability to think critically. Virtually every participant listed personal cognitive developments that assisted themselves in acquiring critical thinking skills. Several interviewees recognized their course readings, class discussions, and in-class writing assignments, and how some assessments even challenged their previously held beliefs. Each first-year seminar at the site institution includes a unit detailing what critical thinking is, and what college faculty expects students to be able to do. This unit, however, does more to inform students as to what critical thinking is as opposed to how it is accomplished. Students were encouraged to think critically when combining the lessons learned in multiple course units. Participants made clear that the more relevant the example topic was, the more likely they were to remain engaged and perceive tangible benefits gained from each assessment.

Beth recognized that while many of her instructors stressed the importance of being able to think and write critically, few, if any, ever discussed how to achieve this skill. Alaina supported this account by describing her own experiences in the site institution’s first-year seminar. Because Alaina did not complete the first-year seminar until her second semester, she developed rudimentary critical thinking skills on her own during her initial semester in college. Consequently, she did not benefit from her first-year seminar’s critical thinking unit as much as her classmates did. She perceived, however, that critical thinking skills is one of the most difficult concepts for first-semester community college students to achieve, and described a marked difference in class participation and discussions during topics that were more interesting to her and her classmates. She admitted to struggling during her initial semester on campus because she was had not been properly trained to think and write critically. Alaina said that, “I
cannot imagine starting college now without knowing how to think critically, but that’s what most students probably have to learn to do if they don’t learn how in orientation.”

Hannah described her journey towards becoming a critical thinker as the process of determining between “Facts versus feelings and understanding why people believe what they believe.” She discussed how the in-class writing assignments often introduced the class to new topics, and after short class discussions, students wrote responses to specific positions or points of view. She added that, typically, her instructor did not tell students which position they were to support during the class discussion. Therefore, students were required to be familiar with both sides of the argument. She believed this to be one of the most critical cognitive components within the class. Without pause, Hannah stated that the critical thinking unit helped her during future coursework more than any other cognitive course component, with the exception of maybe the essay-writing unit. She explained, “Learning how to think at a deeper level really helped in all of my classes. It requires more than memorization!” Jojo concurred with Hannah’s perceptions. He added,

The daily assignments helped develop my critical thinking skills. Often times we would watch a video and then have to give our analysis of it. This required providing reasons and facts to support our view, not just spouting our opinion.

The various assignments used by first-year seminar instructors to teach critical thinking skills maintained the central unifying theme of increased student self-confidence with their own abilities. Janis described one of the course readings in her first-year seminar, and recalled the profound impact it had on her and her classmates. She was unable to remember the author or article title. However, she remembered it focusing on racism and the federal for-profit prison system. Janis declared that she did not expect to discuss such topics in an orientation class, and because she has two family members who are currently incarcerated, she has strong opinions on
the subject. Janis’ first-year seminar instructor discussed how some individuals have difficulty distancing personal feelings and opinions from objective facts. She remembered her instructor challenging students to consider multiple perspectives, and question things you previously understood as fact. Janis confessed that this course reading, the class discussion that followed, and her ability to analyze the position from multiple points of view was critical in her development as a college student. This confidence enabled her to develop a greater sense of self-confidence in her other courses. She described this further declaring:

The assignments in class when we were learning about critical thinking helped me adjust to college classes and what teachers expected. I had been worried that I might not be able to succeed in college because I wasn’t really a good student in high school, but when I started contributing in class during the article discussions, it was the first time I truly felt like a college student.

To Janis, the personal relevance of the article helped her to maintain interest, and she was able to recognize how the various course units complemented one another to produce students who were competent critical thinkers.

Participants identified note taking, active reading, and critical thinking skills as important cognitive course components in their first-year seminar. From these categories, the theme, competence and confidence, emerged from the data. These skills enabled students to achieve success in initial and future coursework, and most importantly, taught them how to successfully complete college-level academic assignments. Once students first experienced academic successes in their first-year seminar and perceived the integration of learned cognitive skills in other coursework, they exhibited a tremendous sense of self-confidence that manifest itself by further empowering and motivating each student to long-term college success.
Theme 3: Campus Integration and Support

Participants discussed a number of individuals and departments on the site institution’s campus to which they were introduced, and perceived the utility of their services as critical affective course components. Taken together, within these categories emerged the theme of campus integration and support. While some of the participants were aware of the campus’ resources and services, many confessed that they would not have likely taken the initiative to seek assistance from the various areas had they not been first introduced to the individuals and departments during enrollment in the first-year seminar. Successful students perceived that introducing the two groups in a neutral setting, and the support they offered, were critical affective course components.

Academic advising. During the course of interviews, it became apparent that students appreciated and they perceived more tangible benefits gained from the advising unit than any other affective course component within the first-year seminar. While some institutions have experimented with, and achieved positive retention statistics using, centralized advising models which employ large numbers of advisors whose only job is to counsel and advise students, currently this appears to be isolated primarily at four-year colleges and universities (Chiteng Kot, 2014). Furthermore, McFarlane (2014) purported that mandatory academic advising models achieve higher retention rates than do voluntary models.

In the site institution’s first-year seminar, all students were required to make an appointment with their academic advisors, and to complete an advising form created by the Freshman Studies Department. Several participants perceived this course component as critical. For example, Michelle suggested she never would have contacted or scheduled an appointment with her advisor because, “She was always in and out of her office so much or in such a hurry
that I never wanted to bother her.” Based on Michelle’s age and her desire to blend in, she made a point not to ask questions, do, or say anything out of the normal. Because of her first-year seminar course advising assignment, Michelle met her academic advisor early and the two established a significant relationship. The two women discussed academics, life, and goals. Michelle, like many others, found her advisor to be indispensable.

For many students majoring in Health Sciences and Career and Technical Education programs, their advisor became their single most important contact on campus. John, who is majoring in Criminal Justice, and felt vastly unprepared when he began college, believed that the relationship he maintained with his advisor, who happens to be the director of the Criminal Justice Department, has been critical to his sustained success. John noted that his advisor not only helped students begin to see what a career in Criminal Justice looks like, but more importantly, he helped teach them what it means to be a successful college student. John added,

Most students who want to major in CRJ think it’s going to be a lot of Law and Order type work. They really don’t have a good idea of the day in, day out. I know firsthand, because I was in that boat too. My advisor made sure we knew what to expect.

Mya explained how her advisor not only helped integrate her into the institution and departmental culture, but was also a confidant who gave her honest feedback and advice. Mya majored in Childhood Development, and noted that her advisor, a long-time employee of the college, was well connected to many local employers. Quite candidly, Mya’s advisor, who also taught many of the core courses for her major, informed her that she only recommended students for jobs that she trusted and believed would be good ambassadors of the college generally, and the Childhood Development program specifically. Mya acknowledged that their initial meeting served notice that students must take college seriously every day. Her relationship with her advisor is, “wonderful,” mainly because her advisor outlined departmental specifications and
expectations during their initial while meeting completing the Freshman Studies Department’s advising form.

Janis had a comparable experience to Mya’s. Janis is majoring in Physical Therapy Assistant, and hopes to remain in her hometown after graduation and earn a job at a health care facility. Janis credited her advisor, who, like Mya, is her primary instructor for most of her core courses, with giving her and her classmates relevant information and straightforward advice. Janis felt that her advisor was sometimes exacting, but understood why she was that way. Janis said,

When I first met Ms. (advisor), I wasn’t sure if she was having a bad day, or if she liked me. When we first met and completed the orientation advising assignment, she answered all of my questions, and gave me some good advice, but it wasn’t like talking to my orientation teacher. She wasn’t trying to recruit me or something. But I came to see that she has so many responsibilities and so little time on campus that I actually appreciate her more now than ever. In hindsight, I can look back and see that she divides her time between her students on campus and in clinicals, and over time, you realize that she is always going to be honest with you.

Advisors generally, and the first-year seminars’ advising unit specifically, emerged as one of the most important affective course components categorized by successful students in this study. Advisors and the advising unit were frequently mentioned in combination with the counseling center presentation, and the Statewide Transfer Articulation Reporting System (STARS) Guide and degree plan course units.

Counseling center and STARS guide/degree plan. Each study participant indicated that the counseling center visit and the course’s focus on the Statewide Transfer Articulation Reporting System (STARS) Guide and degree plan as critical affective course components. The STARS Guide is an Alabama statewide program that guarantees the transferability of coursework amongst public colleges and universities. While only transfer students were required to complete and print a STARS Guide, each student was assigned a degree plan based upon their
declared major at the site institution. The degree plan ensured that each student completed the proper coursework necessary in order to graduate. The institution employs two full-time counselors for an average student population of nearly 5,000 students. Thus, the study participants indicated that they appreciated the counselors’ time and presentation, as well as the ability to ask them questions on an individual basis after class.

A diverse group of study participants found the STARS Guide and degree plan unit essential. Bridget, for example, who completed the first-year seminar during her fourth semester in college, perceived the counseling center visit and emphasis on course selection to be one of the most important components within the entire course. She explained further,

One of the most beneficial things we did was when we reviewed the STARS Guide. A lot of community college students plan to transfer to a four-year university and the STARS Guide tells exactly what classes are needed for the college the student plans to transfer to. This eliminates the worry of wondering if this or that class will be accepted at the university.

Bridget also discussed the usefulness of the institution’s degree plan for those pursuing a terminal degree or certificate. She explained that the counselor who visited her course stayed after class until every question was answered. Riley had similar feelings. Based on Riley’s experiences in the military, she discussed her preference for structure and order, as the STARS Guide and degree plan detail exactly which courses students may transfer to other institutions and were required to complete in order to graduate.

Beth, who is graduating with an Associate in Arts degree, but intends to enroll in the Physical Therapist Assistant program in fall 2017, used her Degree plan much like transfer students use their degree plan and STARS Guide in order to eliminate unnecessary courses not required in the PTA program. Beth stated that she still used the lessons she learned in her first-year seminar. She confessed that,
I still mark in my degree plan each semester. I’m still setting goals too. When I complete one, as in finish a course, I set another one. So now that I’m graduating with my AA degree, I know I have to keep working.

Alaina encountered many of the same things as Beth. Alaina failed to gain entry into the Radiologic Technology Program during her initial application, and credited her knowledge of the college’s degree plan, and her first-year instructor’s influence for her persistence while waiting to apply the following year. She perceived that, had she not been aware of other degree options, she may have acted irrationally and stopped attending school. “Had I done that,” Alaina stated, “I’m almost certain I wouldn’t be here now since I’ve recently been married and now have a child.” For many students, college-ready and underprepared, the counseling center visit, and the course’s emphasis on STARS Guide and degree plan informed them of their many degree, certificate, and career options, and once they were made aware, their knowledge of the documents and degree and certificate option requirements inspired them to persist.

**Student and campus services.** A number of participants perceived that the presentations and informational units delivered by the department of Student and Campus Services were critical affective course components. Students who were new to the culture of higher education discussed how even though they wanted to become more involved on campus, they had a difficult time finding information about campus clubs and organizations. Bridget and Hannah considered their participation in campus organizations critical to their sustained persistence, and both suggested that had they not been made aware of all of the campus clubs and organizations during the Student and Campus Services presentation, they would not have known they existed. Bridget added, “They (Student and Campus Services) send emails fairly often, but most students never use their school email accounts. Almost every teacher prefers to use Blackboard email, so for most students there’s really no need to check their school email.” Michelle has been involved
with Rotaract, a student-service learning club sponsored by a local Rotary chapter. Perhaps because of her age, she feels more invested in the institutional culture than ever when representing the college and organization within the community through Rotaract. It is evident that she has dealt with issues of belonging, and for her, participation in Rotaract allows her to feel fully integrated into the campus culture.

John, Beth, and Jim found the representative from TRiO discussing Student Support Services, a federally funded program designed for first-generation, needs-based, college students to be superb. The participants in this study confessed to being completely unaware of student support services within TRiO. John positively described his experience with a math counselor at TRiO.

During my orientation course, a person from TRiO came and talked to our class and told everyone about their department and what they did. I didn’t even know what all was available. The speaker had application forms and I signed up during class that day. My math counselor helped me get finish Math 100 and 112.

Beth also took advantage of the counselors in Student Support Services. She found their counselors and study spaces comforting and, and detailed how her group of TRiO cohorts helped motive one another to persist. Beth attributed her attendance in the first-year seminar, and credited the TRiO speaker bringing application forms to her presentation for her enrolling and becoming a member, which she perceived as a major reason why she will soon be a college graduate.

**Campus tour.** A number of participants detailed that the campus tour made them feel more comfortable within their campus community, and that after the tour, they felt more integrated on campus. John described his campus tour as informational because he missed the first few days of class in his initial semester due to an illness. John still remembered this moment vividly, mainly because he perceived it as a turning point.
I felt way behind. When I started to school at (site institution), I didn’t know much about the campus or where things were at. A member of the Diplomats gave us a tour of the campus and told us where most things were. That was really valuable to me.

Had John not received support at such a critical moment, he perceived himself falling further behind and “slipping through the cracks.”

Bridget completed the institution’s first-year seminar during the summer so, due to unforeseen weather events and time restrictions, her class was unable to complete a tour with the campus Diplomats. Her instructor toured the students, but admitted to not being as knowledgeable about the Health Sciences, and Career and Technical Education programs as were the campus Diplomats who were trained to lead tours. Even during her limited tour, Bridget perceived the tour as significant in order to integrate students into the campus culture. As someone who is often shy and reserved, she indicated that while she was aware of most of the departments on campus as well as where they were located, had this been her first semester, she perceived that this would have been a great resource for someone as shy as herself. Bridget added,

This tour of the campus shows students where they to go for certain classes. (Site institution) is set up where Health Sciences courses are in one building, science course in another. This does make it easier to know what building to go to for a class, but still; students need to have a good look at the campus. They not only need to know where their classes are at but where other classes and offices are, just in case something arises that they need to visit that class or office.

Jojo echoed Bridget’s thoughts saying, “I truly enjoyed getting to go on the campus tour with the college Diplomats. I was used to coming straight to campus, going to my classes, and then leaving.” Jojo felt reassured not only to hear the names of individuals and services offered to students, but also to see where they were physically located, which increased his internal perceptions of institutional support.
The writing center. Most of the study participants declared that, when they began college, they immensely disliked writing, and some even said they selected majors that they did not believe would be as writing intensive as others. Students perceived that the Writing Center and its staff were inviting and non-intimidating, which is significant despite how most new students feel about the process of writing. For example, Jojo admitted,

As much as I didn’t want to, being required to go to the Writing Center was extremely helpful in developing my writing skills. In almost all of my classes, I had writing assignments, and because of our frequent visits to the Writing Center during orientation, I had the confidence to take on other courses whereas some other students maybe did not.

Hannah also believed her classes’ frequent Writing Center visits helped integrate her into the campus culture. Hannah declared, “Learning about the Writing Center was very important to me. They helped me improve in this area, and I sought help from the tutors on almost all of my major writing assignments.”

Michelle stated that she, like most of the study participants, still uses the Writing Center on a regular basis. Michelle noted that, during her first year in college, she regularly attended game night at the Writing Center. This took place during the campus activities period, and students used the Center’s lounge to play word games like Scrabble. The longer she has been enrolled at the college, the less she has attended these events because her coursework became more difficult and she has joined other campus organizations. Michelle proudly added, however, that with graduation approaching, she recently attended a tutoring session to revise and edit her resume.

While the Writing Center is primarily known for increasing students’ writing and critical thinking skills, for many of this study’s participants, the Writing Center was equally important in creating a safe and non-intimidating place for students to seek counsel outside of class. Students who admitted that they had limited writing skills upon entering college also admitted to being
nervous and anxious about asking their instructors repeat questions, even if that meant performing poorly on writing assessments. To the participants in this study, the Writing Center was equally important in fostering cognitive and affective course components, as well as fully integrating students into the campus culture.

**The learning resource center.** The Learning Resource Center (LRC) provided students with many services and support mechanisms that they perceived as significant to their future success. The LRC includes printed volumes, periodical titles, and media software items, as well as database collections including the Alabama Virtual Library. Few participants discussed cognitive components associated with the LRC. However, several participants described meeting library and work-study assistants during their visit to the LRC in their first-year seminar. John said that he felt comfortable in the LRC the minute he walked in because two of the library assistants reminded him of women at his grandparent’s church. “They were all just really nice,” he said. “You could tell they meant what they said – as in, they really were interested in helping you if they could. They weren’t just saying it.”

Some participants returned to seek help with Blackboard and student email from the library and work-study assistants. Jim described a time in which he was working in the LRC on an English assignment, recognized one of the library assistants from his LRC tour and presentation, and felt comfortable asking her for help. Had she been less welcoming, he doubted he would have sought help from any employees, and used the facility as a study space only. While David has been in college, due to his athletic obligations on the baseball team, he was required to study when and where he could, most often away from his apartment and roommates. The LRC was vital to David, as it maintained evening and weekend hours for students with
nontraditional course schedules. David recalled requesting help examining science journals within the LRC’s online database collection. David described their assistance saying,

A student worker in the LRC showed me how to do the advanced search option, which allowed me to focus my searches and get better articles. My teacher for Anatomy and Physiology I and II required us to use the database system almost weekly, so I actually had to learn how to use the system instead of relying on people to show you each time.

When pressed on this point, David added that he would have likely solved most student-related technology problems with little trouble. However, he admitted that the library assistants’ support was critical. After he completed the first-year seminar and did not have easy access to his first-year seminar instructor, the LRC assistants provided critical support.

First-year seminar instructor. Regardless of age, major, enrollment status, or academic preparedness, this study’s participants identified the support from their first-year seminar instructor as the one indispensable affective course component. Students noted that their first-year instructors were seemingly always available for assistance. They also perceived that these instructors went beyond typical faculty roles and responsibilities.

Participants perceived that their first-year seminar instructor was always available, and routinely encouraged students to ask questions pertaining to the course, or about their overall experiences at the institution. Repeatedly, participants made similar statements like Frieda. She said,

Most all of my instructors, especially during my first semester when I took several remedial courses, asked if we had any questions. But my orientation instructor made it a point to make sure we were confident we knew what was going on.

Autumn also stressed the point that her instructor went to great lengths to ensure that students felt prepared and confident once they left their first-year seminar course. Autumn stated,

The teacher is there for you, and if they don’t know the answer to your question, than they will do their best they can to find it for you. I was always afraid to ask questions until it was usually too late until I came to (site institution) and found out that the only
stupid question is the one you do not ask because someone else is wanting to ask the same thing.

Academically underprepared and college-ready students alike shared this perception. Kellie acknowledged, “While the professors are not there to hold the student’s hand, their best interest is ensuring the success of the students.” Kellie added, “Professors have office hours available for students to visit them, and students are encouraged to contact their orientation instructor with any problems. I took orientation at night, and my professor stayed late after class a lot of times.”

Other participants who completed the site institution’s first-year seminar during their initial semester in college suffered personal struggles, and their instructors became personal confidants. These participants noticed that their first-year seminar instructor was more sensitive to personal issues than were instructors in other courses. Several students attributed their persistence in college during their initial semester to their first-year seminar instructor. Hannah acknowledged one such instance in which she dealt with the death of her grandmother at the same time a major assignment was due. Hannah was particularly close to her grandmother. Her grandmother regularly watched Hannah’s daughter when she needed personal time away for her studies. One clearly noticed that this moment still resonated with Hannah, as evidenced by her detailed description of the event.

The most significant moment in particular for me was the day my grandmother passed away. The midterm essay was due in class on that day, but I was so distraught over the loss of my grandmother that I could not even think about going to class. I remembered that my instructor had said that if we were going to absent we should try to contact her to let her know. I just sent a short Blackboard message explaining the situation, and I did not check back for a response until several days later. I had already decided that I would probably drop the course. I felt like there would be no way I could catch up after missing the deadline for a significant assignment. To my relief, when I checked Blackboard my instructor had sent a very encouraging message. She expressed sympathy for my loss, and encouraged me to submit the assignment as soon as possible. I think this was the most significant moment because I strongly believe that if I had withdrawn that semester, I would not have registered for the next. The instructor still deducted points for the essay
being late, but I learned that I should not quit even when my life gets difficult. I also learned that my instructors were willing to help me.

Michelle faced a financial incident no less stressful to someone attempting to support a family while navigating the myriad of college expenses. Michelle believed her instructor’s support was critical to her continued attendance, as she witnessed firsthand that, “I saw that my instructors were there for me from the beginning. This really impacted my life, and made me want to try harder.” She described one such incident in which her first-year seminar instructor helped her create an attendance plan to continue enrollment in the course during a time when she did not have reliable transportation. She declared,

> At the beginning of the semester, I knew my transmission was tearing up on my car, so my instructor and I made a plan on how to continue school even if I did not have a car. My transmission did go out, I was able to refer back to the plan, and it worked. I was able to complete my course work for the semester. One of the most important things was learning not to procrastinate and plan ahead. Planning ahead has kept me on the right track and is preparing me for graduation.

Had it not been for the support of her first-year seminar instructor, it would have been easy for Michelle to have withdrawn and to have become another negative retention statistic. With her instructor’s support, however, she will soon graduate, and most excitedly for her, will become the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Frieda described how, on the first day of class, her first-year seminar instructor had a unique ability to make students aware of the importance and relevance of the course, while also encouraging a relaxed mood in which students were aware that he was there to support and assist them. Frieda explained how this attitude continued throughout the entire course. She recalled one occasion in which her instructor brought drinks and snacks for everyone, and held class in the campus courtyard. He routinely made class fun and less intimidating while ensuring that she and
her classmates were well aware of all of the campus resources and departments available to assist
them.

Mya also explained that her first-year seminar instructor encouraged a sense of
importance and course relevancy during their initial class meeting. The instructor challenged her
and her classmates to consider what success meant to each student in a short writing assignment,
and the significance and gravity of this moment stuck with her over her three-plus years in
college. Mya described this perception proclaiming:

The most important thing that he mentioned in his classroom was that he didn’t want us
to define success, but he wanted us to explain what success meant to us. When he said
that, it didn’t mean anything to me at the time, but as time went on I developed what
success meant to me. By the end of his class, I was able to know, and feel what success is
really about.

She later added, “By the end of his class, I was able to know, and feel what success is really
about. My instructor helped us realize this.” Mya perceived her instructor as a key component in
her integration, and significantly valued the support she received.

The affective course component categories within this theme facilitated students’
integration into the campus culture and provided them with a high level of support. This occurred
through a variety of individual and departmental presentations, as well as course components
ultimately designed to inform and familiarize students with campus resources, and to illustrate
the differences in secondary and postsecondary education.

**Theme 4: Responsibility and Motivation**

When asked to detail which affective course components were most critical to their
sustained academic success, participants discussed a number of aspects designed to assist their
transition into higher education. From these categories, extracted by specific actions and personal
characteristics each participant exhibited and perceived as significant, emerged the theme of
Responsibility and Motivation. The researcher identified these course components through participant perceptions of a number of course assessments including in and out of class assignments, guest lecturer presentations, and low-stakes daily grades. Participants acknowledged that these affective course components were instrumental to their persistence during tough academic and personal struggles, and sustained motivation until certificate or degree completion.

**Overcoming procrastination with time management.** One of the most common and important affective course components described by participants was the development and use of time management skills. Students accomplished this in a variety of ways. Course assessments that assisted this development included class discussions, writing assignments, and introspective reflection in which they monitored their weekly schedules. This study’s participants perceived that procrastination, and not academic deficiency, was a primary reason why many students were unsuccessful in college. Thus, participants perceived time management skills as critical to sustained college success.

Participants stated that college culture and expectations were not like high school. Bridget discussed how she realized that she was a motivated student by the lack of motivation some of her classmates exhibited. Kellie stated, “College life is greatly different from high school life. You are an adult and accountable for your own actions.” She later added, “Being an adult takes responsibility, and having college success with this trait is no exception.” As a military wife with three children, Kellie learned to master time management due to her many responsibilities. John also learned the value of time management. He described time management as the most important short-term and long-term affective course component he learned during the first-year seminar. John discussed the immediate importance of time management skills stating:
Time management and not procrastinating, for sure. In high school it was easy to wait until the last minute and produce decent results. In college, faculty can tell when something was rushed, so these two things helped me plan ahead of time to finish my assignments. My instructor really pushed this a lot. John quickly reverted to time management while discussing success in future coursework. He stated,

Time management, personal responsibility, not procrastinating. All of these were useful tips I was able to incorporate into future courses. My instructor made this known. I realized no one was going to hold my hand like the counselors did in high school.

Emily summarized what many participants felt. “College is no joke and needs to be taken seriously. If you did not take high school seriously, college is your place to shine. Your transcript starts over.” Hannah felt comfortable waiting until the last minute to complete assignments in high school, and was unaware of how ineffective this practice was. She added, “I learned that I could overcome procrastination. In orientation, I learned how to manage my time, and I found that I could change this bad habit.”

Many participants described the most important aspect of time management as learning to create a manageable schedule and stay on track of one’s assignments. John said that he bought a daily planner after his instructor covered the time management unit, and acknowledged that he still uses it today. He said, “Everything I have to do is written in that planner. And I still use it every day.” Creating structure based on one’s personal, professional, and academic responsibilities was essential. Angela described this feeling in detail.

For myself as an individual, I struggled, and still do, with procrastination and time management skills. This has mainly been a result of such a hectic schedule between work and family. Once I started trying to manage my time better, I started doing better in school. I found it to be essential to develop better time management skills in order to be successful in college, so this was probably one of the most important components of the course.
Jojo said that the immediate benefit of the scheduling activity helped him achieve success initially and in later coursework as he saw his grades improve consistently. He attributed much of this improvement to completing all course related assignments. Using a planner ensured he did not overlook assignments and was properly prepared for class. He added, “I realized that I needed intense structure in both my daily routine and also in my study habits, and environment. Both of these skills helped me the most during my first full semester in college.”

Michelle noted that the time management activity helped her track where and how she spent her time, and it helped plan her entire week. She described how, “This activity helped me more than others because I was constantly being late for everything, including assignments.” Michelle discussed her scheduling system in more detail and later confessed, “I learned that I had so many things standing in my way that I thought were important, but at the end of the day I found those things to not be as important as my studies.” Marcus believed that, by the end of the first month in his first-year seminar, his instructor had conveyed to each student the importance of scheduling to his or her success. Marcus said, “The only way I ever passed 8:00 a.m. classes was scheduling time to sleep. Most people don’t think you would have to schedule sleep, but I did.” Mya thought that the time management activities in her first-year seminar taught her that it was time to “buckle down” and take her courses seriously. She recognized that treated college coursework and class attendance much as she did in high school, and realized that she must change her mentality and preparation. Her instructor was key, she thought, by equating scheduling as the first step in successful time management skills.

Many participants thought that punctuality was a important element of proper time management. Jacob believed that punctuality is central to everything one does in college. “College is about becoming a professional I think. Students become professionals and a major
part of that is doing the little things you’re supposed to.” Jacob described punctuality in attendance and assignments, and how scheduling allowed him to achieve both. Frieda thought that her instructor reinforced the significance of time management and punctuality. At the end of her first-year seminar, Emily understood that preparation was one of the most important elements to her success. She stated,

An important affective course component we were taught was to always be prepared for class. One of the most obvious ways to be prepared is to be on time for all classes. If you are even five minutes late you could potentially miss out on a daily assignment the instructor had already started.

Emily detailed other elements of academic preparedness, yet each element reinforced punctuality in class attendance, due dates, and responsible course citizenship.

Students described the time management unit’s emphasis on achieving balance as an important affective course component. Participants with multiple personal, professional, and academic responsibilities frequently described being overwhelmed. Their first-year seminar instructor encouraged students to schedule time for themselves. Matthew thoroughly described the importance of achieving balance.

College is often only one aspect of your life and you have other responsibilities that demand your time. Anyone can balance their schedule by creating a strict schedule. This helps complete assignments in a timely manner, and relieves stress if executed properly. The key to this being beneficial is discipline. You have to treat it as if it is the only time you have to do the assignment, even if it’s not. You have to keep the mentality that there can be no excuses. However, one has to be sure to still leave time for yourself to unwind. Relaxation is important to not being burned out, and to keep your sanity.

Michelle echoed Jacob’s thoughts, indicating that she routinely planned “free nights” as a way to prioritize her study time. She supposed that, if she studied and worked every spare moment, she would become overwhelmed, which would do more harm than good. Jacob also scheduled free time alongside study time and considered ways he dealt with specific challenges. Jacob described that he treated his study schedule similarly to his work schedule. “Treat it as a fulltime job,
because that is exactly what college is, or should be.” He discussed potential challenges stating, “If you have friends wanting to hang out during a study day, have the courage to tell them no.” A critical element of achieving balance is appreciating the struggles students endure in order to create a better future for themselves and their families. Autumn stated,

College is an experience that you should enjoy. Yes, it is stressful, and yes, it will drive you absolutely insane. But it is also the most amazing, freeing, and wonderful experience in the world. The teachers, friends, and memories will last a lifetime.

Jim confirmed Autumn’s perceptions. Jim said that, “You get out of it what you put in. Folks should care enough about themselves to find something they love, even if it takes time. I always took time for breaks and fun. It definitely helped me stay sane.” For these students, achieving balance was a critical element of proper time management. Participants avoided procrastination by managing their time in a number of ways that prepared them to confront the rigors of college.

**Attendance.** Several participants discussed the importance of consistent class attendance. Bridget acknowledged that not all courses she took at the site institution had mandatory attendance policies. She believed that her first-year seminars’ regular daily grades, which constituted 40% of the final course average, were positive training for students that might not have otherwise attended regularly. She thought the low stakes daily grades, “Got you in the routine of coming to class regularly. I think if you do it for one class you’re more likely to attend more classes.”

Angela perceived that a critical element in her success was being prepared, and that meant she must first attend all of her classes. She conceded that

I know I wouldn’t be able to be successful in my classes if I did not attend them. I find it very important to prepare for my classes by keeping up and preparing with what each upcoming class is going to be about.
Angela further discussed how her first-year seminar’s course unit on time management included lectures on preparation, and “what you do before you arrive” discussions. These class discussions helped her internalize her routines as well as learn from classmates and consider implementing other strategies that worked for her peers. Jacob communicated the importance of class attendance quite succinctly. He stressed that:

The most important piece of time management is to be on time with whatever you’re doing, to have a system to get whatever you’re doing accomplished. This may seem like a redundant statement, but you can’t imagine how many people overlook this simple concept. Proper attendance is essential to creating a solid foundation for your studies.

Janis also believed that one could not be successful in college until they first learned the importance of regular class attendance. Perhaps perceived by most as routine, many participants felt compelled to categorize class attendance as a significant affective course component.

**Goal setting.** A common low-stakes daily grade assignment in many students’ first-year seminar included goal setting. Participants detailed how they were encouraged to create several variations of personal and academic goals in order to maintain motivation until degree or certificate was conferred. Out of all the participants, Beth appeared most influenced by the course unit on goal setting. In her opinion, this was the single most critical component of the entire course. She admitted:

One of the most important aspects of my orientation course was learning the importance of setting goals. Oftentimes, college students begin taking courses without having a true, attainable goal in the nearby future. Without a clear, concise goal, unnecessary classes can take which can be a waste of time. Fortunately, this course helped me actually analyze and plan what my short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals were, and it also helped me achieve them.

Beth further explained that her first-year seminar instructor challenged her and her classmates to list and define their goals regularly. They accomplished this through a number of assessments including in-class writing assignments and class discussions.
Kayley also discussed her goals at length, and how one assignment in first-year seminar helped her set appropriate goals. She explained that the assignment was tied to the advising unit, and students were asked to bring a copy of their degree plan, which lists all of the courses needed to graduate within their specified major. With degree plan in hand, students made a tentative list of each course they were required to take in order to earn their degree or certificate, and they organized them by semester. This gave students a definite idea of which courses were required, as well as how long it would take them to graduate. Kayley perceived this as a critical affective component because, prior to this assignment, she had no idea what courses to take or how long she would be in school. She explained, “When I sat down to talk to my advisor, she wanted to know about academic and personal goals. I had just covered academic goals in orientation. Our class made several short-term goals, so when I was with my advisor, we were able to concentrate on long-term career goals, things I really needed her help with.”

Towards the end of her interview, Beth again offered perceptions on goal setting and the importance they played in her academic maturation.

Goals should shape the life path one takes, and each goal set should contribute to the achievement of larger goals. I’m beyond thankful I took this course and realized this concept when I did. Now when I look back my goal plans, I have met several of the goals I set when I first started college and this class encouraged me to do so. Although we had several great discussions and assignments, I must say that learning the importance of goals greatly impacted my life and still holds great affect today.

When asked to explain in more detail, she examined some of the short-term goals she had already completed. Accomplishing some short-term goals, she perceived, inspired her to attain long-term goals, such as beginning her career. Effective goal setting encouraged Beth’s personal and academic maturation by concentrating on specific behaviors and actions.

Jacob and Angela found it important to insulate themselves with others who shared, or at least respected, their goals. Jacob explained how he had to distance himself from friends and
acquaintances that were not positive influences. Jacob said, “You have to have the courage to tell them no. True friends will understand the goals you’ve set for yourself, and will happily help them be achieved.” Angela described a group of her friends who complain regularly, but do not seek to advance their personal and professional lives. She discussed how the most challenging aspect of staying motivated was breaking old routines and habits. “I don’t have enough time to do everything, and having goals that I know I want to meet more than anything else helps me stay focused.”

For these students, goal setting was a critical element of their success. Achieving short-term goals allowed them to see and feel what college success looked like. This success further motivated them to persevere until certificate or degree completion.

Willingness to be inspired. Many participants described their receptiveness to guest lecturer presentations and course assignments. Furthermore, early on during their first-year seminar, they perceived the course content as relevant and beneficial to their long-term college success. Their openness to course instruction emerged as the willingness to be inspired.

One such guest lecturer that inspired numerous students was the site institution’s dean of Academic Affairs. The dean delivers what he calls a “Welcome Lecture” to each first-year seminar at the institution. This presentation reflects on his years of experience as a faculty member, and contains emotionally charged and inspiring rhetoric. Andrew described the importance of the dean’s presentation.

The most significant aspect of orientation to me was when the dean spoke to the class. He came and spoke about why we were here and what it takes to be successful at the college level. He detailed his experiences, through college and what it took for him to persevere and complete school, and what it would take for us to do the same. He showed to many people in the class that there is a reason for everyone being here whether, it be for yourself or to support kids at home. Overall, he was very impactful on me because whenever I feel like not going to class or skipping out on one of the awful physics lab reports. I just remembered the reason why I am at (site institution).
Michelle also found the dean’s presentation impactful. She explained that his words resonated with her, and helped motivate her at a critical time in her college education when she experienced financial trouble. She confessed that it would have been easy to withdraw without steady transportation, but something about his influence, coupled with other motivational presentations, encouraged her to persist.

Marcus declared that the dean’s presentation, “Provided answers to our classmates.” He added that, “Many of my classmates were skeptical about the course and college, but the dean made us feel welcome and comfortable. He gave an inspiring speech and advice, and I believe that helped me and my classmates achieve success.” Others also found the presentation informational and inspiring. Jojo appreciated the dean taking time from his schedule to speak to their class. He believed that the dean truly cared about the success of each student in the class, and this personal concern from the highest ranking academic employee at the institution increased his initial motivation, and helped sustain it in future coursework.

Jim had this to say in response to an English faculty members’ presentation: “Realizing you have within yourself the power to change and improve your circumstances can alter one’s course of mind forever. That’s what happened to me when I listened to (guest lecturers’) speech during my first-year seminar.” This instructor spoke to each first-year seminar and discussed her experiences in college, and increased students’ motivation. Growing up poor, her message resonated with many students. During his first semester in college, Jim changed his major from Nursing to English Education with the hope of one day teaching at the college level. Although he did not explicitly say so, it was evident that this instructors’ presentation inspired him to select this career field. Bridget also found this presentation impactful. She stated that, while she had not yet struggled financially in college, she believed that her financial situation would warrant tough
decisions in the years to come, and this guest lecturers’ honest assessment of the trials that many college students endure remained in the forefront of her mind.

The participants’ receptiveness to goal-setting assignments demanded students who were willing to be inspired. These minor, low-stakes assessments resonated with successful students long after their first-year seminar ended. No one was more impacted by these assignments than Beth. During the process of creating academic and personal goals, she learned important lessons about herself. Namely, she discovered how devoted she was towards accomplishing her ultimate academic goal of degree completion. Participants’ willingness to be inspired allowed them to be receptive to the first-year seminar’s course content.

The theme Responsibility and Motivation emerged during data analysis within several affective course component categories perceived by students as significantly encouraging persistence until certificate or degree conferment. These categories were identified from a number of course assessments and guest lecturer presentations. While discussing these categories, participants acknowledged that successful students exhibited specific behaviors and actions that they perceived critical to student persistence. These characteristics helped motivate participants, and encouraged responsibility.

Discussion of Findings and Emerging Themes

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine which first-year seminar course components graduating community college students perceived as critical to their persistence until certificate or degree completion at one medium-sized, rural community college in the southeast. The researcher employed critical incident and semi-structured interview questionnaires in order to gather data and ascertain graduating students’ perceptions of first-year seminar course components. The researcher selected a group of participants intended to mirror the site
institutions’ diversity in order to provide an accurate assessment of student perceptions. Data collection and analysis led to the emergence of four themes: (a) increased writing efficiency; (b) competence and confidence; (c) campus integration and support; and (d) responsibility and motivation.

This study’s participants perceived a number of writing assignments within their first-year seminar as critical cognitive course components. Interviewees categorized several writing assessments designed to introduce and acclimate freshman students to college writing. The assessments ranged in scope from formative in-class and low-stakes daily grade assignments, to more detailed article summaries, to properly formatted summative midterm and final essays. Students perceived the writing assignments in their first-year seminar were less intimidating than in other courses. Their first-year seminar instructors spent more time explaining and clarifying material than instructors in other courses did. Furthermore, students were less nervous to ask the instructor questions because most students were in their initial semester, and classmates did not fear asking irrelevant questions as much as they did in other courses. Increased writing abilities translated into greater student confidence, which many perceived as a previous limitation to achieving academic success. The writing assignments in the first-year seminar both increased students writing abilities and proved to themselves that they were capable of completing college level writing.

A second theme to emerge from the data analysis was the perception that certain cognitive course components encouraged competent and confident students who were then able to achieve academic success in college. The most important cognitive course components identified by students were note-taking, active reading, and critical thinking skills. These skills often built upon one another, and once students perceived the application and integration of these
skills in other coursework, an empowering sense of self-confidence emerged within each participant. A key element to teaching these cognitive course components included an instructors’ ability to maintain subject matter relevance. Students who perceived example material relevant were much likelier to maintain focus, and reap positive benefits from the course units.

The third theme to emerge from the data was campus integration and support. Participants categorized a number of individuals and services as affective course components that directly supported their integration into the campus culture and provided a high level of support. Individuals and departments categorized within the theme included Academic Advising, the Counseling Center and use of STARS Guide/degree plan, Student and Campus Services, the Campus Tour, the Writing Center, the Learning Resource Center, and the First-Year Seminar Instructor. These affective course components brought institutional services to students. Had students been required to seek these services on their own and without support, many perceived they would not have persisted until graduation. These components appeared most important to students’ short-term success, providing a high level of support during campus integration. However, the support of key individuals such as academic advisors and counselors remained significant during their entire course of study.

A final theme that emerged from the data was Responsibility and Motivation. Participants categorized a number of behaviors and actions that successful college student’s exhibit, and were encouraged during their first-year seminar. These behaviors and actions included time management, attendance, goal setting, and the willingness to be inspired. These affective course components brought students to the institution by encouraging and nurturing the behaviors and actions exhibited by successful college students. Had students been expected to develop these
behaviors and actions on their own, many perceived that they would not have persisted until graduation. These components appeared most significant to students’ long-term success, inspiring responsibility that motivated them to persist. However, these behaviors and actions were certainly beneficial to students’ initial success, too.

The four major themes and the subthemes that emerged through the coding process that are related to each are presented in Figure 1.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** Graphic representation of data reduction

**Discussion of Cognitive and Affective Course Components**

In conducting this study, the researcher determined that some cognitive course components were perceived by participants as more important than others. The most important cognitive components perceived by participants were writing assignments. Participants noted that these components assisted their short-term and long-term success, and required them to reflect upon and internalize a myriad of course materials. The researcher determined that note
taking and active reading components, which were most often described by participants and coded by the researcher together, were the second most important cognitive components. Some participants described that these components assisted their initial transition into postsecondary education. However, most perceived that these components helped lay a blueprint of how to achieve success in future, often more challenging, coursework. A less important cognitive course component was critical thinking skills. Some participants did not identify this component at all, and others noted that the critical thinking unit in their first-year seminar primarily made them aware of what critical thinking is. While some participants did indeed find this component significant, it was less pervasive than the other cognitive course components.

The researcher also determined that some affective course components were more significant than others. The most important affective course component perceived by participants was their first-year seminar instructor. The first-year seminar instructor facilitated their integration into the campus culture, provided initial support, and for many, served as a personal confidant. Several participants described challenging academic, social, and personal circumstances that they did not perceive they could have endured without the support and counsel they received from their first-year seminar instructor. Participants did not view their instructor as someone whose only job was to make them aware of campus resources and teach basic study skills. Participants regarded their first-year instructor as one of the most important individuals they encountered during their academic careers. Slightly less important were participants’ academic advisors. These individuals also provided much needed support, and participants appreciated their relevant and pragmatic advice. The next most significant affective components included a number of personal characteristics and expectations that participants perceived successful college students must exhibit. These included time management skills,
proactive daily, weekly, and semester planning and scheduling, regular class attendance, and goal setting. Participants described how course assignments and assessments encouraged these behaviors. These components were identified as equally important towards participants’ short-term and long-term college success. Somewhat less significant were affective components designed to introduce students to individuals and campus resource departments. These components consisted of departments such as the Learning Resource Center (LRC), the Writing Center, and Student Support Services. These departments and their staff provided initial support to students. Students perceived the support from these departments as significant to their initial persistence, but became less important as time passed.

The researcher determined that participants perceived that first-year seminar affective course components were more critical towards encouraging student persistence until degree completion. Successful application of cognitive components assisted students during initial and future coursework, and inspired self-confidence in their abilities. Affective course components, however, also inspired self-confidence and supported personal characteristics that increased one’s personal responsibility and motivation. Affective course components stimulates students’ work ethic, and led them to persevere during hard times.

**Chapter Summary**

The successful community college students interviewed for this study detailed and categorized many cognitive and affective course components within their first-year seminar that encouraged persistence until certificate or degree completion. These participants explained how increased writing efficiency is paramount. Students described a number of diverse formative and summative writing assignments designed to familiarize students with a variety of college writing techniques, and provide a template for successful completion. Additionally, students perceived a
number of cognitive study skills as significant that eased their academic transition into higher education, and which included the added benefit of instilling confidence in oneself. While analyzing affective course components, students acknowledged multiple individuals and campus departments that encouraged their successful campus integration, and provided them with initial and long-term support networks. Finally, the participants perceived affective course components that encouraged specific behaviors and actions exhibited by successful students. The interviewees provided thick and rich responses in the critical incident and interview questionnaires concerning significant cognitive and affective course components. Chapter V will include additional findings from the study, answers to the research questions, conclusions drawn from the research, the integration of participants’ perceptions using Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model, recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and the researchers’ closing remarks.
CHAPTER V:
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

As open access institutions, community colleges encounter higher percentages of academically and socially underprepared students than do most four-year colleges and universities that maintain admissions standards (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Bailey & Alfonso, 2008; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). In an age of limited federal and state funding, and the belief that many states are moving towards performance-based funding models (Hermes, 2012; Miao, 2012), community college administrators seek ways to increase institutional retention and student success. Some colleges define instructional quality using institutional retention alone, even though there is a growing body of evidence that suggests this is not an appropriate criterion (Bahr, 2009; Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). Many community colleges have introduced and expanded their first-year experience programs in an attempt to combat student under preparedness and encourage student success (Bain, 2012; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Strange, 2007). While many first-year experience programs demonstrate positive results (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005), first-year seminars appear best poised to achieve the greatest amounts of student success in open access community colleges (Bers & Younger, 2014; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Porter & Swing, 2006).

The increased attention given to community college student success has generated a tremendous amount of interest and scholarship. Practitioners and researchers agree that student participation in a first-year seminar positively encourages persistence (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005;
Barbatis, 2010; Boulanger, 2009; Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Choy, 2001; Fike & Fike, 2008; Grimes, 1997; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Porter & Swing, 2006; Savi, 2011; Stupka, 1993). However, the existing literature does not specifically address which first-year seminar course components are most critical to sustained student persistence. Because community colleges face an increasing number of underprepared students (Barbatis, 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Grimes, 1997; Miranda, 2014;), specific attention given to students’ perceptions of significant first-year seminar course components is critical in order to create significant learning experiences, which encourage student persistence and success (Bain, 2004, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Fink, 2013).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine which first-year seminar course components were most important in encouraging student persistence until degree completion at one medium-sized, rural community college in the southeast. By providing specific attention to students’ perceptions of cognitive and affective first-year seminar course components, this qualitative study contributes to and fills a gap in the existing literature on community college first-year seminars.

Discussion

This study was grounded and framed using Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model. The study’s participants categorized cognitive and affective first-year seminar course components, which the researcher compared examined using Fink’s six learning goals within his Taxonomy of Significant Learning. The participants included 21 students who had filed an intent to graduate in spring semester 2017. The data were gathered over four weeks during spring 2017, and assembled using critical incident and semi-structured interview questionnaires. The critical incident questionnaire was completed by the participants prior to
each interview. The interviews were completed at mutually agreed upon times and locations on
the campus at the site institution. The participants responded to a variety of interview questions,
which were designed using Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning, in order to discern
students’ perceptions of the most important first-year seminar course components.

The study’s data were analyzed using general pragmatic qualitative research (Savin-Baden &
Major, 2013). As the researcher collected critical incidents and conducted interviews,
he began transcribing, analyzing, and initial coding. The researcher first employed holistic
coding in Cycle 1, and then vivo coding methods in Cycle 2 (Saldaña, 2015). He then used
thematic data analysis to examine categories and identify themes (Creswell, 2009). Four distinct
themes emerged during thematic analysis: (a) writing efficiency is paramount; (b) competence
and confidence; (c) campus integration and support; and (d) responsibility and motivation.

A discussion of the four emerging themes is presented in Chapter IV. In addition to the
findings discussed in the previous chapter, the researcher will now address the findings for each
research question in relation to Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning. As referenced
in Chapter II, Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning is described below.

1. *Foundational knowledge*: Students’ mastery of basic facts and concepts deemed
   relevant to the course;

2. *Application*: Students’ ability to apply foundational knowledge;

3. *Integration*: Students’ capacity to appreciate the application of foundational
   knowledge in other coursework;

4. *Human dimension*: Students’ ability to perceive the value of integrating foundational
   knowledge for oneself;
5. *Caring*: Students’ reassessment of personal perceptions about a subject based upon a deeper understanding and application of the foundational knowledge; and

6. *Learning how to learn*: Students’ having the ability to continue learning about a subject and using foundational knowledge learned in a course even after the course has ended.

Finally, integration of each research question’s findings are presented using Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model. Combined, discussion of the finding’s using the ICD Model and Taxonomy of Significant Learning contribute to an understanding of the research questions.

**Research Question One**

*Which first-year seminar cognitive course components do graduating students perceive as being most important in encouraging persistence to degree completion?*

The participants in this study identified a number of cognitive course components that encouraged student persistence. The themes of Increased Writing Efficiency, and Competence and Confidence emerged during data analysis. Participants categorized a number of writing assignments they perceived beneficial to their initial and long-term success. Furthermore, participants categorized three study skills strategies that they perceived also benefited their initial and long-term success. College-ready and academically underprepared participants alike acknowledged that these cognitive components were fundamental skills that all successful college students should utilize.

Many participants acknowledged that that they were anxious during their first weeks on campus (Hanlon O’Connell, 2015). Several nontraditional students confessed that they perceived themselves academically unprepared and unable to complete college-level work (Byrd
Several had been away from school for many years, and accurately anticipated that remedial coursework would prolong their program of study, making it more difficult for them to persist until certificate or degree completion. Traditional students also expressed academic apprehension, admitting that they had not taken school seriously in the past. Research by Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) and Cox (2009) has contended that students’ performance-based fears are the single greatest inhibitor of student success. When students become overwhelmed and fearful of failure, they experience memory deficits and are unable to perform tasks they previously could.

Each interviewee acknowledged the varying writing assignments in their first-year seminar as critical cognitive course components (Bain, 2004, 2012; Pacarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ryan & Glenn, 2004). Students noted that their first-year seminar instructors’ detailed explanations of the various writing assignments helped them overcome initial anxieties. The in-class writing assignments were especially significant, mainly due to the frequency in which they were administered and feedback was given. The assignments became routine and proved to students that they could successfully complete college-level writing. Initial academic competence encouraged the successful completion of more in-depth writing later in the semester and in subsequent coursework.

Participants categorized article summary assignments that required them to read, take notes, and summarize academic journal articles. Students perceived the primary value of these assignments were the methodical approach in which they were introduced and completed, as well as their ability to perceive the similarities between these assignments to other coursework. These student perceptions support Fink’s (2013) Application and Integration learning goals. Students regularly confessed to being afraid to ask instructors too many questions in other courses.
Students were intimidated by instructors’ intelligence and the possibility that their questions would confirm their academic deficiencies in the minds of their instructors and peers (Moltz, 2009). The article summary assignment in their first-year seminar resembled assignments in other coursework. Once students successfully completed the article summary, and recognized the similarities in other course assignments, they perceived themselves as being able to apply this learning to completing college-level writing assignments.

Students described study skills training that facilitated initial coursework success. Two of these were active reading and note taking. Participants described their prior perceptions of these skills as passive activities and did not give much thought to how successful use of these skills encouraged success. Peverly, Brobst and Morris (2002) and Peverly, Brobst, Graham, and Shaw (2003) determined academic achievement, especially early in one’s educational career, was linked to the successful implementation of study strategies.

Study skills strategies such as note taking and active reading were frequently mentioned by participants as significant short-term cognitive course components. Interviewees described that their first-year seminar instructor taught specific study skills strategies and encouraged students to develop personal study systems based upon their learning preferences. Effective use of these study skills strategies support Fink’s (2013) Foundational Knowledge, and Application, learning goals. Participants perceived that these study skills encouraged their cognitive integration into postsecondary education, and were particularly significant in later, more challenging coursework.

Participants noted that low-stakes writing assignments, and active reading and note taking study skills accelerated their short-term success, and provided a basis for sustained cognitive development and success. Bean (2011) found, however, that article summaries and other forms
of formative writing assignments did little to develop students’ critical thinking skills. Interviewees perceived that the combination of summative writing assignments and critical thinking study skills were significant to their long-term cognitive development and success. Wade (1995) defined critical thinking skills as “the ability and willingness to assess claims and make objective judgments on the basis of well supported evidence” (p. 25). Other research confirms that critical thinking skills were accelerated when combined with writing skills (Varelas, Wolfe, & Ialongo, 2015).

Participants noted that their first-year seminar instructors spent more time outlining summative essay instructions and guidelines than did instructors in other courses. Of particular benefit was the first-year seminar’s focus on Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting and plagiarism units. Moltz (2009) argued that many underprepared students forgo asking basic questions that will inform instructors or their peers of their academic deficiencies. Participants explained that they perceived instructors in other courses assumed that all students knew how to properly structure and format essays. Others contended that they had been penalized for plagiarism infractions, but noted their infractions were unintentional (Deil Amen, 2011).

Many interviewees noted that their summative writing assignments progressed through multiple drafts, which produced much less anxiety than in other courses (Cox, 2009; Tampke, 2013). The class meeting before the summative assignments’ due date was devoted to prewriting. Students formulated outlines, worked on thesis statement and topic sentence development, and began rough drafts. The class meeting following the assignments’ due date was spent discussing themes, students’ perspectives, and means for improvement. While a few of the students described the extra class time spent on these assignments as unnecessary, the participants holding these views completed the institution’s first-year seminar several semesters
into their course of study. The challenges associated with teaching writing and critical thinking skills to students at varying cognitive developmental levels is well documented (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003), yet even those whose cognitive development showed greater progress than others perceived the course writing unit’s utility as significant to students’ long term academic success.

The summative essay assignments required students to refer to previously covered course topics and consider multiple perspectives in their writing. Students used previous formative in-class writing assignments as templates to complete the summative writing assignments. These assignments encouraged critical thinking skills by requiring students to reconsider previously held assumptions and perspectives, and determine if their opinions had changed during the course of the semester. Thinking critically about such topics supports Fink’s (2013) Application and Integration learning goals. Students positively perceived their first-year seminar summative writing assignments, and the integration of critical thinking skills. Combined, these course components encouraged student persistence in initial and future coursework.

Most participants had difficulty remembering specific course readings. Research on educational relevance determined that students experienced greater cognitive benefits when materials were perceived relevant and significant (Assor & Kaplan, 2002; Cosijin & Ingwersen, 2000). Students who were able to recall specific readings had unique relationships to their topics, and they found their inclusion in the first-year seminar surprising. These topics included politics and racial divisions. The majority of participants suggested that the amount of time that had passed, over two years in some cases, was to blame for their failure to recall specific course readings. Given the amount of time passed, and the amount of coursework completed since, it is unlikely that students would recall specifics unless they cared deeply about such topics. Previous
research confirms these perceptions. Means, Jonassen, and Dwyer (1997) argued that embedded (extrinsic) relevance had greater effects than intrinsic relevance, meaning the successful completion of course readings and corresponding class activities had greater long-term effects than did increased student learning from content-specific assignments. Students who perceived course readings as important often developed new feelings, interests, and values as a result of their inclusion within the course. Their ability to recall specifics regarding the readings signifies the seriousness in which students perceived the learning activities associated with the assignments. Therefore, for some students, the relevance of specific course readings supports Fink’s (2013) Caring learning goals.

The low-stakes nature of the formative writing assignments and the early introduction of study skills training through non-intimidating, low-stakes daily grade assignments eased student anxiety, and allowed participants to achieve, however small, a modicum of success early in their college careers. Continued success while writing assignments grew in complexity, and further integration of study skills strategies, increased participants’ self-assurance comparatively. Much research on the successful implementation of academic outcomes (Raymond & Napoli, 1998; Settle, 2011), the benefits of tiered deep learning goals (Reason, Cox, McIntosh & Terenzini, 2010), and successful academic performance in relation to persistence (Stupka, 1993; Taylor, 2015; Tukibayea & Gonyea, 2014; Wang, 2012) validate these participants’ perceptions. Increased student confidence through tiered learning assessments supports Fink’s (2013) Learning How to Learn learning goals.

Underprepared community college students exhibit higher levels of cognitive skills deficiency, yet do not differ from college-ready students in self-esteem or the ability to implement personal study skills strategies (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Grimes, 1997). Therefore,
freshman community college students demonstrating all levels of preparedness benefit from exposure to and successful implementation of cognitive study skills strategies and increased writing efficiency (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Mayo, 2013; Padgett, 2012, 2014; Mith, 2005). The flexibility of these cognitive course components, especially the numerous writing assignments, provided students with a basic set of academic and study skills strategy training. Successful application and integration of these skills produced confident students who understood and believed the importance of their learned skills and knowledge were more likely to succeed in future coursework that was perceived as more challenging (Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Levin & Calcagno, 2008; Robles, 2015). Fink (2013) argued that in order to create significant learning experiences, all six learning goals in the Taxonomy of Significant Learning should be achieved. According to this study’s participants, the site institutions’ first-year seminar cognitive course components focus on increased writing efficiency and study skills training, as well as the integration of these components, achieved these learning goals.

**Research Question Two**

*Which first-year seminar affective course components do graduating students perceive as being most important in encouraging persistence to degree completion?*

The participants in this study identified a number of affective course components that encouraged student persistence. The theme Integration and Support emerged during data analysis. Participants categorized a number of individuals, departments, and services at the site institution to which they were introduced, and, combined, created a *de facto* support system. These resources supported their transition into higher education generally, and the campus culture specifically. In addition, participants categorized several learned behaviors and actions that they perceived encouraged their long-term college success. Students perceived that the
major utility of affective course components made students aware of campus resources, individuals, and departments, and provided built in support networks.

Perceived as particularly significant to many interviewee’s short-term success were the course units on advising. Students were required to schedule appointments with their assigned advisor, and complete the Freshman Studies Department advising form. Students noted that the purpose of the form was to make them aware of their responsibilities during the advising and registration process. The participants also described a presentation delivered by one of the campus counselors to their class that focused on understating and use of the degree plan and the Statewide Transfer Articulation Reporting System (STARS) Guide transfer agreement. This presentation taught students how to comprehend each document, as well as the ability to recognize the transferability of in-state coursework. One’s ability to utilize these documents and appreciate their importance supports Fink’s (2013) Caring and Human Dimensions learning goals.

Recent research has advocated for centralized advisors, professionals whose only job is to advise specific groups of students. (Chiteng Kot, 2014). Students, however, perceived that both the counselors and their faculty advisor assisted their short-term success. Supporting the research of Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012) and Wasley (2007), the larger one’s initial support networks, the better, especially in relation to underprepared nontraditional students. Others contend that purposeful academic advising and holistic student development encourages integration, and can be the difference between success and failure (Allen, Smith, & Mueleck, 2013; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Kuh, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005).

The advising assignment was typically completed at the beginning of the semester and the counseling center presentation was usually scheduled towards the end of the course, during
the next semester’s registration period. Bahr (2008) found that early and intrusive academic advising drastically encouraged community college student success, especially amongst underprepared populations. This contradicts previous studies which argued that counselors should direct students to suitable majors based on their prior cognitive development (Clark, 1960). At no time did the participants in this study perceive that their advisors attempted to dissuade them from their chosen majors. Rather, most stated that their advisors presented them with straightforward, honest answers to their questions, and students greatly appreciated their counsel. Multiple students in Health Sciences and Career and Technical Education programs stated that their advisors were perhaps the single most important individuals that encouraged their persistence. According to the participants, the many components associated with the advising units appear to support Fink’s (2013) Integration, Human Dimension, and Learning How to Learn learning goals. Students demonstrated Integration by using information supplied by their academic advisors during the counseling center’s course registration presentation. Human Dimension occurred once students successfully registered themselves, and continued scheduling vigilance exhibited learning how to learn.

Participants categorized a number of campus resources that they were made aware of because of participation in the first-year seminar. Students positively discussed the departments and services, and were comforted to know that many resources were employed for their benefit. The most frequently mentioned departments and services were Student and Campus Services, the Learning Resource Center (LRC), the Writing Center, and campus Diplomats who led their peers on campus tours. While some of these departments and services provided students with cognitive skills training, participants’ initial perceptions of these resources were categorized as affective components encouraging campus integration. As aforementioned, much student fear arises due
to perceptions of one’s academic deficiencies. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) and Cox (2009) have studied student fear, and declared that, in addition to immediate cognitive skills development, one of the most promising approaches towards minimizing student fear is the implementation of a diverse and persistent support group. These campus resources and the first-year seminar’s low-stakes daily grades accompanying each unit would appear to support Fink’s (2013) concepts of Foundational Knowledge and Application learning goals, and were significant affective course components creating support networks and integrating students into the campus culture.

Numerous participants discussed completing weekly time management sheets designed to monitor and assess where one spent the majority of their time. Some noted that they did not take the assignment seriously during the first few weeks of the course. They often disregarded their time management charts, and only completed the necessary blocks immediately preceding class so as not to lose valuable daily grade points. Interestingly, however, each participant who initially disregarded the assignment noted that within a few weeks they understood and appreciated the relevance of the assignment once they determined how much time they spent on nonessential undertakings. Participants came to this realization at different points in the semester, yet each participant described how he or she valued their educational opportunities and wanted badly to become successful college students. They were not intentionally demonstrating poor time management skills. Rather, participants confessed to being unaware of their poor habits. Once relevance was determined, students became more likely to participate, complete, and value these low-stakes assignments.

Participants perceived that affective course components made them aware of campus services, departments, and individuals designed to ease their transition into higher education. Participants noted that many would not have been aware of these services had they not
participated in the first-year seminar. Research by Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) contended that student fear and anxiety is a major culprit of student failure. Cox (2009) also noted that student fear, and students’ tendency to avoid assessment, prevents many from achieving success. They argue that thoughtful preparation and support networks are two of the best ways to mitigate student fear and anxiety. The participants detailed multiple affective course components that attempt to integrate students into the campus culture.

**Research Question Three**

*What other aspects of the first-year seminar course do graduating students perceive as being important in encouraging persistence to degree completion?*

The participants in this study identified a number of desired learning outcomes of the course as important to their continued persistence. Furthermore, participants categorized a number of behaviors, characteristics and attributes they perceived that successful first-year seminar instructors and students exhibit. The theme *responsibility and motivation* emerged during data analysis.

Participants described learning activities and desired learning outcomes of course participation that encouraged their long-term college success, and motivated them to persist. Many of these behaviors and actions are soft skills, defined as personal attributes that indicate one’s maturity and employability (Robles, 2012). The participants in this study identified and discussed many such skills that they perceived their first-year seminar promoted. Robles (2012) observed that initial soft skills are equally as important as technical expertise in higher education. Powell (2014) found that one’s soft skills more accurately predicted student academic achievement than did cognitive preparedness. Other research indicates that soft skills training should be outcomes of all community college first-year experience programs (Bailey & Alfonso,
2005; Bers & Younger, 2014). Virtually every participant described the learned traits resulting from procrastination and time management units as critical learning outcomes of affective course components that encouraged long-term success. Interviewees noted that this skill was not achieved quickly. Rather, it was a work in progress, and one skill that very few ever fully master. Therefore, participants understood and appreciated why their first-year seminar instructor spent such large amounts of time covering this topic.

Participants perceived that scheduling routine study time in which they were most productive was critical to their long-term success. Traditional and nontraditional students, as well as those with varying levels of academic preparedness perceived time management skills as essential. These student perceptions support a wide range of educational research. Ochroch and Dugan (1986) noted over three decades ago that personality factors greatly affected high-risk students’ chances of success in higher education, chief among these being responsibility. A great amount of research since also confirms the importance of student responsibility and motivation (Adelman, 2005; Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Astin, 1993; Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987; Baars & Arnold, 2014; Fike & Flke, 2008; Kuh, 2005; O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009; Porter & Swing, 2006; Robles, 2012; Rudman & Irvine, 1992; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Settle, 2011; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002; Woosley & Shepler, 2011; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

Another desired learning outcome associated with time management perceived by students was creating balance in one’s life. A few participants who did not define themselves as procrastinators stated that they often became overwhelmed with the amount of assignments they were required to complete, and they perceived that purposeful scheduling allowed them allocate time to complete assignments without becoming overextended and overwhelmed with
responsibilities. The participants in this study believed that many of their peers were unsuccessful in college because they did not properly manage their time, which led to overt stress and fatigue, and ultimately resulted in failure (Astin, 1993; Baars & Arnold, 2014; Grimes, 1997; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Many participants noted that schedule planning became a staple of their daily routines. Others explained how they could not imagine successfully completing all of their daily responsibilities without thoughtful planning and time management skills. According to Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning, students’ ability to utilize positive personal attributes, recognize poor time management skills, and also have the determination to amend negative behaviors supports Application, Human Dimension, and Learning How to Learn learning goals.

Interviewees categorized regular class attendance as an important learning outcome that encouraged long-term persistence. A few traditional students described their class attendance in high school as unimportant, and not necessary. Some nontraditional students explained that, prior to completion of their first-year seminar, they did not always prioritize class attendance over other events. Traditional and nontraditional students perceived that the daily grade assignments, which constituted a majority of their final course grade, inadvertently encouraged attendance in other courses. Participants understood that class attendance was critical to achieving success and, while attending the first-year seminar, they were more likely to attend their other courses. Over time, these behaviors became commonplace and students noticed that they regularly attended courses that did not mandate such policies. Students also perceived the relationship between class attendance and being present at work, as both are measurements of professionalism and responsibility (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2005). According to Fink’s (2013)
Taxonomy of Significant Learning, students’ perceptions of the benefit and necessity of regular class attendance fulfills the caring and learning how to learn learning goals.

Several participants described goal-setting activities as important learning activities that encouraged initial success, but were most beneficial in maintaining the motivation to persist in subsequent semesters (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Students described in-class activities that challenged them to define what success meant to them and formulate goals to achieve their definitions of success. Beth created numerous short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals, approximating academic aspirations as well as personal goals. Other participants reported that being required to define their own goals and ambitions instead of having an instructor lecture on a prescribed definition of success encouraged self-reflection. Mya perceived this to be the most significant moment of the course, and that it was the foundation for her initial, as well as sustained, success in college. Other participants, too, perceived that the goal setting activities’ major importance was increasing their motivation to persist until graduation. These perceptions corroborated numerous other studies supporting the importance of student motivation towards goal achievement and success (Millar & Tannar, 2011; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Petty, 2014; Pickens & Eick, 2009; Robles, 2015; Savi, 2011; Secuban, 2012, Simmons, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Lacante, 2004; Stupka, 1993; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). By encouraging students to define what success meant to them, and creating pathways for students to achieve a variety of goals, the emphasis on goal setting activities supported Fink’s (2013) human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn learning goals.

A unique personal characteristic described by students, and most appropriately labelled as the willingness to be inspired, supported students’ long-term success. This intrinsic quality manifests itself during particularly inspiring and motivational presentations by the first-year
seminar instructor or guest lecturers. Participants appreciated guest lecturers, and found the dean’s welcome lecture and a presentation by a visiting English faculty member to be particularly motivating. The guest lecturers shared personal anecdotes and encouraged students to persist throughout whatever challenges they were sure to encounter. Students perceived these presentations as impactful because the guest lecturers did not shy away from discussing their own personal and professional difficulties. These presentations acknowledged typical student troubles and suggested practical approaches to mitigate these issues.

Interviewees explained that first-year seminar instructors demonstrated personal characteristics that were vital to their short-term persistence and prolonged success. Before being introduced to campus counselors or meeting their advisors, it was their first-year seminar instructor who supported their initial campus integration. Participants noted that first-year seminar instructors had a unique ability to establish the course relevance, and were able to connect with students on a personal basis. Research confirms that establishing and maintaining course relevance is a critical component of student success (Cosijin & Ingwersen, 2000; Means, Jonassen, & Dwyer, 1997). Preliminary class activities included “ice-breaker” exercises that gauged students’ interests and created a sense of community. Instructors’ ability to create a non-intimidating environment while maintaining relevance is a unique ability not easily achieved (Adelman, 2005; DiMaria, 2006; Grimes; 1997; Hughes; 2015; Jessup-Anger; 2011).

Participants recognized that these initial and informal class discussions made them feel like valuable members of the class (Wasley, 2007; Wild & Ebbers, 2002), and the instructors’ attention to and focus on their point of view encouraged their future preparation and willingness to participate during class discussions and assignments (Meer & Chapman, 2014; Ryan & Glenn, 2004; Savi, 2011). Underprepared and college-ready students, as well as first-semester enrollees
and those taking the first-year seminar after their first semester in college positively perceived their relationship with the instructor. The first-year seminar instructor as an initial confidant and integral member of students’ support networks maintains a unique place in Fink’s (2013) Taxonomy of Significant Learning. As a singular affective course component, the instructor represents Foundational Knowledge. However, as a component of the student support network, the instructor promoted perceptions of Fink’s *human dimension* and *caring* learning goals.

The perceived relevance of these presentations appeared to support the other affective course components described by students, and by which varying degrees of student engagement were supported (Kuh, 2005; Tinto, 1998; Trowler, 2010). The inspiring rhetoric delivered to students by campus faculty and administrators through a number of presentations, class discussions, and lectures encouraged long-term success by increasing students’ personal motivation. This characteristic most closely identifies with Fink’s (2013) *human dimension* and *caring* learning goals within the Taxonomy of Significant Learning. Because these presentations motivated students even after the course had ended supports Fink’s *learning how to learn* learning goals.

**Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model**

Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model generally, and his Taxonomy of Significant Learning specifically, framed and guided the development of this study. According to Fink, course integration of the ICD Model produces significant learning experiences for students. The following discussion considers participants’ perceptions of critical first-year seminar course components’ integration using Fink’s ICD Model.
Situational Factors

Fink (2013) defined situational factors as the “specific context of the teaching and learning situations,” the “expectations of external groups,” the “nature of the subject,” the characteristics of the teacher,” and any “special pedagogical challenges” (p. 76-77). Fink added that situational factors include, “all of the situational constraints and opportunities of the course” (p. 141). Students acknowledged that they entered college lacking not only cognitive skills, but were also underprepared for many of the responsibilities needed to be successful in college. Participants concluded that they were more closely connected to their instructor and other individuals on campus than they were to fellow classmates. Nevertheless, they did not perceive that the number of classmates in each seminar detracted from their availability to connect with peers. The interviewees realized early on that the first-year seminar was designed to introduce them to campus resources and to teach students the difference in expectations between secondary and postsecondary education. Participants perceived that many of the cognitive course components were appropriately fashioned for students of varying levels of academic preparedness. Furthermore, participants perceived that the affective course components provided support and inspired motivation amongst students who were initially disinterested as well as those determined to succeed (Bain, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Participants’ perceived that their first-year seminar instructor was a critical affective component of the course. Each participant recognized that the instructor was responsible for creating a non-intimidating environment, while ensuring each student was aware of the courses’ relevancy (Bain, 2004). The instructor provided support and inspired motivation at a critical time in participants’ college careers (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Through guided course assignments and support, the first-year seminar instructor constructed a shared vision of success perceived by many as significant to
their initial and long-term persistence and success. This study’s participants perceived that noticeable situational factors were determined and accommodated.

**Learning Goals**

In Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model, learning goals are defined as “several kinds of significant learning, not just the understand-and-remember variety” (p. 141). Fink’s learning goals are based on his Taxonomy of Significant Learning, which promotes a learning-centered approach as opposed to traditional content-centered approaches. A learning-centered approach emphasizes content knowledge, but also employs an integrative approach designed to stimulate critical thinking skills, content integration, and produce lifelong learners. For a learning experience to be significant, it should incorporate all six learning goals including foundational knowledge, application, integration, caring, human dimension, and learning how to learn. Participants perceived that most of the cognitive course components encouraged foundational knowledge, application and integration, while the affective course components encouraged foundational knowledge and application, but more frequently facilitated the synergistic combination of learning goals including Caring, human dimension, and learning how to learn. The one major exception to these perceptions were the first-year seminars’ writing assignments. The various formative and summative writing assignments advanced foundational knowledge, application, and integration by teaching students basic writing assessments they would likely encounter during college. Several interviewees noted that they valued and utilized the writing skills throughout their college careers. The first-year seminar’s formative writing assignments improved underprepared students’ confidence, which led them to undertake more in-depth summative writing assignments later in the semester without fear of failure. Academically prepared students agreed that the first-year seminar’s varying writing assignments
were good practice, and reinforced skills learned in other coursework. These perceptions support
the caring and learning how to learn learning goals (Bain, 2002). While study skills strategies
training was significant, their utility were not perceived as quickly as were the writing units and
most other affective course components. Therefore, participants perceived that the first-year
seminar’s learning goals, in relation to Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning, did create
significant learning experiences, albeit apparently unintentionally at times, with only a few minor
exceptions.

Learning Activities

According to Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model, learning activities
engage students in active learning by incorporating powerful forms of experiential and reflective
learning as well as ways of getting basic information and ideas (p. 141). An abundance of recent
research supports Fink’s (2013) claims that, in order to create significant learning experiences,
teaching should include student-centered approaches that promote active learning instead of
teacher-centered instruction, which require passive memory recall (Bain, 2004, 2012; Bailey &
Alfonso, 2005; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Goodman, 2014;
McKeachie, 2002; Tample, 2013; Wild & Ebers, 2002). Fink argued that learning activities
should reinforce learning goals. In addition, research indicates that students should be able to
identify the relevance of specific learning activities (Barbatis, 2010; Boulanger, 2009; Crisp &
Taggart, 2013; Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, 2001; Hanlon O’Connell, 2015; Mayo, 2013; Meer
Interviewees discussed a number of learning activities in relation to their perception of
significant course components. In many cases, the learning activities reinforced the course
components.
Few participants listed lecture as a common learning activity. When it was listed, it was typically used by guest lecturers and presentations delivered by outside campus departments. Students did not negatively perceive lecture when used, as it usually was the most appropriate method to convey foundational knowledge about one’s department and their services offered. An overarching student perception was that class discussions, most often led by their first-year seminar instructor, were inclusive in nature, affording students the opportunity to share in the discussion. Outside of the instructor-led class discussions, only students in small course sections felt particularly connected to their classmates. Judging by participants’ perceptions, it does not appear that the first-year seminars’ learning activities supported Fink’s (2013) human dimension learning goal with respect to encouraging cooperative learning activities.

Fink (2013) described a number of “doing” learning activities that require students to participate actively in the learning process. These sorts of activities require students to apply foundational knowledge in a variety of ways. The participants in this study described several learning activities categorized by Fink as “doing” experiences. One of the most frequently cited and significant was a follow-up activity to the counseling center’s presentation on institutional degree plans and the Statewide Transfer Articulation Reporting System (STARS) Guide System. Using their degree plans, students were required to make tentative lists of all courses they were required to complete in order to earn their degree, and then aggregate the courses based on the number of semesters it would take them to graduate. Similar “doing” learning activities required students to complete a departmental advising form with their advisors, use research databases in the Learning Resource Center (LRC), and schedule an online appointment in the Writing Center.

Some of the most frequently cited and meaningful learning activities were presentations by guest lecturers, and visits to campus departments and resources such as the Learning
Resource Center (LRC), the Writing Center, and Student and Campus Services (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Mayo, 2013; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Nearly each time a participant described the significance of a presentation by a guest lecturer or a visit to a campus department, they explained how a low-stakes assignment, frequently in-class writing assignments, accompanied the presentation and provided time for personal reflection. Fink (2013) described these learning activities as observational experiences and believes that students, “need time to reflect in order to decide what meaning to give these other learning activities. Without this reflection, they have learned something new, but they have not made that learning fully meaningful to themselves” (p. 122). Students were afforded many direct observational learning activities that integrated them into the campus culture, helped establish initial course relevance, and motivated them to persist. Their reflection through low-stakes assignments helped reinforce these learning activities. According to the participants’ perceptions, the learning activities within the first-year seminar were directly reflective of Fink’s (2013) ICD Model.

Feedback and Assessment

Fink (2013) defined quality feedback and assessment as educative assessment, which includes “forward-looking assessment, opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment, clear criteria and standards, and FIDeLity feedback” (p. 141). Fink proposed that for learning experiences to be significant, courses should shift from backward-looking, auditive assessments whose punitive measure of application of foundational knowledge does not improve long-term student learning. Rather, Fink endorsed the practice of educative assessment, which supports forward-looking assessments based on criteria and standards that encourage self-assessment and allow for thoughtful feedback between the instructor and student. As opposed to auditive assessments, educative assessments have a greater purpose than determining students’ grades.
Many of the campus resource units, categorized as both significant cognitive and affective course components, were assessed using backward-looking auditive assessment techniques through a series of online multiple-choice quizzes. Participants noted that they were allowed to use their student manuals, which provided answers to each quiz question through power point presentations, and they were allowed unlimited opportunities to retake the quizzes. Some participants mentioned that their first-year seminar instructor reviewed each quiz during the subsequent class meeting, and required students to discuss correct and incorrect answers. This method does not promote all of Fink’s educative assessment criteria. However, it does appear to offer meaningful self-assessment by providing immediate feedback, allowing students to retake quizzes, and discussing the questions collectively.

Participants stated that they received many handouts, examples, and grading rubrics designed to familiarize them with the first-year seminar writing units. In-class writing assignments were typically returned at the beginning of each subsequent class meeting with instructor notes. During article summary discussions, instructors provided students with a copy of their version of the assignment in order to illustrate how they took notes, and which points they found salient within the reading. Prior to completion of the midterm essay, participants described a practice essay assignment that they mostly completed in class with the aid of their instructor. Students outlined topics, developed thesis statements and topic sentences, and reviewed these with their instructor. Many participants who experienced writing anxiety perceived the first practice essay alleviated their stress and anxiety because it functioned as a low-stakes assignment and was assessed based on completion. This afforded students the flexibility to take chances and not become overwhelmed with fear of failure (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014; Cox, 2009). Participants acknowledged that they knew exactly what their instructors’
essay-grading rubric entailed due to numerous class examples. On one occasion during class, students were given an essay written by an anonymous student, and were required to identify its thesis statement and topic sentences, and were also required to determine its grade. This activity, combined with the practice essay, provided students with clear and transparent grading criteria, and fostered confidence in their ability to complete the summative midterm and final essays to the exact assignments’ specifications.

Other low-stakes daily grade assignments reinforced guest lecturer presentations, and visits to campus departments. These learning activities were perceived by participants as significant because they supported each presentation and required students to apply foundational knowledge. The application activities increased the likelihood that students would remember motivational aspects of guest lecturer presentations and use campus resources in later coursework. These assignments increased participants’ familiarity with various services offered, and supported their long-term motivation to persist.

The researcher determined that nearly all of the learning goals and activities in the site institution’s first-year seminar supported Fink’s (2013) educative assessment criteria. Participants noted that instructors provided clear examples and detailed instructions concerning course assignments. Nearly every formative and summative assignment provided the opportunity for self-assessment and reflection, and frequent forms of feedback were provided promptly. Based on the data, nearly all feedback and assessment of cognitive and affective course components meet Fink’s educative assessment criteria.

Integration

According to Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model, course integration occurs when “All of the major components of the course… are all aligned so they reflect and
support each other” (p. 141). As aforementioned, the data indicates that participants perceived their first-year seminar was successfully integrated based upon Fink’s ICD Model. Participants recognized relevant situational factors such as their instructor’s ability to foster a welcoming and non-intimidating class environment. These were both informative and non-threatening based upon students’ initial academic and social preparation, and students perceived that they encouraged their success. They categorized many cognitive and affective course components, which supported Fink’s expectation of well-developed learning goals. Student-centered “doing,” “observational,” and “reflective” activities that are clearly related to the learning goals encouraged an active learning environment. Many forward-looking assessments with clear criteria and standards encouraged self-assessment and allowed for purposeful dialogue and feedback between instructor and student. The participants described that the activities that prepared them for the assessments measured the stated course goals. Therefore, the researcher concludes that participants perceived that the site-institutions’ first-year seminar was successfully integrated.

Conclusions

The researcher investigated which cognitive and affective course components graduating community colleges students perceived as most significant towards encouraging sustained persistence until certificate or degree conferment. A diverse group of participants was selected intended to mirror institutional diversity. In summation, a number of conclusions may be drawn from the researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ descriptions of their perceptions.

Successful students perceive study skills learned in a first-year seminar to have a positive effect on their persistence. Effective use of study skills support students’ cognitive development and increase instructional relevance when applied in other coursework. The most common study
skills perceived as significant by students were active reading, note taking, and critical thinking skills. Course learning activities regularly required students to use these skills during non-threatening, low-stakes assessments. When students were able to recognize the benefit of specific study skills, their perceptions of the first-year seminar’s relevance increased.

Successful students utilize writing skills learned in first-year seminars throughout their college course-taking. Many students enter postsecondary education fearing college-level writing assignments. This fear of failure often leads to overt stress and anxiety. The formative writing assignments in the first-year seminar introduced students to college-level writing assignments in a non-threatening fashion. These were presented in the form of in-class daily grades that were assessed based on completion. Detailed instructor feedback on these assessments regularly inspired students. The formative assignments built upon one another and concluded in summative article summary, midterm, and final essays. The summative assignments helped alleviate students’ writing fears, and encouraged their academic perseverance.

Successful students report that first-year seminar course components that increased their motivation and confidence were valuable to them. Several affective course components inspired motivation, and a combination of cognitive and affective components increased students’ self-confidence. Often, one’s increased confidence occurred after they were motivated by the successful application of specific foundational knowledge. Students described these instances repeatedly during completion of writing assignments and study skills assessments. Inspiring presentations by guest lecturers also motivated students. Students who benefited from these presentations were receptive to the guests’ material, and appreciative of their counsel.

The first-year seminar instructor was perceived by graduating students as the most important first-year seminar course component. No matter when the participant completed the
course, their level of preparedness, or which components they perceived most significant, the instructor was commonly referenced as the linchpin who facilitated students’ success. Therefore, the researcher believes that the instructor is the most significant community college first-year seminar course component encouraging student persistence until degree completion.

The first-year seminar at this college effectively addresses Fink’s (2013) six types of significant learning detailed in his Taxonomy of Significant Learning. Students were presented foundational knowledge in a variety of formats including power point presentations, instructor-made videos, guest presentations, course readings, and lecture. These formats provided students with a basic understanding of relevant course information and ideas. Both cognitive and affective components were introduced through understand and remember/recite type of Foundational Knowledge learning goals. Application occurred when students utilized learned Foundational Knowledge in a variety of course assessments that stimulated different kinds of thinking. Writing assignments did this often by requiring personal reflection. Application learning goals were often utilized through specific course components, but were also realized through within course activities as desired learning outcomes. Other assignments such as course scheduling, goal setting, and time management required proficiency of foundational knowledge, but also necessitated personal reflection. Successful Integration occurred when students applied foundational knowledge learned in the first-year seminar to other courses. Students perceived that cognitive course components such as writing skills were integrated quickly, while affective course components such as time management and goal setting often took longer to integrate. Fink’s human dimension learning goals were most often supported by affective course components that involved reflection and increased knowledge about oneself. These included personal characteristics of successful college students and were supported by learning activities
such as time management, course scheduling, and goal setting. Caring learning goals that required reassessment of one’s personal perceptions about a subject based on a deeper understanding of foundational knowledge were frequently accomplished once students determined the component’s relevance. This occurred within cognitive components such as writing and study skills, and affective components such as individual and departmental presentations that sought to integrate students into the campus culture. Learning How to Learn learning goals were achieved by students who became better students and self-directed learners, and those who continued learning after the course ended. Students described their experiences continuing the use of and adding to cognitive components such as writing and study skills, and affective components such as advising, course scheduling, time management, and goal setting.

The first-year seminar at this college demonstrates all characteristics of Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model. Situational factors such as students’ fears and initial preparedness were considered and learning activities supported students of varying degrees. Instructors deliberately created a non-threatening and inviting classroom environment in which students felt comfortable and willing to move out of their comfort zone. All six of Fink’s learning goals were achieved within cognitive and affective course components. Learning activities supported learning goals by focusing on student-centered approaches that promoted an active learning environment. In-class writing assignments involving personal reflection, and the faculty advising assignment are two commonly cited examples of active, student-centered learning activities. Prompt feedback and thoughtful assessment was demonstrated routinely. Many low-stakes writing assignments provided instructors with an opportunity to compliment and guide student writing. Students completed a practice essay before attempting summative article summary, midterm, and final essays, and were given numerous handouts and examples
with detailed instructions. Instructors often completed assignments alongside students in order to demonstrate what successful completion of assignments looked like, as well as to provide examples of the steps they took to complete each assignment. Course integration occurred by successfully aligning the first four ICD Model components. Situational factors were considered and reflected in course learning goals. Assessments addressed the learning goals, and provided ample opportunity for substantive instructor feedback, support, and direction. Formative student-centered learning activities prepare students to reflect and use different types of thinking. Together, these components led to successful course integration.

Based on these conclusions, it is evident that a combination of cognitive and affective course components influenced students in considerably different ways. Community colleges that maintain diverse educational programs and encounter students at varying levels of academic and social preparedness may combat these issues through participation in a first-year seminar that emphasizes an integrative approach to cognitive and affective student development.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Through critical incident and interview questionnaires, the researcher examined which cognitive and affective first-year seminar course components successful students perceived as most significant towards their persistence until certificate or degree conferment. The results of this study and the four themes that emerged from the data were consistent with previous research. The literature suggests that many students enter community colleges with vastly different levels of academic preparedness (Atherton, 2012; Bain, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Finke & Fike, 2008; Miranda, 2014; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000; Perin, 2005), and that institutions should structure services to support students’ cognitive transition into higher education (Cuseo, 1991; Derby & Smith, 2004; Feldman, 2005, Goodman, 2014; Hossler, 2006;
Koslow Martin, 2010; Kuh, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Messineo, 2012; O’Gara, Karp, & Hghes, 2009; Padgett, Bers, & Younger, 2014; Porter & Swing, 2006; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Schnell, Louis, & Doetkott, 2003, Tinto, 1974). The literature also confirms that social integration is vitally important to student persistence and success (Astin, 1993; Bain, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1974, 1993; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Students’ successful integration and use of newly attained cognitive and affective components increases course relevance and reduces student fear (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014; Cosijin & Ingwersen, 2000; Cox, 2009; Crumpton & Gregory, 2011; Marcias, 2013; Means, Jonassen, & Dwyer, 1997), which encourages motivation to persist (Andriessen, Phalet, & Lens, 2006; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Jessup-Anger, 2011; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Petty, 2014; Pickens & Eick, 2009; Powell, 2014; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Savi, 2011; Tinto, 1993).

This course-specific examination of graduating community college students’ perceptions of significant cognitive and affective course components provides data that may be useful to administrators implementing first-year experience programs, department chairpersons who want to integrate first-year seminar course design, and faculty who wish to provide significant learning experiences for students. Therefore, the information gleaned from this study leads the researcher to the following recommendations for practice.

Several of the participants in this study discussed how successful integration and use of cognitive and affective components increased course relevance and their motivation to persist. The department/division chairperson, in consultation with faculty, should ensure that cognitive
and affective course components are fully integrated and that learning activities are in place to establish course relevance.

Students’ perceptions of cognitive and affective course components depended on when they completed the first-year seminar within their program of study. In order to maximize course utility, students should be required to take the first-year seminar during their initial semester in college. This could ensure that the maximum benefit of each cognitive and affective course component is realized, and that students are introduced to individuals in their support networks that can motivate them to persist as early as possible.

Fink (2013) noted that institutions should provide organizational support for faculty seeking to integrate courses using the Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model. Administrators who are serious about student learning and persistence should provide time and resources to Freshman Studies Departments that are undertaking this challenge.

Students who completed the first-year seminar during their initial semester in college perceived their instructor as one of the most critical components of the course. The instructor facilitated the cognitive and affective components, and provided students with initial support. Administrators and division/department chairpersons should give much thought to and identify only successful and engaging faculty to teach these courses.

Most faculty who teach the first-year seminar at the site-institution teach full time in other campus departments and teach the first-year seminar on a part-time basis. Increased collaboration amongst full-time and part-time faculty could allow faculty to learn from one another, and to discuss the different sorts of cognitive and affective issues encountered by first-year students.
Recommendations for Further Research

The implications for practice and the results of this study lead the researcher to make recommendations for further research concerning successful community college student perceptions of significant first-year seminar cognitive and affective course components that encouraged persistence until certificate or degree completion. Based on the study’s findings, the researcher recommends the following.

Because this study was limited to one medium-sized, rural institution in the southeast, the researcher recommends that future research include the study of other institutions within the system of varying sizes and service populations. Similar studies that focus on participants at other institutions would provide additional insight into how they structure their first-year seminars, which could allow for more purposeful course design.

The focus of this study considered successful community college students’ perceptions of significant first-year seminar components. With an emphasis on institutional retention and student persistence, further research should investigate unsuccessful students’ perceptions of cognitive and affective course components. Such studies may provide valuable insight into course design, integration, and structure, and may provide faculty with early-alert indicators in order to support and engage at-risk students.

This study explained students’ perceptions during their final semester before graduation. A more expansive study using a survey model measuring students’ perceptions immediately following completion of the first-year seminar would provide useful information that participants may have forgotten, given the length of time between course completion and graduation.

The data used in this study were collected from students who had filed an intent to graduate. Future researchers should employ Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD)
Model to investigate first-year seminar instructors’ perceptions of significant cognitive and affective course components. Such research would prove useful in aligning faculty-student expectations.

**Closing Remarks**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand which first-year seminar cognitive and affective course components successful community college students perceived as most significant in encouraging persistence until certificate or degree completion. The study took place at one medium-sized, rural institution in the southeast. The study was grounded using Fink’s (2013) Integrated Course Design (ICD) Model generally, and his Taxonomy of Significant Learning Goals specifically. Using Fink’s ICD Model, the researcher created the study’s interview questions, coded, and analyzed the data. Using general pragmatic qualitative research, the researcher employed thematic data analysis, which enabled him to identify emergent themes within the data. Four distinct themes emerged during thematic data analysis including: (a) writing efficiency is paramount; (b) competence and confidence; (c) campus integration and support; and (d) responsibility and motivation. This researcher hopes that the information gathered from this course-specific study will add to the knowledge base in this field and fill a gap in the existing literature regarding community college student first-year experience persistence and success. Designing better first-year seminar courses could lead to greater institutional retention and student success in community colleges.
REFERENCES


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Reason, R.D., Cox, B.E., McIntosh, K., & Terenzini, P.T. (2010, May). Deep learning as an individual, conditional, and contextual influence on first-year student outcomes. Paper presented at The Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, Chicago, IL: ERIC.


Rudmann, J. (1992). An evaluation of several early alert strategies for helping first semester freshmen at the community college and a description of the newly developed early alert retention system (EARS) software. California Community College Fund for Instructional Improvement.


Dear student:

Hello and congratulations on your upcoming graduation! I know how much time, dedication, and work went into this accomplishment, and you should be very proud.

My name is Zack Kelley and I am an instructor at Wallace Community College. I am requesting your help in a study that will ask you to complete a questionnaire and meet me to perform an interview regarding your experiences in your first-year seminar course. As an upcoming graduate, I would like to ask you a series of questions about your experiences in your first-year seminar, as well as the courses’ impact on your ability to finish your coursework and earn your certificate or degree.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and will not affect your grades or ability to graduate in any way. Your identity will be completely protected, and for the purposes of the research, you will be assigned a pseudonym.

If you agree to participate in the research study, I will email you a questionnaire that I ask you complete, to the best of your memory, before our interview together. The interview will take place on campus, and will last roughly one to two hours.

Again, congratulations on your upcoming graduation, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Zack Kelley
APPENDIX B:
PARTICIPANT CONFIRMATION EMAIL

Dear student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study! You will find a questionnaire attachment that I would like for you to complete to the best of your memory. When you have completed the questionnaire, please see the second attachment, a copy of my office hours. I have listed two-hour blocks for us to complete the interview process. I anticipate that our interview will last between one to two hours, but will not exceed two.

I would like to remind you that your identity will be completely protected. Your first-year seminar instructor will never see your responses. Furthermore, you will be given a pseudonym in this study.

I sincerely thank you for taking the time and effort to participate in this research study!

Thank you,
Zack Kelley
APPENDIX C:
PARTICANT EMAIL ALTERNATE

Dear student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. However, at this time, the study has enough participants to fulfill its research goals. If one or more students are not able to continue participation in the study, I would like to request your participation at such a time.

I sincerely thank you for being willing to participate in this research study, and congratulations again on your upcoming graduation.

Thank you,
Zack Kelley
APPENDIX D:

CRITICAL INCIDENT PROTOCOL

Using MLA structure and the five-paragraph essay format, to the best of your memory please answer the question below.

1. Please describe in as much detail as possible the most significant or most impactful aspect or moment you remember during your first-year seminar course?
APPENDIX E:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE PROTOCOL

1. Which first-year seminar cognitive course components are most significant in encouraging student persistence until degree completion?
   
a. Can you tell me about which cognitive course components you believe helped you achieve success in future coursework? (foundational knowledge)
   b. Can you tell me about which cognitive course component(s) you believe benefitted you the most initially as a first-semester college freshman?
   c. What course readings did you find most impactful? Why do you believe this was so? How or why do you think this reading affected you more than the others? (application)
   d. Can you tell me about which class activities you found most helpful? Why do you believe this to be so? How or why do you think this activity affected you more than the others? (application)
   e. Can you describe in as much detail as possible a time in which you realized that a cognitive course component you learned in your first-year seminar course enabled you to achieve success in later coursework? At which point did you come to this realization? What unit was this cognitive component associated with? Do you have any further examples of this? (integration)
2. Which first-year seminar affective course components are most significant in encouraging student persistence until degree completion?

   a. Can you tell me about which affective course components you believe helped you achieve success in future coursework? (foundational knowledge)

   b. Can you tell me about which affective course component(s) you believe benefitted you the most initially a first-semester college freshman?

   c. Can you describe a time in your first-year seminar course that you learned something about yourself? How was this helpful? (human dimension)

   d. Can you describe a time in your first-year seminar course that you learned something about one of your classmates? How was this helpful? (human dimension)

   e. Tell me about a time during your first-year seminar course that you remember feeling invested, or specifically caring about your success, or understanding that what you were doing in the course would benefit you later? (caring)

   f. Can you describe which affective course components you have continued employing in future coursework? (learning how to learn)

   g. Please describe any course components that helped develop your critical thinking skills in future coursework. Could you say anything more about that, or do you have anything else to add? (learning how to learn)

   h. In closing, I would like for you to take a second and think about your first-year seminar course. Is there anything that we have not discussed about the course components, cognitive or affective, that you would like for me to know?
APPENDIX F:
ABBREVIATED REFERENCE SYLLABUS

Humanities, Social, and Behavioral Sciences Division
ORI 105 – Orientation and Student Success

I. Course Identification

A. This course is designed to orient students to the college experience by providing them with tools needed for academic and personal success. Topics include developing an internal focus of control, time management and organization skills, critical and creative thinking strategies, personal and professional maturity, and effective study skills for college and beyond.

B. No Pre-Requisites Requirements

C. 3 credit hours

II. Division/Instructor Information

A. Instructor

B. Division Director

III. Curriculum Status Statement

A. Awards associate in arts, associate in science, and associate in applied science degrees. The associate in arts (AA) and associate in science (AS) degree programs are designed for students planning to transfer to a senior institution to pursue a course of study in liberal arts, the sciences, or a specialized professional field. The associate in applied science (AAS) degree is designed for students planning to seek employment based on competencies and skills attained through AAS degree programs of study and applicable courses may or may not be transferable to senior institutions. Certificates are awarded for programs below the degree level that are designed for students who plan to seek employment based on competencies and skills attained through these programs of study.

B. This course partially satisfies Area V requirement for the Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degrees. This course may be transferable to other colleges and universities and is required in many programs of study. It is the responsibility of the
student desiring transfer credit to check with their transfer institution to assure applicability of courses toward their planned education goals

IV. Student Learning Outcomes

A. Enter Course Outcomes/Objectives

1. Students will utilize the college’s academic advising service by locating, scheduling, and meeting with their assigned advisors.

2. Students will demonstrate the ability to access and manage electronic college resources as it pertains to student email, Blackboard, and the student portal.

3. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the campus resources and student success skills.

4. Students will develop beginning college level writing skills.

5. Students will exhibit life skills through completion of daily course assignments.

B. Enter Program Outcomes

1. College-level skills in critical reading and thinking.

2. Effective written communication skills using standards of written English to produce sentences and paragraphs that are purposeful, sequential, logical, and effectively organized.

3. Information Literacy- having the ability to successfully retrieve and manage information through traditional means, efficient use of technology, and computer literacy.

C. Enter General Education

1. Critical Thinking. The ability to analyze problems by differentiating fact from opinions, using evidence from diverse sources effectively, and using sound reasoning to specify multiple solutions and their consequences.

2. Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Based on Knowledge of the Individual and Society. The ability to apply self-assessment, awareness, and reflection strategies to interpersonal, work, community, career, and educational pathways, respectfully engaging with other cultures in an effort to understand them.
V. Course Content

A. This course aims to orient students to the college experience by providing them with skills required for academic and personal success. Topics discussed are technology, college resources, time management and organizational skills, critical thinking strategies, personal and professional maturity, and success tactics.

VI. Methods of Instruction and Evaluation

A. General statement—Instruction

This course utilizes a variety of in-class and out-of-class activities designed to help students create greater success in college and in life. Within every class session, you will ideally experience three or more of the following activities:

- An exercise that reinforces the reading and writing in the text.
- A quick-write activity in response to an in-class exercise or prompt from the text
- Discussion (in pairs, trios, quartets, or with the entire class). For example, discussions could focus on one of the following features: “Ways to Succeed in College”.

B. General statement—Evaluations

1. In-class activities including exercises, quick-writing activities, pop quizzes, and discussions
2. An article summary
3. Resource Quizzes found on the content section of our Blackboard page.
5. Final Essay/Exam.
   a) Assignment details will be given out and discussed in class.

C. General statement—Essay Criteria

1. All essays will require a minimum of five paragraph. Each paragraph must contain a minimum of five sentences. Essay will be typed using Microsoft Word in Modern Language Association format.

VII. Course Requirements/Grading Criteria

A. Standard institutional grading scale
1. Standard institutional grading scale

\[
\begin{align*}
100 – 90 &= A \\
89 – 80 &= B \\
79 – 70 &= C \\
69 – 60 &= D \\
59 &\, \text{& Below} = F
\end{align*}
\]

B. Description of evaluation/assessment tools and techniques

1. Participation (Daily Grade) activities (20 points per activity) = 400 points
2. Article Summary = 100 points
3. Student-Faculty Advising Assignment = 100 points
4. Resource Quizzes (20 points each) = 200 points
5. Midterm Essay = 100 points.
6. Final Paper = 100 points

Total Possible Points = 1000 points.

- Anticipated date will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class.

C. Questions and/or concerns—

1. Any student who has a question or concern about the final course grade must consult with the faculty member within the first twelve calendar days of the following term.

VIII. Textbooks, Supplies, Materials

A. Textbook

1. The Manual is the major instructional resource for this course. It is created by the Orientation Department and printed by the print shop to keep prices as low as possible for students. You may find the manual in both campus bookstores.

IX. Course Policies

A. Exam make-up policy

1. Participation (daily grade) activities cannot be made up. Students who can validate catastrophic life events may be offered alternate activities on rare occasions at the discretion of the instructor. Tests are offered online via Blackboard and will be available until a specified date near the end of the semester to allow students sufficient time for completion. Point penalties apply to all late assignments.

B. Cell phones
1. Turn them off, or at the very least, on silent. In the event of an emergency, please ask individuals to call the Wallace Community College switchboard.

C. Academic integrity statement
   1. See the College Wide Policies for actions that constitute cheating or plagiarism.

D. Eating/drinking policies
   1. Drinks are allowed (clean up all spills) in traditional classrooms. However, no food or drinks are permitted in computer labs.

X. Additional Division/Discipline Information
   A. Attendance
      1. Please review the College Wide Policies. Absences may result in missed participation points (cannot be made up) as well as limiting the effectiveness of the course for your overall development.

XI. Instructor's Personal Statement of Affirmation

Instructors respect each student as an individual. We welcome any student for conferences and especially encourage students who are failing prior to mid-term to make an appointment to discuss their status.

XII. College Wide Policies

College wide policies and information are found at
APPENDIX G:

APPROVAL LETTER FROM SITE INSTITUTION

Zachary L. Kelley  
Dr. David E. Hardy, Faculty Advisor  
Permission Letter

1 November 2016

Dear [Name]

As a student in the doctoral program at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, I am conducting a research study to examine students’ experiences in Wallace Community College’s first-year seminars. I need your assistance to complete this study.

With your permission, I would like to interview WCC students and examine campus data that is pertinent to my research. The data that I collect will only be used for the purpose of my study, and all student participants will remain anonymous. There are no foreseeable risks to persons involved in the study, and participation is completely voluntary. There are also no direct benefits to participants.

The results of my research will be reported in the form of a doctoral dissertation at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Research such as this is important and necessary in order to help make decisions regarding students’ experiences in first-year seminars, as well as first-year seminar course design.

Your signature below indicates that you will permit me to conduct research at the Wallace Community College Dothan campus.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Zachary L. Kelley  
Instructor

[Signature]

Dr. Linda C. Young  
Name of President  
[Signature of President]  
[Date]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Zachary L. Kelley  
Name of Researcher  
[Signature of Researcher]  
[Date]
February 20, 2017

Zack Kelley
ELPTC
College of Education
Box 870231

Re: IRB#: 17-OR-669 “Community College First-Year Seminar Courses and Persistence to Degree: A Qualitative Exploration of Graduating Students Perceptions of Course Components”

Dear Mr. Kelley:

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

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on February 19, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent form to provide to your participants.

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

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

[Redacted] T. Myles, MSM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer

358 Rose Administration Building | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127
205-348-8461 | Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-1066
APPENDIX I:

UA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPLICATION

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

CONSENT FORM FOR NONMEDICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Individual’s Consent to be in a Research Study

You are being asked to be in a research study. This study is called “Community college first-year seminar courses and persistence to degree: A qualitative exploration of graduating students’ perceptions of course components.” This study is being done by Mr. Zack Kelley. He is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Higher Education Administration at The University of Alabama, Mr. Kelley is being supervised by Dr. David E. Hardy, Associate Dean for Research and Service and Associate Professor of Higher Education in the College of Education at The University of Alabama. Because this study is a partial fulfillment of degree requirements, Mr. Kelley is not receiving any salary or monetary compensation for completing this project.

What is this study about?

The intent of this qualitative study is to seek to understand which cognitive and affective course components graduating community college students believe are most significant in first-year seminar courses. Currently, there is much research detailing the utility of first-year experience seminars, but virtually no studies seek to understand which course components students perceive are most significant to their sustained success. There currently exists a void of research focusing on two-year institutions’ first-year experience seminars. What research is available typically measures student participation alone. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to understand and explain students’ perceptions of which first-year seminar course components were most significant.

Why is this study important—What good will the results do?

An intensive examination of graduating community students’ perceptions of the course components within their first-year seminar course will provide insight into ways in which community colleges may increase student persistence through their first-year experience seminars. The emphasis on course content and instructional strategies from students’ perspective may be of value to practitioners and curriculum design committees when determining the specific educational needs of two-year college freshmen entering first-year experience courses.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have filed an intent to graduate and successfully completed the institution’s first-year seminar course.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 2/13/2017
EXPIRATION DATE: 2/19/2018
How many other people will be in this study?

The investigator will interview between twenty—twenty-five students. The participants will be selected in an attempt to mirror the institution’s diversity.

What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, Mr. Kelley will ask you to complete the preliminary questionnaire prompt, and conduct a single interview with you at a mutually agreed upon time and location. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Mr. Kelley will use a semi-structured interview question protocol as a guide for the interview, and the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Every effort will be made to protect your privacy. Your name will not be used in any publications that result from this study, and any potentially identifying comments will be masked as much as possible without distorting the meaning of your responses.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

The preliminary questionnaire prompt is not timed. The interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes, depending on how much information about your perceptions you choose to share.

Will being in this study cost me anything?

The only cost to you from this study is your time.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?

There will be no financial remuneration for participating in this study.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being this study?

There are no foreseeable risks.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you. However, the researcher will attempt to learn from your perceptions as a graduating community college student as to which course components you perceived as most significant to your sustained success. These insights may lead to useful recommendations to current and future program administrators, as well as faculty members who seek to enhance first-year experience seminars.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your identity and participation in the study will be known only to the researcher and to you. You are free to decide where and when the researcher will conduct the private, one-on-one interviews so you may talk without being overheard. When the researcher reports findings
and/or publishes any articles using this data, he will use pseudonyms to ensure participants' anonymity.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All data collected for this study -- the audio tapes, transcripts of the interviews and critical incidents -- will be kept on a password encrypted hard drive locked in Mr. Kelley's office at the site institution. He will be the only person with access to these data. The data will be retained on his hard drive for a period of five years after the study is completed. At the end of five years, all data will be shredded and/or incinerated. When the researcher reports findings and/or publishes any articles using this data, he will use pseudonyms to ensure participants' anonymity.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

The only alternative is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?

Being in this study is totally voluntary. It is your free choice. You may choose not to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Not participating or stopping participation will have no effect on your relationships with the researcher, or Wallace Community College.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board is a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies. They may review the study records if they wish. This is to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions about this study, please ask them. Please contact me by phone at (334) 618-8496 or via mail at:

Zack Kelley
106 Lamont Circle
Dothan, AL 36303

You may also contact the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. David E. Hardy, Director of Research at the Education Policy Center at The University of Alabama and Assistant Professor in the Higher Education Administration Program, via phone at (205) 348-8038 or through mail at the following address:

Dr. David E. Hardy
College of Education
The University of Alabama
207 Carmichael Hall
Box 870231
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0231
If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or at any time become dissatisfied with any aspect of this study, you may anonymously contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205) 348-8461 or toll free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the online survey for research participants, which is located at the site above. If you prefer, you may ask Mr. Kelley for a hard copy of the transcript. Should you have further questions, you may send an e-mail to participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions.

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Research Participant          Date

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Investigator                   Date

____ Yes, you have my permission to audio record the interview.

____ No, I do not want my interview recorded.

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Research Participant          Date

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Investigator                   Date