DEFINING EXCELLENCE AND INNOVATION IN AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A STUDY OF BEST PRACTICES IN FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS THAT LEAD TO STUDENT SUCCESS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the growing concern that students graduating from United States' high schools are not prepared to enter college with the requisite skills to be successful. President Obama's Graduation Initiative coupled with the weak performance of high-school graduates on college readiness examinations have led to a focus on first-year seminars as an important tool for advancing the completion agenda. These seminars are being used in a variety of ways to help students succeed by preparing them for the academic rigors of college coursework.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify best practices in community college first-year seminars that have been demonstrated to lead to improved outcomes. For the purpose of this study, improved outcomes are defined as the strategies and / or practices that institutions employ in their first-year seminars that directly address the issues of college readiness and President Obama's 2020 graduation initiative. The author examined the best practices employed by five award-winning recipients of the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, using Barefoot & Fidler's (1996) seven gold standards as the measure by which to gauge best practices.

The study identified twelve best practices employed in the first-year seminars at the award-winning institutions investigated in the study: mandatory placement testing, outreach to high-school partners, teaching life skills, early advising, utilization of various

methods of assessment, awarding academic credit for the seminars, limiting seminar class size, continual training, and development of seminar staff and faculty, teaching involvement by both faculty and student affairs personnel, compensation for faculty and non-faculty involved in teaching the seminar, the use of upper-level peer mentors, and the inclusion of various seminar types.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my guiding light and source of strength,

my mother, Lottie Jackson, my father William Jackson,

and my devoted husband Marc McFadden,

for their love, support, encouragement, and prayers;

our daughters, Sydney and Brittney,

whom I encourage to pursue their goals with passion, discipline, purpose,

and unwavering commitment.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Over the past three decades, cabinet members of various presidential administrations have made more than a few noteworthy attempts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in American institutions of education. Since the 1980s, America has slipped to 16th in the world among certificate and degree holders for adults ages 25-34, falling behind Korea, Canada, Japan and other nations (White House, 2012). The United States struggles with a college achievement gap since approximately 38.2% of high-school graduates do not seek entry into institutions of higher education after graduation (Bureau of Labor and Statistics [BLS], 2013).

During this same time frame, various secretaries of education have convened commissions to help define deficiencies that exist both at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The reports from the commissions concluded that many factors contribute to the achievement gap. "The achievement gap in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, college entry and completion rates, among other success measures" *Education Week* (2011, para. 1). One of the commission's reports identified issues such as poor quality of teacher preparation and lack of academic rigor as factors contributing to the achievement gap in secondary institutions. At the post-secondary level, concerns regarding access, cost,

obstacles to financial aid, transparency / accountability and lack of innovation were evident in a second report nearly 25 years later.

To lay the groundwork for this study of best practices in First-Year Seminars (FYS), it is important to discuss what is known about the problems that exist in America's education systems. The reports produced by the secretaries of education entitled A *Nation at Risk* and *A Test of Leadership* respectively, serve to highlight the problems throughout America's education system and also function as a tool to help educators identify where reinforcement is needed. Nearly a decade after the publication of *A Test of Leadership*, President Barack Obama introduced a new initiative to bolster the number of college graduates in the United States by the year 2020. The president's proposal focused on a completion agenda and addresses various ways colleges can help students succeed. The reports from the commissions coupled with the president's initiative will be used as a template to describe how FYS can help bridge the achievement gap. The following sections of this chapter will further discuss *A Nation at Risk, A Test of Leadership* and The *American Graduation Initiative*."

Secretary T.H. Bell: *A Nation at Risk*

Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, under the direction of President Ronald Reagan, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The commission produced a report entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). This document examined the quality of primary and secondary education in the United States (U.S.) as we approach the 21st Century.

According to Secretary Bell, the commission was created because of public perceptions regarding the state of America's educational system. The Secretary noted that

creation of the commission was based on his "responsibility to provide leadership, constructive criticism, and effective assistance to schools and universities" (U.S. Department of Education, 1983, para. 2)

The commission's report revealed several facts about the state of education in the United States with four measured outcomes: content / curriculum, expectations, time, and teaching. A review of the commission's findings revealed that curricular issues topped the list, indicating that the curricula in secondary schools had been "homogenized, diluted and diffused to the point that they no longer [had] a central purpose" (U.S. Department of Education: Findings, 1983, para. 3). Trends also showed that since the 1960s more students migrated from vocational and college preparatory courses, such as advanced mathematics and foreign languages, to more non-specific "general" courses, such as physical education and home economics.

The findings regarding expectations uncovered many inconsistencies and deficiencies that exist at the K-12 and post-secondary level. The secretary defined "expectations in terms of the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills that school and college graduates should possess" (U.S. Department of Education: Findings, 1983, para. 6). The commission also referred to the time, hard work, behavior, self-discipline, and motivation that are essential for high student achievement. The report notes that deficits in the area of "expectations" include the following items:

- A decrease in the amount of high school homework (one-hour per night average).
- Lack of science and mathematics courses and foreign language requirements compared to other industrialized nations.
- Lowered acceptance requirements by colleges and universities, thus lowering the bar and lessening accountability at the secondary level.
- A watering-down of textbooks, due to a shortage of experienced teachers and scholars to write quality schoolbooks that challenge readers.

- Decreased spending allowance for textbooks and other instructional materials at public primary and secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education: Findings, 1983, para. 7).

The commission also noted a deficiency in the amount of time students spend in school. The report tells a disturbing story about how little time Americans invest in schoolwork. In England and other industrialized countries, students are spending approximately eight hours per day in school, compared to the United States where students average approximately six hours per day in school. Additionally, American students spent more time taking non-consequential elective courses compared to schools in other countries that spent more time on core subjects such as English, History or Biology. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the report found that "in most schools, the teaching of study skills is haphazard and unplanned. Consequently, many students complete high school and enter college without disciplined and systematic study habits" (U.S. Department of Education: Findings, 1983, para.25).

The commission's report further indicates many problems exist in finding qualified personnel to teach courses. They also found that teacher preparation programs need significant improvement and stated that the majority of time spent preparing teachers focused too much on educational methods, as opposed to training teachers in subject areas such as mathematics and science. The report cited a significant shortage of mathematics and science teachers and claimed that nearly half of the newly employed teachers in mathematics and science were unqualified.

The findings were alarming and pointed out some hard truths about America's educational system. The report also cited the following:

- International comparisons of student achievement, completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.
- Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.
- About 13% of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40%.
- Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.
- Over half the population of gifted students does not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school.
- The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points.
- College Board achievement tests also reveal consistent declines in recent years in such subjects as physics and English.
- Both the number and proportion of students demonstrating superior achievement on the SATs (i.e., those with scores of 650 or higher) have also dramatically declined.
- Many 17-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40% cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.
- There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of U.S. 17-year-olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973, and 1977.
- Between 1975 and 1980, remedial mathematics courses in public four-year colleges increased by 72% and now constitute one-quarter of all mathematics courses taught in those institutions.
- Average tested achievement of students graduating from college is also lower. (U.S. Department of Education, 1983: A nation at risk, para. 13)

These findings show an incredible need to address outcomes, particularly at the high-school level, and the commission placed the responsibility for reform on everyone from the “students themselves; from parents, teachers, and school boards; from colleges and universities; from local, State, and Federal officials; from teachers' and administrators' organizations; from industrial and labor councils; and from other groups

with interest in and responsibility for educational reform" (U.S. Department of Education: Recommendations, 1983, para. 59). As summarized in the report, the commission concluded that the nation was at risk for graduating many students unprepared for the academic rigors of higher education, thus furthering the achievement gap. Unfortunately, in 2006 when Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings produced the next report on the state of American institutions of higher education, not much had changed (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 6).

Secretary Margaret Spellings: *A Test of Leadership*

Margaret Spellings, the newly appointed Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, assembled the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2005 to examine and propose reform at the post-secondary level. In September 2006, the commission completed a full report of its findings and recommendations, entitled *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. The report cited six areas of concern within higher education: access, cost, obstacles to financial aid, transparency / accountability, and lack of innovation.

The Spellings' Report notes that a student's academic performance in high school can severely restrict access to higher education. It further states that nearly 25% of students attending public high schools do not graduate, and that number rises exponentially in low-income and minority districts. The commissioners also state that inadequate high school preparation and misalignment between high schools and colleges creates an "expectations gap" (U.S. Department of Education p. 17). For those students fortunate enough to make it to college, the achievement gap quickly becomes evident,

and nearly 40% of these students find themselves in developmental or remedial education courses early in their college education (U.S. Department of Education p. 25).

According to the commission, other barriers to access include affordability and cost. Fewer opportunities for scholarships, grants, and work-study opportunities have left students to either pay out of pocket or obtain costly student loans. At the community college level, access is guaranteed; however, class availability is not. Conversely, universities have selective admissions, and admissions officers often choose higher achieving students rather than those who struggled at the secondary level. The authors of *A Test of Leadership* also noted that waitlists of up to four years have limited access for many students, even at community colleges, to high-profile competitive programs, such as nursing, radiologic technology, and respiratory therapy. Some students do not see the benefit of waiting and choose other fields of study. Others become discouraged and decide to enter the workforce while waiting, but unfortunately, many who choose this path never return to college.

The commission also remarked that the American financial aid system is in need of retooling. The report states, "the entire financial aid system—including federal, state, institutional, and private programs—is confusing, complex, inefficient, duplicative, and frequently does not direct aid to students who truly need it" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 28). Streitfeld (2009) states that student loans have topped the $150 billion mark and that students and parents alike are too often unclear about the hazards and pitfalls of student loans and how costs vary among institutions.

Another area of concern cited by the commission was the problem of transparency and accountability in colleges and universities, in particular, a lack of transparency and

accessibility with respect to graduation and retention rates. With each college and university creating and operating its own databases to track statistics, policymakers and prospective students find it difficult to locate and analyze essential institutional data (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 21). The commission states, "This lack of useful data and accountability hinders policymakers and the public from making informed decisions and prevents higher education from demonstrating its contribution to the public good" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 20). While it is not illegal for institutions to forgo publishing this data, failing to do so leaves students, parents, legislative bodies and accrediting bodies conjecturing about institutional outcomes.

The last area of concern noted by the commission was lack of innovation in postsecondary institutions, which has hampered, not only local, state, and federal economies, but has also affected the United States' foothold in the larger global economy. The report stated that educators have been apprehensive about implementing and improving workforce development methodologies such as entrepreneurship and global technologies. According to the report, educators' hesitance in these areas will eventually cripple future growth and economic development for the country, thus putting the United States further behind other countries of lesser means. The report also stated that educators must not be afraid to experiment with different teaching methods particularly in the areas of science and mathematics.

The reports from Secretaries Bell and Spellings revealed considerable problems with America's K-12 and higher education systems. At the K-12 level, issues such as lack of academic rigor, length of the school day / year, and inadequate teacher preparation have been a constant source of problems that have plagued American schools for

decades. At the post-secondary level, concerns regarding access to higher education, cost, difficulties obtaining financial aid as well as a lack of transparency, accountability and innovation were noted in the secretary's reports, but remain problematic several years later. The deficiencies noted by the commissions have contributed to college readiness issues, with an increase in the numbers of students unprepared for the academic rigors of college (ACT, 2013). While there have been a number of small and large-scale reform efforts that have attempted to address the problems outlined in these reports, attempts have largely failed to provide long-term solutions to 21st century problems (Boggs, 2011). Given that only 25% of the nation's high-school graduates are testing at the college level (ACT, 2013), colleges and universities across the country will continue to experience difficulties with student retention and persistence.

Facing a global recession and a crumbling educational infrastructure, newly elected President Barack Obama sought to help the economy with a bold new plan to help citizens achieve certificates and degrees while concurrently bridging the achievement gap.

President Barack Obama: *The American Graduation Initiative*

In 2009, when President Barack Obama took office, he immediately began making plans to change the course of education in the United States. He appointed Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education and made it part of his presidential agenda to improve American institutions of higher education. Addressing education and the quality of education promptly became a top priority for the president and his advisors. In fact, for the first time, community colleges played a central role in federal educational reform efforts (The White House, 2009).

The economic collapse of 2008 brought mass devastation to the American workforce and caused record high unemployment rates (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Millions of unemployed Americans came to the stark realization that they needed to return to college either for enhancing a current skill set or to receive education in a new subject area. For most, spending four years completing a degree was not an option, so many turned to community colleges to accomplish their goals (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2009). While enrollment at both two- and four-year institutions saw a steady increase over the last decade, the economic crisis contributed to substantial spikes in enrollment at community colleges (Degree Directory.Org, 2009).

President Barack Obama saw the immediate need for retraining America's workforce and recognized the role of the community college in this effort. On February 24, 2009, in a speech addressed to congress, the president established an ambitious agenda for America to once again have the highest number of college graduates in the world (The White House, 2009). In a live speech five months later at Macomb Community College in Michigan, the president put his plan into action by placing the spotlight on community colleges to meet this ambitious goal. The president also stated in his address (The White House, 2009):

> Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. Yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high-school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. Moreover, half of the students who begin college never finish.

The president's remarks left many stunned; even some educators were unaware that completion rates fared so poorly. For years, administrators at colleges and

universities lacked focus and lost sight of retention and completion rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The president now had the facts and left many administrators to answer questions at their own institutions. For the first time at many institutions, the urgency of ensuring student success became a priority. Completion rates and learning outcomes suddenly became more significant and thus the creation of new programs that promote student success quickly ensued (Russell, 2011).

The president's plan was designed to help Americans retrain, as well as receive degrees in new and emerging fields. He intended for his plan to not only put Americans back to work in better paying jobs but to also stimulate the national economy. However, one problem remained: The issues outlined in the reports from Secretaries Bell and Spellings still existed.

One must ask, would record high enrollment levels only serve to compound the problems in the higher education system or would college leaders rise to the occasion and find innovative ways to address existing problems while providing quality education to the masses? The president's mission certainly challenged higher education leaders to offer immediate and thoughtful solutions to these tough problems.

K-12 and Higher Education Reform Efforts (1983 - 2001)

Since the early 1980s, educational leaders have attempted to address the problems identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings. These efforts at reform remained part of a larger effort to bridge the widening achievement gap and correct deficiencies within K-12 and postsecondary education. Reform efforts at the K-12 level during the latter half of the 20th century attempted to educate the "whole child" with a series of educational concepts designed to help students comprehend material on a broader scale. These methods

focused less on traditional reading and writing activities but embodied learning at a deeper level, in an attempt to help students become aware of information relative to its historical perspective. Years later, federal government programs such Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) were introduced, but these programs were riddled with problems and faced stiff opposition from inception (Education Reform, 2010). Reform at the post-secondary level was not a large-scale government-led effort; it was rather a series of smaller efforts made by visionary groups and educational leaders that were designed to keep pace with community, global and workforce needs.

Problems with implementation and controversial techniques to measure OBE (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory [NCREL], 1995) led to congress passing the NCLB Act of 2001; a new attempt at broad-based educational reform that sought to keep the outcomes based approach but also added an assessment requirement whereby states established their own achievement standards. The Act required schools to assess students at select grade levels in order to receive access to federal funding. While NCLB seemed to address some of the criticisms of the OBE, there were an equal number of criticisms of the Act itself. Opponents of NCLB voiced several concerns including unrealistic expectations stemming from the NCLB requirement of every student to "test to grade level in reading and math by 2014" (Education Reform, 2010, para. 1). Critics claim that teachers have become so focused on institutional outcomes and federal funding that they are merely "teaching to the test" and have severely shortchanged students' educations by omitting essential material necessary to have a well-balanced education (Education Reform, 2010, para. 3).

Despite all of the reform efforts occurring at the K-12 level, not much was occurring at the post-secondary level. One of the few attempts at in higher education reform came in 1997 with the publication of *The Learning College* by Terry O'Banion. The Learning College Model (LCM) sought to make learning a priority for students during their entire college experience. Established on six main principles, O'Banion (1997, p. 47) describes the framework for the LCM:

- The learning college creates a substantive change in individual learners.
- The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible
- The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

The learning-centered approach is a holistic process, whereby highly trained faculty members become facilitators of the educational process and actively involve students in learning, while staff and administrators assess learning outcomes. In addition to its emphasis on creating a rich learning environment, this model encouraged community involvement and collaborative-based learning.

The introduction of O'Banion's LCM became a model for bridging the achievement gap by helping underprepared students ready themselves for the academic rigors of college. (While the term "underprepared" can be used to describe a variety of academic deficiencies, for the balance of this paper, the term underprepared will be defined as "college freshman who are not capable of taking college-level courses based

on the college-readiness assessments as administered by individual institutions.”) According to O’Banion himself, the LCM is an integral component in the development of effective FYS (O’Banion, 2013). Many of the elements of the LCM are seen in today’s seminars, and O’Banion & Wilson (2011, p. 6) further make the case about the LCM’s importance in reform and FYS:

> As the Learning Revolution spread throughout all levels of education in the United States innovators and reformers began to create programs and practices to reflect the emerging focus on learning. Learning Communities were being created everywhere, and research established their potency as an effective new program to retain students and improve their performance. Learning Outcomes became the coin of the realm for organizing and focusing what needed to be learned; the accrediting associations began to require learning outcomes of all institutions. Peter Senge’s *Learning Organization* captured the imaginations of scores of leaders who tried to transform their organizational structures and practices to reflect the new emphasis on learning. Studies on the brain were translated into educational practice to expand students’ potential for learning. Learning Portfolios were designed to capture the substance of what students were learning. And a host of learning-centered innovations flooded the journals and conference forums: Classroom Assessment Techniques, Project-Based Learning, Contextual Learning, Work-Based Learning, Authentic Learning, First-Year Experience, Service Learning, Active Learning, and Collaborative Learning are examples.

O’Banion’s LCM not only further opened the door to pave the way for the resurgence of FYS, but it also helped to address many of the deficiencies noted by Secretaries Bell and Spellings in their reports.

K-12 and Higher Education Reform Efforts (2002-2013)

Nearly 20 years after *A Nation at Risk* was published, the issues of reform and bridging the achievement gap remain at the forefront for educators in both K-12 and in institutions of higher education. However, the skills required of students today are drastically different from those needed in the 1980s when *A Nation at Risk* was published. Technological proficiency, understanding of global diversity, critical thinking and working in a collaborative manner are essential elements students must possess upon high school graduation. The question remains: How can old and new problems be fixed in ways that encourage the incorporation of 21st century educational standards? There are efforts underway at the K-12 and postsecondary level that encourage the incorporation of 21st century concepts, as well as government efforts to provide incentives to states to improve their educational infrastructures. Within higher education, programs made possible through philanthropic foundations such as the Lumina Foundation attempt to build on O'Banion's model of the learning college by emphasizing student success (O'Banion, 2013). While the federal government can suggest that college leaders work with local and state governing bodies to effect change that will help bridge the achievement gap, government officials cannot mandate change. The federal government through the Department of Education has also tried to effect change by encouraging college and university leaders to work within their institutions and with advocacy organizations to find ways to improve college readiness and reinforce student success. Lastly, methods to improve retention and student success that were popular in higher education in the 1970s have been rediscovered and are making a comeback with a slightly newer look. According to Pope (2005), First-Year Experience Programs are one

such approach gaining in popularity, one that could be the nation's best option for solving the expectations or achievement gap.

However, educational researchers and political leaders have not placed the burden of closing the educational gap on those who work in higher education alone. Administrators and teachers at the K-12 level have also been called to account. In 2009, President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan introduced a new attempt at K-12 reform entitled Race to the Top (RTT). Funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the government pledged $4.35 billion for reform of America's K-12 institutions (United States Department of Education, 2009). The plan encourages states to comprehensively address reform by collaborating with local education authorities (LEAs) to use RTT "and other funds to increase student achievement, decrease the achievement gaps across student subgroups, and increase the rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers" (United States Department of Education, 2009, p. 4). Two components of the RTT application process involve states coordinating with LEAs to determine how a seamless P-20 approach to education can be obtained. The requirements call for involvement with early childhood education centers as well as state colleges and universities to better align curriculum at both levels. This integrated approach not only has potential to decrease the achievement gap but aligns all state educational institutions with regard to learning outcomes and expectations.

While RTT is the largest reform effort in U.S. history (United States Department of Education, 2009) and was built on the principle of improving outcomes, there are plenty of skeptics including teachers, unions, politicians, and analysts who view this

program as more detrimental than helpful. One key criticism of the program is that it encourages states to allow more charter schools instead of restructuring existing public schools. Another program criticism is that the RTT program still advocates "teaching to the test" and puts too much emphasis on mathematics and reading while disregarding other subjects (Grannan, 2010). Some say that the federal government has overstepped its boundaries by interfering with public school systems and should not be involved in program creation (Alliance for the Separation of School and State, 2008). Many contend that the advent of programs such as RTT has done little to change the educational landscape for American K-12 institutions (Ravitch, 2010) while award recipients are touting the massive improvements seen in education statewide since receiving funding (Tennessee State Government, 2010). Stakeholders and analysts are still in the initial stages of reviewing RTT and its efficacy; however, long-term effects may not be realized for quite some time (Ounce of Prevention, 2012).

The K-12 advocacy group Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) is a national organization that advocates for 21st century readiness for all school-aged children. Its goal is to help provide students and teachers with the necessary tools and resources to help the United States educational system incorporate critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation into the curriculum. Additionally, P21 considers the following characteristics equally important to its 21st century mission:

- Information, media literacy, and communication skills,
- Interpersonal, collaborative, and self-direction skills,
- Global awareness,
- Economic and business literacy, including entrepreneurial skills, and
- Civic literacy (P21, n.d.).

P21's holistic approach to educational reform does not start and end with the student. A large portion of the organization's philosophy places emphasis on teaching and assessment, and its conceptual framework is such that it also places responsibility on teachers for assuring that they are responsible for standards, assessments, curriculum and instruction, their own professional development, and providing optimal learning environments for children.

Critics of P21 have claimed that the concepts employed by this model put too much emphasis on technology, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, and collaboration. (*The Forum for Youth Investment*, 2009). Members of the group Forum for Youth Investment (FYI) argue that students need to have a good foundation in core content areas and analytical skills before they can incorporate 21st century standards into their educational repertoire. FYI members also state that "the 21st century skills movement erodes opportunities for a well-rounded education and further forces schools that are constrained by NCLB to reduce subject matter options in order to increase 21st century skills (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2009, para. 2).

At the postsecondary level, college and university leaders have worked with national organizations to undertake reform at the institutional level. Integrating the goal of student success into the college / university mission was a big trend at the turn of the century and brought about bold new programming such as completion agendas, mandatory new student orientations and FYS (Pope, 2005).

In 2004, the Lumina Foundation created Achieving the Dream (ATD), "a national reform network dedicated to community college student success and completion; focused

primarily on helping low-income students and students of color complete their education and obtain market-valued credentials" (Achieving the Dream, n.d.). In order to gain acceptance into ATD, colleges had to be willing to change fundamental operations in an effort to bring about student success. Achieving the Dream (n.d.) established four principles for improving institutional outcomes and five steps to increasing student success:

- Principle 1 – Committed Leadership
- Principle 2 – Use of Evidence to Improve Programs and Services
- Principle 3 – Broad Engagement
- Principle 4 – Systemic Institutional Improvement
- Step 1 – Commitment to Improving Student Outcomes
- Step 2 – Use Data to Prioritize Actions
- Step 3 – Engage Stakeholders to Help Develop a Plan
- Step 4 – Implement, Evaluate, and Improve Strategies
- Step 5 – Establish a Culture of Continuous Improvement

The principles and steps were created to provide colleges with a framework for closing the achievement gap and improving student outcomes. According to Gonzalez (2011, para. 11), colleges that have enjoyed the most success from ATD "shared several key characteristics, including broad-based support from administrators, faculty, and staff; strong institutional research departments that produced accessible reports on student achievement; regular evaluations of their programs; and an ability to scale up successful programs."

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2012), there are 1,655 public community colleges in the United States, and 415 private colleges. With 2,070 colleges eligible to participate in ATD, only 169 (8.1%)

are currently members. One could wonder why are so few colleges participating in ATD when student success should be a leading goal at all colleges. One possible reason is the lack of research to support that such changes actually work. Gonzalez (2011, p. 6) states that despite making significant institutional changes to accommodate ATD standards "student outcomes have remained relatively unchanged" since the program's inception in 2004. Gonzalez (2011) also stated that in spite of the $76 million invested in the project by the Lumina Foundation, evidence of notable changes was not immediately seen in the areas of developmental math, reading or English. Dad (2011) mentioned that while many schools support the premise of ATD, ultimately budgetary constraints stopped them from moving forward with implementing such plans. He (Dad, 2011, para. 11) also offers a more pessimistic perspective regarding student success and lack of commitment to programs such as ATD:

> More darkly, there's the unspoken truth that some students will just never make it. Depending on your angle to the universe, the meaning of [some] will vary; I've heard serious people argue earnestly that the pass rates we currently have are simply the best we can get, given the students we get. It's hard not to notice that selective institutions have consistently higher student success rates, even when they herd their students into 300-seat lectures taught by graduate students. When you have open-door admissions, you can't repackage failure as 'selectivity;' instead, you have to own it and get blamed for it. Selective institutions can outsource failure; we don't have that option.

Dad (2011) makes a thought-provoking argument concerning an intriguing national dilemma: Are public colleges inherently set up to fail by virtue of the fact that they are open-door institutions, or should this situation be viewed from the perspective that private colleges have an advantage because they offer selective admissions? Or

perhaps, Dad has finally identified the central root of this argument, which is that public colleges are in a difficult situation because of the perpetual academic decline in K-12 institutions.

Another effort occurring at the community college level is the incorporation of 21st century skills into the curricula. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012) is working to implement a policy entitled "Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future." This effort seeks to reform community colleges by addressing nine distinct areas:

- Community college completion commitment,
- Re-imagining pathways for students,
- Community college / K-12 collaboration for college readiness,
- Developmental education re-design—resources for community colleges,
- Closing the skills gaps,
- Policy and advocacy agenda for reclaiming the American Dream,
- Redefining institutional roles and functions,
- Accountability, and
- Faculty engagement and leadership development (AACC, 2012).

The AACC initiative—designed to work in conjunction with President Obama's 2020 plan—is intended to help educate an additional five million students with degrees, certificates or other credentials by 2020 (AACC, 2012). The AACC's proposal is a collaborative effort with top community college leaders as well as organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the American College Testing Company, and the Educational Testing Service.

First-Year Seminars (FYS) are one of the most promising attempts at reform in community colleges and universities. As stated earlier in this chapter, FYS are built on

the framework of O'Banion's LCM. Although these programs have been in existence since the late 1800s, they lost recognition for nearly four decades and regained popularity as calls for institutional accountability and improving student success became increasingly more important. In 2011, Padgett & Keup estimated that nearly 94% of all colleges and universities across the nation offered some type of FYS. While the structure of FYS varies greatly, these seminars function to help students successfully transition to college by preparing them academically and socially (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2009). FYS serve as an introduction to the college while seeking to arm students with the basic skills needed to succeed inside and outside of the classroom. This is accomplished by skilled facilitators who are trained in the concept of student-centered learning and who seek initiatives to help students grow and develop on a personal and professional level. Post-secondary leaders are beginning to realize the difference that these programs are making, not only as it relates to retention but also in time-to-degree completion and student leadership qualities (Keup, 2012).

According to Barefoot & Fidler (1996), seven characteristics define a successful FYS:

1. Academic credit
2. Centered in first-year curriculum
3. Involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in design and instruction
4. Instructor training and development
5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery
7. Ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus community

Thus, it can be seen that attempts at educational reform over the past 30 years have shown elements of success while other efforts have proven less successful. Permanent reform may succeed if K-12 and college leaders work in conjunction with one another to find resolutions to the identified areas of weakness while also incorporating 21st century educational standards. Failure to do so will certainly have devastating results not only on workforce issues nationwide but also on America's standing in the larger global economy. While Race to the Top (RTT) has some skeptics (Ravitch, 2010), recipients of the RTT awards state that measureable differences are occurring statewide (State of Tennessee, 2010). Ultimately, local education authorities and independent researchers who perform longitudinal studies will determine the efficacy of these programs. Advocacy organizations such as P21 and the Association of American Community Colleges are beginning to address concerns identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings and have approached reform by garnering support from stakeholders. At the institutional level, the re-emergence of FYS in community colleges is yielding positive results (Friedman, 2012) and, as this researcher would suggest, may be the missing link in bridging the achievement gap for which college and K-12 leaders have been looking.

Since *A Nation at Risk* and *A Test of Leadership* were published, reform efforts in the United States have been plentiful—at least eight major attempts at reform both at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. Efforts at the K-12 level include Outcomes Based Education, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Each of these efforts has been largely government-led and has produced varied results. The other major attempts at reform occurred at the post-secondary level and include O'Banion's Learning College Model, The Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream initiative, the American

Association of Community College's Reclaiming the Dream proposal and First-Year Experience programs. Two of the problems cited by Secretary Spellings were transparency and data tracking in postsecondary institutions. While many of the reform efforts mentioned in this chapter have been implemented in colleges throughout the nation, it is unclear on whether or not they are effective due to the lack of transparency with respect to the tracking of data. What is known, however, is that a problem still exists in K-12 institutions throughout this country, as evidenced by research from the American College Testing Company (2013) whose authors assert that only 25% of high-school graduates in this country are ready for college-level courses. Berliner (2013, para. 2) writes the following about reform efforts in America:

> The research question asked is why so many school reform efforts have produced so little improvement in American schools. The answer offered is that the sources of school failure have been thought to reside inside the schools, resulting in attempts to improve America's teachers, curriculum, testing programs and administration. It is argued in this paper, however, that the sources of America's educational problems are outside school, primarily a result of income inequality. Thus it is suggested that targeted economic and social policies have more potential to improve the nation's schools than almost anything currently being proposed by either political party at federal, state, or local levels.

As an educator interested in educational reform, this researcher wonders if Berliner's theory regarding income inequalities is correct. What if the perpetual decline in K-12 institutions that Dad (2011) spoke about has a direct correlation with Berliner's theory? If Berliner is correct, it means that no matter how many efforts at reform the government attempts that they will all fail unless supported by policies that will level the playing field for all students and make every school in each district equal. This is yet

another compelling thought that requires further consideration. It is the researcher's belief that FYS are the most promising reform effort at the post-secondary level. A well-structured FYS incorporates elements of the eight major attempts at reform and also addresses many of the concerns identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

Purpose of the Study

The number of issues facing America's educational institutions today is astounding. With record enrollments at the community college level, leaders have to do more to improve outcomes while adhering to the open door concept. Community college leaders have to find new and creative ways to help students succeed. The time has come for community college leaders to develop a viable plan to help students cross the finish line. With the achievement gap widening, community colleges are in perfect position to boost their societal standing and increase their communal value by offering comprehensive courses and programs like FYS that place students on a path to success.

The purpose of this study is to identify best practices in community college FYS that have been demonstrated to lead to improved outcomes. *Improved outcomes* are defined as the strategies and / or practices that institutions employ in their FYS that directly address the concerns of Secretaries Bell and Spellings and advance the 2020 initiative proposed by President Obama.

Statement of the Problem

The problems that exist in America's education system have been well documented since the 1980s starting with *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) and later with *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education,

2006). Attempts at K-12 reform have largely failed, while the number of high-school graduates prepared for college-level courses continues to decline (ACT 2013). New reform efforts at the post-secondary level appear promising; however, colleges and universities use varied methods of reporting outcomes, which makes it difficult to assess the efficacy of these reform efforts. In an attempt to address the widening achievement gap, many colleges throughout the nation have implemented FYS as a means of helping students prepare for the academic rigors of college. While these programs have been in existence for many years (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996), the reemergence of these programs has increased significantly since 2000 (Pope, 2005). National organizations such as the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition recognize individuals each year for their outstanding work and commitment to First-Year Experience (FYE). The researcher's intent is to identify the best practices in FYS that are helping to close the achievement gap as outlined by Secretaries Bell and Spellings, and that are also helping to advance President Obama's 2020 Graduation Initiative.

Significance of the Study

Despite reform efforts over the past three decades, the achievement gap continues to widen. With only 25% of the nation's high-school graduates prepared to take college-level courses (ACT, 2013), many college leaders have taken the challenge of ensuring student success by implementing First-Year Seminars (FYS). This study aims to demonstrate that the best practices employed within these seminars not only narrow the achievement gap, but also help to address many of the deficiencies in student college readiness addressed by the two commissions. Despite the comprehensive body of research that exists demonstrating the impact of FYS on academic success, very little is

known about the best practices of FYS and how they work to bridge the achievement gap. This study aims to show that these seminars have contributed to narrowing the achievement gap, advancing the Graduation Initiative, and addressing the concerns of both Secretaries Bell and Spellings. To do this, Barefoot and Fidler's (1996) seven gold standards for effective FYS have been used as a measuring stick.

Research Questions

The researcher is interested in understanding how FYS in community colleges can best be used to bridge the achievement gap and whether these practices address the issues defined by Secretaries Bell and Spellings while advancing President Obama's 2020 graduation initiative. The researcher will also analyze whether any other common themes not identified by Barefoot and Fidler exist and how FYS enhance other institutional efforts at reform such as Achieving the Dream.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What common themes emerge in each institution's FYE program that directly addresses the concerns of the two commissions?
2. What characteristics do the FYE programs share with the seven gold standards as identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996)?
3. What assessment tools are in place to evaluate the performance of FYE programs?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used for this study. Qualitative data were collected from award winning recipients recognized by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The researcher conducted telephone interviews with five award receivers, asking questions regarding practices used in their

first-year experience seminars that could help to bridge the achievement gap. These questions were created by using Barefoot & Fidler's (1996) seven gold standards as a basis. The data collected from this study may lead to future research and influence curricular decisions both at the K-12 and post-secondary levels.

Conclusion

It is clear that American schools and colleges have deficiencies that need to be addressed. With the level of unpreparedness that exists with today's high school graduates, many colleges have come to embrace FYS and consider them an integral component to student success. As these programs grow, college educators will customize these programs to meet the needs and / or deficiencies of the constituents they serve. FYS may indeed be the missing link that Secretaries Bell and Spellings were seeking to bridge the achievement gap. The balance of this paper will focus on various pieces of literature to support this belief, as well as the methodology used to gather the data. The conclusion will concentrate on analysis of the data, implications for future research and additional findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to investigate best practices in community college First- Year Seminars (FYS) that contribute to the success of students, specifically underprepared students. The majority of literature studied for this review was published between the years of 1988 and 2013, particularly due to the increased interest in, and need for, FYS since the late 1980s as noted by Pope (2005). This review provides a brief history of FYS, defines the role community colleges play in higher education, and explains why strengthening FYS is of particular importance to these institutions. The information contained in this chapter will serve as the basis for the research and help to establish the need for best practices in FYS as they relate to curriculum, content, and structure.

History of the First-Year Experience

First-Year Seminars (FYS), Freshman Seminars (FS), New Student Orientation (NSO), First-Year Program (FYP), and First-Year Experience (FYE) are a few of the many names given to courses and programs designed to help students new to the college experience succeed. Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 43) suggest, "It is a common mistake for people to call first-year seminars, the first-year experience. Seminars are in fact, only one of a number of tactics that are commonly used to support first-year students." Hunter & Linder (2005, p. 275) suggest, "A seminar by definition is a small discussion-based

course in which students and their instructors exchange ideas and information." FYS serve as an introduction to the college while seeking to arm students with the basic skills needed to succeed academically (Hunter & Linder, 2005). These seminars are taught by skilled facilitators who are trained in the concept of student-centered learning and who seek initiatives to help students grow and develop personally and professionally (Hunter & Linder, 2005). For the purposes of this study, the researcher will refer to individual first-year courses as First-Year Seminars (FYS) and the entire collection of tactics that an institution employs for first-year support as FYE programs.

Contrary to popular belief, FYE programs have been in existence for more than 100 years, with roots originating in the 19th century. Barefoot & Fidler (1996) explain that the beginnings of FYE programs date back to the 1880s and are similar in purpose to today's FYE programs. "The first freshman seminar was offered in 1882 at Lee College in Kentucky and the first [for-credit] seminar became part of the curriculum at Reed College in 1911" (University of South Carolina, n.d. [USC] para. 2). Other evidence of FYE programs was unearthed at Boston University in 1888, the University of Michigan and Oberlin College in 1900 as well as Columbia and Dartmouth College in 1924 (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

In the 1900s the doctrine of in loco parentis drove institutions to assume responsibility for students housed on its campuses. The assumed responsibility was not only for physical well-being but also for students' mental, academic, and social-well-being. In the 1920s and 1930s, colleges and universities saw an increase in enrollment and sought better ways to provide essential services to students. During this time, nearly

100 institutions nationwide offered FYE programs in an attempt to fill the needs of their evolving and ever-growing student population (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

During the 1930s, FYE programs fell out of favor, primarily due to objections from faculty members regarding lack of academic rigor (Padgett & Keup, 2011, p. 1). Additionally, institutions had difficulty recruiting new faculty members who would support the FYE programs. Regrettably, institutions no longer wanted the burden of being responsible for student's well-being, with many institutions developing a "sink or swim attitude towards first-year students" (Padgett & Keup, 2011, p. 1).

After the 1930s, FYE programs varied widely and nearly vanished from existence during the 1960s. However, in the 1970s FYE programs made a re-appearance "when colleges and universities experienced an influx of non-traditional students, decreased retention during the first two years, and external pressures over the quality of undergraduate education" (Stewart, 2009, p. 3). The University of South Carolina also helped pave the way for modern-day programs with the creation of their FYE and University 101 programs (USC, n.d,). The conception of these programs at the University of South Carolina originated after student riots erupted in the early 1970s in opposition to the Vietnam War as well as other campus matters such as alleged student / faculty / administration trust issues and perceived inequalities. More than 1,000 students stormed the president's office for a 24-hour period and demanded a change. In 1972, students received the change they sought. The University 101 course at the University of South Carolina took center stage with the primary goal of developing a level of commitment with respect to communication and trust (USC, n.d.).

In 1986, officials at the University of South Carolina opened the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, which functions as a resource for students, faculty, and administrators (USC, 2012). According to the University of South Carolina's website, "The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition serves as the trusted expert, internationally recognized leader, and clearinghouse for scholarship, policy, and best practice for all postsecondary student transitions" (University of South Carolina [USC], 2012, para. 1).

First-Year Seminars in Community Colleges

Under preparedness is perhaps the one of the most important components of bridging the achievement gap. While over half of the undergraduates in the United States are enrolled in community colleges (AACC, 2013), a staggering 61% of community college freshmen need remediation (Martin & Campbell, 2010). Regrettably, many of the students in need of remediation are not successful in their college endeavors (Martin & Campbell, 2010). The deficiencies noted by Secretaries Bell and Spellings do not seem to be improving, so it is up to community college leaders to understand the factors that contribute to the success of students in need of remediation and work on common goals to address those needs. FYS may be the critical link to solve such problems.

Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 2) have reported that nearly 94% of all colleges and universities across the nation have some type of FYS. This is impressive considering that nearly 50 years ago these programs nearly vanished from existence. What is alarming, however, is the fact that the number of four-year institutions with FYS far outweighs the number of community colleges with FYS. In 2009, Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 5)

conducted a study of colleges and universities with FYS and discovered that out of 890 respondents, nearly 74% of universities nationwide have some form of First-Year Seminar; however, only 26% of community colleges offer a First-Year Seminar. According to *Inside Higher Ed* (2011), since the economic collapse of 2008, enrollment of high school students at community colleges exceeded enrollment of high school students at four-year institutions, yet the number of community colleges offering FYS pales in comparison to the number of universities offering similar programming. As previously mentioned in chapter one, the Spelling's Report noted that inadequate high school preparation and misalignment between high schools and colleges creates an "expectations gap" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 17). President Obama also stated that just over half of American citizens have a high school diploma. Community colleges can play a pivotal role in bridging the achievement gap. With the resurgence of FYS (Pope, 2005) and the increased numbers of students enrolling in community colleges since the economic collapse, an opportunity to make inroads towards the issue of college readiness exists. However, more community college must be willing to offer this important programming.

Types of First-Year Seminars

Several types of seminars exist to help first-year students and students-in-transition. The seminars may be mandatory or optional and can be structured in multiple ways ranging from basic study skills to pre-professional seminars based on standards expected in certain industries. Institutional culture, community needs and internal policies also help influence the type of FYS a college or university will offer.

While the structures of FYS vary from institution to institution, they all function to help students successfully transition socially and academically into the college setting. Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 10) suggest there are five primary types of seminars: (1) Extended orientation seminars, (2) Academic seminars with uniform content, (3) Academic on various topics, (4) Pre-professional or discipline-linked, (5) Basic study skills seminars. The following section will detail the various seminar types.

Hunter & Linder (2005, p. 279) note that 62% of all higher education institutions offer an extended orientation type of seminar with a strong focus on "student survival and success techniques." Extended orientation seminars are typically credit-bearing courses that are often offered as electives, part of the general education requirement, or counted towards the institution's core curriculum.

There are two types of academic seminars: those with uniform content across the curriculum and those with variable subject matter. Hunter & Linder (2005, p. 279) suggest that "nearly 17% of first-year seminars are academic seminars with common content across sections." This type of seminar may be offered as an elective or required by the institution. The focus of academic seminars is to "address critical academic skills such as writing, reasoning, and critical thinking (Hunter & Linder, 2005, p. 279). Hunter and Linder further state that nearly 13% of FYS are academic seminars on various topics and are tailored to the faculty members' area of expertise.

According to Hunter & Linder (2005, p. 280), professional or discipline-linked seminars and basic study skills seminars "constitute less than 7% of reported first-year seminars." The professional seminars prepare students for a specific field of study such as medicine or law, whereas the basic study skill seminars are generally offered to

underprepared students. Basic study skills seminars stress fundamentals such as note and test-taking skills, critical thinking and reading skills.

The five types of seminars as noted by Hunter & Linder (2005) present a variety of ways to help students as they transition into the college setting. These seminars may also have a positive impact on students socially and academically. According to Keup (2012), colleges are learning to adapt the various types of seminars based on the student's educational needs and objectives with many institutions offering more than one type of seminar.

Barefoot & Fidler's Seven Gold Standards

The basis for much of the research for this paper consists of using Barefoot & Fidler's (1996), seven (interdependent) gold standards for FYS. These standards will be used as a measure by which to base best practices as identified by the award winning research participants. These practices will further help determine how the research participants help bridge the achievement gap as noted by Secretaries Bell and Spellings. Each standard will be discussed in the sections to follow. The gold standards are as follows (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996):

1. Academic credit
2. Centered in first-year curriculum
3. Involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in design and instruction
4. Instructor training and development
5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery
7. Ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus community

Gold Standard One: Academic Credit

Although FYS can be credit bearing or offered on a non-credit basis, research has shown that institutions that offer academic credit for FYS are more likely to produce successful students as opposed to those who do not (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). The decision to offer academic credit for these courses is an important factor and must be carefully considered by institutional leaders as well as FYE program administrators and faculty. Likewise, the number of hours a student spends in FYS each week / semester is another factor that must be evaluated.

According to Hunter (2012), while Betsy Barefoot was conducting research for her doctoral coursework on FYE programs, she noticed that institutions that had successful seminars were institutions that awarded credit for their courses. Hunter (2012) stated that when colleges attach a credit requirement to seminars that students are more likely to succeed because there are consequences involved such as grade point average and ability to move forward.

Barefoot & Fidler (1996) contend that FYS that have an academic credit requirement are more likely to help students persist. Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 118) conducted a nationwide survey in 2009 of FYS in community colleges and universities and found that 11.4% of community colleges' FYS were non-credit bearing, while 88.6% were credit-bearing. Of community college FYS, 47% were one credit hour, 13.9% were two credit hours, 34% were three credit hours, 1.5% were four credit hours, 1% were five credit hours and 1.5% offered FYS worth more than five credit hours.

Padgett & Keup's survey provided additional information. Among community colleges, 58.9% offered FYS as an elective while 33% applied the coursework toward

general education requirements, and 9.8% of respondents used the FYS towards the students' major requirements. In addition, according to survey data, 40.2% of students enrolled in FYS spent three hours per week in the classroom, 28.8% spent two hours per week in the classroom, and 24.7% spent one hour per week in class. One can conclude that Barefoot's original research as well as recent research from the 2009 Padgett & Keup survey showed a strong trend that supports credit-bearing FYS.

The decision to make FYS worth academic credit or not rests solely with program personnel and college administration. Many questions have to be considered such as how many credits the seminar should be worth and how credits should be applied (toward major or general education requirements). Barefoot & Fidler (1996) suggest that FYS worth academic credit are an industry best practice. Dan Friedman, Director of University 101 Programs at the University of South Carolina and Joni Webb Petschauer, Senior Fellow at American Council on Education (2012) suggest that more institutions are beginning to offer freshman seminars as a credit-bearing course and continued research to support these findings is already underway.

Gold Standard Two: Centered in First-Year Curriculum

Many educational leaders versed on the subject of FYE such as Friedman (2012), Hunter (2012), and Padgett & Keup (2009), have agreed that curriculum in FYS should be the central focus, not the secondary or tertiary emphasis. Further, many of these experts have argued that the FYS curriculum should stand on its own while serving as a key element of the general education and core requirements (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

Petschauer (2012) has outlined a three-step process as it relates to developing a curriculum for FYS. She discussed the significance of beginning with the end in mind

and summarized the importance of defining outcomes and how defining those outcomes is the critical first step. The second step is designing and implementing the course content and the curriculum. The third step is preparing faculty and instructors to administer the curriculum as it was designed. Petschauer further asserted that faculty interpretation of how the curriculum should be delivered could become muddled without guiding principles or a course syllabus. Discussed in gold standard four, but also an integral component of this gold standard, is the training and development of seminar instructors. Petschauer (2012) affirmed that developing and training instructors to effectively teach the curriculum is crucial to curriculum development. She emphasized that faculty need the right combination of motivation and development not only to support the needs of the students, but also to support their own needs as well.

The curriculum is an essential component of any FYS. Additionally, FYS serve as the foundation for all other program elements, so it is of the utmost importance that administrators work with faculty to ensure that key concepts are being incorporated into the curriculum. Friedman (2012) described the components of a successful FYS curriculum:

> The prescription for a successful First-Year curriculum is the R and the X and if you can do these two things, you are more likely to have a successful seminar. The R stands for relevance. Are we doing the right things? The second thing is the X, [in which] X is for excellence. The excellence is more of "are we doing things right?" So all we have to do is figure out if are we doing the right things and are we doing things right.

Friedman (2012) further stated that in order to develop a successful FYS, personnel not only have to make the content relevant to students, but college personnel

must also align the curriculum with institutional priorities. Friedman (2012), an expert in assessment, also asserted that curriculum development cannot be divorced from assessment. He has argued that the two are inextricably linked and that future program changes (if necessary) would be difficult to conduct without the bond between curriculum development and assessment.

Gold Standards Three and Four: Involvement by Faculty and Student Affairs Professionals

Key issues program administrators must always consider include recruitment, orientation, and continuing education of seminar instructors. Considerable time, effort, energy and forethought are given as to who can teach within these seminars and how those individuals will receive professional development, individual evaluation and recognition from year to year.

McLaughlin, Latino, and Hunter (2012) presented a very complex framework at the Institute for First-Year Seminar Leadership that outlined best practices in recruiting, preparing and rewarding FYS instructors. Their process begins with instructor recruitment. McLaughlin et al. (2012, p. 5) suggested that FYE program administrators present their program at meetings as often as possible in order to raise awareness and that administrators "take prospective instructors to lunch, solicit nominations for instructors, make appointments with new faculty, and invite campus award winners" to be a part of the instructional team). McLaughlin, et al. (2012) also stressed the importance of making the prospective instructor feel as if it is a privilege to teach FYS and that these positions are highly selective. Describing some of the issues related to identifying and recruiting FYS instructors, McLaughlin et al. (2012) have noted that challenges can vary from campus to campus:

> On some campuses, based on the type of seminar that you have, only full-time tenure track faculty can teach a seminar. On other campuses, you may be in a situation where the only people who can teach your seminar are adjunct instructors. Then, again, you may be on a campus where any variety of people can teach. Therefore, you are limited to what your campus culture allows and what your program is set up to do. On some campuses, especially those that may have unionized faculty, you may have budget implications for what you do in faculty development. If the culture and the governance structure is such that you have to compensate instructors for everything they do beyond teaching the courses, you have got an uphill battle there so you have something that you have to be concerned about.

In a 2009 survey, Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 33) found that in more than 60% of responding institutions [n=890], tenure track faculty taught the First-Year Seminar, a trend that Hunter & Linder (2005, p. 282) reported has been on the rise since the late 1980s. Worth noting, however, is that nearly 48% of student affairs professionals were involved in teaching pre-professional or discipline linked seminars (Padgett & Keup, 2009).

Once instructors are chosen, administrators following best practices should shift the focus to faculty preparation (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Newly hired faculty should be encouraged to attend a syllabus-writing workshop that clearly defines the goals, expectations, learning outcomes, tools, tests, materials, and resources needed in order for students to be successful. After this workshop, faculty should attend a training seminar which guides them through the four phases of faculty development including group building / developing community, identifying learner needs and characteristics, resource discovery and use, as well as bridging and transitions. And finally, McLaughlin et al.

(2012) have discussed the importance of instructor evaluations and the various ways that evaluations can be executed, such as end-of-course written evaluations, focus groups, or advisory board meetings.

Instructor / faculty reward and recognition are an essential component of best practices outlined by McLaughlin et al. (2012) and Friedman (2012). They outlined a series of methods used to identify exceptional work in the field such as "certificates, awards, simple acknowledgements, and formal expressions" (McLaughlin et al., 2012, p. 11).

Although Barefoot and Fidler (1996) recommended that "involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in program design and instruction" be a model for exemplary programs, the changing makeup of college job responsibilities and the advent of more unionized campus environments interfere with student and faculty input in program design and instruction. While there are many institutions that do utilize student affairs staff to teach pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of seminars are being taught by full-time tenured faculty members (Padget & Keup, 2009). McLaughlin, Latino, and Hunter (2012) found this to be notable given that many full-time faculty appointments are being awarded to general education courses such as science and mathematics. Even though many courses may be taught by full-time faculty, Brown and McPhail (2011, p. 79) cautioned that institutions "cannot assume that faculty and staff will become more effective in their work to support first-year student success without comprehensive pre-service and in-service professional development programs." The literature suggests that a holistic approach to recruitment,

preparation of faculty, and compensation of faculty are essential to the success of students in these programs.

Gold Standard Five: Compensation or Other Reward for Teaching

Institutions choose to compensate First-Year Seminar instructors in a variety of ways. Some of the more common methods are stipend, release time, professional development funds, and graduate student support. Padgett & Keup (2011) found that most four-year campuses use a stipend to pay instructors across all categories of seminars. The amount of compensation received ranged from less than $500 to more than $4,000 per course. The 2011 survey conducted by Padgett & Keup provided more details regarding instructor stipends:

> The average amount of First-Year Seminar instructor stipend ranges between $1,001 to $2,000 per class for faculty (both tenure-track and adjunct) as well as for student affairs and other campus professionals. Graduate student instructors who receive stipends for First-Year Seminar instruction receive a slightly lower amount that averages between $501 and $1,000 per class. A calculation of mean stipend amounts by instructor role showed that adjunct faculty tend to receive the highest stipend. Tenure-track faculty and other campus professionals are nearly tied for the second and third positions and student affairs professionals represent the lowest paid category of First-Year Seminar instructors among professional roles [i.e., except graduate students].

Although a variety of methods exist for compensating instructors, stipends appear to be the most common. Collective bargaining, campus culture, and policy may influence how much instructors are paid.

Gold Standard Six: Involvement by Upper Level Students in Seminar Delivery

The transition from high school to college can be very difficult for some students, especially for academically underprepared students. Having upper-level students available to help new students transition is a practice that has proven successful and is becoming increasingly more popular in FYS (Peer Mentor.net, Inc., 2012).

Grites & Rondeau (2011) found that currently enrolled students make the best representatives and advocates for new and prospective students. They also found that students with peer mentors were also more likely to have a positive college experience. A study conducted by Barefoot, Arcario, & Guzman (2011, p. 106), found that "new students look to peer mentors for the following: '(a) strategies for success (e.g., overcoming challenges, adjusting to college, connecting with campus resources and other students), (b) information (e.g., preparing for transfer to a four year-college, student life, and activities), and (c) other students' academic goals and plans.'"

Many institutions with or without FYS offer upper level classmen the opportunity to mentor incoming freshmen students; however, some universities have taken peer mentoring to a new level by offering leadership courses to peer mentors that teach them how to support freshmen. Mentors are also taught how to lead effectively around campus and in the community. According to Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot (2005, p. 172), The University of Texas at El Paso has implemented the Student Leadership Institute (SLI) in order to provide training for peer mentors: "Training includes topics such as leadership theory, interpersonal communication skills, working within groups, time management, diversity, study skills, and classroom teaching techniques." Students attend the 120-hour seminar for six months and complete it being fully capable of performing leadership

responsibilities throughout the college, often earning money for their services. This model is similar to Senior Seminar programs offered at universities throughout the country that see the importance of cultivating incoming students as well as preparing seniors for leadership roles prior to graduation.

The structure, shape, and degree of involvement of peer mentoring in FYS can vary from institution to institution; however, the fact remains that this critical aspect of helping students transition is an important element in student success and bridging the achievement gap. Psychologists understand that human beings must have certain basic needs met in order to feel motivated and accepted. Peer mentoring can assist in fulfilling those needs while simultaneously helping mentors develop a unique set of leadership skills that can be immediately utilized in the community, around campus, or in future employment (Hunter, 2012).

Gold Standard Seven: Assessment and Dissemination of Information

Assessment is an important component of any seminar; however, it is of particular importance to First-Year Seminars because of their direct impact on student success. Most importantly, the areas being assessed must be relevant to course objectives and must be performed on a continuing basis.

When Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 49) conducted their triennial First-Year Seminar survey in 2009, 56.5% of respondents reported that they had performed seminar assessment since the last survey in 2006, although nearly a third said they had not performed assessment since 2006, and another 10% said they were unsure if seminar assessment had been performed at all. Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 49) further noted that these numbers indicated that "first-year seminar assessment has yet to fully engage all

stakeholders at these institutions." One survey question asked respondents to "select the three most important course objectives for the First-Year Seminar. Overall, developing academic skills, developing a connection with the institution, and providing an orientation to campus resources and services were of the highest priority to institutions" (Padgett & Keup, 2011, p. 49).

Friedman (2012) has proposed that two types of assessment exist: "(1) Summative—used to make a judgment about the efficacy of a program or course; and (2) Formative—used to provide feedback in order to foster improvement." He also recommended that administrators of FYS evaluate their seminars using a mixture of summative and formative assessments. It is the researcher's belief that a series of indirect and direct assessment methods using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures is the best way to comprehensively assess seminar performance. Qualitative assessment methods such as focus groups or student advisory councils are common practice in FYS today (Friedman, 2012). Direct measures such as rubrics, surveys, and course-embedded assignments are other ways to assess outcomes. Padgett & Keup's findings (2011, p. 62) supported Friedman's work, which showed that qualitative methodologies are used to evaluate these courses at many colleges and universities across the country.

Friedman (2012) also noted that assessment should be performed using multiple lenses: criterion, peer-referenced, longitudinal, and value added. With the "criterion" perspective, performance is measured against specific internal or external predetermined standards. "Peer-referenced" refers to benchmarking; it is a careful examination for assessment purposes of how different seminars stack up against one another with respect to similar seminar types. Friedman (2012) contended that it is difficult to find these data

and stated that he has used an instrument for assessment called the First-Year Admission Survey of FYI, sponsored by Education Benchmarking, Inc. He listed some of the fifteen different factors that this instrument uses to assess FYS based on the topics included in the courses: “knowledge of campus policies, wellness, management of time and priorities, cognitive and academic skills, academic polices, etc."

Friedman (2012) further stated that the survey instrument is designed to allow administrators to compare their institutional data against that of six other colleges / universities as well as examine benchmarking data with schools that are in the same Carnegie classification. It is the belief of this researcher that administrators over FYS may not be successful in finding six institutions that look like theirs, but using the Carnegie classification will give administrators what Friedman calls “a sense of relative standing.” “Longitudinal” is the third means of assessment and looks at improvements or areas of concern over time. Friedman (2012) contended that effective administrators must be aware of all input variables that may affect output. For example, if the percentage of incoming students deemed to have writing proficiency jumped from 60% to 80% over three years, how would administrators know if internal modifications affected that change or if external factors played a role, such as high schools doing something different to improve writing proficiency? Friedman has insisted that all variables must be closely monitored and that administrators should be careful about making assumptions. Lastly, “value added” assessment aims to find out if seminar improvements are really the result of the efforts of intrinsic seminar tweaking or the result of extrinsic factors. Finally, Friedman (2012) delivered a word of caution and stated, “Assessment only allows us to make inferences about our [courses] or programs, not to draw absolute truths.”

Padgett & Keup (2011, p. 62) concluded that assessment is an important component of an FYS that is often overlooked, underappreciated, and not measured properly. They also offered insight regarding additional improvements that might benefit First-Year Seminars:

> Lack of assessment activities and results negatively [impact] the ability of First-Year Seminar faculty, staff and leadership to maintain the relevance and excellence of the course and puts it in a vulnerable position with respect to addressing institutional calls for accountability. Further, there appears to be a disconnect between the objectives identified for First-Year Seminars and the outcomes that are used to measure the course. It is likely that this disconnect is at least in part due to an overreliance upon easily measured but incomplete metrics of success, such as retention, satisfaction, and grade point average, rather than more direct measures of performance and seminar outcomes.

Themes and Characteristics of First-Year Seminars

Most FYE programs and seminars were founded on the philosophies of John Gardner, whose work with FYE programs gained national attention while at the University of South Carolina (USC). Gardner believed that the First-Year-Experience should be a "comprehensive cohesive plan rather than a course. The rationale for the comprehensive plan is that there is a philosophy that connects academics to university mission, policies and practice" (University of Mary Washington [UMW], 2012). In this regard, Barefoot (2000, p. 8) noted that college and university leaders need to implement the following characteristics in order to have successful First-Year Seminars and programs:

- Give FYE college-wide recognition and status.
- House FYE programs and courses in appropriate facilities.

- Staff FYE programs with appropriate staff.
- Give FYE programs the appropriate institutional funding.
- Create avenues to help FYE personnel establish alliances with area high schools.
- Give the proper time and resources to assessment.

Barefoot (2000, p.4) observed that oftentimes FYE programs "are in a continuous battle for status" within the college and that many FYE programs fall victim to administration and staffing changes, shifting institutional policies and commitments or budget cuts, thus leading to FYE program personnel being the single champion for their cause rather than having broad-based institutional support. As it relates to proper housing of the program and courses, Barefoot (2000) also noted that these programs and courses are often housed in marginal facilities, given very little if any budget at all and are too often taught by teaching or graduate assistants and do not have a full complement of staff contributing from other areas of the college. High-school outreach is another issue addressed by Barefoot (2000) who noted that too many college educators are pointing fingers at high schools as being the root of student problems. She has suggested that FYE program administrators work with college leaders to find collaborative ways to mitigate college readiness issues, an approach that may not only benefit students, but may also help improve outcomes at both the high-school and college level.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Barefoot & Fidler (1996) identified the seven gold standards for best practices in FYS. Those seven best practices serve as the hallmark and guiding principles within the industry (Keup, 2012). However, while attending an institute on First-Year Seminars at the University of South Carolina, the author had an opportunity to not only hear Hunter (2012) and Keup (2012) present, but also spoke to

both of them to ascertain other prominent best practices in FYS currently seen throughout the country (see Table 1).

Table 1: Best Practices in FYS as Noted by Hunter & Keup

BEST PRACTICES IN FYS	COMMONALITIES IN FYS	CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL FYS	MOST COMMON COURSE TOPICS*
• Student-Faculty Contact • Active Learning • Prompt Feedback • Time on Task • High Expectations • Respect for Diverse Learning Styles • Cooperation Among Students	• Small Class Size • Discussion Intensive • Peer Connections • Faculty/Student and • Student/Student Interaction • Engaging Pedagogy • Early and Frequent Feedback • Out of Class Engagement • Intentional Development of Community • Reflection of and Support of Institutional Mission and Goals	• Academic Credit • Centered in First-Year Curriculum • Involve Both Faculty and Student Affairs in Design and Instruction • Instructor Training and Development • Compensation or Other Reward for Teaching • Involves Upper Level Students in Seminar Delivery • Assessment	• Campus Resources 42% • Study Skills 39.8% • Academic Planning/Advising 35.7% • Critical Thinking 34.8% • Time Management 27.6%

**Out of 1,018 two-year and four-year respondents*

There are many accepted structures with regard to FYS. An institution's financial backing of these courses coupled with support by executive leadership are often determining factors when understanding how / why an institution constructs an FYS in a particular manner (Friedman, 2012). While it does not appear that there is one right way of structuring these seminars, there is agreement from educational leaders that the end goal in all FYS is for students to develop academic skills, develop a connection with the

institution, orient the student to campus resources, and to encourage self-exploration and personal development (Keup, 2012).

Conclusion

Barefoot (2000, p. 1) suggested that First-Year Seminars offer the "perfect opportunity to take stock of the range of initiatives that for [two] decades have attempted to enhance the first-year experience in U.S. higher education." Reviewed here is an overview of the importance of FYS, best practices related to FYS, and how these practices can help bridge the achievement gap, improve persistence and retention, and improve institutional outcomes. While the structure of FYS may vary by institution, some basic elements should exist in all courses in order to ensure the integrity of the seminar. The seven gold standards as identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996) are an integral component to the success of these courses and form the guiding principles by which course development should be constructed (Keup, 2012). Additionally, ensuring that the objectives and goals of the FYS align with not only the mission, vision, and values of the college, but also with the institutional policies and procedures by which the institution is governed will help to ensure that students' first year will be successful (Barefoot, 2000). The information from this chapter will be expanded in chapter three to show how research participants have used these best practices within their institutions to bridge the achievement gap and promote student success.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Many studies have been written about the significance of First-Year-Experience (FYE) programs and seminars and their impact on student success. However, fewer studies have been done that identify best practices associated with these programs and seminars in spite of the fact that the increased climate of accountability in higher education is causing many institutions to implement FYE programs and / or seminars in an effort to improve retention and graduation rates. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify best practices in community college FYS that have been demonstrated to lead to improved outcomes. Improved outcomes are defined as the strategies and / or practices that institutions employ in their FYS that directly address the concerns of Secretaries Bell and Spellings and advance the 2020 initiative proposed by President Obama.

Multiple Case Study Approach

According to Yin (2003), a multiple case study enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons will be drawn, it is imperative that the cases be chosen carefully so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases, or predict contrasting results based on a theory (Yin, 2003). As Yin (2004, p.2 has stated, “The case study method has attained routine status as a viable method for doing education research.” A case study by definition is a holistic approach to investigate a current phenomenon within its natural

setting. The phenomenon may be numerous things such as an event, an activity, a program, a problem or individual" (Yin, 2004, p.1). The natural setting is the context in which the phenomenon occurs (Merriam, 2009). The phenomenon and the natural setting together are a bounded system, which means there are limits on what is considered relevant or workable (Merriam 2009). The boundaries are set in terms of time, place, events, and processes. The researcher chose the case study approach for this research because of its ability to help frame the best practices from each participant. The bounded system within this study was created by the participant's institutional environment and the practices employed by the respective FYS. By choosing this method, the researcher was able to compare and contrast the institutional structures, policies and procedures among participants and ultimately determine those practices that have helped to bridge the achievement gap, promote college readiness, and help students succeed within the institutions represented in the study.

The researcher interviewed participants that have been recognized for their outstanding work in First-Year Experience (FYE) in order to identify the shared practices they have in common with Barefoot & Fidler's gold standard practices (1996). Additionally, the researcher was able to identify similarities and differences among programs and determine the specific practices that help bridge the achievement gap and promote student success.

A collective case study approach was chosen for this study because of its ability to help the researcher focus on the whole bounded system, in which "one phenomenon such as a single person, a program, a group, an institution, community or specific policy is studied within boundaries" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). It was also the most preferred

method for this research because "case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy and the end product being richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2009, p. 288). In addition, with this approach, the researcher was unable to manipulate or control behaviors or settings nor were there any externally imposed constraints. This method can also help the reader understand, at a deeper level, the meaning of a social phenomenon such as FYS, with as little disruption to the natural setting as possible.

Principles of Qualitative Research

By definition, qualitative research is "a systematic subjective approach used to describe life experiences and give them meaning. The goal is to gain insight; explore the depth, richness, and complexity inherent in the phenomenon" (University of Missouri St. Louis [UMSL], n.d., para. 1). According to Patton (2002), qualitative research has twelve major characteristics covering three categories. The characteristics and categories are listed in Table 2. The following sections detail these characteristics and describe how they were used to design, collect and analyze the data.

Table 2: Principles of Qualitative Research

Design Strategies	Data Collection & Fieldwork Strategies	Analysis Strategies
1. Naturalistic Inquiry 2. Emergent Design Flexibility 3. Purposeful Sampling	4. Qualitative Data 5. Personal Experience and Engagement 6. Empathic Neutrality and Mindfulness 7. Dynamic Systems	8. Unique Case Orientation 9. Inductive Analysis and Creative Synthesis 10. Holistic Perspective 11. Context Sensitivity 12. Voice, Perspective & Reflexivity

Design Strategy

With respect to design strategy, *Naturalistic Inquiry (Design Strategy #1)* is the art of studying real-life situations as they unfold naturally. This type of research focuses on how people behave when they are engrossed in real life. There is no controlling or manipulation of people, settings or environment (Patton, 2002).

Emergent Design (Design Strategy #2) involves data collection and analysis procedures that can evolve over the course of a research project in response to what is learned in the earlier parts of the study (Given, 2008). Additionally, emergent design does not allow the researcher to get locked into an inflexible design; it encourages and allows for the creation of new paths (Patton, 2002).

Purposeful Sampling (Design Strategy #3) as defined by Patton (2002) is cases for study such as organizations, people, and communities. The cases for study are chosen for their information-rich and enlightening properties. They also offer worthwhile examples of the occurrence being studied.

For this study, the researcher incorporated elements of all three design strategies. With *naturalistic design,* the researcher focused on how people behave in real-life situations. Not manipulating any of the phenomena being studied and not committing to a rigid concept of design, the researcher employed the *emergent design technique*. The researcher actively engaged with the research participants in an effort to better understand their organizations, students, practices and culture. Furthermore, the researcher worked to maintain neutrality and mindfulness by refraining from judgment and respecting research participants as well as their opinions, processes and institutional policies. Because the

nature of the research was dynamic and subject to change at any time, the researcher held no preconceived notions or expectations as to outcomes. *Purposeful sampling* was the primary approach: the researcher purposely studied award-winning recipients and how the practices used within their institutions contribute to student success and promote closing the achievement gap. By utilizing the aforementioned design strategies, the researcher encouraged truthful accounts of best practices among participants and used those accounts to determine how President Obama's graduation initiative can be advanced while addressing issues identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings.

Data Collection

In addition to issues of design strategy, researchers must have a systematic approach to data collection as detailed in the middle column of Table 2. *Qualitative Research (Data Collection & Fieldwork Strategy #4)* "is a collection of various methods of gathering information for the purpose of gaining insight into individuals attitudes, behaviors, value systems, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles. The data is then used to inform business decisions and policy formation (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Patton (2002) added that observations in qualitative data can yield a detailed thick description by capturing direct quotations about personal perspectives and experiences, especially in case studies.

Merriam (2009, p. 219) described *Adequate Engagement (Data Collection & Fieldwork Strategy #5)* as a "strategy that makes sense when you are trying to get as close as possible to the participant's understanding of a phenomenon. When the data and emerging findings feel saturated and you begin to see or hear the same things over and over again and no new information surfaces as you collect more data, you are adequately

engaged in the data." Patton (2009, p. 41) stated that when the researcher engages with the people, situation or phenomenon being studied that the "researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon."

Empathic neutrality and mindfulness (Data Collection & Fieldwork Strategy #6) occurs when research is conducted in a nonjudgmental fashion showing openness and responsiveness to the phenomenon being studied. It is of the utmost importance for the researcher to remain neutral and refrain from judgment or bias, especially when collecting and analyzing the data (Merriam, 2009).

Dynamic systems (Data Collection & Fieldwork Strategy #7) concentrate on interview processes and are considered ongoing regardless of the type of phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). It is important for the researcher to be aware of the dynamics that may change the natural setting of the phenomena being studied. Attention to detail and processes are important and help the researcher stay on task while dealing with a fluctuating environment (Patton, 2002).

To collect the data for this study, the researcher used a holistic approach which involved the collection of in-depth and detailed data that are rich in content and involved multiple sources of information including, participant observations, interviews, audio-visual material, online documents, reports, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2003). The researcher performed a series of telephone interviews with FYE award recipients identified for their exceptional contributions in this field at their institutions. (See Appendix A for interview questions). These research participants were recognized by the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience

and Students in Transition between the years of 1990-2012. The researcher further chose to narrow the field to five award recipients in the eastern region of the country. After identifying the award recipients, the researcher contacted the participants via phone, using the wording contained in Appendix B. The interviews were conducted between March and May of 2013. Research participants signed a consent form (Appendix C) prior to the interview which fully informed the participants about the research that was being conducted and informed the participants of any risk factors involved. Table 3 lists the institutional titles of the participants and the dates and times on which they were interviewed.

Table 3: Research Participant Information

College	Name of Participant	Title	Date	Length of Interview	Time
Institution A	Respondent 1	Coordinator of the First Year Experience	March 28, 2013	31 minutes	9:00 a.m.
Institution B	Respondent 2	Co-Director of the First-Year Experience Program	April 10, 2013	37 minutes	9:00 a.m.
Institution C	Respondent 3	Assistant Dean Academic Affairs	May 20, 2013	29 minutes	1:00 p.m.
Institution D	Respondent 4	Director of Special Services	May 22, 2013	68 minutes	1:30 p.m.
Institution E	Respondent 5	Associate Professor	May 23, 2013	26 minutes	10:30 a.m.

Each interview was recorded both for verification purposes and also for use in data analysis. According to SAGE (n.d.), “the recording of audio data through devices such as tape recorders has been a significant development within qualitative research, replacing the researcher's handwritten notes.” The benefits of tape recording include the researcher’s ability to concentrate and listen to the interviewee, the chance of fewer errors, and having a recording of the interview also gives the researcher a chance to go

back over the material to ensure accuracy (Opdenakker, 2006). Once the recordings were obtained, this researcher uploaded the files to a personal computer where the data were encrypted and password protected.

Some of the artifacts collected for the research include pamphlets, curriculum guides, and brochures from the participant institutions. The artifacts collected not only include information about the institution but information regarding the seminar. Information about the individuals chosen to participate in this research was obtained from the University of South Carolina's First-Year Experience and Student's in Transition website, which features a narrative on the award-winning recipients. Additional institutional and program information was obtained from the websites of each college in order to gain further insight into the college's organizational structure as well as the structure and practices of the FYE program(s). Many of the program artifacts spoke directly to college readiness issues and specifically addressed student success and how retention could be improved through participation in FYE courses. Through interviews and artifacts, the researcher was able to make the connection between the need for these programs in community colleges and how these programs can be instrumental in helping to advance President Obama's 2020 Graduation Initiative while addressing the concerns outlined by the two federal commissions.

Data Processing and Analysis

Once data are collected, the researcher must follow a systematic process for analyzing and interpreting the data. Table 2 details five analysis strategies. *Unique Case Orientation (Analysis Strategies #8)* assumes that each case is different and unique

(Patton, 2002). "Researchers must remember that every study is special and deserves in-depth attention" (Colorado State University, n.d.).

Inductive Analysis and Creative Synthesis (Analysis Strategies #9) is the art of "being immersed in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes and interrelationships. It begins by exploring, then confirming, guided by analytical principles rather than rules, and ends with creative synthesis" (Patton, 2002, p. 41).

A *Holistic Perspective (Analysis Strategies #10)* assumes that the whole phenomenon is greater than the sum of its parts (Patton, 2002). Researchers at Colorado State University (n.d.) have asserted that almost every action or communication viewed with a holistic perspective must be taken as a part of the whole phenomenon of a certain community or culture.

Context sensitivity (Analysis Strategies #11) refers to the fact that each case "is context-bound; it is not located in a vacuum but always tied to its context, which refers to the locality, time and culture in which it takes place, and the values and beliefs the participants and researchers hold" (SAGE, 2012).

Qualitative researchers must also pay attention to *voice, perspective and reflexivity (Analysis Strategies #12),* paying attention to their own voice and perspective while attempting to demonstrate balance, understanding, authenticity, and trustworthiness by being as objective as possible (Patton, 2002).

Davenport and Prusak (1998) refer to qualitative data analysis as a form of knowledge management—managing analytical processes to transform data into information and information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. It is the

process of systemically applying statistical and / or logical techniques to describe and illustrate condense, recap, and evaluate data (Northern Illinois University [NIU], 2012). Data analysis allows the researcher to draw conclusions and separate the phenomenon of interest from other elements of the data that serve as a distraction.

The researcher in this study employed all five of the concepts for data collection suggested by Patton (2002): Unique Case Orientation; Inductive Analysis; Creative Synthesis; Holistic Perspective; Context Sensitivity and Voice, Perspective, and Reflexivity. The unique case study orientation allowed the researcher to view each participant, his / her institutions as well as his / her programs as unique and different from one another. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of each institution's practices while paying attention to key details. Inductive analysis and creative synthesis were used to identify emerging themes, patterns, and relationships found within each institution's seminar. These details helped to provide a rich analysis and helped the researcher tie together commonalities and create the framework for best practices. The researcher used a holistic perspective by taking into account that the phenomenon being studied was the seminar, but that at each institution, these seminars are inter-related with other factors such as institutional structure, culture, financial status, and other variables, all of which must also be considered. The researcher was also aware of context sensitivity and made an effort to ensure that data interpretation was based on appropriate comparisons in terms of institutional nature, perspective, and background.

Another important aspect of qualitative research concerns how the researcher and—in this case, educators—can apply what is learned to other situations. Unlike quantitative research, one cannot generalize from the samples (cases) studied to the

whole population. However, someone studying the research could identify practices that might be applicable—or transferable—to his or her own situation. This researcher made every effort to examine the data for transferability and adaptability in new settings. Trochim (2006, para. 5) stated the following about transferability:

> Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. From a qualitative perspective transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing. The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by doing a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to "transfer" the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is.

In order not to undermine the dependability of the study, the researcher worked to avoid subjectivity, to provide an objective analysis of the data, and to not allow personal feelings or opinions to interfere with the analysis of information.

Analysis of the data began by utilizing information obtained from the interviews and artifacts. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guidelines for thematic analysis: "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns / [themes] within data. It minimally organizes and describes [the] data in rich detail" (2006, p. 79). Further, thematic analysis assists the researcher in discovering themes and concepts that emerge as a part of the analysis process and allows the researcher to share patterns / themes with the reader. With thematic analysis, there are no foregone conclusions or preconceived ideas; therefore, this framework is flexible and lends itself well to qualitative case-based research: "Thematic analysis can be essentialist

or realist" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80); this type of data analysis allows the researcher to report "experiences, meanings and the reality of participants or it can be a constructionist method which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences, and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). Morales 2006) further explained this approach:

> [Braun & Clarke] used the word guidelines to highlight the flexibility of this qualitative analytic method. These guidelines are (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) [Reading through] each transcript, to be immersed in the data, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

Prior to analyzing the data, the researcher had all of the audiotaped interviews professionally transcribed. Reading the transcripts allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data. Qualitative research often includes some form of transcription, which focuses on presenting the data objectively and precisely (Oliver, et al., 2005). After the researcher has transcribed the interviews, Chenail (2012) identified the next step as conducting a line-by-line analysis of qualitative data in order to obtain meaningful results, particularly when this process is used in conjunction with "Microsoft Word's insert comment reviewing option." This method assists the researcher in "tagging" units of information with certain keywords or codes. SAGE Publication (n.d, p.8.) explained the following about coding:

> Coding is an exploratory problem-solving technique that allows the researcher to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification to categorize. Coding is only the initial stop toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation for a report. Coding is not just

> labeling [;] it is linking. It leads you from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea.

Analyzing the data in this way allows the researcher to become better "organized by the lines of words and not by undivided units of data" (Chenail, 2012, p. 268). As the researcher continues to review the data, the "tagged" information can be further refined into meaningful more specific qualitative units. Utilizing the line-by-line method accomplishes much of what software packages can accomplish but can be easily tailored and adapted by the researcher.

In this study, the artifacts collected were also analyzed with the transcribed interviews. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2008), it is important for the researcher to analyze artifacts in tandem with other data collected. This method of analysis simulates triangulation and reinforces best practices. According to Guion, et al. (2013):

> Triangulation is the art of establishing the validity of qualitative studies; and validity in qualitative research refers to whether the findings of a study are true and certain—[true] in the sense that research findings accurately reflect the situation, and [certain] in the sense that research findings are supported by the evidence.

Triangulation of the data is important because it enhances the validity of research findings: "Regardless of which philosophical, epistemological, or methodological perspectives an evaluator is working from, it is necessary to use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study in order to withstand critique by colleagues" (Mathison, 1988, para. 1). For this study, the researcher triangulated the data by using

different sources of information such as interviews and artifacts in order to increase the validity of the study. Additionally, the researcher compared the research findings to industry best practices, such as the seven gold standards identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996).

Research Questions

The researcher was interested in understanding how FYS in community colleges can best be used to bridge the achievement gap and whether these practices address the issues defined by Secretaries Bell and Spellings while advancing President Obama's 2020 graduation initiative. The researcher also wanted to determine if any other common themes not identified by Barefoot and Fidler (1996) exist and how FYS enhance student success. The three research questions were as follows:

Research question 1: What common themes emerged in each institution's FYE program that directly address the concerns of the two commissions?

Secretaries Bell and Spellings identified several issues that have led to the deterioration of educational principles in many high schools and colleges throughout the country. Some of the areas of concern mentioned by the secretaries included weak content / curriculum, inadequate time in the classroom, poor access to higher education (particularly with minorities) as well as lack of transparency, accountability, and innovation. This researcher was interested in identifying what, if any, characteristics within these programs addressed the deficiencies identified by the secretaries.

Research question 2: What characteristics (if any) do the FYE seminars studied share with the seven gold standards as identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996)?

Barefoot and Fidler (1996) identified seven gold standards for FYE seminars: (1) offered for academic credit; (2) centered in first-year curriculum; (3) taught and supported by both faculty and student affairs; (4) instructors trained and provided with professional development as an integral part of the program; (5) instructors compensated or rewarded for teaching the seminar; (6) upper-level students involved in seminar delivery; (7) seminar effectiveness assessed and results disseminated to the campus community. According to Keup (2012) all of these are integral components of a comprehensive approach to FYE seminar offerings; however, Padgett and Keup's 2009 study confirmed that the structure of FYE seminars and programs can vary widely. The researcher was interested in determining which seminar structures are more conducive to producing successful students, as well as determining which of the seven characteristics the award-wining seminars studied have in common.

Research question 3: What assessment tools are in place to evaluate the performance of FYE programs?

Assessment is an essential element to any program where one wishes to measure achievement. As mentioned in chapter two, Friedman (2012) suggested that there are two types of assessments appropriate for FYE seminars—summative and formative. The summative assessment explores the efficacy of a course or program while the formative is used to provide feedback so subsequent improvements can be made. Friedman (2012) also suggested that a mixture of summative and formative assessments be utilized for the best results and that a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures be utilized to comprehensively assess program performance. The researcher was interested in which type of assessment model(s) were used as well as what types of assessment instruments

have been utilized in an effort to see how various programs compare to one another with respect to seminar type.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that this study was not all encompassing. The research was narrowed in scope by the use of Barefoot & Fiddler's (1996) seven gold standards and the participants chosen, among other factors. There are multiple opportunities for future research in this area that might involve different recipients and different criteria to determine best practices as well as research that could focus on gaining information from a student perspective. The participants chosen for research were recently recognized for their contributions to the field of FYE; therefore, this is not a longitudinal study. According to Bynner (2006, para. 1), a longitudinal study can be defined as "any social or developmental research involving collection of data from the same individuals (or groups) across time." Additionally, the programs themselves did not receive recognition, only the individuals responsible for program or seminar administration received acknowledgment from the University of South Carolina National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Other factors such as institutional governance and philosophy could potentially influence program performance, operation, and / or outcomes. Likewise, location, funding and demographics could have also played a role in the success of FYS programs. Lastly, because the research participants were located exclusively in the eastern region of the country, they may not be representative samples of best practices seen throughout other regions.

Conclusion

Using the 12 strategies, identified by Patton (2012), the researcher employed the correct design strategies, collection methods, and strategies for analysis to ensure a comprehensive, unbiased account of the research findings. As college readiness issues continue to grow in American school districts (ACT, 2013), FYE programs and seminars can play a pivotal role in helping students succeed (Hunter, et al., 2005). Using the seven gold standards identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996) as a measuring stick, the researcher gained a perspective gained from these award recipients that could be instrumental in providing insight into the best ways to bridge the achievement gap. This study identified the key findings related to best practices in FYE courses with the desire of disseminating the information to educators and leaders in both the K-12 and higher education settings, in order to help students better prepare for college and succeed once enrolled. Chapter four provides additional information regarding the responses from research participants about their FYS.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate best practices in First-Year Seminars (specifically at community colleges) and how best practices employed in these courses can be used to bridge the achievement gap. The researcher was interested in understanding whether these practices address the issues defined by Secretaries Bell and Spellings while advancing President Obama's 2020 graduation initiative. The researcher interviewed five participants to solicit answers to these questions. Although the structure and content of the research participants' seminars varied greatly, many commonalities were observed with respect to best practices. These commonalities will be discussed in detail throughout this chapter.

Research Participants

Each year, the National Resource Center for First Year-Experience and Students in Transition chooses individuals for exemplary work in First-Year Experience (FYE). The criteria for award winners is as follows (National Resource Center, 2013):

> The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is pleased to recognize and reward individuals on the nation's campuses who are Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates involved in high-impact practices for first-year student success.

Each year, presidents of American higher education institutions are invited to nominate one educator on their campus for this award that are doing exceptional work in the areas of student learning, development and success. A national panel of distinguished educators reviews the nomination portfolios and selects 10 individuals as the nation's Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates. Two award recipients are chosen in each of the following categories:

- Two-Year Colleges
- Four-Year Colleges & Universities with less than 2,000 students
- Four-Year Colleges & Universities with 2,000 to 7,000 students
- Four-Year Colleges & Universities with 7,001 to 15,000 students
- Four-Year Colleges & Universities with more than 15,000 students

Since 2004, thirty-five awards have been granted to community college personnel throughout the country. All thirty-five award recipients were contacted to participate in the study; however, only five consented and agreed to a telephone interview. The interviews were conducted between March and May of 2013. Table 4 shows participant demographic information

Table 4: Demographic Information of Survey Participants

NAME	TITLE OF PARTICIPANT	LOCATION	COLLEGE SIZE IN TERMS OF NUMBER OF STUDENTS
Institution A	Coordinator of the First Year Experience	Northeast	7,400
Institution B	Co-Director of the First-Year Experience Program	Southeast	13,000
Institution C	Assistant Dean, Academic Affairs	Northeast	11,000
Institution D	Director of Special Services	Northeast	6,800
Institution E	Associate Professor	Northeast	5,300

The following sections represent responses from the research participants to the 14 interview questions presented in Appendix A. In an effort to present the findings in a thorough and comprehensive manner, tables and charts are included with survey responses.

Closing the Achievement Gap

The research participants were asked what their programs do specifically to address the areas of concern identified by Secretaries Bell & Spellings. The participants identified several themes that addressed bridging the gap between high school completion and college entry. Some of those themes include:

- Using college placement exams
- Outreach to high schools
- Teaching life and survival skills
- Early advising

The use of placement exams such as Accuplacer or COMPASS to determine college readiness and course placement level was the most notable factor, with all respondents stating that English placement is mandatory at their colleges, while two stated that math and English placement are both mandatory.

High school involvement was the second most notable factor among respondents with three stating that they have direct involvement in either training high school teachers or having college faculty teach college readiness courses within local high schools. Respondent one from institution A indicated that her school does a combination of high school outreach as well as placement testing: "We even have placement tests in the high schools to help high schools and students see, in 10th grade, for example, where are they in their math preparation. Are they on track to be ready for college math or aren't they?

Then of course, math placement testing is one of our biggest challenges for us as an institution. About 80% of our incoming class test into developmental math."

Respondent five at institution E stated that sending their own "college faculty into the high schools to teach FYE courses helped students have a better idea of what it was all about [prior to entering college] so they'll be ahead of the game." Likewise, Respondent four at Institution D affirmed that they "have a college readiness program [that] provides orientation and information sessions for high-school students to try and help high-school student[s] develop the necessary tools to transition into college. For example, we offer courses in preparation for college-level math, reading, writing, and basic computers."

This study also revealed that two of the institutions surveyed valued teaching life and survival skills as an integral component of closing the achievement gap. Respondent Three from Institution C stated, "We have an orientation course that is taught for credit by faculty and in that seminar, they teach survival skills at college and they'll also have the introduction to some form of an academic scheme to try to make the bridge between academics and orientation and success."

Respondents also stated that early advising helped bridge the achievement gap. One of those surveyed suggested that early advising was not only instrumental in bridging the achievement gap but also contributes to college completion. Respondent One from Institution A stated the following, "Every student that steps in the college here has a one hour individual advising appointment following our orientation, which is kind of a group session. We talk generally about goals, and just some general college information and then spend an hour individual session where we identify student's goals and strengths

and kind of write those down. It will start a discussion, then we create their map to their degree, whatever that turns out to be, if it's four semesters, five semesters, whatever that means for students with ESL coursework or developmental coursework or something. And talking about all the financial aid rules for that, but mostly so that they can see to the finish line, see what they're working toward, what the steps are they have to take to complete that. And so then students have that plan with their self-identified goals of transferring or finding a major, whatever those might be, kind of help them transition to the faculty adviser who has, of course, more specialized knowledge in their area."

As evidenced by the research, the common themes of placement testing, high school outreach, teaching life and survival skills and early advising are integral to closing the achievement gap. Placement testing upon entering college allows educators to gain a basic understanding of the degree of college-readiness students possess, while high school outreach helps students become better prepared prior to reaching college. Early advising as well as teaching life and survival skills helps students succeed once enrolled. All are essential to college readiness and success. See Table 5 for all identified factors as they relate to closing the achievement gap based on the findings of this study.

Table 5: Most Notable Factors in Closing the Achievement Gap

TYPE OF INTERVENTION	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS *
Mandatory Placement Testing (English and/or Math)	5
High School Involvement	3
Teaching Life/Survival Skills	2
Early Advising	1

**Each number is independent of the other. It is possible for each institution in the study to have multiple factors.*

Seminar Structure

The research participants were asked what type of seminar structure their programs utilize and several of the survey participants indicated that there are varying levels of FYS or pre-FYS that students can choose from based on placement level and / or personal preference. For instance, the participant from institution B stated,

> I would say, we probably do a little bit of academic seminars with uniform content, academic on various topics and pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars. The most [common] would be seminars with uniform content, but we do have discipline link, like linking some to math, and we're linking some to sciences. We also have ones that are related to types of learners such as adult learners or ESL students, and then we have different formats like hybrid or fast-track. It's one course that has a series of topics within it. Sometimes, for example, we have a biology-themed one for students who we know are going into the health science careers. So sometimes they do address the same objectives as all the other first-year experience courses, but they'll relate those objectives to biology content and certain situations they [students] might encounter in their field.

Respondent three from institution C stated,

> We have two courses right now. One is called OCD, Orientation Career Development, and that's a pretty standard [how to survive in college] that people are doing everywhere in the country. Study skills, time management, what the role of a student is, how to use the library, those kinds of things. The second is called freshman-year seminar. They're doing more in that direction. Similar set of skills but also the academic—maybe a professor of arts does a course in revolutionary art or a professor of psychology does an integration of psychology successes or the literacy professor does something like literacy of the Dominican Republic. So it's a one-credit course, so it's soft skills, how to survive, but it's also integrating more academic experience.

Likewise, respondent four at institution D stated, "We have two different types, actually two different levels of college studies, skills. One is basic study skills; the other is like a psychology 100-level class which focuses more on academics."

There is no clear frontrunner as it relates to type of seminar type. What is clear, however, is that institutions are utilizing a variety of seminars to fit the needs of their students. While academic seminars using uniform content, focusing on pre-professional issues, and emphasizing basic study skills were the most common among research participants, the institutions in this study appeared to be customizing their seminars based on student's academic and personal needs. Table 6 summarizes the various seminar types among respondent institutions.

Table 6: Types of Freshman Seminars

SEMINAR TYPE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS*
Extended orientation seminars	1
Academic seminars with uniform content	2
Academic on various topics	1
Pre-professional or discipline-linked	2
Basic study skills seminars	2

**Each number is independent of the other. It is possible for each institution in the study to have multiple factors.*

Mandatory Versus Optional Seminars

The research participants were asked if their programs were mandatory or optional. All five research participants stated that at their institutions, students are required to take their institution's version of FYS; however, each college had various conditions to accompany the mandate. One common theme that emerged is that FYS is

mandatory for students who place at the remedial level in mathematics, English, or both. Table 7 explains the mandates and seminar requirements.

Table 7: Condition of FYS Mandate

NAME OF INSTITUTION	SEMINAR REQUIREMENT
Institution A	• Mandatory for degree seeking students only
Institution B	• Mandatory for students who place into remedial mathematics and English
Institution C	• Mandatory for all students; however, students avoid the seminar by obtaining counselor waivers
Institution D	• Mandatory for degree-seeking students only
Institution E	• Mandatory for any student who has one or more remedial needs. Highly encouraged for the rest of students

Academic Credit Hours for FYS

The research participants were asked if their seminar(s) are worth academic credit and all reported that their seminars are credit-bearing. Respondent two from institution B stated, "One thing we've done with the seminar, because our college is hesitant to require it of all students because their curriculum is already so packed, but we worked hard with the state to design the class so that it can become transferable for credit. It makes it a little more attractive to students who don't place at the developmental level." Table 8 details how many academic credits the seminars are worth at participant colleges:

Table 8: Credit Hours of Seminar

CREDIT HOURS OF SEMINAR	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
1 credit hour	2
2 credit hours	1
3 credit hours	1
Varies depending on type of seminar	1

Average Class Size

All participants were asked what the average class size was for their seminars. Each indicated that the maximum seating capacity for their FYS is 25. Respondent four from institution D stated that while 25 is the maximum, the actual enrollment depended on the subject matter of the seminar. This commitment to small class size is consistent with the research of Hunter (2012) who suggested that by keeping FYS class sizes smaller, students develop a greater sense of belonging versus larger class sizes. The results regarding class size are illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9: Class Size

INSTITUTION	SIZE OF CLASS
Institution A	• Capped at 22
Institution B	• Approximately 20 during winter and summer semesters • In the fall, numbers may rise to 24
Institution C	• Capped at 20
Institution D	• Capped at 25 for students testing at the college level • Less than 25 for students who test at the remedial level
Institution E	• Capped at 25

Teaching and Compensation

The research participants were asked who was involved in teaching the seminar and the method of compensation for those individuals. Each institution surveyed encouraged faculty involvement with teaching FYS. However, the other individuals involved with teaching the courses varied among respondents. Interestingly, respondent four from institution D is the only participant who stated that dedicated faculty alone are assigned to teach FYS. Respondent three from institution C said that only counselors

teach one of their FYS courses entitled Orientation Career Development (OCD). However, their primary FYS course is taught by a combination of counselors and faculty but is slowly moving toward all faculty. Lastly, most institutions stated that any staff involved in teaching FYS must do so in addition to their full-time jobs. Table 10 illustrates the level of involvement by various college personnel with respect to providing instruction for FYS.

Table 10: Faculty and Staff Teaching Involvement

POSITION TITLE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Faculty (Full-Time and/or Part-Time)	5
Student Affairs Staff (including Student Life, Student Services and Admissions)	3
Counselors	3
Academic Advisors	1
Financial Aid Staff	1
Academic Support Staff	1
Mentors	1
Administrators	1
College Grant Writers	1

**Each number is independent of one another. It is possible for each institution in the study to have multiple factors.*

All survey respondents stated that they use faculty to teach FYS; therefore, the primary method of compensation for faculty was for the course to be included as part of their load for the semester / term. The second most prevalent method of compensation was stipend, followed by flat rate per credit hour and faculty overload rate. Table 11 provides a more detailed explanation of methods for compensation.

Table 11: Faculty and Staff Compensation

METHOD OF COMPENSATION	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS*
Full-Time Faculty (Included in teaching load)	5
Stipend	2
Flat Rate Paid per Credit Hour	1
Non-Faculty (Receive faculty overload rate)	1

**Each number is independent of one another. It is possible for each institution in the study to have multiple factors.*

Program Administration

The manner in which a course or program is managed is an important element of First-Year Seminars. The participants involved with this study were asked what type of program governance was present at their respective institutions. Most respondents replied that they have a coordinator while some said they have a director. However, four of the participants stated that either the coordinator's or director's involvement in managing the FYE program or seminar was a full-time commitment. Remarkably, respondent two from institution B stated that they specifically designed their program to have two co-directors, one from faculty and one from Student Services. The respondent stated, "It's a collaboration of different departments coming together to make it work, so I kind of like the integrated idea with multiple perspectives lending their expertise to the subject area".

The majority of participants responded that their program employs a coordinator to manage their seminar(s). Table 12 shows the percentages of coordinators versus directors among research participants.

Table 12: Program Administration

POSITION TITLE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Coordinator	3
Director	2

Pre-Professional Training and Continuing Education

The research participants were asked what, if any, type of training seminar instructors are required to participate in prior to teaching, and the answers varied greatly from no requirements to mandatory / formal training. Respondent one from institution A replied that "due to our union contract, no training can be mandatory. We do strongly encourage all of our instructors to [participate in training]." Respondent two from institution B stated that training included a variety of activities:

> Usually the instructors will meet with me for at least an hour to go over what the objectives of the course are. Because we want to make it very clear it's not just a study skills class, it's not just about resources on campus, it's not just about critical thinking, but it's a combination of all of those. And so I sit down, I go over, I show them. We have a learning management system, and I have developed a course template that has tons of resources that connect with our different objectives. Of course, there are just so many resources out there on the web and every place. I try to make sure they are at least familiar with what they have at their fingertips. I do provide sample course syllabi and calendars and then there's a weekly email that goes out where people share ideas of what they're doing in the seminar course. We have a training at the beginning of the semester where we meet for a couple of hours usually and somebody shares some strategies they've been using. Sometimes we'll have the publisher come in and do some training with our book or the supplemental materials. And then at the end of the semester, we usually have a wrap-up and take a look and see what's working, what isn't working and what we need to work on for the next semester.

Table 13 provides specific information about the type of professional training each survey participant provides. Similarly, continuing education is an integral component of teaching in any subject, so the question of how FYS instructors participate

in ongoing professional development was posed to the participants which yielded a multitude of responses, revealing that while some institutions mandate continuing education, others do not. Respondent two from institution B stated that, “As instructors, we are required to maintain a certain number of professional development hours.” Respondent one from institution A replied that while training and continuing education are not mandatory because of contractual issues, they try to work with the coordinator to provide one-on-one training with the instructor.

Expectations for FYS instructors to participate in professional development prior to teaching the course varied among the participants. The same was true regarding requirements for continuing education for FYS instructors, with institutions opting for multiple ways to ensure that instructors stay abreast of the latest industry practices. Tables 13 and 14 illustrate the various methods that research participants stated they utilize for pre-professional development and continuing education.

Table 13: Types of Pre-Professional Development Participation

Type of Pre-Professional Development Required	Number of Respondents
Do Not Meet at All	2
Mandatory Formal Training	1
Informal Meetings	1
Workshops	1

Table 14: Types of Continuing Education

TYPE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION REQUIREMENT	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS*
No Mandatory Requirements	1
Non-Mandatory Group Meetings (Twice Monthly)	1
Non-Mandatory Group Meetings (Each Semester)	1
Non-Mandatory Group Meetings (Several Times per year)	1
Non-Mandatory Workshops	1
Mandatory Seminars	1
Required Refresher Course Every 2 years	1
One-on-One Training with the Coordinator	1

**Each number is independent of one another. It is possible for research participants to have multiple ways to provide continuing education.*

Service Learning and Peer Mentoring

The research participants were asked if their institutions offered service learning and peer mentoring as a component of their FYE programs or FYS courses. When asked about the service-learning component, respondent two from institution B stated the following:

> We do not use it consistently, but there are certainly instructors who do use it. I've used service learning within my five classes, not on a regular basis but at different times. And there are a few instructors who consistently use it every time. But, because again of the number of sections we have sometimes, it's very difficult to get placement in service learning. We just try to do it where people have the motivation. Also as a community college, sometimes it's hard with the service learning projects off-campus and certainly if you're near a city, you understand a lot of our students are lacking in transportation or the resources to get to different places they would need to go.

With respect to peer mentoring, respondent one from institution A stated that their institution does the following:

> We just are in our first year piloting a program where about, I think we have eight or ten instructors who are really interested in it, found some peer mentors and have been using them in their classes. We're trying out to see how it works before the college commits to it. Like at this point, there's no additional resources committed to it. But the peer mentors are interested in that kind of experience and that kind of leadership development. So we utilize it, but not really in a formal way yet.

Tables 15 and 16, respectively, present the results of answers to these two questions: Service learning is not offered at most participant colleges while the majority of these colleges depend on upper level classmen to mentor students enrolled in FYS.

Table 15: Is Service Learning Offered at the College?

SERVICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
No	3
Yes	2

Table 16: Use of Upper-Level Peer Mentors

USE OF PEER MENTORS?	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
No	2
Yes	3

Division Responsible for FYE Program / Seminars

FYE programs or seminars can be housed in many different areas of the college (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). All participants were asked where the program or seminar was housed within their institutions. The participants in this survey said that the majority of FYE programs or seminars were housed in the Academic Affairs Division. However, the

interviews also revealed that institutions with more than one seminar may choose to house them in different divisions. For example, respondent three from institution C stated that the "Orientation Career Development Program was housed in Student Affairs, while the First-Year Seminar course was housed in Academic Affairs." Additionally, many other survey participants revealed that while their courses were primarily held in Academic Affairs, that there was considerable collaboration with staff from Student Affairs.

The overwhelming majority of respondents housed their programs or seminars in Academic Affairs. Table 17 illustrates the various areas within the colleges where FYE programs or seminars reside:

Table 17: Where is the FYE Program or Seminar Housed?

DIVISION WHERE PROGRAM/SEMINAR IS HOUSED	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS*
Academic Affairs	3
Center of Language and Learning Design	1
Student Affairs	1
Social Sciences	1

**Each number is independent of the other. It is possible for research participants to have more than one seminar housed in different divisions.*

First-Year Seminar Assessment

Seminar outcomes cannot be measured without assessment. Therefore, assessment is an effective tool for seminar instructors and / or administrators to use to determine where improvements are needed. Hunter (2012) stated that assessment is any effort to gather, analyze and interpret evidence which describes program effectiveness." Hunter

(2012) also explained that "assessment is an ongoing process and not a one-time deal; it should be aimed at understanding and improving."

The research participants were asked to identify the assessment techniques utilized within their institutions to evaluate their FYS. Respondent one from institution A stated the following with respect to assessment:

> We do a lot of evaluating of the process for students halfway through and all the way through their first semester, their first year, to kind of gauge their experience and see if what we're doing (because we think it's a good idea), is actually helping. For our FYE course specifically, like I said, we recently made some changes to make them all A-terms and to kind of coordinate our content. So we've been doing some specific surveys and focus groups on students to understand their experience in that process, to see if it's essentially doing things we hoped it would do for them. We do also use that course, because as I mentioned, the vast majority of our incoming students take that course. We also use that course as an opportunity to assess some of our other FYE things like the orientation and mandatory advisement that I was talking about. I would say we just use those classes as a place to get in touch with those students, and then we do our survey after they have completed two semesters here. We just send them a survey; it's an email survey. I say we get about 55 to 60% of students that complete it and give us some feedback on their first two semesters of college and what sort of things they remember, and what was helpful, what wasn't helpful. And oftentimes they talk about their course and specifically their instructor, what they got out of the course, that kind of thing.

Respondent two from institution B stated that their faculty and staff use a separate yet intertwined method of assessment: "We had the teachers evaluated. We had the students evaluated, and we saw that when the students saw that teachers were using certain strategies, they [students] tended to be more successful and retained. So then, we

adjusted our professional development to help teach our FYEX [First-Year Experience] instructors how to use more of those strategies, to provide resources to do that, but we have not followed up yet. It's time-consuming; however, we just need to do it.

Respondent five from institution E indicated that her institution uses a mix by performing informal assessment every year, with a larger more involved formal assessment every five years. Respondent three from institution C stated that professional assessment has been valuable:

> We use the Community College Research Center. We know that they're probably the best in the country in this kind of thing. We just received grants in the amount of $150,000 to study freshman year seminar here, how we've developed the seminar and what the outcomes are. So we value having an outside organization coming in to actually evaluate it.

Respondent four from institution D stated that many methods of assessment have proven helpful:

> We use a variety of methods for assessment. Middle States (our accreditation agency) scrutinizes our outcomes with a five-year review. So this helps us maintain alignment with our accreditation guidelines as well as ensure that we are reaching our course objectives. Additionally, we use in-course surveys that remain anonymous which are then reviewed by our research department. Essentially what happens is the professor hands these surveys out in class and walks out of the room. The professor never touches the evaluations. The surveys go directly to the research department, and their staff sends it to an outside agency where people score these things. The agency sends it all back, and it's all kind of standardized; it just isn't our own survey. There's also a part of the survey that is open-ended so students can write whatever they want, and all their comments get tied up with the responses.

Results for methods of assessment are displayed in Table 18. Surveys were the most commonly reported assessment tool along with the use of outside assessment agencies.

Table 18: Types of Assessment Techniques Used

TYPE OF ASSESSMENT USED	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS*
In-Class Surveys	1
Email Surveys	2
Focus Groups	2
Use of External Assessment Agency	2
Informal Assessment	1

**Each number is independent of the other. It is possible for research participants to have more than one method of seminar assessment.*

Summary

The results of the analyses have been used to address the research questions that were presented for this study. The research questions are as follows:

1. Which common themes emerge in each institution's seminar that directly addresses the concerns of the two commissions?
2. Which characteristics do the seminars share with the seven gold standards as identified by Barefoot and Fidler (1996)?
3. Which assessment tools are in place to evaluate the performance of seminar?

Response to Research Question One

Secretaries Bell and Spellings noted issues such as lack of academic rigor, too few hours in the school day / year as compared to other industrialized nations, as well as inadequate teacher preparation as major factors contributing to the achievement gap. This widening achievement gap leads to college readiness issues and subsequently increases the need for remedial coursework once students enter college (ACT, 2013). At the

postsecondary level, Secretary Spellings addressed concerns regarding access to higher education, cost, and a lack of transparency, accountability and innovation by educators as being major factors contributing to the lack of academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The common themes that emerged in each institution's seminar that address the widening achievement gap included mandatory placement testing and college outreach to high schools. The overwhelming majority of respondents stated that both factors are important to ensure academic success with incoming freshmen.

With respect to the lack of transparency and innovation identified by Secretary Spellings, the research revealed that areas of promise included awarding academic credit for First-Year Seminars (which increases course transferability to four-year institutions), limiting class size, using peer mentors, and incorporating creative methods of assessment. The research also showed that the majority of participants' seminars were worth at least one credit hour. All institutions surveyed limited enrollment to 25 students, and the majority of seminars utilized peer mentors as a method of outreach to first-year students. Because assessment is necessary to determine the outcomes of any FYS, it was interesting to note that all the institutional participants used some type of assessment, whether formal or informal. E-mail surveys and the use of external assessment agencies appeared to be the most popular methods of assessment. According to Barefoot and Fidler (1996), proper assessment and dissemination of information is vital so that key data can be shared and administrators of first-year seminars can become more transparent in and contribute to a culture of comprehensibility and accountability.

Response to Research Question Two

Barefoot and Fidler (1996) identified seven gold standards for First-Year Seminars:

1. Academic credit
2. Centered in first-year curriculum
3. Involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in design and instruction
4. Instructor training and development
5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery
7. Ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus community

Findings from the research participants revealed that each of the seven gold standards identified by Barefoot and Fidler (1996) have been employed within these institutions' seminar courses. These gold standards are industry best practices as identified by several key leaders at the University of South Carolina Institute for First-Year Seminar Leadership. As stated previously in this chapter, all research participants offer at least one credit hour of academic credit for their seminars. Likewise, all institutions surveyed offered first-year student centered curriculum, which includes basic study skills and survival skills. Additionally, many of these institutions offered more than one seminar in order to accommodate students desiring more than a first-year curriculum. A professional or discipline-linked seminar was the second most popular seminar offered at participant colleges.

Involvement by both faculty and student affairs personnel was another key finding of this research study. All participants had faculty involvement while three of

respondents utilized student affairs and faculty as suggested by Barefoot and Fidler (1996). In addition, three of respondents also cited faculty and counseling involvement. Staff from other areas of the college also participated in the coordination of FYE seminars, including administrators, grant writers, and financial aid personnel. However, the overwhelming majority did acknowledge using faculty, student affairs, and counselors as the main professionals involved with teaching these courses.

Another very important finding in the survey was the emphasis participant schools place on training and development for faculty and staff involved in freshman seminars. Interestingly, the majority of respondents did not require any type of training prior to teaching FYS while continuing education requirements varied. There were eight different methods of offering continuing education; however, all eight had the same number of respondents, indicating that there is no clear-cut preference for the manner in which continuing education is offered.

All of the institutional participants in this survey responded that their faculty are compensated for teaching seminars as part of their teaching load. However, non-faculty staff teaching the course tended to be paid most often with a stipend. Less popular methods of payment include paying non-faculty the faculty overload rate or paying a flat rate per credit hour.

Finally, involvement by upper-level peer mentors and the use of adequate assessment practices were not only identified measures of bridging the achievement gap outlined by secretaries Bell and Spellings, they are also part of the seven gold standards noted by Barefoot and Fidler (1996).

Response to Research Question Three

Research participants utilized a variety of methods for seminar assessment: Techniques ranged from informal surveys and focus groups to formal assessment done internally or by outside agencies specializing in assessment. Regardless the method, assessment remains a critical component to ensuring success of the seminar as well as the student (Friedman, 2012). While Barefoot and Fidler (1996) identified assessment as one of the seven gold standards, on its own it continues to be an integral component in closing the achievement gap noted by both secretaries and as evidenced by the research conducted in this survey. Benchmarking an institution's seminar outcomes against those of others is how industry best practices are identified and established; this is also a form of assessment that can be used as part of a larger more complex system of assessment (Friedman, 2012). Hunter (2012) and Friedman (2012) suggested that no matter the assessment method, assessment must take place early and often.

Conclusion

Some of the more common themes that emerged as a result of the research include:

- Mandatory placement testing, which was used by all participant colleges as a method to ensure that students are placed at the correct course levels upon entering college.
- Early advising is another emerging trend in closing the achievement gap and helping students succeed. Not all institutions utilize this method, but those who did saw it as an opportunity to make a personal connection with students and to help make students feel comfortable in seeking help when and if needed.
- Outreach to high school partners was another common thread among respondents. Most of those surveyed either offered to have their faculty teach the high-school instructors about college entry requirements, or the participants had college faculty teach college readiness courses within local high schools.

- Awarding academic credit for FYS was another theme that emerged as promising because it encouraged more students to take the seminars, even if students are not mandated to do so.
- Limiting class size appeared to be important because students may feel a greater sense of belonging in a smaller class.
- Peer mentors were used by most respondents as a method of helping students succeed. Institutions saw greater retention and completion during the first year when pairing freshmen with an upper-level peer mentor.
- The use of various methods of assessment to evaluate seminar or program function emerged as another theme. The research revealed that FYE administrators employ a variety of assessment measures to evaluate student and seminar success.
- Offering various seminar types was common among most respondents. Most respondents stated that they utilized a variety of seminar types to accommodate students' needs.
- Teaching involvement by both faculty and student affairs personnel was an important factor as noted by Barefoot and Fidler (1996) and was also a common thread among respondents who noted that involvement by both student affairs and faculty offered students a well-rounded view of the first-year of college.
- The importance of regular training and development for staff and faculty also emerged as an integral component of the FYS offerings at the participant institutions. Participants in the study recognized the need for instructors to be up-to-date on the latest industry standards as well as institutional requirements.
- Compensation for faculty (included in teaching load) and non-faculty (stipend) appeared to be popular practices within the industry as noted by Padgett and Keup (2011). These findings were also consistent among research participants for this study.

Many of the common themes identified as a result of this research were included in Barefoot and Fidler's (1996) seven gold standards. However, other themes such as placement testing, outreach to local high schools, early advising and offering various seminars based on student need emerged as new trends that show promise in helping to close the achievement gap, advance President Obama's Graduation Initiative, and address issues identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings. Conclusions and recommendations based on these findings can be found in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The important issues of retention, persistence, academic success and completion are of vital significance not only to higher education students, but also to leaders of community colleges throughout the nation. Finding innovative ways to address these challenges is a major imperative for leaders within higher education in light of the high stakes to the country as described in a variety of federal reports over the last 30 years. In 1986, Secretary of Education T.H. Bell outlined the importance of bridging the achievement gap, while 25 years later in 2008, Secretary Spellings pointed out deficiencies still present in postsecondary institutions. President Obama has vowed to hold college leaders accountable for these weaknesses, while simultaneously providing incentives to colleges to help graduate more students than any other industrialized nation by 2020. However, the question of how to accomplish this remains. Despite countless attempts at reform of America's K-12 and postsecondary systems such as Race to the Top (RTT) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), critical problems still exist in preparing students to become college-ready prior to high-school graduation (ACT, 2013).

One of the more promising pathways to helping students become ready for the academic rigors of college appears to be the resurgence of First-Year Seminars (FYS)

(Pope, 2005). While these seminars have been in existence since the late 1800s, their re-emergence has brought about positive changes in recent years that directly address the challenges identified by the commissions of the two education secretaries. This conclusion is further supported by the results of the research presented in this study.

The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices in First-Year Seminars (specifically at community colleges) and their effect on student success. The research questions were as follows:

1. What common themes emerge in each institution's FYE program that directly addresses the concerns of the two commissions?
2. What characteristics do the FYE programs share with the seven gold standards as identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996)?
3. What assessment tools are in place to evaluate the performance of FYE programs[1]?

[1] Note: At this point in the study, the researcher noted that the terms "program," and "course," or "seminar," were often used interchangeably. While the distinction between "program" and "course/seminar" was made in chapter 2, at the time these interviews were conducted, the participants were clearly describing their FYE courses or seminars, not comprehensive FYE programs.

In an effort to ascertain best practices in First-Year Seminars that may help bridge the achievement gap, the researcher collected qualitative data from award winning recipients of the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition program. The award-winning recipients were selected for their outstanding work in work in the areas of student learning, development, and academic success. The researcher chose to use the seven gold standards identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996) as the measure by which to gauge best practices:

1. Academic credit
2. Centered in first-year curriculum

3. Involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in design and instruction
4. Instructor training and development
5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery
7. Ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus community

This chapter discusses the key findings based on the research questions and responses by the participants interviewed for this study. These findings and their relationship to bridging the achievement gap will be discussed in detail, best practices will be identified, limitations of this study will be discussed, and, finally, suggestions for future research will be noted.

Research Question One: Best Practices in Bridging the Achievement Gap

Research question one concerns common themes that emerged in each of the participant institutions' FYE seminars that directly addressed the concerns of the Bell and Spellings commissions, especially the issue of the achievement between high school and college. The research participants interviewed for this study seem to have discovered some critical missing links to begin to close the widening achievement gap between high-school graduation and college entry. Identified below are four prominent themes that emerged in regard to closing the achievement gap. The themes are listed in order of most popular response to least popular response. Each theme will be discussed in detail in the sections to follow.

- Using college placement exams
- Outreach to high schools
- Teaching life and survival skills

- Early advising

The first theme emerging from the interviews revealed that all participants required incoming students to take placement testing for English and / or mathematics. Belfield & Crosta (2012, p.6) state that "colleges typically use placement tests as a binary indicator: Does a student require developmental education, or is the student ready for college-level courses in a particular subject?" Several of the respondents for this study also suggested the same reasons for placing such importance on placement exams. Belfield & Crosta (2012) found that placement tests alone are not the best predictor for success, but they assert that high school transcripts in addition to college placement tests are the best tools for predicting performance in college. Likewise, Yale (2008) suggests that using high school grade point average and placement test scores among other variables such as first-semester grade point average are guiding principles for improving student learning and success. Analysis of the interview responses in this study clearly establishes that institutions are finding success with college placement testing. What is less known, however, is if the placement tests within these institutions are used in conjunction with other criteria, such as high school transcripts or high school grade point average.

Placement testing is an important issue for college educators to consider. Thirty years after *A Nation at Risk* was published, lack of college readiness continues to be a leading reason why students are not successful in their college endeavors (ACT, 2013). Secretaries Bell and Spellings outlined the importance of closing the achievement gap, noting problems in K-12 and postsecondary institutions such as lack of innovation, transparency, and accountability, and inadequate teacher preparation. As mentioned in

chapter one, an American College Testing Company survey (2013) revealed that there continues to be an expectations gap with regard to what high schools are teaching versus what colleges desire incoming freshmen to know. The ACT survey also indicated that the lack of rigor in high school curricula is affecting college readiness and that more high-school instructors felt their students were prepared for college-level courses than college instructors themselves did. According to Jon Erickson, ACT's President of Education):

> When high school teachers believe their students are well prepared for college-level courses, but colleges disagree, we have a problem. If we are to improve the college and career readiness of our nation's high school graduates, we must make sure that our standards are aligned between high school and college. (ACT, 2013, para. 2).

Outreach to high schools was the second theme identified by the study participants as one of the most simple, yet effective methods of readying high-school graduates for the academic rigors of college. Barnett & Hughes (n.d.) suggest that community college outreach to high school accomplishes three things: 1) Encourages enrollment in college, 2) readies students for college, and 3) facilitates persistence once students are enrolled. Barnett & Hughes (n.d., p. 58) elaborate:

1. Enrollment in college—In order for students to complete college, they must first enroll. Colleges work with high schools to increase the likelihood that students will view college matriculation as an option.
2. College readiness at enrollment—Many students enter college in need of remediation; participation in remedial (also called developmental) education is associated with lower rates of degree completion.
3. Persistence in college—Students often enter college only to leave before completing a degree, frequently during the first year. Their success can depend on the extent to which they make a smooth transition from high school to college.

4. There [are] a broad range of goals and activities among community college-high school partnerships; we have organized the most prominent programs and initiatives into two categories as follows:
    - Initiatives designed to provide high school students with access to existing and regular college resources and offerings, such as assessments or college courses.
    - Programs or activities that partnerships develop together specifically for high school students and their needs.

The experiences of the participant schools in this study align with the findings of Barnett and Hughes (n.d.) and suggest a positive correlation between college outreach to high schools and the subsequent success of students within the first-year of college. According to researchers at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW, n.d.), positive correlation can be defined in the following manner, "A positive correlation means that as one variable goes up in value, the other variable goes up too. Or as one variable goes down in value, the other variable goes down too."

A third theme emerging from the responses of the research participants related to the importance of teaching life skills to first-year students, with some of the participants stating that the life skills curriculum is embedded in the seminar. According to officials at Miami Dade College (n.d.), "Life Skills classes help [students] cope with adding the demands of college to [a] busy life and prepares [students] for [a] successful future." Additionally, life skills teaches students how to develop good study skills, manage stress, improve leadership skills, balance work, school and family, and focus on mental well-being and social integration (Miami Dade, n.d.). These are all important skills for students in transition to possess if they are to be successful in completing college.

The use of early advising is the fourth theme identified and is an emerging best practice recognized by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2010)

as well as the Achieving the Dream organization (ATD, 2013) who recently made a policy change to include early advising as a suggested way to improve student success. Officials at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA, n.d.), affirm the following regarding early advising:

> Mandating early advising for first time-to-college students is a component of the new GPS for Success Initiative which is designed to provide a comprehensive advising experience to students who are recent high school graduates, have never been to college before and are enrolled in an academic program. The goal is to retain students by establishing relationships, fostering connections with professional advisors and faculty, and teaching students how to plan and evaluate their academic performance.

Nutt (2003) explains, "Academic advising is the direct link between the academic affairs and student affairs components of a campus that can build a culture of student retention." Tinto (1987) also states that effective academic advising is paramount to better student retention as well as successful institutional outcomes. Meeting with an advisor gives students clear academic and career goals and relieves the uncertainty that many new students have. Additionally, adopting this practice may help integrate the student into the college community and instill a sense of belonging. Early advising appears to be a successful strategy in the eyes of well-respected industry leaders and is a practice that continues to grow in popularity both in community colleges and four-year institutions (Nutt, 2003).

Research Question Two: Common Characteristics with Seven Gold Standards

Research question two concerned the issue of best practices and led the researcher to analyze the participants' interview data for ways in which their FYE seminars

measured up to the seven gold standards of successful seminars as identified by Barefoot and Fidler (1996) and listed below:

1. Academic credit
2. Centered in first-year curriculum
3. Involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in design and instruction
4. Instructor training and development
5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery
7. Ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus community

According to officials at the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (2012), the seven gold standards are the measuring stick by which First-Year Seminars (FYS) should be assessed. The research for this survey revealed that six of the seven gold standards were common elements of a successful FYS. The six areas identified by this research were the following:

1. Assessment
2. Academic Credit
3. Instructor training and development
4. Teaching involvement by both faculty and student affairs personnel
5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery

Centered in first-year curriculum was the only gold standard identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996) not identified as a best practice as a result of the interviews conducted for this study. When participants were asked about the curriculum for their seminars, the results varied with participants indicating that their curricula were based on

student need. The principle of curriculum being centered on first-year curriculum did not hold true for this study and showed that participants are not adhering to a standard curriculum, but are customizing seminars to fit the needs of the students they serve.

Keup (2012) suggested that Barefoot & Filder's (1996) seven gold standards were identified nearly three decades ago (in the mid 1980s) when Betsy Barefoot was conducting research for her doctoral degree. It is the researcher's belief that the lack of alignment with gold standard number two, "centered in first-year curriculum," results from the changing nature of today's college freshmen. Astute college leaders understand that there are significant differences between today's college freshmen and the freshmen of the mid 1980s (Pryor et al., 2007). While the research results for this study show that seminars centered in first-year curriculum are still important, it is clear that seminar curriculum is beginning to vary. The results of this research show that institutions today are customizing programs and services to fit the needs of the students they serve. Pryor et al. (2007. p.3) who also used a *Nation at Risk* (1983) and a *Test of Leadership* (2006) as a basis for their study suggested that, "Many changes have occurred in American higher education in the last 40 years. Most significant has been the unprecedented growth in enrollments, accompanied by changes in the proportions who are female, who are students of color and who attend full-time." It is the researcher's belief that these changing demographics are contributing factors as to why First-Year Seminars are changing throughout the country. Likewise, Yale (2008, para 1) suggested, "No one structure is the silver bullet. [Best practice is a] hybrid of approaches based on institutional characteristics and student needs." The researcher agrees with Yale and believes that as institutions conceptualize their own framework for student success, FYE

programs will continue to evolve to meet those needs. Despite the fact that other types of seminars in addition to those centered in the first-year experience were offered at the participant institutions, it is clear that all seven gold standards are FYS best practices and were contributing factors to the success of the research participants involved in this study

Research Question Three: Common Assessment Characteristics

Research question three concerned the identification of assessment tools that FYS administrators use to evaluate the performance of their seminars. Barefoot & Fidler (1996) identified gold standard number seven as the utilization of assessment as an integral component of a successful seminar. The researcher felt that assessment was such a significant factor in seminar and student success that assessment was isolated from the other gold standards and used as a research question on its own. In fact, the importance of using various methods of assessment emerged as a fifth theme in the participant interviews. Listed below are five types of assessment tools that the researcher identified in regards to best practices for assessment. They are listed in order of the most popular response to the least popular response, and each will be discussed in detail in the sections to follow.

- Use of external assessment agencies*
- Email surveys*
- In class surveys
- Focus groups
- Informal assessment

**Use of external assessment agencies and email surveys were equal in the number of respondents.*

The use of external assessment agencies and email surveys were mentioned as the most common methods of assessment. Keup (n.d.) referred to external assessment agencies and their related survey instruments as "Off-the-Shelf" (OTS) examples of assessment. These types of OTS assessments include well-known agencies such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and Educational Benchmarking Incorporated (EBI). Keup (n.d.) also suggested that perhaps the reason some seminar leaders prefer to use OTS survey instruments is a matter of logistics. Table 19, adapted from Keup (n.d.), lists some of the advantages and disadvantages of using assessment agencies.

Table 19: Advantages and Disadvantages of External Assessment Agencies (OTS)

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
• Short preparation time • Survey already fully developed • Questions predetermined/fixed based upon content and administration protocol • Can create instant credibility • Tend to have better psychometrics* • Some agencies provide institutions with individual incentives • Standardized form used, making scoring of the test and comparisons to other institutions easier (benchmarking) • Consistency in scoring because the individuals scoring the survey have been professionally trained to do so • Reporting automatically done for the institution**	• Need to adhere to the administration cycle • Results can be delayed if scoring done off campus • Primary costs associated with purchase of assessment • Costs associated with scoring the assessment • Costs associated with analyzing data • Costs associated with specialized reporting • May have associated recurring or monthly costs • Survey may not meet the specific needs of the institution / may provide incomplete coverage and inhibit acceptance

**According to Merriam Webster (n.d.) psychometrics is the technique of mental measurements: the use of quantitative devices for assessing psychological trends.*
***Gold standard number seven by Barefoot & Fidler (1996) suggested that seminars be evaluated on a regular basis and results of the evaluation be disseminated to others.*

Keup (n.d.) referred to homegrown surveys as the other types of assessment technique. These types of homegrown assessments include in-class surveys, focus groups, and informal methods of assessment. More specifically, some of the homegrown assessment tools utilize customizable software such as Survey Monkey and Zoomerang. Other services such as Eduventures or Student Voice can be purchased and customized to fit institutional / program needs. Keup (n.d., p. 6) suggested that "homegrown assessment methods are developed locally and are focused on the institution and that the content for the survey is developed and adapted by the campus / unit." Table 20, adapted from Keup (n.d.), displays the advantages and disadvantages of homegrown assessment instruments.

Table 20: Advantages and Disadvantages of Homegrown Assessment

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
• Allows for a thorough diagnostic coverage of local goals and interests • Allows for assessment to be tailored to local goals and content • Encourages local ownership and acceptance • Local specificity may yield greater respondent "buy in" • Can create student perception of immediate impact • Allows for immediate scoring • Accommodates flexible testing times as long as the survey meets institutional and programmatic needs • Allows for greater flexibility, particularly with IRB involvement • Allows for flexibility in type of survey (objective, open-ended) and type of question (multiple choice, rank ordering, etc.) • Allows for institutional tailoring of results and reporting • Is a one-time investment	• Concerns about quality may interfere with acceptance; lack of professional quality may affect results and institutional acceptance • Must fully test psychometric properties • Must create a professional appearance • Takes considerable time and resources to develop • Requires primary costs associated with development • Involves costs associated with software/hardware • Includes costs associated with training individuals to score the survey

It is clear that both OTS and homegrown methods of assessment have advantages and disadvantages. Based on information provided by the participants in this study, the researcher concluded that that homegrown assessment and the use of external agency assessment were best practices in equal use. It is the researcher's belief that the use of homegrown assessment in conjunction with OTS assessment yields the best results. This assertion is supported by Friedman (2012), who suggests that multiple methods of assessment be utilized to evaluate First-Year Seminars.

Ancillary Findings and Further Evidence of Best Practices

Mandatory vs. Optional Seminars: Padgett & Keup's 2009 survey suggests that of the 1,019 respondents surveyed for their study, an overwhelming 890 replied that they "offer some type of First-Year Seminar (FYS) at their college or university. This suggests that 87.3% of survey respondents—representing a national sample of American higher education institutions—offer a first-year seminar" (Padgett & Keup, 2011, p. 14). However, the disaggregated data revealed that community colleges are severely lagging behind their four-year counterparts with respect to making FYS mandatory for all students. In fact, Padgett & Keup's 2009 survey revealed that of the 74 two-year colleges who responded to the survey, only 31.5% required students to take the course. The recipients that participated in this research study all mandated FYS for freshmen; however, each institution had a condition of the mandate that relaxed the mandate or created loopholes that students could use to evade the mandate. The "Completion Agenda" published by the American Association of Community Colleges and its Board of Directors (McPhail, 2011) suggested that mandatory seminars are an integral component of helping students persist. Additionally, the 2013 Noel-Levitz Student

Retention and College Completion Practices Report for Four-Year and Two-Year Institutions also stated that, "First-year student programs, and honor programs emerged as the top-ranked, most effective strategies and tactics across higher education (Noel-Levitz, 2013)" for persistence and retention. Making First-Year Seminars mandatory is clearly a best practice that is becoming more common, especially in the community college setting. It is the researcher's belief and recommendation that community college leaders remove the conditions that accompany the mandate so that all institutions would be working toward requiring an FYS for every student, regardless of placement level or certificate / degree aspiration. Doing so might not only help to improve student success and completion rates, but could also contribute to President Obama's initiative of graduating more college students than any other industrialized nation by the year 2020.

Credit-Bearing Seminars versus Non-Credit Seminars: A sixth theme emerging from the participant interviews is the ability for institutions to offer credit for seminars**.** It has already been noted that Barefoot & Fidler (1996) found that colleges and universities who offer seminars worth academic credit tend to retain more students, thus contributing to the student success factor. The five research participants interviewed for this study all offer academic credit for their First-Year Seminars. However, the number of credits each institution attaches to the course varies from one credit hour to three credit hours. " The Final Report on the 21st-Century Initiative Listening Tour, published by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012), stated that offering credit for First-Year Seminars can be a positive concept because "students do not want to enroll in courses they do not receive credit for." This philosophy is one that can be beneficial to institutions as well as students as community college leaders continue to work with

government officials and four-year partners to make these credits transferable. This level of commitment by all higher education leaders and government representatives could aid in bridging the achievement gap and also in fulfilling President Obama's 2020 Graduation Initiative.

Smaller Class Sizes Could Lead to Success: A seventh theme emerging from the participant interviews is the importance of smaller class sizes. All five research participants indicated that the maximum seating capacity for seminars does not exceed 25. Throughout the years, many research studies have shown the benefits to smaller class size, particularly when working with developmental students. Cuseo (n.d.) performed an empirical study that detailed the adverse effects on the teaching, learning, and retention of first-year students with respect to large class size. Cuseo's research highlighted eight reasons why first-year students suffer with respect to large class size, (Cuseo, n.d.):

1. Large class size increases faculty reliance on the lecture method of instruction.
2. Large classes reduce students' level of active involvement in the learning process.
3. Large class size reduces the frequency and quality of instructor interaction with and feedback to students.
4. Large-class settings reduce students' depth of thinking inside the classroom.
5. Large class size limits the breadth and depth of course objectives, course assignments, and course-related learning outside the classroom.
6. Students' academic achievement (learning) and academic performance (grades) are lowered in courses with large class size.
7. Students report less course satisfaction in large-sized classes.
8. Students give lower overall ratings (evaluations) for course instruction delivered in large classes.

Cuseo has raised some valid points with respect to small class sizes. It is the researcher's belief that smaller class sizes play a role in student success. Padgett & Keup (2011) determined that 38.3% of two-year respondents had class sizes of 20-24, while

20.3% had class sizes of 25-29. Only 9.7% of two-year institutions surveyed had classes of 30 or more students. The data revealed in the researcher's study, coupled with Padget & Keup and Cuseo's studies, confirm that limiting class size is indeed an industry best practice. Limiting class size may also help with student's transitioning from high school to college. Upcraft et al. (2005, p. 61) stated that "large classes are a major source of frustration and dissatisfaction for both faculty who teach them [especially graduate teaching assistants] and first-year students." Upcraft et al. (2005, p. 61) also state that large classroom sizes tend to lead to "student boredom, poor attendance patterns, high levels of plagiarism, and almost exclusive use of multiple choice tests." Many of these issues were identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings in their respective reports. These problems will certainly not contribute to closing the achievement gap and may impede student success and completion.

Professional Development and Continuing Education: The importance of supporting FYS instructors through both initial and on-going professional development is the eighth identified theme. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents who participated in this research study replied that their institutions do not require seminar instructors to undergo any type of training opportunities whether informal or formal prior to teaching a seminar. Likewise, most institutions did not mandate continuing education courses for instructors. Many respondents indicated that mandates for professional development and continuing education are prohibited because of clauses in staff and faculty contracts. Although not required, most respondents stated that staff and / or faculty make a concerted effort to attend trainings when offered and that many instructors coming in during their time off, despite not being compensated to do so. Most

respondents stated that faculty and / or staff teaching within these courses are committed to student success and enjoy sharing ideas and best practices while attending the training sessions.

Mizell (2010) contends that "Educators who do not experience effective professional development do not improve their skills, and student learning suffers. It is the researcher's belief that professional development is an important component for anyone teaching in any subject matter. It is also the researcher's belief that teachers should be experts in their subject matter, and establishing a mandatory training session seems essential in order for instructors to abreast of new practices in the field. It is unfortunate that some institutions cannot mandate professional development and continuing education because of contractual issues. Professional development and continuing education should be designed to heighten awareness of best practices, industry trends and current research findings. According to Hirsh (2005):

> A significant challenge to schools is selecting the staff development approach that aligns most clearly with the assumptions and beliefs of staff members and produces the results desired for students. When beliefs are in alignment, change in behavior accelerates; when beliefs underlying a new staff development program contradict long-held beliefs of participants change can come much slower or not at all. To expedite the change process and successfully close the achievement gap, educators might begin the process by ensuring a thorough understanding of the assumptions and beliefs underlying staff development programs.

According to Sparks (2003), effective professional development will deepen participant understanding, transform beliefs and assumptions, and create a stream of continuous actions that change habits and affect practice. It is the researcher's opinion

that pre-professional training and continuing education will contribute to closing the achievement gap and are best practices that should be promoted industry-wide.

Faculty and Staff Teaching Involvement and Compensation: The ninth and tenth themes that emerged from the data are the involvement of both faculty and staff as teachers and the compensation provided to them. Survey results revealed that full-time faculty are primarily responsible for teaching seminars, and most of these are English teachers. Additionally, all institutions compensated faculty members by including pay as part of their full-time load. Student Affairs and Counseling were second behind faculty for FYE teaching responsibilities, with the majority of these individuals receiving compensation by stipend. Keup (2012) suggested that compensation for stipends typically ranges between $500 to $4,000 per course depending on how many credit hours the course is worth and whether or not it is taught at a four-year institution versus a community college. Keup (2012) also asserted that her research revealed that providing a stipend is the most common form of compensation, while the second most popular method is no compensation at all. Keup further contended:

> Other ways of compensation are fairly woefully underutilized and I would say that there is a lot of room there to be innovative in terms of how instructors are compensated. It is typically like you are provided a stipend or they are going to say it is part of your duty. Special development funds and sometimes grants, pedagogy and teaching and learning grants, are things that I have heard. There are many other ways you can recognize or incentivize instructors, but we don't often think about those; we think about that we can't do this on a large scale because we don't have the money to pay the instructors.

The task is for community college leaders to bring these programs onto campuses by creating innovative ways to compensate instructors no matter whether they are faculty or staff. The researcher agrees with Keup (2012) that there are multitudes of ways such as stipend, release time, or flat-rate pay to compensate or provide incentives to instructors. Finding creative methods for compensation may also create opportunities to consolidate programs or services, streamline processes, and improve student outcomes.

***Using upper-level students as peer mentors*:** The eleventh theme identified was the use of upper-level peer mentors in FYS. According to Upcraft et al. (2005) some of the best uses for peer mentors include advising, counseling, and teaching. Upcraft et al. also suggest that peer advisors working in any of those capacities receive extensive training and meet certain criteria to qualify. The officials at Ferris State University stated, "When a mentee commits to his / her academic success, everyone benefits" (Ferris State University, n.d., para. 1). Table 21, adapted from Ferris State University (n.d.), discusses the benefits of peer mentoring.

Table 21: Benefits of Peer Mentoring

MENTOR BENEFITS	MENTEE BENEFITS	INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS
To share one's knowledge and experiences	To learn more about the university and the community	Increase student retention
To enhance self esteem	To build self-esteem	Increase cultural diversity awareness
To share educational, leadership, career and learning goals	To enhance self-motivation, self-discipline, and goal setting	Improve instructor/student rapport
To gain recognition for service to the individual and the institution	To be more successful in one's academic career	Improve campus climate
To enjoy the feeling of being useful and supportive	To be motivated by academic success	
To develop a meaningful resume entry		

Offering Various Seminar Types: The twelfth and final theme was the use of a variety of seminar types by the institutions participating in this research. As previously mentioned in chapter two, Padgett & Keup (2011) suggested there are five basic seminar types: (1) Extended orientation seminars, (2) Academic seminars with uniform content, (3) Academic on various topics, (4) Pre-professional or discipline-linked, (5) Basic study skills seminars. Hunter & Linder (2005) stated that of those five seminar types 62% of all higher education institutions offer an extended orientation type of seminar with a strong focus on life / survival skills. Participants of this study revealed that they offered multiple types of seminars in an effort to best serve the needs of their students. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the demographics of today's college freshmen are much different from those of 30 years ago. It is encouraging that FYS leaders recognize these differences and are adding and customizing seminars to meet the needs of the constituents they serve.

FYE Courses and Programs are not a Panacea: It is easy to see how FYS and FYE programs can be viewed as a cure-all for what ails America's K-12 and higher education system. The reality is that FYS and FYE programs were never designed to single-handedly work to boost success rates; they were meant to work in conjunction with other programs and services to create a well-balanced institutional framework by which students could be successful (Troxel & Cutwright, 2008). Troxel & Cutright (2008, p. 8) stated, "Individual programs can produce measurable and positive results, but their impact is substantially muted if they are not part of a more holistic approach to the first year of college." It is important for FYE program personnel and college administrators to work in a collaborative fashion so that institutional goals and seminar content can be properly aligned. The success of students is dependent on these

relationship-building efforts between key institutional stakeholders. O'Banion proposes that planning and selecting activities to promote student engagement is not a one-size fits all approach, implying that students are individuals and that the level and types of engagement may vary from student to student. It is clear that FYS are not the solution to solving all of the problems that exist in higher education, but they are a good start to closing the achievement gap, addressing the problems identified by Secretaries Bell and Spellings, and pushing the college completion agenda which will help support President Obama's graduation initiative.

Orientation in Addition to First-Year Experience: As mentioned earlier, FYE seminars are not magic bullets; they are simply a means by which to help students transition to the first year of college. However, when coupled with orientation, the two work synergistically to give students a stronger foundation from which to build (Upcraft et al., 2005). Many of the survey respondents mentioned that they offer orientation in addition to FYS. According to Upcraft et al. (2005), orientations are becoming more commonplace in community colleges and typically consist of a tour of the campus, introduction to key service and support areas, as well as sessions to inform students about important dates and deadlines. However, O'Banion (1997) has suggested that four-year institutions do a decidedly better job of helping students transition to college-level learning by providing weeklong orientations whereas most community colleges only provide a few hours' worth of orientation to freshmen students. While this is a step in the right direction to promote student success and retention, community college leaders must improve how much time freshmen students are spending being oriented to the college. Perhaps developing a customized orientation schedule with varying amounts of

orientation time based on student type (i.e., guest, transfer, readmit) would be beneficial, allocating more time to students new to the college experience. Considering the lack of preparedness of today's college student (ACT, 2013), orientation can certainly be beneficial to efforts to close the achievement gap.

Increasing Student-to-Student Interaction: Many of the respondents stated that their students are actively engaged with student activities on or around campus. In addition to peer mentors and service learning, support services such as learning communities, athletics, and civic engagement are some of the other emerging methods that colleges are employing to engage students. Chickering & Reisser (1993) suggested that students must integrate the seven "vectors" of student identity to have a successful transition into the college setting:

- Developing competence
- Managing emotions
- Moving through autonomy toward interdependence
- Developing mature interpersonal relationships
- Establishing Identity
- Developing purpose
- Developing integrity

Active student engagement is vital in order for students to work through the stages and emotional tasks associated with these vectors which collectively and individually are integral components of student success. It is imperative that students are made aware of the importance of engagement early on, so relationship building begins immediately during their transition to college. In addition to student-to-student engagement, many participant colleges required a certain level of faculty-to-student

involvement, requiring faculty to meet with first-year students several times each semester to check not only their academic progress, but also to promote their social connectedness as well (Crockett, n.d.). "Research shows that the more level of engagement a student is exposed to, the more likely they are to learn and persist toward achieving their academic goals" (Crockett, n.d.). It is the researcher's belief that increasing student-to-student interaction is a best practice that will help close the achievement gap by helping students transition to the first year of college, thus increasing preparedness for the academic rigors within the first-year.

Developmental Education and First-Year Experience: Developmental education at the community college level has been and continues to be an extremely controversial subject in the field of higher education. There are many who believe that community college is not the place for remediation and that students not prepared for the academic rigors of higher education are best served by reinforcing their skills in adult education courses elsewhere. Others believe that turning students away goes against the open-door policy of the community college and feel that community colleges must seek to serve all students, regardless of skill level. However, none of the respondents interviewed for this research have outsourced remediation, but instead have found creative ways to incorporate remedial needs in mathematics and / or English into the first- year curriculum. For example, respondent four from institution D stated that they have paired their developmental English course with a college level psychology course. Respondent three from institution C sought to bridge the gap by offering laboratories with developmental courses. Taught by supplemental instructors or tutors, the laboratories help reinforce concepts learned in class. Early advising coupled with intrusive advising

was another common practice with developmental students. Many of the participants for this study noted the importance of outlining an academic plan immediately upon entering and ensuring that students are adhering to the plan through their sophomore year. The Achieving the Dream Organization (2011) suggest that other best practices with respect to first-year students and developmental education include "policies [ranging] from college readiness programs, mandatory new student orientation, student success courses, developmental course redesign, curriculum redesign, to cooperative learning, learning communities, and intensive and individualized advising." ACT (2013) officials have noted the gaps in college readiness in America's high school students entering college today. The study stated that only 25% of high-school graduates test at the college level. As stated earlier in this chapter, it is the researcher's belief that college outreach to high schools is an essential component to bridging the achievement gap. This proactive approach is an effective measure in helping students succeed once enrolled in college.

Early Alert / Intervention: Another secondary theme observed by research participants was the advent of student academic management systems via portal or some other type of manual early-alert system. The portal is not designed to take the place of faculty or instructors but is used as an aid to assist and support students. The purpose of the alert system is early intervention (especially during the first semester) with students who may be struggling academically by directing them to resources capable of aiding with their coursework. Upcraft et al. (2005, p. 103) suggest that "early warning systems and early feedback can be critical to student success. It is too late to wait until midterm exam time to give students an idea of how well they are performing." It is the researchers belief that early-alert systems are not only a best practice, but will also be an effective

tool in closing the achievement gap and help President Obama fulfill the 2020 graduation initiative.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify best practices in community college First-Year Seminars that have been demonstrated to lead to improved outcomes. During the course of this research, several limitations were noted. In chapter three, the researcher mentioned that there were 35 award recipients that received awards for their outstanding contributions in the area of first-year experience since 2004. Again, all 35 recipients were contacted; however, only five consented to participate in the research for this study. Ideally, the researcher would have preferred to have more participants to interview; however, the results still yielded useful information. Likewise, the research participants were all located on the nation's eastern seaboard, which may have altered recommendations for industry best practices because of trends that may exist regionally.

Another limitation of this study was the fact that the researcher was unsure of the type of assessment instrument used by research participants. Although the majority of participants stated they used an outside agency for assessment of the seminar, it is unclear whether they used an Off-the-Shelf (OTS) survey or a homegrown instrument for assessment. Knowing the difference may have proven more beneficial in discussing best assessment practices.

Finally, a longitudinal study consisting of outcomes spanning years would have been preferred as opposed to interviews consisting of a brief snapshot of current practices.

Implications for Future Research

There are multiple areas addressed in this study that warrant further research. Each area of interest is addressed below and will be further discussed in the sections to follow.

- The perpetual decline of America's K-12 system and the resulting lack of college attainment
- College outreach to high schools and bridging the achievement gap
- The use of college placement exams as a predictor for success in the first year
- The role of student demographics and socioeconomic status and the increasing need for FYS
- The importance of early advising and the corresponding retention / persistence as mandated by FYS

The perpetual decline of America's K-12 system continues to plague not only the students that graduate from these institutions, but the colleges and universities that they seek to enter after graduation. As discussed in chapter one, Secretary Bell described major problems in K-12 institutions that contribute to the achievement gap, and 30 years later, many of the same problems still exist and in some situations to a worse extent. Future research involving longitudinal data is needed to show whether the initiatives and reforms occurring within K-12 and higher education are making a difference.

The fact that respondents saw such a strong positive correlation with high-school outreach and bridging the achievement gap is encouraging. There have been a number of studies performed about college outreach to high schools; however, less is known about how many colleges are mandating high school outreach as a requirement for their First-Year Seminars. Additional research is also needed to determine if those institutions

requiring high-school outreach are seeing greater success and completion rates as a result of the mandate.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, placement exams are a controversial predictor of success. Although it was not a question directly asked in this study, participants revealed that they all require placement exams upon college entry, and many of them determine what type of seminar students will be placed in based on those results. Some research exists about placement exams and college completion, but more research is needed on placement exams as it relates to retention during the first year of college. Perhaps colleges should collect more data on how well students who follow placement fare in comparison to those who do not, especially in their first year of college and also in terms of graduation rates.

Yale (2008) suggested that many of the changes seen in higher education during the last 40 years are a direct result of the changing demographics of American college freshmen, especially in terms of the significant changes in the number of women and ethnic minorities now enrolled in higher education. In chapter one, it was mentioned that the commission convened by Secretary Bell identified a 40% functional illiteracy rate among minority youth, a number that did not see much change by 2006 when *A Test of Leadership* was published. Pope (2005) mentioned that FYS were reemerging in popularity, and perhaps this is due to the changing demographics and under-preparedness (ACT, 2013) of today's youth. Further research to determine if there is a correlation between the changing demographics and the resurgence of FYS may also yield interesting results and could possibly help colleges better customize their seminars based on the needs of students in their communities.

The importance of early advising was identified as a specific example of how seminar leaders attempt to bridge the achievement gap. It is interesting to note that many of the participants interviewed for this research utilized early advising as a mandatory component of FYS. Further longitudinal research to isolate colleges utilizing this practice and their retention and completion rates may be beneficial to educational leaders, particularly those in student services and support areas.

Community college leaders have an obligation to the constituents they serve to conduct meaningful research in order to better serve students and their respective communities. It is unfortunate that the research to date regarding bridging the achievement gap has yielded few results in readying students for the academic rigors of college. This researcher feels strongly that community college leaders should conduct research with the intent of serving the immediate needs of the community, but also band together to solve the larger national problem of under-preparedness in America's high-school graduates. It is incumbent upon these leaders to work with various state, local, and federal authorities to ensure that the high school curriculum is aligned with college requirements and to make certain that when it is not, that programs such as First-Year Seminar are utilizing best practices to help students succeed.

Conclusion

Between 1983 when A *Nation at Risk* was published and 2006 when *A Test of Leadership* was issued, the state of American K-12 and higher education was in very poor condition with systemic problems plaguing both systems. Thirty years later, according to ACT (2013) not much has changed with respect to K-12 preparation. Currently, only 25% of American high-school graduates test at the college level, and

even worse, many of the students that do make it to college are not being retained (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Despite countless attempts at reform throughout the years, the fact remains that many of the problems that have existed for years, still exist now. Pope (2005) spoke of the reemergence of FYS in colleges and universities as a method of helping students succeed, and it is the researcher's belief that these seminars are the country's best hope of bridging the achievement gap between high-school graduation and college completion.

The research conducted for this study revealed 12 best practices utilized by FYE leaders at institutions who have been recognized for their outstanding work in the field of FYE. As originally mentioned in chapter two, Barefoot & Fidler (1996) identified seven gold standards that every successful First-Year Seminar should possess. Of the 12 best practices identified as a result of this research, six of those practices originated from Barefoot & Fidler's (1996) seven gold standards as noted in Table 22. This speaks very highly of the significance of the gold standards, as well as Barefoot & Fidler and their knowledge of best practices in the field of first-year experience.

Table 22: Commonalities in Research Findings for this Study & Barefoot & Fidler's Seven Gold Standards

11 Emerging Themes Identified in This Study	Barefoot & Fidler's Seven Gold Standards
1. Mandatory placement testing	1. Academic credit
2. Outreach to high school partners	2. Centered in first-year curriculum
3. Teaching life skills	3. Involvement by both faculty and student affairs professionals in design and instruction
4. Early advising	4. Instructor training and development
5. Utilizing various methods of assessment*	5. Compensation or other reward for teaching
6. Awarding academic credit*	6. Involvement by upper level students in seminar delivery
7. Limiting class size	7. Ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus
8. Continual training and development of staff and faculty*	

11 Emerging Themes Identified in This Study	Barefoot & Fidler's Seven Gold Standards
9. Teaching involvement by both faculty and student affairs personnel*	community.
10. Compensating faculty and non-faculty involved in teaching the course*	
11. Using upper-level peer mentors*	
12. Offering various seminar types	

**Indicates a common theme between the researcher's study and that of Barefoot & Fidler's (1996) study.*

In order to rectify the problems outlined by Secretaries Bell and Spellings while advancing President Obama's Graduation Initiative, more must be done to ensure that all high-school graduates are college ready. First-Year Seminars offer an encouraging yet practical way to address these concerns. With increasing enrollment and changing demographics (Yale, 2008), community college leaders must act now to find ways to bridge the achievement gap and advance the completion agenda. The best practices in First-Year Seminars identified as a result of this study offer promise and hope in helping students find success upon entering college. It is the researcher's hope and belief that First-Year Seminars in conjunction with high-school outreach and other institutional programs will be the catalyst to unlock the door to student success and bridging the achievement gap.

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APPENDICES

A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does your program do[1] specifically to address the areas of concerns identified in the two reports by the Secretaries of Education?
2. Which type of the five seminars does your institution offer?
    a. Extended orientation seminars
    b. Academic seminars with uniform content
    c. Academic on various topics
    d. Pre-professional or discipline-linked
    e. Basic study skills seminars
3. Is your seminar mandatory or optional?
    a. If you seminar is optional, who attends more often, underprepared students or honors students?
    b. If your seminar is optional what is the age range of students attending?
    c. If your seminar is optional what is the gender of most students attending?
    d. If your seminar is optional what is the race of most students attending?
4. Is the seminar worth academic credit? If so, how many credits?
5. What is your average class size?
6. Who teaches your seminar course?
7. Is there a dean/director/coordinator over your institution's FYS program?
    a. If so, is he/she full or part-time?
8. What type of preparation do FYE instructors undergo?
9. How are instructors compensated for teaching FYE courses?
10. In what types of professional development do FYE instructors participate? Is participation in the professional development mandatory or optional?

11. Does your seminar offer a service-learning component?
12. Where is your FYE course housed? In academic affairs, student affairs or in an academic department?
13. Does your program utilize upper level freshmen or peer mentors?
14. What assessment techniques does your institution utilize to evaluate the FYE seminar?

APPENDIX

B: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

SCRIPT FOR FYE PROGRAM FACULTY/ADMINISTRATOR - INTERVIEW PARTICIPATION REQUEST

Dear *******,

My name is Tanya McFadden, and I am a doctoral student in the Ferris State University Doctorate of Community College Leadership Program. The title of my dissertation is "Defining Excellence & Innovation in America's Community Colleges: A Study of Best Practices in First-Year Experience Programs that Lead to Student Success." The purpose of this qualitative case study is to ascertain how practices used by award winning recipients of the National Resource Center's First Year-Experience and Students in Transitions program translate to student success. Because you are an award winner, I am inviting you to be an interview participant in this research study.

Research Overview

The research questions are as follows:

- What common themes emerge in each institution's FYE program that directly addresses the concerns of the two commissions?
- What characteristics do the FYE programs share with the seven gold standards as identified by Barefoot & Fidler (1996)?
- What assessment tools are in place to evaluate the performance of FYE programs[1]?

[1] Note: At this point in the study, the researcher noted that the terms "program" and "course" or "seminar" were often used interchangeably. While the distinction between "program" and "course/seminar" was made in chapter 2, at the time these interviews were conducted, the participants were clearly describing their FYE courses or seminars, not comprehensive FYE programs.

The interview will consist of several questions and will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the interviews, l will analyze the responses for common themes and identify best practices within the field that lead to student success. The results of the study will be included in this dissertation which will be defended to a committee at Ferris State University in the spring of 2013 and may be used in future published articles and professional presentations.

Benefit of Participating in this Research

Participation in this research provides you an opportunity to inspire innovation, to encourage a new way of thinking, and to inform others about successful practices in First Year Experience Programs. Additionally, participant input has the potential to influence colleges seeking to improve their First Year Experience Programs or colleges considering starting new programs. Likewise, sharing such information would serve to advance the community college mission and help to improve student success initiatives that many colleges are implementing during this era of increased accountability. There will be no monetary or other type of compensation for participation in this study.

Anonymity/Confidentiality

Research participants and their affiliated institutions shall remain anonymous. Your personal name and your institution's name will not be used in connection to your responses, but will be coded and referred to as "Program-Alpha Letter, Institution-Roman Numeral." For example, "Educator D" at "Institution IV."

Risks of Participating in the Research

While considered minimal, there is a potential risk to relationships through authentic responses of delicate subject matter. Effort will be taken to avoid association of sensitive responses to you or to your institution; however, associations may still be made by readers familiar with the First Year Experience Program at your institution.

Research Data

The interview will be audio taped and professionally transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings and transcript results will be securely maintained by me as the researcher and password protected.

Informed Consent

I will be sending you a follow-up email to arrange a time for the interview. The interviews will be conducted via Skype and/or telephone. Engaging with me to arrange a time and date for the interview and subsequently answering interview questions will constitute your voluntary consent to participate. You will be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the interview. Attached you will find the approval allowing me to proceed with research efforts issued by the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your participation will provide great value

to the study. I will contact you by e-mail to arrange for the interview in hopes you will consent to participate.

Sincerely,

Tanya McFadden
Doctoral Candidate
Ferris State University Doctorate of Community College Leadership Program

APPENDIX

C: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

By signing this document, I understand the following:

- I am being interviewed as part of a qualitative study titled: Defining Excellence & Innovation in America's Community Colleges: A Study of Best Practices in First Year Experience Programs that Lead to Student Success.
- My interview will be audiotaped and professionally transcribed in the form of a typed transcript intended for analysis. Audio recordings will be heard by the researcher and transcriptionist only and destroyed upon production of the transcript. Transcripts will be securely maintained by the researcher, encrypted and password protected for a period of two years following the study, at which time they will be destroyed.
- My responses will be included in the researcher's dissertation to be defended to a committee at Ferris State University in the spring of 2013 and may be used in future published articles and professional presentations.
- Results of the study can be made available by contacting the researcher:

  Tanya McFadden
  6148 Amber Lane
  Grand Blanc, MI 48439
  tanyacherie@ameritech.net
  (248-318-5532)

- While considered minimal, acknowledged is the potential risk to relationships through authentic responses of delicate subject matter. Effort will be taken to avoid association of sensitive responses to you or to your institution; however, association may still be made by readers familiar with the First Year Experience Program at your institution.
- Research participants and their affiliated institutions shall remain anonymous. Your personal name and your institution's name will not be used in connection to your responses, but will be coded and referred to as "Program-Alpha Letter, Institution-Roman Numeral." For example, "Educator D" at "Institution IV."
- My participation in this study is voluntary. I have the right to refuse to answer any questions or stop the interview and withdraw my consent at any time during the

course of the interview. I am not receiving any compensation for my participation in this study.

- This research plan has undergone the scrutiny of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Protection of Human Subjects - Ferris State University. The researcher has received approval to proceed with this interview research. I have viewed the approval document. I may contact the IRB at Ferris State University should I have concerns. The contact information is as follows:

Dr. Connie Meinholdt, Chair, IRB
ACS-2072, Ferris State University
Big Rapids, MI 49307
(231) 591-2759
IRB@ferris.edu

_____ _____

Subject Signature Date

_____

Subject Printed Name

APPENDIX

D: FREQUENTLY USED ABBREVIATIONS

Frequently Used Abbreviations

AACC – American Association of Community Colleges

ATD – Achieving the Dream

FYE – First-Year Experience

FYS – First-Year Seminar

FS – Freshman Seminar

LCM – Learning College Model

NCLB – No Child Left Behind