

A CASE STUDY: ASSESSING THE SUCCESSES OF A FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSE

by

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ABSTRACT

First-Year Experience programs have existed within higher education for decades. Specifically, the University of South Carolina's University 101 (c.1972) serves as the gold standard for such programs. Best practice examples will indicate how years of implementing such retention efforts such as the First-Year Experience programs have "made the connection" between student and institution.

However, it is not until recently that many community colleges have realized their own need for change in their institutional focus from one of access to that of completion. Research pertaining to how community colleges have distinctively approached engaging their students in an effort to address student retention is in its infancy.

This study examines the effectiveness of the newly created First-Year-Experience (FYE) course at a small, public, Midwestern community college. Key findings concluded that the college's first-year experience course was effective in meeting the four institutional goals and the research questions of this study. These research questions center on the course's ability to engage the students into their new academic surroundings, and therefore, add to the possibility of retaining students through completion of their academic degrees.

However, the findings also suggest that major revisions in the course might significantly impact the probability of increasing student engagement if the course content and methods of instruction were altered to reflect established best practices for FYE courses/programs.

Additional recommendations such as prioritizing student retention within the organization, expanding FYE to encompass all students' entire first year and beyond rather than the first semester for a few select students, and involving all constituencies, including students, in the discussion of student retention are also examined.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all community college students, faculty and staff, and leaders. It is my sincere hope that I may continue to contribute works that might improve our learning experiences.

I also dedicate my work to my family:

- to my parents who taught me that hard work is often necessary but the rewards are huge;
- to my husband, Scott, and daughters, Katie, Becky, and Mary – Thank you very much. I love each one of you more than you can imagine!
- and, to my brother, Butch, whom I miss dearly every day.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
ABSTRACT.....	i
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures	ix
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study	1
Introduction	1
The Growing Need for Accountability: Student Retention and Completion	3
Community Colleges and Retention.....	7
Community Colleges and Underprepared Students	7
Community Colleges and Transition Strategies	8
Orientation Programs	9
Supplemental Instruction	10
Learning Communities	11
First-Year-Experience Seminars	12
The Focus and Design of this Study	13
The College	14
Student Profile	15
The Student Retention/First-Year Experience Summit	17
Approval and Rollout of the FYE course	18
Assessing the Initial Success of the FYE Course.....	19
Assessment Plan	20
Contribution of the Study	21
Limitations and Delimitations of the Study	21
Organization of the Study.....	24
Chapter Summary	25
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature	27
Chapter Introduction	27
Chapter Organization	28
I: Calls for Educational Reform	28
The Learning College.....	29
Achieving the Dream	32
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	33
Finding the Right Solution	35

II. The Role of Student Engagement	36
Models of Student Engagement	36
Section II: Connecting Student Engagement to Institutional Solutions – Orientation and First-Year Experience	40
III: Defining FYE for Community College Students	43
Community College Missions – Why a Student Attends the Community College.....	44
Community College Student Characteristics	45
III. Best Practice Components of FYE.....	46
Identifying FYE Best Practices.....	46
Understanding Student Engagement	48
Principles / Components of Effective Retention Programs	49
Chapter Summary	53
Chapter Three: Methodology	55
Chapter Introduction	55
Chapter Organization	55
Section I: Rationale for Research Approach	56
Section II: Research Setting: “The College”	59
Section III: Research Sample and Data Sources	60
Focus Group Sessions	60
Supporting Quantitative Data.....	62
Section IV: Data Collection Methods.....	62
Focus Group Settings and Timing	62
Focus Group Structure	63
Section V: Data Analysis Methods	63
Section VI: Validity and Reliability.....	67
Section VII: Delimitations and Limitations	68
Chapter Summary	68
Chapter Four: Results and Analysis.....	69
Chapter Introduction	69
Chapter Organization	69
Section I: Focus Group Results: Identification of Themes.....	70
Section II: Analysis of Focus Group Discussions	84
Theme 1: Students’ ability to think critically about their career choices	84
Theme 2: Students’ ability to self-advise.....	85
Theme 3: Students’ increased financial literacy.....	85
Theme 4: Increase retention and completion	87
Theme 5: Effectiveness of course content	87
Theme 6: Institutional status of the course	89
Section Summary	91
Section III: Supporting Quantitative Data	92
Section IV: FYE Course Components	93
Best Practice “Gold Standard” Components	93

Best Practice Components in the FYE Course.....	96
Chapter Summary	96
Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendations	98
Chapter Introduction	98
Chapter Organization	99
Section I: Evaluating the Course Goals.....	99
Recommendations	102
Section II: Evaluating the Institutional Goals.....	103
Recommendations	105
Section III: Best Practice Course Components	107
Recommendations	107
Chapter Summary	110
References.....	112
Appendix A: Sample Syllabus, EDUC 120.....	117
Appendix B: Focus Group Comments, Raw Data.....	123

LIST OF TABLES

	page
Table 1: 2010 Retention Rates – First Time Freshmen in College	7
Table 2: Student Profile, 2013	16
Table 3: A conceptual organizer for student engagement	39
Table 4. Evidence of Best Practice Indicators: FYE	51
Table 5: FYE Course, Fall 2012	60
Table 6: Best Practice Literature	64
Table 7: Comments by Theme	70
Table 8: Theme 1 Results, Choosing a Major	71
Table 9: Theme 2 results, Ability to Self-advise.....	72
Table 10: Theme 3 results, Increased financial literacy.....	74
Table 11: Theme 4 results, Increased retention or completion rates	76
Table 12: Theme 5 results, Effectiveness of course content	77
Table 13: Theme 6 results, Institutional status of the course	81
Table 14: Summary of positive and negative comments, by theme	92
Table 15: FYE course components in six two-year community colleges (compared to USC)	95
Table 16: The FYE Course components compared with University 101 (USC)	96
Table 17: Content Area and Outcomes for FYE Courses.....	100

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Tinto's Model of Student Retention	38
Figure 2: Affinity Diagram.....	66

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Since their beginning in the early 1900s, and throughout the 20th century, community colleges had been concerned with bringing quality education to the masses. As community colleges were granted authority to exist, each state's legislators looked to this innovative educational model to provide greatly expanded access to higher education for the public. This access might serve several purposes, such as academic transfer preparation, vocational-technical education, continuing education, developmental education, or perhaps, community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). However, regardless of the purpose for seeking education at a community college, many more citizens have benefited from attending a community college as their source of post-secondary education than ever before. Furthermore, as their title indicates, a *community* college serves the educational needs of the community.

However, with the financial crisis of the years following 2009, coupled with a national sentiment of global competition, mounting pressure existed to deliver that education in the most financially effective manner as possible — specifically to increase the number of students who complete their studies and earn a certificate or degree while simultaneously decreasing the time in which it takes them to do so. This challenge in education delivery was emphasized by President Barack Obama in his 2009 speech at

Macomb Community College, in Warren, Michigan: “Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but that will help us thrive and compete in a global economy. To build that foundation, we must slow the growth of health care costs that are driving us into debt, make the tough choices necessary to bring down deficits, and create the jobs of the future in growing industries, including a new clean energy economy. But we also must ensure that we are educating and preparing our people for those jobs” (Obama, 2009). This speech went on to be coined the “American Graduation Initiative” (Obama, 2009).

Sadly, nine months later, the American Graduation Initiative and its \$12 billion in funding were never enacted. However, in the aftermath, community colleges continued to focus on how to move more students toward the achievement of their goals, with a new emphasis on graduation. Specifically, “in April 2010, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and five other community college organizations responded by reaffirming their commitment to completion while maintaining their commitment to increasing access and quality by issuing a joint statement, *Democracy’s Colleges: A Call to Action*” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). In this landmark statement, now referred to as the “completion agenda” (McPhil, C.J., 2011), the AACC committed the organization to assist their members in producing 50% more students with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020 (McPhil, C.J., 2011).

The Growing Need for Accountability: Student Retention and Completion

In the United States, there has always been, and continues to be, a natural desire to better oneself through the attainment of knowledge. Specifically, during the 20th and 21st centuries, collectively as a country, we can equate the attainment of a college degree with a higher standard of life. As stated by Boggs (2011), “It is now commonly accepted that educational achievement is correlated with higher individual lifetime earnings and a better quality of life. Increasing the general level of education is also seen as important for the well being of society and the economic competitiveness of a country. The more education any one of us gets, the better off we all are” (p. 6).

Since the first community college, Joliet Junior College, came into existence at the turn of the 20th century, community colleges have served the higher education needs of the nation in a variety of ways. Missions of a comprehensive community college range from providing the first two years of educational requirements later transferred to a baccalaureate-degree granting college or university, to providing community life-long learning and self-improvement opportunities. Workforce development and job skill enhancement, obtaining an associate’s degree, or providing remedial education to those who find themselves underprepared to enter college are also among the many purposes, or missions, of a community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Community colleges have historically performed these missions while maintaining an “open-door” policy (Myran, 2009). True open-door policy requires that a community college not exclude applicants based on prior academic performance (such

as most universities do (Bolden, 2009). During the past century, community colleges have successfully brought education to many who otherwise might never have had the opportunities associated with completion of a degree. Stated differently, Myran (2009) offers that the community college has “led to the democratization of U.S. higher education” (p. 1).

However, accrediting agencies, governmental units, workplace partners, the communities for which a community college exists, and the students themselves, are all calling for accountability. A major contention, involved in holding community colleges accountable, centers on the metrics by which community colleges’ success is measured. Higher education, as a whole, has been held accountable for the number of degrees and/or certificates awarded to completing students. This “number of completers” metric has been used in both four-year universities, as well as, community colleges for several years as a primary indicator of their success (Hudgins, 2006).

As stated by Dougherty (2006), The four-year universities have generally been allowed to “[be] academically selective by channeling less-able students toward the community colleges” (p. 79). In addition, a community college student, “*on average*, tends to be less well off, less prepared academically and less ambitious educationally and occupationally than are four-year college entrants” (p. 77). Some of these differences may be explained by academic preparedness, and by the offerings of the community college and/or university, while others, are attributed to socioeconomic factors, such as:

- Community college students are more likely to be the first in their family to attend college and are much less likely to have parents who have graduated from a four-year college.
- Almost 36% of community college students are at least 30 years old, compared to only 20% of public four-year college students.
- The average tuition is less than one-half that at public four-year colleges, and because community colleges are located in most towns and cities, many students are able to live at home while attending college – thus bringing the total investment in attaining their college degree down even further.
- Roughly, one-half of those attending a community college who are employed, report work as their primary activity, compared to only one-quarter of those attending public comprehensive four-year colleges (Kane, 2006).

However, logic dictates that if the mission and/or purpose of a community college, and perhaps even the types of students who attend, differs from other institutions of higher education, the definition and method of measuring the success of a community college student should be different from that of a four-year, mostly residential, college or university.

Nevertheless, with the increased focus on completion, community colleges are now being held accountable for the number of students who graduate with a degree or certificate, just as the four-year college or university is held accountable. Obtaining a degree, especially within a prescribed time frame of two to three years, may not necessarily be the goal of some community college students. Again, the reasons a student might enroll — such as improvement in specific job skills, remediation, or other efforts regarding self-development — may dictate whether degree completion is the intent. As stated by Kuh, et al. in *Student Success in College*, “everyone agrees that persistence and educational attainment rates, as well as the quality of student learning,

must improve if postsecondary education is to meet the needs of our nation and our world” (p. 7).

An additional challenge facing community colleges, during this time when their open-door admissions policy poses such an important component of the accountability question, is the reality of sharp decreases in revenue. The analogy used as the recognized formula for community college revenue, specifically in the state of Michigan, during the latter half of the 20th century was that of a three-legged stool (Myran, 2009).

Typically, one-third of the revenue was generated from property tax valuations, one-third from state appropriations, and one-third from student tuition. Following the national trends and the especially hard-hit economic circumstances of Michigan during the years of 2009-2013, this trilogy of revenue was drastically distorted. With State appropriations and property tax valuations plummeting, the only recourse was to increase student tuition. At the very time of unprecedented spikes in enrollment, often of displaced workers and underprepared students, community college leaders were forced to look at their programs and services with an eye towards efficiency and to reinvent the open-door concept — access was no longer enough. The four cornerstones of the “new open-door” concept includes student access, student success, campus-wide inclusiveness, and community engagement (Myran, 2009). However, the monumental question at hand was how does a community college expand their services to accommodate this new open-door concept? Many feared that the only way in which to develop programs that address such things as inclusiveness and engagement, would necessitate the reallocation of precious dollars, and other resources, from the provision

of academics — the very reason new students were flocking to the institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Community Colleges and Retention

While designed with good intention, the completion agenda, as defined by the AACC to mean “increasing the completion of degrees and/or certificates by 50% by 2020,” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010) may pose an additional and significant challenge for many community colleges that currently have difficulties in retaining students through graduation.

One explanation as to why nearly half of those who enroll in a community college will fail to persist to their second year, and thus will also fail to realize their academic goals, include self-inflated expectations in regards to how successful the college freshman will perform both academically and in adjusting socially to their new academic environment. Other impacts involve the mounting pressures on students, including a lack of financial resources, family obligations, and work obligations (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010).

Table 1: 2010 Retention Rates – First Time Freshmen in College

Institution type	Location	Retention Rate
2-Year – Public and Private	United States	53.0%
2-Year – Public and Private	Michigan	51.5%

Note: Retention = Number of students who complete the first year and enroll for a second year.

Community Colleges and Underprepared Students

The completion agenda has been also complicated by the fact that many students who access post-secondary education are not prepared to engage in college

level work: “As critical as writing, reading and critical thinking skills are to their futures, far too many entering college students are woefully unprepared in these areas. Among ACT-tested 2011 high school graduates, for example, only 66% met ACT’s College Readiness Standards (2008) in writing, and fewer than half met the standards established by ACT for reading. Furthermore, since 2006, those percentages in writing and reading have steadily decreased” (ACT Profile Report, 2012).

Several reasons have been offered as to why students are not prepared. Among them include the decay of the secondary school system and its ability to meet the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population in terms of socio-economic background, race, and ethnicity. As Cohen and Brawer (2008) have noted, “The apparent breakdown of basic academic education in secondary schools in the 1960s, coupled with the expanded percentage of people entering college, [has] brought developmental education to the fore” (p. 25). This has been particularly evident at the open-door community college that does not typically exclude students based on academic performance. In their white paper “*Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education: A Joint Statement*,” Charles A. Dana Center et al. wrote: “70% of community college students take at least one remedial course. Too many of these students never overcome being placed into a remedial course. Only about a quarter of community college students who take a remedial course graduate within eight years” (p.3).

Community Colleges and Transition Strategies

In an effort to address these challenges, universities and community colleges alike have applied transition strategies, such as orientation programs, supplemental

instruction, learning communities and first-year programming to help students transition from high school into post-secondary education.

Orientation Programs

Mack, and others, have commented on the importance of orientation strategies: “A student’s integration into a college or university can be multi-faceted with a successful orientation program breaking the institution down into manageable parts and helping students navigate their new community in a way that also supports their personal and academic development” (Mack, C. E., 2010, p. 6).

In many institutions, orientation programs are front-loaded; that is, they occur prior to the first day of classes in the fall term or “preterm.” Generally, representatives from the student services department will orient or inform students about various topics. These topics can vary, however tend to include items, such as, how to register for classes, a cursory review of “who’s who” at the college (key staff and contact information), general expectations regarding academic work, campus life opportunities (including information pertaining to living arrangements and extracurricular groups/activities), and most likely a tour of the college (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010).

However, preterm orientation poses challenges to community college students. Most community college students commute to their classes, and therefore are not on campus other than during class times. In addition, many of these students have conflicting priorities such as full-time jobs, family care obligations, and other significant life commitments that deter them from spending additional time at school. These challenges can make preterm orientation programs difficult for students to attend, and

difficult for community colleges to require. They also help explain why many community colleges admit that their orientation programs are considered less than effective. Nevertheless, community colleges are being challenged to find ways to orient students regardless of these obstacles: According to Cuevas & Timmerman (2010), “To be an effective advocate for student success and retention, two-year colleges must embrace orientation and new student support programming beyond the traditional preterm orientation program. Successful long-term approaches include supplemental instruction, first-year seminars, and learning communities” (p. 71).

Supplemental Instruction

As defined by Hurley and Gilbert (2008), “Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a peer-led academic assistance program that targets traditionally difficult courses and is offered to all students enrolled in the supported classes. The peer-led sessions are held three or four times a week in an informal seminar during which students compare notes, discuss readings and concepts, clarify issues of confusion and solve complex problems” (p. 1).

In *The First-Year Experience Monograph Series No. 7 Supplemental Instruction*, while addressing their past 35 years of SI at The University of Missouri – Kansas City, Wilcox and Jacobs define SI as “to have students talking to students about difficult course content, as soon as possible, as much as possible, and for as long as possible. To talk is to teach and to teach is to learn. Whoever does most of the talking does most of the learning because talking requires prerequisite critical thinking” (p.vii).

Lessons learned, again stated by Wilcox and Jacobs (p.8), include:

1. SI does not work well when sessions are supporting an easy (or perceived as easy) course,
2. SI does not work well in a course with an instructor who does not support the program, and,
3. SI does not work well when multiple sections of a course are led by only one SI leader. SI leaders are unable to attend multiple lectures, and the SI model does not work well when SI leaders do not attend class.

Learning Communities

While the concept of a learning community has been around for several decades as an undergraduate reform measure, what a learning community provides for students has changed over these past several years: “Learning communities restructure the curriculum by linking or clustering two or more courses and enrolling a common cohort of students” (Smith et al, 2004, p. 4).

Because learning communities depend on innovative thinking from a cross-functional sampling within a community college, collaboration and institutional support are key to the implementation of an effective learning community. Learning community support needs are quite varied and are specified by Smith et al. as faculty recruitment, faculty development support, residence life and co-curricular connections, marketing and promotion, academic advising, student recruitment, the registration process, space and scheduling, library and information technology, assessment and evaluation, and other types of administrative support, as well (p. 305). Without these services being offered in a collaborative effort, by institutional staff and faculty, the new student is left to make the connections on their own.

First-Year-Experience Seminars

Many institutions have adopted a first-year-experience (FYE) course to help transition those who are not familiar with an institution into building relationships with those currently at the institution and therefore becoming engaged in their new academic environment. The content of an FYE seminar, as an extension of orientation, varies greatly among institutions. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2011) offers that “FYE [courses] create a small community within the larger campus for first-year students, helping them build relationships with other students as well as faculty and staff” (p. 3). Course components often address:

- Relationship building – engaging students with the college
- Academic Expectations – what is college-level work at this college?
- Student Support Services – testing and placement services, advising, career planning, financial aid, tutoring and writing laboratories, library resources, etc.
- Academic Skill Enhancement – studying habits, test-taking strategies, note taking, time management etc.

More developed FYE programs, as opposed to FYE seminars or courses, can include community service or experiential learning and may also serve as the foundation course of a learning community (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005).

Effective first-year-experience (FYE) programs are but one initiative that attempts to turn access into success by keeping students in college and helping them overcome barriers that might otherwise prevent them from reaching their goals (Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011). While hundreds, if not thousands, of four-year universities have

developed transition efforts, such as FYE programs to assist students, this is a relatively new initiative at the community college level. As stated by Jennifer Keup in the forward of *Fulfilling the Promise of the Community College: Increasing First-Year Student Engagement and Success* by Brown, King, & Stanley, (2011): “In the past decade, advancements in national surveys, new methodologies, and more sophisticated and widespread assessment practices that focus on the community colleges and their students as units of observation have resulted in a growing body of research and scholarship on two-year institutions. [...] Two of the important themes throughout this body of research and assessment on community colleges are: (a) The first year, as a springboard for student success, matters just as much in two-year institutions as it does in their four-year counterparts, and (b) even when considering specific institutional contexts and cultures, standards of best practice for institutional support and success of first-year students in community colleges are emerging” (p. 103).

The Focus and Design of this Study

This study examines the effectiveness of a newly created FYE course at a small, public, Midwestern community college. Specifically, this study addresses the question: Does the FYE course enhance the success and retention of first-time freshmen at the college?

While supplemental instruction and learning communities are referenced briefly, the main focus of this research pertains to the first-year-experience (FYE) courses and seminars as an approach to addressing the issue of helping community college students make an effective transition to college life.

The research conducted in this study is divided into several components: (1) Observation of both student and faculty focus group discussions concerning the FYE course, (2) A review of best practices throughout the country in regards to approaches that address student engagement and retention, and (3) Recommendations, based on existing research and best practices, that may improve the FYE course and the overall retention and completion strategies of the college.

The College

The college is a rural, publicly supported, locally controlled, comprehensive, two-year, co-educational, commuter and residential, community college. The main campus is located in a primarily rural county, with the village population at 5,806. A smaller satellite campus is located approximately 20 miles away, in another, albeit slightly larger, rural area (population 11,430). It is worthy to note that the smaller satellite campus is adjacent to the state line and a more densely populated county. Slightly over 179,300 people reside in an area estimated to be within 30 minutes' travel from the satellite campus). In 1964, county residents voted to establish the college, elected a Board of Trustees, and approved a 1.50 mill property tax levy to finance the institution. As an expression of their support, the voters approved this levy in perpetuity rather than for a limited time. As was the case at its founding, the institution remains the only institution of higher learning in its tax-paying district. Total enrollment for the 2012-2013 year was 3,566 students (College Office of Institutional Research, 2014)

At the time of this study, the college offered 26 associate degree programs and 22 certificates, and through partnership with four-year institutions, ten bachelor's

degree programs. In addition, tuition is less than half the cost of most four-year colleges and universities in the proximity. According to the 2012 National Community College Benchmarking Study, the institution ranks 85% in the nation regarding student success, 92% in transfer grade point average, and 4.5% for utilization of the college by its tax-paying district (College Office of Institutional Research, 2014).

Additionally, The College is considered financially strong and is recognized as an excellent steward of financial resources. As stated by the Chief Financial Officer: "*The College* continues to have a strong financial foundation, as supported by its Standard & Poor's bond rating of AA. It has had the financial resources and commitment to regularly invest in its facilities as shown by the construction during FY '13 of a new residence hall and renovation of a student service center and bookstore. *The College* has a well-established long-range planning process involving the board of trustees along with the administrative leaders of the College. This process ensures that the resources are effectively allocated to those programs and services that drive the College's core mission of student success. *The College* is financially positioned to continue normal operations during periods of uncertainty because of their financial strength." (*The College* - Chief Financial Officer, 2016).

Student Profile

While it may be difficult to identify or describe an "average student," the following statistics (reflecting Fall Semester 2013) are provided as a guide:

Table 2: Student Profile, 2013

Race		
White/Caucasian	76%	
Minority	24%	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black/African American • Hispanic/Latino • Multiracial • "Unknown" / Not declared • American Indian, Asian, and Non-Resident Alien 		11% 5% 5% 3% <1%
Age		
< or = 24 yrs	73%	
> or = 25 yrs	27%	
Gender		
Female	59%	
Male	41%	
Pell Grant Disbursements		
A. Total # of enrolled students receiving Pell Grant awards		
AY2002-03	1,236	25.2%
AY2013-14	2,086	58.5%
B. Degree seeking students enrolled who were awarded Pell grants		
AY2002-03		41.3%
AY2013-14		72.2%

(College Office of Institutional Research, 2014)

In the same semester, 27% of the students were attending college for the first time after high school while another 8% transferred from another college (College Office of Institutional Research, 2014). This is important to note since 35%, or approximately one third of all students attending the institution during this academic year, could potentially benefit from an orientation to the college's environment, culture, academic expectations, and support services that would help increase that student's probability of success in college.

The Student Retention/First-Year Experience Summit

Although the institution has been successful in attracting students to its campuses, according to a senior administrator, since 2013 the institution “has been experiencing a significant decline in student retention over the past four years. Although we review multiple measures of student retention, the issue is probably best summarized by two key measures. The fall-to-fall retention of first time, degree-seeking freshmen has fallen from 62% for the fall 2008 cohort to 52% for the fall 2011 cohort, a drop of 10% in four years. Similarly, the fall-to-fall retention for the all degree seeking, first-time freshmen has fallen from 58.4% for the fall 2008 cohort to 44.9% for the fall 2011 cohort. This represents a drop of nearly 14% in a period of four years” (Institutional Chief Operating Officer/Executive Vice President, 2012).

Prior to 2010, several individuals at the institution were interested and intrigued by the topic of first-year-experience courses. In fact, according to college sources, it was identified in several college-wide discussions as a means to improving student retention (College Office of Institutional Research, 2014). Over the years, various well-intentioned efforts, mostly in the areas of academic advising and developmental education, were in the initial design stages. However, most efforts taken to address retention were not coordinated and, as a result, were not comprehensive for all students of the college. In the spring of 2011, the institution’s chief operating officer called together a group of individuals who represented various roles within the institution, including academic leadership, faculty, advising, and student support services. Speculating that many of these issues could be addressed in a first-year-experience course or seminar, the group

held The Student Retention/First-Year Experience Summit. From this initial meeting and review of available retention and completion data, the group drafted several versions of what a first-year experience course might include. As described in meeting minutes and reports, the group identified the following outcomes as central to the FYE course:

1. A greater number of students will think more critically about career choices and some will have focused upon a career choice (i.e., diminish the number of “undeclared majors”).
2. Most students will be comfortable self-advising, including selecting courses, selecting a major, and changing a major.
3. The majority of students will have a basic understanding of financial literacy that will influence their decision-making relative to student debt.
4. Students completing the FYE Course will be more likely to be retained from fall to winter and fall to fall (Institutional Documents).

Approval and Rollout of the FYE course

At the next meeting of the institution’s curriculum and instruction committee, the group presented a proposal for a two-credit FYE course. The curriculum committee approved the plan in December 2011, and pilot sections of the course were scheduled for the fall semester of 2012 (Institutional documents).

Development of course outcomes and instructional materials was assigned to the dean of students. Standardized instructional materials were developed and provided to all FYE course instructors. Instructors for the course represented both full-time faculty and advising staff. Not only was this course designed to affect student retention; it was also an attempt to bridge the invisible divide between faculty and student support services. In fact, one section was co-taught by the dean of academic studies and the dean of students. Others were taught by faculty members, and still other sections

were taught by academic advisors, all following the standard instructional materials (Institutional documents).

In the fall of 2012, fourteen sections — with a total of 208 students — of the FYE course were taught by thirteen instructors. An effort was made by all advising staff to encourage enrollment in the FYE course by making this course a co-requisite to ENGL 103 (Freshman English). While the majority of students, 155, were in their first semester at the institution, 53 returning students were also enrolled - due to the co-requisite to ENGL 103. (College Office of Institutional Research, 2014)

Assessing the Initial Success of the FYE Course

During the development stages of the FYE course, the designers recognized the importance of collecting comparative data to measure the impact of the course. The designers identified two types of data they wished to collect: (1) preliminary reactions from instructors and students about the success of the FYE course, (2) baseline data providing a view of the actual effect of the course on student success. To collect the first body of data, near the completion of the initial pilot term, the director of institutional research at the institution held focus group discussions with both faculty and students. The second body of data, institutional data on retention and student success, was collected in the semester following the pilot.

In order to acquire an external, more objective interpretation of these discussions and retention data, the institution contacted this researcher, asking for a systematic assessment of the two sets of data. The institution also requested

recommendations to provide input into the institution's continuous quality improvement cycle.

Assessment Plan

To meet the needs of the institution, this researcher developed an assessment plan that would incorporate the results from eleven (11) focus group discussions and retention data in order to provide insights into the *initial* successes of the FYE Course. It is noted that actual measures of retention and success are more long-term in nature and would not be available for a number of years. As such, the first step in measuring the effectiveness of the course was determining whether or not the course met its outcomes.

Therefore, the over-riding goal of this study is to determine if the FYE Course enhances the success and retention of the first-time freshmen at the institution. More specifically, the study examined the following questions:

1. Do students who complete the FYE Course meet the four established course outcomes:
 - Do they think more critically about their career choice?
 - Are they more comfortable in self-advising, including completing an Education Development Plan (EDP), selecting and registering for the appropriate courses, and when applicable, changing their major?
 - Do the students have a basic level of financial literacy, and are they able to apply this information when making decisions relative to their student debt?
 - Do they feel better equipped in order to retain from fall to spring and fall to fall?
2. How do the practices in the FYE Course compare to the established best practices for FYE courses?

Contribution of the Study

This assessment plan is important because it will assist the institution in the further refinement of its retention strategies. Whether it is Deming's principles of continuous improvement, Shewart's P-D-C-A cycle of process improvement or the System's Thinking philosophy of Peter Senge, all advocate a review of the current situation (a look at best practices) at the time corrective measures are being formulated. This, however, was not done at the college during the years leading up to 2013. Therefore, a comprehensive review of literature for common programmatic themes among best practice institutions will either confirm or uncover components that might strengthen student retention efforts at the college. Continuous quality improvement theorists also promote review of the effectiveness of a program (or any remedy to a problem), both in terms of its individual goals and how it affects the organization as a whole. This review of the FYE course is occurring at the end of its first semester of implementation. Therefore, this study will serve as the review at the adjustment stage in the program life-cycle of the FYE course.

The thorough review of successful FYE programs and other transition strategies, especially in regards to the community college, will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding student engagement and retention pertaining to this discrete subset of post-secondary students.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations are chosen boundaries employed by the researcher in an attempt to focus the scope of study. For this work, the researcher developed a bounded case

study of one institution's first-year experience course. According to Cresswell, as quoted in *Quality Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* by S. B. Merriam (2009), "case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., Observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description* and case-based themes (p. 43). Merriam provides several examples of bounded case studies "(see for example Koosimile's [2002] study of a new science curriculum in Botswana, Ram's [2001] case study of a small family business, or Perry's [2008] case study of the national health policy of Ghana)" (p.40), which are similar in nature to the institution's first-year experience course under study. Furthermore, the bounded case study was assessed as to its ability to impact student retention. Through a comprehensive review of best practices in FYE and transition efforts, the researcher further intended to bring additional resources to the target institution, assisting it in reaching its retention goals and contribute to the body of knowledge regarding retention strategies specific to community colleges. Therefore, internal validity and reliability are considered highly accurate since the entire population of the FYE course forms the case under review. Conclusions and recommendations drawn from the case study review will be able to be applied directly to the FYE course at the college. An additional delimitation of the study relates to the students who did not persist. Of the 208 students enrolled in the FYE course, 175, or 85%, completed the course; the remaining 33, 15%, dropped the course. These 33 are likely the very students for whom

retention strategies are developed and implemented. Without hearing the reasons behind their non-persistence, it is arguably impossible to remedy low retention rates. Further research will need to be conducted to show the effectiveness of the proposed recommendations. Even with future research, the results and recommendations of this study may only reflect a valid and reliable model for these students, at one rural community college, at one particular point in time.

Limitations, on the other hand, are external conditions, not necessarily chosen, that restrict the scope of the study or may affect its outcome: Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) state “As generalization [ability] is not the goal of qualitative research; rather, the focus is on transferability – that is, the ability to apply findings in similar contexts or settings” (p. 8). A major concern regarding external validity, or generalization, exists with this study. One of the concerns is based on the focus group discussions: by relying on the feedback provided during the focus group discussions, do the results contain a significant void pertaining to the voices of those who did not, for whatever reason, participate. The focus group discussions involved 100 students, or 48%, of the students; whereas, 11 faculty, or 85%, participated in their focus group discussion. In addition, if the overall projected outcome of the course was to improve student engagement and retention, were those who did not participate in the focus group discussions among the disengaged? If so, their feelings and behaviors were not considered when assessing the effectiveness of The FYE Course and recommending further enhancements to the course.

It is also noted that the researcher left the employment of the College in the midst of the study which created a disconnect between the study and data outcomes. Specifically, pieces of research that were intended to be a part of the study were lost. These pieces included an in depth survey of faculty members and a more robust examination of student retention data.

Organization of the Study

This study has been organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review of FYE and student engagement best practice institutions, with an emphasis on the programmatic components that have helped identified them as examples of best practice. Special consideration is given to community college programs and how they compare to their four-year institution counterparts.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used for the study including the rationale for adopting said research methodology. Subsections involving participant selection, data collection, analysis, and validity are also included.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the focus group interviews. In contrast, the retention of the FYE course students compared to a similar cohort not taking the FYE course will be addressed. This chapter will also compare the data to the programmatic components of best practice institutions, as identified earlier in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 interprets and evaluates the findings linking them to the research questions. Furthermore, drawing conclusions and providing recommendations regarding further inquiry close the body of the research.

Chapter Summary

Numerous studies have indicated that the attainment of a college degree has a positive impact on an individual's earning potential and quality of life. Community colleges have been instrumental in bringing education to the citizenry of the United States, especially to disadvantaged groups, that in some cases results in an associate's degree, and in other cases, serves as a springboard to attaining bachelor's and advanced degrees. However, access is no longer the primary acceptable measure of community college success. Student retention and completion are now just as important, if not more so, than access.

The competing missions of a community college, coupled with their distinct student characteristics, pose particularly difficult challenges for these institutions in helping their students complete their studies in a limited amount of time. Research indicates that student engagement is one way in which to ensure timely and appropriate student recruitment, retention, and completion. A method of increasing student engagement that has primarily been implemented by four-year universities is the orientation process, including the establishment of an extended orientation or first-year-experience course.

The target institution assessed in this study has similar concerns regarding student retention and completion that mirrors community colleges in general. In response to this concern the FYE course was created. Having started without a strong reliance on national best practices, but rather, a focus on specific institutional outcomes, institutional personnel believe it was the appropriate time to implement and

assess the effectiveness of the course and provide recommendations for improvement.

This assessment and recommendation is accomplished primarily through the analysis of rich descriptive data collected from focus group discussions, institutional retention data, and a comparison of the FYE course to best practices in the genre of student retention programs and initiatives.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter Introduction

This research study examines the effectiveness of the first-year experience course at a rural, publicly supported, locally controlled comprehensive, two-year, co-educational, commuter and residential community college, and identifies best practice institutions in regards to student engagement and FYE programs and courses.

Supporting this study, a comprehensive review of existing literature related to student engagement and its effect on student retention, examples of student engagement efforts in the broadest sense, and specifically, effective program components of a FYE course, were conducted.

As this study is intended to assist community college personnel in their assessment of the effectiveness of the FYE Course and to improve the overall retention and student success strategies, an emphasis was placed on the review of literature that specifically involved community colleges in regards to student success. In addition to key database inquiries, information was also collected at the Institute on First-Year Student Success in the Community College held at The University of South Carolina on November 4-6, 2012. (This is one of the first institutes offered by a recognized authority, in regards to FYE programs, devoted exclusively to implementation of FYE courses at the community college level).

Chapter Organization

The chapter is organized into five major sections:

- Section I: Calls for Educational Reform, speaks to the persistent need for change within the post-secondary educational system, specifically, how community colleges continue to struggle with multiple missions and how this impacts student success.
- Section II: The Role of Student Engagement discusses general theories and examples of current thinking in regards to the link between post-secondary student engagement and success.
- Section III offers a slightly more focused examination of first FYE programs and other initiatives that explain of how both universities and community colleges have approached transitioning students into college life.
- Section IV focuses on the components of an effective FYE course by identifying the content of best practice FYE courses. Gaps and shortcomings in the literature speak to how the literature has historically featured FYE programs and courses in four-year institutions, thus, providing a rationale for this community college specific research study.

I: Calls for Educational Reform

Almost from the beginning of formal education, there have been calls for its reform. The college-going stakes are even higher today, both in terms of costs and potential benefits to students and society. To be economically self-sufficient in the information-driven world economy, some form of postsecondary education – preferably a baccalaureate degree – is all but essential (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). If postsecondary education is all but essential, unprecedented numbers of students, and particularly historically underserved students, find themselves coming to campuses — especially those of community colleges. Thus, as stated by Senge et al., (2002) “higher education in the United States must do something at a scale as yet not realized: provide high-quality postsecondary education to more than three-quarters

of the adult population” (p. 12). Yet many students do not have the academic preparation necessary for success in college. Kuh, & Associates (2010) contend “Many students find their campus social as well as academic environments somewhat foreign – even unfriendly — and challenging to navigate. [...] The challenge is clear: colleges and universities must find way to help more students attain their educational goals” (p. ix.). According to many researchers, including Boggs (2011), “Improving student persistence and success rates, although a worthy goal, is not easy work, especially in times of economic recession and retrenchment” (p. 12). Several national initiatives express student success as their ultimate goal, and include The Learning College Model, Achieving the Dream, The Gates Foundation Postsecondary Success Initiative, and the Obama Administration Higher Education Agenda, to name a few. However, according to Kay McClenney, the daunting task of choosing where to start can be paralyzing to many in community college leadership: “While many initiatives are starting to surface as answers to these complex problems, research to substantiate the preferred next steps remains in its infancy – especially in regards to implementation at the community college level” (p. 3).

The Learning College

Some theorists, such as Terry O’Banion and Peter Senge, have indicated for decades that in order to address student success, especially in terms of retention and completion, the entire educational system in the United States is at a pivotal cross-roads requiring insurmountable change – if not its entire decimation (Senge et al, 2000; O’Banion, 1997). However, the call for dramatic education reform is hardly an

innovative concept. As early as 1983, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its initial report, *A Nation at Risk*, and its follow-up report, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* in 1993, educational researchers were calling for an entire overhaul of the American educational system. These reports, sponsored cooperatively by four private foundations —The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Johnson Foundation, Inc., Lilly Endowment, Inc., and The Pew Charitable Trusts — were early predictors of the challenges American higher education continues to face. As quoted by Terry O’Banion, in *A learning college for the 21st century, 1997*, “we can no longer improve the education of our children by improving school as we know it. The time has come to recognize that it is not the solution, it is the problem” (p. 5).

Calls for educational reform covered all of higher education, including community colleges. Specific to community college reform, Baker and Reed discussed the then-current reform efforts in a 1994 *Community College Journal* article by concluding that “All of these solutions work toward trimming the branches, when attacking the root is the only viable source of action” (p.32). The use of a garden analogy in reviewing education reform was again, expressed by Terry O’Banion (1997), “The reform movement of the past decade has been trimming the branches of a dying tree” (p. 7).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Peter Senge was known for his thinking and work in regards to the “Five Learning Disciplines: Personal Mastery, Shared Vision, Mental Models, Team Learning and Systems Thinking” Senge, et al. summarized their

earlier work in 2000 when they contended that the creation and maintenance of the American educational system mirrored the creation and maintenance of the Industrial Age: “The result of this machine-age thinking was a model of school separate from daily life, governed in an authoritarian manner, oriented above all else to producing a standardized product, the labor input needed for the rapidly growing industrial-age workplace — and as dependent on maintaining control as the armies of Frederick the Great” (p. 31).

Senge, et al. are attributed with coining the term “learning organization” – a place that embraces the five learning disciplines with a focus on the learner. Furthermore, Senge, et al. (2000) contend that change, in the educational system, is not only necessary, but inevitable: “The safest prediction is change: schools can no longer prepare people to fit in the world of twenty years ago, because that world will no longer exist” (p. 10).

While Senge, et al. were exposing dramatic change in education, O’Banion proposed change theory during the early- to mid-1990s was that of the “Learning College”: “The learning college places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, anyplace, anytime is based on six key principles (p.47):

- The learning college creates 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”

As quoted in *A Learning College for the 21st Century* by Terry O’Banion (1997), George Keller says, “We need an outburst of utopian schemes and inventive thinking. If schools and colleges are to be redesigned, we must begin massive efforts of brainstorming and creative thinking, grounded in political, psychological, and financial realities. Only then will we be able to build a new” (p.226). Close to two decades later, many contend that only a select few community colleges have been successful in their redesign efforts. Many organizations are still looking for a new educational reform movement that can help them improve student success. Although both are now more than a decade old, two important drivers of educational reform are offering current initiatives: the Achieving the Dream initiative, launched by Lumina Foundation, and the many initiatives of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream (AtD) is “an ambitious national initiative launched by the Lumina Foundation for Education in 2004, with support from a number of other philanthropies and organizations. The initiative helps community colleges learn how to collect and analyze student performance data in order to build a ‘culture of evidence’ — a culture in which colleges routinely use solid evidence to develop institution-wide reform strategies that are aimed at helping their students succeed academically.

Achieving the Dream has grown into a national movement; more than 130 community colleges are now participating” (Rutschow, p. iii).

An endorsement from Robert G. Templin, Jr., President, Northern Virginia community college in 2015 states: “ATD has the [necessary] kind of thought leaders within it and successful practitioners who really have breakthrough ideas, and it is because of that network we are able to look at promising practices, try them out at home, and share results with our colleagues. I think it is the very best way to learn” (About us - achieving the dream, 2015)

Early critics of the AtD initiative claim that trends in student outcomes — such as course completion, persistence, maintaining good grades, and earning college credentials — have remained relatively unchanged at these colleges. (Rutschow, et al., 2011; Gonzalez, 2011, The State of Washington, 2011). However, most also contend that large scale progress will take sustained, long-term efforts on the part of community colleges (Gonzalez, 2011).

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

To address the completion agenda question, many philanthropic organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have pushed for radical improvement of college completion. According to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s website (2013), “Our Postsecondary Success strategy seeks to increase low-income students’ college completion rates through innovations that can improve the productivity and performance of U.S. universities and colleges and ensure that all students have access to high-quality, highly personalized education” (n. p.).

In 2009, the Gates Foundation gave over \$373 million to various educational reform initiatives, with the intention to improve Pre-Kindergarten through post-secondary education throughout our country. In regards to higher-education, Hilary Pennington, director of Education, Postsecondary Success and Special Initiatives at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is quoted on the Gate Foundation website by stating: “By working together, states, community colleges, and local school districts can design programs to accelerate high-quality learning and shorten the amount of time it takes to earn a degree” (2015, n.p.).

Critics offer the Gates Foundation has overlooked the links between poverty and poor academic achievement, and has unfairly demonized teachers for poor achievement by underprivileged students. They contend that the Gates Foundation should be embracing anti-poverty and living wage policies rather than pursuing untested and empirically unsupported education reforms (Piller, 2007).

Furthermore, the article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “How Gates Shapes State Higher-Education Policy,” by Katherine Mangan (2015), along with the attached commentary, provide yet more skepticism of the influence of the Gates Foundation may be having on education:

At a time when college budgets are strained from decades of cuts in state support, Gates grantees have urged lawmakers to allocate spending more efficiently, emphasizing the need for more students to graduate and presenting evidence that remedial courses hold them back.

Only about 58% of first-time, full-time students who start at a four-year college receive a bachelor's degree from that college within six years. Most higher-education experts agree that that's a problem.

But some object to the way Gates and legislators have gone about tackling the issue. The influence of a major foundation and its grantees in state policy discussions makes some experts uncomfortable, since as a private entity Gates is not accountable to voters. They contend that the strategy bypasses colleges themselves and imposes top-down solutions, seeking quick fixes for complicated problems.

You create this whole hyped-up, get-it-done-fast mentality," says Debra Humphreys, vice president for policy and public engagement for the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Association officials have argued that the completion agenda being pushed by the Gates foundation doesn't pay enough attention to educational quality, and that it focuses too narrowly on getting students through as quickly as possible.

Finding the Right Solution

Given the array of choices of initiatives, choosing where to start can be a daunting task for many community college leaders. The question becomes, as a senior administrator at the College, asked, "Is it possible to develop some of the promising features of these national programs without joining in the larger initiative? Is it possible to customize the approach to fit the needs of an individual institution and its students?" (Chaddock, 2012).

As many researchers have indicated, one of the hindrances to answering these questions is the apparent lack of research and/or findings. According to Kay McClenney (2012), "most of these initiatives are in the early stages of implementation" (p. 4). This leads many administrators to the task of building a pilot program or a proposed theory of change, which after implementation and testing, will likely take on different aspects in a continuous improvement effort.

II. The Role of Student Engagement

All of these calls for educational reform and current initiatives to improve higher education have at least one similar theme: they all seem to suggest that one of the main drivers of completion, and student success in general, is student engagement.

Models of Student Engagement

In *Identity and Education* by A. W. Chickering and L. Reisser (1993), the authors offer the following in regards to historical research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini on student development:

In their monumental study *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research* (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini review every major research report since 1967 on the impacts of higher education on student development. [...] Pascarella and Terenzini suggested broad categories for organizing the diverse array of theories:

1. Psychological theories view development as a series of developmental tasks or stages, include qualitative changes in thinking, feeling, behaving, valuing, and relating to others and to oneself. Examples:
 - Erikson's (1959) eight developmental crises
 - Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of development
 - Marcia's (1965, 1966) model of ego identify status
 - W. Cross's (1971) model of black identity formation
 - Heath's (1968, 1978) maturity model
 - Life-span theories of adult development (Chickering and Havinghurst, 1981; Gould, 1972; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1964, 1968, 1975; Sheehy, 1074; Vaillant, 1977; Knox. 1977)
 - Josselson's (1987) pathways to identity development in women
2. *Cognitive theories* describe changes in thinking and evolving frames of reference that structure values, beliefs, and assumptions. Examples:
 - Perry's (1970) scheme of intellectual and ethics development
 - Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) women's ways of knowing

- Baxter Magolda's (1992) epistemological reflection model
 - Kohlberg's (1969) theory of moral development
 - Gilligan's (1982) different voice model
 - Loevinger's (1976) theory of ego development
 - Kegan's (1982) evolving self
 - Fowler's stages of spiritual development (1981)
 - Kitchener and King's (1981, 1990a, 1990b) reflective judgment model
3. *Typology theories* describe distinctive but stable differences in learning style, personality type, temperament, or socioeconomic background as contexts for development. Examples:
- Kolb's (1976) learning styles
 - The Myers-Briggs typology (Myers, 1980a, 1980b)
 - Keirsey and Bate's (1978) temperaments
 - K. P. Cross's (1971, 1981) work on sociodemographic characteristics
4. *Person-environment interaction* theories focus on how the environmental influences behavior through its interactions with characteristics of the individual. Examples:
- Campus ecology theories (Banning and Kaiser, 1974; Barker, 1968)
 - Holland's (1966, 1985) theory of vocational personalities and work environments
 - Perceptual models (Moos, 1976, 1979; Stern, 1970; Pervin, 1967, 1968a, 1968b) (pp. 1-3)

Published in the same year as Chickering and Reisser's review of the historical research, 1993, Tinto offered his seminal work, the Model of Student Retention:

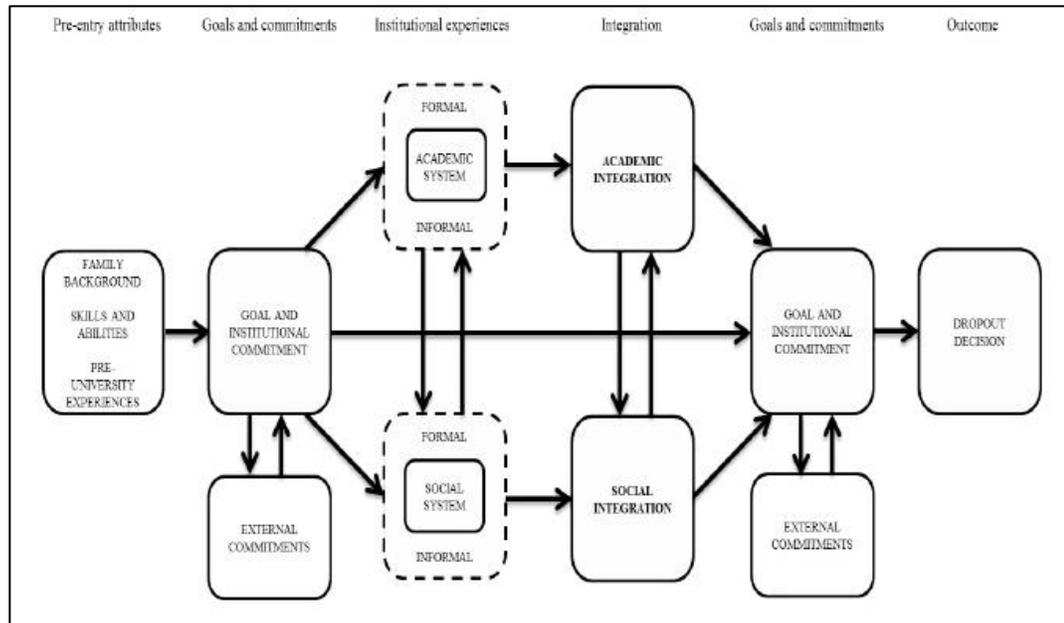


Figure 1: Tinto's Model of Student Retention

The second half of Tinto's Model pertains to this research. Specifically, that both the formal and informal aspects of academic efforts have a bearing on the academic performance the social integration of the student. Furthermore, academic performance and social integration, coupled with the organization's goals and commitment [to serve each student] impacts the ultimate decision of the student to disengage or leave the institution. With respect to this study, one could surmise from Tinto's Model that the academic efforts found in the FYE Course along with faculty and staff interaction (taking place within the FYE Course), peer group interactions and extracurricular activities will impact both the academic and social integration of each student. Coupled with the institution's goal and commitment toward retention, a student will make a final decision to [not] leave the institution — thus the student is retained.

With the proliferation of literature pertaining to student development and engagement, a model that attempts to combine some of the major aspects of various findings might prove helpful. In an effort to provide such a model for discussing the role of student engagement in these reform models, Zepke and Leach developed a “conceptual organizer” (see Table 3). According to Zepke and Leach (2010), “The four research perspectives we identified are testimony to the complexity of engagement. To make sense of this complexity we developed a conceptual organizer with two features. One identifies the main research perspectives in the engagement literature; the other identifies ten proposals for action that emerged from the synthesis of the literature” (pp. 167-177).

Table 3: A conceptual organizer for student engagement

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES	PROPOSALS FOR ACTION
Motivation and agency (Engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency)	1. Enhance students’ self-belief 2. Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with other and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives
Transactional engagement (Students and teachers engage with each other)	3. Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to engagement. 4. Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships 5. Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities
Institutional support (Institutions provide an environment conducive to learning)	6. Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds 7. Invest in a variety of support services 8. Adapt to changing student expectations
Active citizenship (Students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices)	9. Enable students to become active citizens 10. Enable student to develop their social and cultural capital

Kuh et al, in their book *Student Success in College: Creating conditions that Matter (2010)*, agree student engagement is key to any educational reform initiative, however they further identified two key components “The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities. What the institution does to foster student success is of particular interest, as those are practices over which a college or university has some direct influence” (p. 9).

Section II: Connecting Student Engagement to Institutional Solutions – Orientation and First-Year Experience

Early Orientation Programs

Orientation has primarily served as the means by which colleges and universities introduce, and hopefully engage, students into their new academic life environment. It has, however, taken many years to come to this as a solution for increasing student engagement. The history of orientation and other transitioning programs follows the history of higher education in the United States. In the latter years of the 19th century and early years of the 20th century, orientation served an academic purpose. According to Packwood (1977), “Boston University is credited with organizing the first orientation program in 1888 to acquaint new students with college life, and the University of Maine is credited with hosting the first freshman week in 1923 (p. 3).

Mack (2010) claimed that “these introductory programs come from a need for faculty to help students understand the role of a student at a particular institution” (p.3). During these early years of orientation programs, the student body was typically homogeneous in terms of age, gender, socio-economic background thus making it easier, perhaps, to orient to these young adult males, often from affluent families, to their new role of a student. As the number of institutions, size of institutions, and number of students continued to grow, the task of orienting new students to the institution usually fell to a position such as the Dean of Men (Mack, 2010) (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010).

Following the conclusion of WWII, many veterans were returning from war and entered college in hopes of pursuing a degree. This influx of students into colleges and universities caused many institutions to turn their attention to a newly developing profession — Student Affairs — and the group now responsible for the orientation programs of the institution. According to Cohen & Brawer (2008), “As orientation programs emerged, the responsibility for coordinating such programs shifted to student affairs personnel allowing faculty members the opportunity to focus on the classroom and course content” (p. 36).

From the 1950s onward, the profession of Student Affairs, and the programs they offered, continued to flourish in most colleges and universities (Barefoot, et al., 2005) (Bers & Younger, 2015) (Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011) (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010) (Hernandez, 2014). Again, according to Mack (2010), during this time of program development orientation programs began to take shape: “College orientation programs

encapsulate the essence of their organizations by introducing new students to the academic life, culture, traditions, history, people, and surrounding communities” (p. 4)

First-Year-Experience Courses

Regardless of the course title, method of delivery, or even the type of institution, a FYE course is typically, as described by O’Hara, Karp, & Hughes (2009), “aimed at new students, provides participants with information about the college, helps in academic and career planning, and provides techniques to improve study habits and other personal skills. The goals are to orient students to the various services offered at the college, help them acclimate to the college environment, and give them the tools they need to be successful in postsecondary education” (p. 197). Joe Cuseo (2013) notes “a first-year seminar that goes beyond strictly academic topics and takes a holistic (whole-person), student-centered approach to promoting college success [...] is often referred to as an ‘extended orientation,’ ‘college transition,’ or ‘FYE course’ ”(p. 1). Furthermore, Cuseo (2013) has noted that “national research suggests that holistic first-year seminars have the most significant impact on student outcomes” (p. 1).

Upcraft and Gardner (1989), in their seminal text *The Freshman Year Experience*, call for the same holistic approach for an effective FYE course:

Freshmen succeed when they make progress toward fulfilling [the following] educational and personal goals: (1) developing academic and intellectual competence; (2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; (3) developing an identity; (4) deciding on a career and life-style; (5) maintaining personal health and wellness; and (6) developing an integrated philosophy of life. (p. 2)

One of the first universities to change its practice of an orientation to that of a first year experience course, in order to acclimate students to their environment, and thus, increase student engagement, was the University of South Carolina (USC) during the 1970s. As stated by Morris and Cutright (2005) “USC’s first-year experience began in 1972 with a first-year seminar that has since given rise to a complex array of living and learning communities, core initiatives, blended academic and student life services, targeted programs for special populations, and the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (p. 351). Today, USC serves as a “national and international leader in creating a needed dialogue and focusing the academy on the experience of the first-year student” (p. 376).

While compiling data for this study, the researcher found many examples of four-year institution FYE courses. While hesitant to use them for comparison purposes because of a perceived lack of relevancy, this researcher feels that valuable information can be gleaned from the four-year institutions — with the understanding that much of the course content and method of delivery may differ to accommodate the known challenges posed by community colleges and their students.

III: Defining FYE for Community College Students

Early community college FYE course models were derived from four-year institutions (USC) and focused on one introductory course. Based on these early orientation programs and a more recent focus on the entire first-year experience, a general progression of research now exists that speaks to the FYE program rather than the FYE course. What becomes clear in examining the literature is that community

colleges and their students differ in respect to student engagement, retention, and completion, as compared to four-year institutions. Thus, community colleges are now looking for ways to improve student engagement that may or may not be addressed in the research that focuses on these four-year institutions

Community College Missions – Why a Student Attends the Community College.

As indicated by many sources (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010) (Bers & Younger, 2015) (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) (Cuevas & Timmerman, 2010) (Goldrick-Rab, 2010) (Kane, 2006) (Mack, 2010) (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005), community college students differ in a variety of ways from that of their university counterparts. Students may attend a community college for a multitude of reasons as opposed to university students, who as undergraduates, attend in hopes of attaining a bachelor's degree (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010), (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), (Kane, 2006). Community college students may enroll to (1) Complete introductory level coursework, after which, they will transfer to the university, (2) Obtain a certificate or associate's degree that will allow them to directly enter the workforce, (3) Participate in workforce development courses that are devoted to enhancing a particular work skill, (4) Complete remedial education that will address a student's inability to complete college-level work, and, (5) Participate in life-long learning opportunities that may not necessarily be tied to the completion of a particular work-skill and/or degree (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010) (Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011) (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) (Dougherty, 2006)

Today's community college students attend for a combination of reasons addressed by community college "missions"; that is students may enroll to obtain a specific work skill, which, in turn, leads to their desire to complete an associate's degree in the field (Myran, 2009). However, before doing either, the student finds it necessary to take remedial education courses in reading, writing, and math, in order to be successful in both endeavors (Bailey & Morest, 2006).

Community College Student Characteristics

In addition to varying reasons for which a community college student may enroll in classes, the student themselves are demographically diverse (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010), (Bailey & Morest, 2006), (Bolden, 2009), and (Dougherty, 2006). According to (Bailey & Morest, 2006), (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), and (Dougherty, 2006), the community college student is more apt to be older than a traditional college student, commute to college have outside family commitments and full-time employment and are members of the once underserved populations in higher education due to gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic characteristics. These descriptors of a community college student directly impact the institution's ability to orient and engage a student into their learning environment (Bailey & Morest, 2006), (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), (Dougherty, 2006), and (Kane, 2006).

III. Best Practice Components of FYE

Identifying FYE Best Practices

Since FYE courses have been in existence for over 40 years, most of the current literature speaks to the need for FYE Programs to be comprehensive in nature. This equates to a focus on the *total experience* of a first-year student, which often goes beyond a (one-semester) FYE course. However, due to the recent development of such courses at the community college level, it is necessary to infer how components of best practices in regards to FYE programs at the four-year level, might translate to the formation of a FYE course within the community college. For the purposes of this research, FYE is defined as a one-semester *course* in a community college that enhances the probability of student success and retention.

Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, et al.'s book, *Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College* (2005), is an outgrowth of the work performed at the University of South Carolina – National Resource Center. Two of the contributing authors are John Gardner, First Director of USC's University 101 and the subsequent National Resource Center and Betsy Barefoot, who served as the co-director for research and publications at the National Resource Center for eleven years before joining the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Six of the eight authors of this book were or are staff members of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, a national higher education research center located in Brevard, North Carolina: "The Policy Center has encouraged and collaborated in the development of new assessment tools and

methodologies and has conducted a number of national surveys to determine current curricular and co-curricular practices in the first year” (p. xxii).

The book features thirteen institutions and their efforts pertaining to FYE. Five criteria surfaced as indicators by which the institutions were measured for effectiveness:

1. Evidence of an intentional, comprehensive approach to improving the first year that is appropriate to the institution’s type and mission.
2. Evidence of assessment of the various initiatives that constitute this approach.
3. Broad impact on significant number of first-year students, including, but not limited to, special student subpopulations.
4. Strong administrative support for first-year initiatives, evidence of institutionalization, and durability over time.
5. Involvement of a wide range of faculty, student affairs professionals, academic administrators, and other constituent groups. (pp. 6-9).

With the wealth of information disseminated by the National Resource Center, most programmatic models were tailored after the founding University of South Carolina — a predominately residential, regional, research oriented, four-year institution.

While successful initiatives and best practices that deal with all components affecting student engagement, including FYE courses, which may have begun in four-year institutions, community colleges, nevertheless, have reported on similar practices.

The adaption of such practices to the community college students, with their distinct characteristics and needs, however, has proven to be difficult for some community colleges. As recently as 2010, progressive community colleges that have

gone beyond the preterm orientation program as their primary tool for acclimating students to the higher education environment, are considered pioneers in the creation of first-year seminars, courses, and programs.

Understanding Student Engagement

One area of promise realized over the past several years has been the work of Kay McClenney and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012). Four surveys, each coming from a different perspective, assess how students engage in their community colleges and provide insight to improving these educational experiences for students: Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), and Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS). Data collected from thousands of students, faculty members and institutional leaders through these various tools have led the Center for Community College Student Engagement to suggest the following promising practices for community college student success (p. 8):

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS	INITIATING SUCCESS	SUSTAINING SUCCESS
Assessment and Placement	Accelerated or Fast-Track Developmental Education	Class Attendance
Orientation (Mandatory)	First-Year Experience	Alert and Intervention
Academic Goal Setting and Planning	Student Success Course	Experiential Learning beyond the Classroom
Registration before Classes Begin	Learning Community	Tutoring
		Supplemental Instruction

Principles / Components of Effective Retention Programs

Again, according to McClenney (2012), “There is emerging consensus that certain design principles are critical for student success. No matter what program or practice a college implements, it is likely to have a greater impact if its design incorporates the following principles.

- A strong start
- Clear, coherent pathways
- Integrated support.
- High expectations and high support.
- Intensive student engagement.
- Design for scale.
- Professional development (p. 5)

Since the early 1970s there has been much progress in the areas of orientation, and for that matter, the entire student affairs profession. Many four-year colleges and universities have been proclaimed as “best practice” models for others to emulate. As stated previously, most FYE Courses have been modeled after USC’s University 101, and not unlike USC, the FYE Course has adapted into more of a conglomeration of engagement efforts that address the entire first year experiences of a true freshman. Therefore, most research speaks to University FYE Programs that are more comprehensive than any specific FYE Course. With that in mind, however, the Community College Center for Student Engagement has published recent research findings in regards to student engagement, retention and completion at community colleges.

Two specific community colleges that have been named as having promising programs in regards to successful orientation/FYE courses are; LaGuardia Community College in Queens, NY and Palo Alto College in San Antonio, TX (Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011).

Brown, King, and Stanley discuss the success of La Guardia Community College's program: "La Guardia Community College's mission focuses on providing access to higher education, particularly for traditionally underserved students, and translating that access into success" (p. 104). This success has been partly attributed to their FYE efforts: "To create a more holistic and comprehensive transition year, First Year Academies were created to focus all aspects of the first-year transition experience around the discipline areas that constitute the college's majors" (p. 104). Each Academy is then responsible for offering the following transition program components:

- Opening Day Session with an introduction to the common reading program
- Discipline-specific New Student Seminars
- Learning Communities
- Second-semester career development course
- Student ePortfolios
- Discipline-relevant cocurricular activities (p. 105).

In comparison, Palo Alto College (PAC) also serves a diverse student population of primarily economically disadvantaged (49%) and first-generation college students (74%) (Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011). In 2003, SDEV 0170: Strategies for Succeeding in College was implemented and made mandatory for all students. This

course, which is offered free of charge to students, is taught by counseling staff rather than faculty. The course has focused on culturally relevant information to help transition students into the college. Other topics covered in this one-credit course include these:

- An introduction to the Personalized Access to Learning and Services (PALS) system – an internet homepage that provides access to email and other communication systems at the college
- Services available for students with learning disabilities
- Choosing a major and planning for a career
- Completion of an educational plan (pp. 108 – 111).

Since a community college, as an institution, and its students, differ from the four-year university in many respects, it is important to view current models with a critical eye taking into account the differences between community college students and those of the four-year colleges. However, it is possible to arrive at common themes expressed by both bodies of work as one develops a community college FYE course.

Below is a table that begins to assemble these common programmatic themes:

Table 4. Evidence of Best Practice Indicators: FYE

SOURCE	INDICATOR
CCCSE, Achieving Institutional Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Strong Start – Connect with the student before and during the first few weeks. Programs should be intentional, intrusive and comprehensive

SOURCE	INDICATOR
Univ. of South Carolina, CCCSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foster academic success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic strategies for courses/environment ○ How to effectively evaluate information sources ○ Recognize purpose and value of academic integrity ○ Effectively cultivate oral and written communication skills ○ Embrace advising, course planning and major exploration ● Setting high academic standards and providing the necessary tools to reach them <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic planning - advising ○ Academic support – tutoring and mentoring ● Provide clear and coherent pathways ● Integrated support – connecting with student in the classroom instead of referring them out to services that are separate from the learning experience
Univ. of South Carolina, CCCSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Help Students Discover and Connect with Institutional Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identify appropriate campus resources and opportunities that contribute to educational experience, goals and campus engagement ○ Develop relationship building skills with peers, staff and faculty ○ Understand the history and culture of the College/University ● Providing necessary tools to reach academic goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Access to financial aid counseling –gain financial literacy ● Ensure that early contacts foster personal connections
Univ. of South Carolina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prepare Students to Be Responsible Citizens <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Examine how a student’s background and experiences influence their relationship with others ○ Describe concepts of diversity and recognize diverse perspectives ○ Describe and demonstrate principles of responsible citizenship within and beyond the campus community ○ Explain how the implications of a student’s decisions relate to their overall wellness
Univ. of South Carolina, CCCSE, Achieving Institutional Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strong organizational commitment evidenced by appropriate funding, staff and oversight ● Involvement of a wide range of faculty student affairs professionals, academic administrators, and other constituent groups.

SOURCE	INDICATOR
CCCSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional development in terms of student success for everyone: (students, families), faculty, staff, administration, board of trustees
Univ. of South Carolina, CCCSE, Achieving Institutional Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of all programs is necessary and should be incorporated into the development of the program

Chapter Summary

In summary, one of the main drivers of completion and student success in general is student engagement. Colleges, and especially community colleges, are under an unprecedented pressure to provide quality education to more adults. Institutions are being held accountable for the number of students who complete a course of study, and preferably, in the shortest amount of time possible. It is incumbent upon colleges and universities to find ways that will help more students attain their educational goals — one of these measures is the art of transitioning students into their new academic environment.

National initiatives such as Achieving the Dream, Post-secondary Success through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Learning College are but a few major, and often labor-intensive, funding opportunities that many community colleges have recently joined in their effort to address student success. The answers to the complex question of how to improve student retention and success are becoming quite complex and numerous themselves.

The primary means by which universities and colleges used to acclimate their students to college life, between the years of the 1890s and the 1970s, was by some

form of an orientation program. Although orientation programs continue to be offered well into the 21st century, it was at the University of South Carolina in 1972 that administrators and faculty felt students needed something more substantial in terms of introducing them to their new academic environment. USC is now recognized as the “gold standard” for their FYE program.

However, the community college differs from its four-year university counterpart in several ways: their competing missions, student demographics and the completion drivers, and the degree to which community colleges have enacted programmatic solutions to address these differences in light of FYE courses/programs. Although the research is limited on successful FYE and other student-success centered programs that have been implemented at the community college level, there does exist a rather small cohort of institutions that have paved the way in bridging the development of such courses at the community college level.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

With the stakes of student success and completion at an all-time high in all of education, but particularly in the community college, this study was designed to collect data regarding the effectiveness of a newly created FYE Course at a rural, publicly supported, locally controlled comprehensive, two-year, co-educational, commuter and residential community college. In particular, the study examined the course's effect on a students' ability to (1) choose a major, (2) be comfortable with requirements and able to self-advise, (3) develop financial literacy, and (4) complete their plan of study at the college.

While initial steps to improve student retention had been implemented at the college with the adoption of the FYE Course, the institution needed to assess its effectiveness in meeting its goals to retain true freshmen. In addition, the college wanted to identify additional components that would cause the course to become more relevant and successful.

Chapter Organization

This chapter is organized into eight sections, all delineating different aspects of the research plan. Section I, Rationale for Research Approach, addresses the case study approach. Section II offers context for the course being evaluated. Section III, Research

Data Sources, describes the sources of evaluation data. Section IV further describes the data collection methods. Section V describes the data analysis methods. Validity and reliability of the research are addressed in Section VI, and Section VII includes delimitations and limitations of the study. Finally, a summary of the chapter's key points is provided.

Section I: Rationale for Research Approach

In order to evaluate the success of the FYE Course, a case study analysis was conducted. As quoted in Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), Cresswell says that “a case study is both a methodology (a type of design in qualitative inquiry) and an object of study” (p. 31). As quoted in Merriam (2007), Cresswell adds, “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (*a case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description* and case-based themes” (p. 73). It is primarily for these reasons that the case study review was chosen to assess the effectiveness of the FYE Course. The course is among the most recent efforts taken at the college to address student success and retention. In order to evaluate the level of impact this initiative has on the problem, all aspects of the course must be studied. A case study review provided the most comprehensive look at the course from an institutional perspective, and, in addition, provided insight into the feelings and behaviors of the freshmen completing the course.

As stated by J. Key in *Qualitative: Research Design in Occupational Education* (2013), “When conducting qualitative research, the investigator seeks to gain a total or complete picture. [...] According to Stainback and Stainback (1988), a holistic description of events, procedures, and philosophies occurring in natural settings is often needed to make accurate situational decisions. This differs from quantitative research in which selected, pre-defined variables are studied” (p. 2). Stated differently, Merriam (2009), adds “qualitative researchers are interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 23). The case study approach should also bring insight into how the students would make sense of their academic lives — given the tools and concepts shared in the FYE Course. If students were given the opportunity to describe their feelings, and perhaps even explain their behaviors, the case study methodology should identify potential areas for corrective actions and improvements. By supplementing the case study assessments with best practices of student transition efforts from across the country, the researcher may be able to apply other models or initiatives that would further the students’ ability to transition into college and also improve the existing course.

As stated by Ruth McCoy on the webpage *Qualitative Research* (published by the University of North Carolina at Pembroke), “Qualitative research is concerned with non-statistical methods of inquiry and analysis of social phenomena. It draws on an inductive process in which themes and categories emerge through analysis of data collected by

such techniques as interviews, observations, videotapes, and case studies. Samples are usually small and are often purposively selected. Qualitative research uses detailed descriptions from the perspective of the research participants themselves as a means of examining specific issues and problems under study” (p. 1). While one aspect of the success of the FYE Course can be expressed in quantitative measures, including students’ pass rates, comparison of the GPAs of students who completed the course and those who did not, and retention rates of students who completed the course compared to those who did not, these data alone would provide only a glimpse into the true impact of the course on the students who completed the course. They would most likely not provide answers as to “why” or “how” certain aspects of the course impacted student behavior. In order to delve deeper into the “why” and “how” aspects, or the causation, of the success of the course, the qualitative component — students’ feedback regarding their experiences — is combined with the quantitative retention rates (from fall to winter and fall to fall).

Furthermore, Ruth McCoy continues on the webpage Qualitative Research (published by the University of North Carolina at Pembroke), “the importance of qualitative research [is] for providing “naturalistic research or inquiry” (Taylor, 1977) into everyday living through direct observations of human behavior in everyday life. Drawing on symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1969), naturalistic researchers believe that gaining knowledge from sources that have “intimate familiarity” (Lofland, 1976) with an issue is far better than the “objective” distancing approach that supposedly characterizes quantitative approaches (Haworth, 1984). Zurcher (1983) used this

technique as he examined such common occurrences as riding on an airplane or attending a football game” (p. 1).

While focus group discussions provide the researcher with the ability to hear the “voices” of the participants in the experimental course, one of the concerns of relying solely on the feedback provided during the focus group discussions was the void as it pertains to hearing the voice of those who did not, for whatever reason, participate. If the overall projected outcome of the course was to improve student engagement and thus retention, did those who did not participate in the focus group discussions among those that were indeed disengaged? If so, their feelings and behaviors were not taken into consideration when assessing the effectiveness of the FYE Course and recommending further enhancements to the course. This reality leads us to a potentially troubling limitation of this study: Why did some of the FYE Course students drop the course and fail to persist? The students who did not persist are the very students for whom retention strategies are developed and implemented. Without hearing the reasons behind their non-persistence, institutions may continue to face difficulties in remedying low retention rates. It should be noted, however, that the college did invite those who had stopped out of the course to a separate session for an interview and even offered a gift card and free lunch for those who would attend. Unfortunately, there were zero attendees.

Section II: Research Setting: “The College”

The institution that serves as the environment for this evaluative study, as stated previously, is a rural, publicly supported, locally-controlled comprehensive, two-year,

co-educational, commuter, and residential community college. The main campus is located in a primarily rural county, with the village population of 5,806. A smaller satellite campus is located approximately 20 miles away, in another, albeit slightly larger, rural area (population 11,430).

As noted in Chapter 1, although the college has been successful in attracting students to its campuses, administrators have been concerned with decreases in fall-to-fall retention rates in recent years, amounting to nearly 10% from 2008 to 2011, for first time, degree-seeking freshmen.

Section III: Research Sample and Data Sources

Focus Group Sessions

The focus group discussions for this study consisted, exclusively, of students who took the course and faculty/staff who taught the course. Of the 208 students enrolled in the FYE Course, 100 students, or 48%, participated in one of the ten focus group discussions. Stated differently, all students who participated in one of the ten focus group discussions were also students who completed the FYE Course (rather than being enrolled), thus, bringing the participation rate to 57.14%.

Table 5: FYE Course, Fall 2012

	TOTALS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
First Time Freshmen and new transfer students	818	100%
Students enrolled in the FYE Course	208	25.43
Students who completed the FYE Course	175	21.39
Pass Rate of FYE Course (as compared to those enrolled)	175	84.13

As noted previously, instructors for the course represented both full-time faculty and advising staff. In its attempt, not only to affect student retention, but also to bridge the invisible divide between faculty and student support services, one section was co-taught by the dean of academic studies and the dean of students. Other instructors included faculty members and academic advisors, all using standard instructional materials. Each instructor of the FYE Course received initial training, standardized instructional materials, and was provided the opportunity to discuss, as a team, the effectiveness of the course (positive experiences, negative experiences, questions, concerns, etc.) on a monthly basis.

As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, all data were collected by either the director of Institutional Research or the Dean of Students and provided to this researcher. The researcher did act as a scribe during the sessions; however, the researcher did not have any interaction with the participants. Additionally, the researcher had not met any of the students who were enrolled in the FYE Course prior to the study, and therefore, could not identify any student participant during focus group discussions. Although previously associated with the institution and acquainted with many of the FYE Course faculty focus group participants, the researcher did not conduct the sessions, nor have any interaction with the faculty members during the data collection process. The researcher's role, as discussed previously, was to provide an objective interpretation and analysis of the research data and to supplement this analysis with recommendations and analysis based on best practices.

Supporting Quantitative Data

In addition to the comments provided by students and faculty, institutional data consisting of enrollment numbers, number of students who persisted through the course, as well as retention statistics was collected. Specifically, Fall 2012 to Winter 2013 and Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 retention statistics were provided by the College Office of Institutional Research of the college.

Section IV: Data Collection Methods

The college's Director of Institutional Research conducted the focus group sessions of both students and the FYE Course faculty, and provided the quantitative data used for the analysis. Ten focus group sessions were held with students; one session with the faculty.

Focus Group Settings and Timing

Focus group sessions were held at the main campus of the institution, and lasted approximately 50 minutes. All eleven sessions were observed by the researcher, who acted as a scribe and recorded comments offered by the participants. All eleven sessions were held within a two-week time period approximately two weeks prior to completion of the course. Participation was optional and students could attend any of the scheduled focus groups (not necessarily with other members of the same section of course offering). This was done to encourage participation based on the students' schedule.

Focus Group Structure

Each of the ten student focus group discussions began with introductory remarks explaining the purpose of the focus group. For approximately half of the groups, the director of institutional research began by asking “What worked well for you in this course?” and “What would you like to see changed in regards to this course?” In the remaining sessions she guided the discussion by addressing each of the four course goals (1) choosing a major, (2) self-advising, (3) financial literacy, and (4) increased retention. Regardless of the sequence of the questions, the resulting feedback was largely consistent among the focus group discussions.

The one faculty focus group session was structured in a similar manner, beginning with introductory remarks explaining the purpose of the focus group, and then, framing the discussion by asking “What worked well for you in this course?” and “What would you like to see changed in regards to this course?”

Section V: Data Analysis Methods

The researcher reviewed the results of the focus group discussions, course documentation, quantitative data, and compared these factors with prevalent theory and other successful FYE programs. The analysis, provided in Chapter 5, is intended to (1) assess the effectiveness of the FYE course in meeting stated institutional outcomes, (2) compare the findings with “best practice” cases found in the research of literature, and, (3) provide recommendations for improvement based on these findings.

The efforts by which the FYE Course was benchmarked against “best practices” were identified during the literature review phase of this research study. The following table identifies the key resources applied for the best practice recommendations.

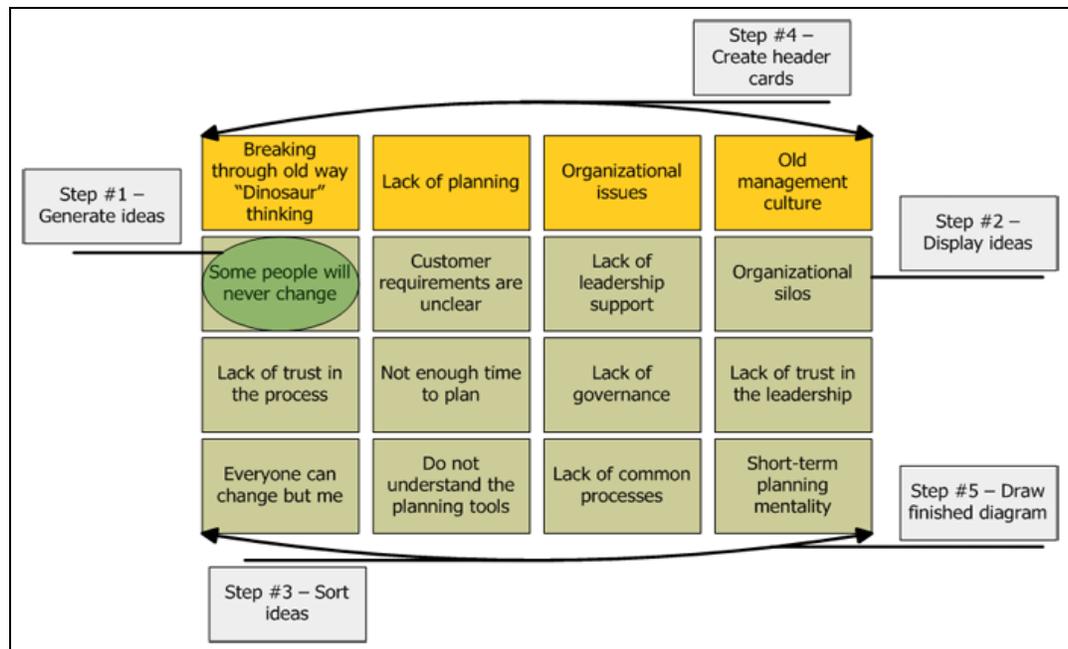
Table 6: Best Practice Literature

TITLE	SOURCE / AUTHORS	PUBLICATION DATE
<i>The First-Year Experience Monograph Series, numbers 13, 49, and 56</i>	National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition (University of South Carolina),	2008
<i>Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College</i>	B. Barefoot, J. Gardner, M. Cutright, L. Morris., C. Schroeder., S. Schwartz, M. Siegel, R. Swing	2005
<i>Challenging & Supporting The First-Year Student: A Handbook for Improving the First Year of College</i>	M.L. Upcraft, J. Gardner, B. Barefoot & Associates	2005
<i>Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Community College Student Success.</i>	S. Goldrick-Rab	2010
<i>Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter</i>	G. Kuh, J. Kenzie, J. Schuh, E. Whitt, & Associates	2010
<i>A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success.</i>	K. McClenney – Center for Community College Student Engagement	2012
<i>The empirical case for the first-year seminar: Evidence of Course Impact on Student Retention, Persistence to Graduation, and Academic Achievement.</i>	J. Cuseo	2013
<i>Improving Student Engagement: Ten Proposals for Action</i>	N. Zepke & L. Leach	2010
<i>Student Success Courses in the Community College: An Exploratory Study of Student Perspectives</i>	L. O’Hara, M. Karp, & K. Hughes	2009
<i>A Learning College for the 21st Century Schools That Learn</i>	T. O’Banion	1997
	Peter Senge, N. Cambron-McCabe, T. Lucas, B. Smith, J. Dutton, A. Kleiner	2000

In order to organize and analyze the focus group feedback, the researcher developed an affinity diagram. An affinity diagram is a quality control tool often used to gather and group ideas. According to Brassard, “By sorting ideas into 5-10 related groups, or summary/header topics statements, the tool:

- Encourages creativity by everyone on the team at all phases of the process;
- Breaks down longstanding communication barriers;
- Encourages non-traditional connections among ideas/issues;
- Allows breakthroughs to emerge naturally, even on long-standing issues;
- Encourages “ownership” of results that emerge because the team creates both the detailed input and general results; and,
- Overcomes “team paralysis: which is brought on by an overwhelming array of options and lack of consensus” (1994, p. 12).

When designing an affinity diagram, ideas generated, usually through brainstorming, however in this case, the comments were those provided by participants in the focus group and which were then transferred to sticky notes. A typical affinity diagram has 40-60 items or ideas as a result of brainstorming; however, it is not unusual to have 100-200 ideas. The next step of the process involves regrouping, looking for areas of “affinity” among the topics. The final step gives each grouping a summary, or header, card that provides a title, or theme, for the grouping.



Source: Abilla, 2010

Figure 2: Affinity Diagram

While affinity diagrams provide a valuable method for grouping qualitative comments and feedback, the KJ Method, a variation of the traditional affinity diagram, provides a more structured approach. In the KJ Method, the cards are fact-based and go through a highly structured refinement process before the final diagram is created” (Brassard, 1994, p. 13).

For this analysis, the researcher applied a “modified” Affinity Diagram by blending and adapting a traditional Affinity Diagram and the KJ Method. After each comment from the focus group discussions was transferred to a sticky note, the researcher-grouped the comments into headings based on the four institutional goals of the FYE course and two more general headings related to the “Content of Course” and

“Institutional Status of the Course.” This process provided an effective method of organizing the many comments into manageable categories or themes.

Section VI: Validity and Reliability

Internal validity and reliability for this study are considered highly accurate since the entire population of the FYE course being evaluated forms the case. Based on these factors, any conclusions and recommendations drawn from the case study review will be able to be applied directly to the FYE course to improve future iterations.

Another aspect regarding the validity of the results pertains to the ability to generalize the study recommendations. Researchers note that “generalization is not the goal of qualitative research; rather, the focus is on transferability — that is, the ability to apply findings in similar contexts or settings” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, pp. 8-9). With this in mind, therefore, the comments from these focus groups, while generally transferable to other, similar, institutions, are intended to provide guidance for this specific institution, related to this specific FYE course, at this particular point in time.

Also of concern has been the researcher's inability to observe all factors that might influence the situation under study (McCoy, 2013). One major aspect of student behavior, in fact, that was not included as part of the case study was feedback from students who did not persist in the FYE Course. As noted previously, this information was not collected, despite efforts made by the institution to include input from these students. This information could be extremely important in developing and improving a retention program. In many cases, questioning students who have been successful — retained students — will often simply confirm aspects that worked. Questioning

students who were not retained, and specifically about those factors that could have helped retain them, would provide valuable data.

Section VII: Delimitations and Limitations

As referenced in Chapter 1, the delimitations for this study are the study participants and the focus on the success of one specific FYE course. The limitations, as discussed earlier, include the students and faculty members who elected not to participate in the study, the questioning methods of the group leader, and the potential impact of the timing of the focus group sessions.

Chapter Summary

In summary, the purpose of this study was to analyze the effectiveness of the college's FYE Course. In particular, the study sought to determine if the course had an effect on the students' ability to (1) choose a major, (2) be able to self-advise, (3) gain financial literacy, and (4) complete a plan of study.

Research data were collected from 3 primary sources: (1) retention data for the Fall 2012 Courses, (2) focus group comments from ten student sessions, and (3) focus group comments from one faculty session. These data were collected, grouped using a modified affinity diagram, and analyzed to provide recommendations for improving the FYE Course. In addition, "best practice" information was reviewed and applied to recommendations for improvement.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Chapter Introduction

In order to evaluate the success of a new FYE course and identify areas needing improvement, the college conducted focus groups involving both students and faculty who participated in the course at the close of its inaugural offering during the fall 2012 semester. Over two hundred comments extracted from these focus groups were then categorized into themes by using an affinity diagram. Both similar and dissimilar comments expressed in each of the themes served as the foundation to findings, as well as interpretation and analysis of the data.

Chapter Organization

This chapter is organized into four major sections: Section I: Focus Group Results and Themes; Section II: Analysis of Themes; Section III: Supporting Quantitative Data; and Section IV: Best Practice Components and Recommendations. In Section I, the majority of the discussion concerns the major themes that emerged in the affinity diagram, especially as they relate to the goals of the course: (1) the students' ability to choose a major, (2) the students' ability to self-advise, (3) the students' financial literacy, (4) the levels of increased retention and/or completion, (5) effective components of the course content and delivery, and (6) the institutional status of the course. Section II provides some analysis of the focus group discussions, as related to

the six themes. Section III includes the supporting institutional data related to Theme 4, retention and completion, and finally, Section IV of this chapter addresses FYE Course Components: Best Practice Comparison and Recommendations.

Section I: Focus Group Results: Identification of Themes

As described previously, a total of 11 focus groups were held at the completion of the inaugural offering of the FYE course. Ten of these sessions involved one hundred students enrolled in the course, a 48% participation rate. The final session involved 11 of the 13 instructors, an 85% participation rate.

Approximately 237 comments were recorded and categorized in all 11 sessions (See Appendix B: Focus Group Comments, Raw Data). By utilizing an affinity diagram, the researcher initially grouped the 237 comments into six categories: the four institutional goals/research questions and two more overall general themes “Content of the Course” and “Institutional Course Status.” Table 7 provides a breakdown of the number of responses tagged for each of the six categories

Table 7: Comments by Theme

THEME	TOTAL # OF THEME COMMENTS
Students’ ability to choose a major	19
Students’ ability to self-advise	44
Students’ increased financial literacy	25
Increased retention or completion	8
Effectiveness of course content	82
Institutional status of the course	59
Totals	237

Following the initial categorization of the 237 comments, the comments were split into those that reflected overall positive viewpoints and those that reflected negative views. While this initial split provides only a rudimentary view of the data, it allows for a general assessment of the participants' assessment of the course in meeting course and institutional goals. Each of the themes is addressed below, in terms of the overall positive vs. negative assessment.

Theme 1: Students' ability to think critically about their career choices

Approximately 19 comments were offered by students regarding the first course goal: to increase the students' ability to think critically about their career choices. Of these comments, 15 were initially classified as being positive and the remaining 4 as providing negative, or critical, commentary. Table 8 provides this initial breakdown.

Table 8: Theme 1 Results, Choosing a Major

STUDENTS — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N =15)
• "Major information/registration/EDP very helpful."
• "Even if you didn't switch [your major] the research helped confirm your major."
• "Career path might be questioned" (re: second guessing choice of major from music major), however, due to course and instructor, student "felt confident about continuing on as music major."
• "Some new information regarding major, like what it takes to be successful."
• "Three students switched their majors during class."
• "[I] was undecided and changed occupation within same major."
• "Made me do things I probably would not have done regarding career choice."
• "Overall I liked the class – it teaches you a lot about yourself and career choices. I changed what my major will be."
• "Did research in class that helped determine change in major (from Vet to Coaching)."
• "Some changed major based on research done in class."
• "The lack of direction [in career choice] did provide more time to investigate things more closely."

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Majority now know what they want to do – a couple want to change [major]. Class was reinforcing to what I already knew.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Career work was very helpful.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It helped me make Major-related decisions, as well as, transfer options.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Course really helped me decide what to do.”
STUDENTS — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=4)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I was already sure of my major and had already been shadowing etc..”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning student since 2009 still doesn’t know what her major is.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[I] didn’t get very much out of the Major section because we already know where we were going. Very comfortable with self-advising (registration) – remembered form 1st advising session.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If you don’t know your major it’s hard to pick a major.”
FACULTY — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N=0)
FACULTY — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=0)

Theme 2: Students’ ability to self-advise

Approximately 44 comments were offered by participants regarding the second course goal: to increase the students’ ability to self-advise, including selecting courses, selecting a major, or changing a major. Of these comments, 37 were initially classified as being positive and the remaining 7 as providing negative, or critical, commentary. Table 9 provides this initial breakdown.

Table 9: Theme 2 results, Ability to Self-advise

STUDENTS — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N =37)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “EDP assignment was very helpful.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Transfer information very helpful.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Just to make sure about transferring – still nice to make sure with an advisor.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First semester students really like EDP, LDP and review of registration process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Too much pressure regarding what you wanted to do – although this was good because you need to know what you’re going to do.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[I’m a] lot more confident about registering for classes and completion of EDP.”

- “Confirmed my choice (more confidence in my decision of transfer institution.)”
 - “The class made you print out your schedule for next semester.”
 - “I liked this class – it was very informative. Especially regarding registration and transfer [options].”
 - “Took the class later – makes plans easier and this class should be required!”
 - Returning students* – “Even though I knew some of the information, I still learned a lot (especially EDP and transferring information).”
 - “Already had plans of whether to go for Associates versus transfer without the degree – this helped me to be sure.”
 - A music major student = “was able to meet with faculty advisor twice a week and this could not have been covered in an appointment with an advisor.”
 - “I liked the class – especially on registering because I didn’t know how to do that before.”
 - “When scheduled classes first time, I didn’t have a plan to transfer or a career path.”
 - Returning Students: “Had EDP and LDP already done but made me stick to it.”
 - Returning Student: “I liked to plan to finish it out (I wouldn’t have had anything down on paper without this class.”
 - “Christy one on one time was helpful – advising (didn’t have to make an appointment to get questions answered).”
 - Returning student who will be transferring to FSU next fall: “Transfer information helped a lot.”
 - “EDP – very helpful to know what you need at The College and even beyond.”
 - “Transfer information was helpful.”
 - “Transfer packet was helpful.”
 - “I liked the transfer resources.”
- STUDENTS — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=7)**
- “Still unsure about ability to transfer.”
 - One going on for Bachelors at FSU: “All were already planning to attain an Associates — didn’t need this information.”
 - “Not very much information about transferring out-of-state.”
 - “Already very comfortable with self-advising (registration) remembered from first advising session.”
 - “You need to have some flexibility within the EDP to accommodate changes (e.g. class is full, you need to repeat a pre-requisite, etc.).”
 - “The transfer session in the SAC was not helpful!”
 - “I already had plans on whether to go for an Associate degree v. transferring without a degree.”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Student: “transfer information was helpful.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Also felt more prepared when they did go in for an advising meeting.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Students: “found registration information helpful, returning already had my work done.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Helped make decision about transferring FSU.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Taking this class makes it easier to register on line rather than a visit with an academic advisor.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Transfer options made student want to complete Associates before.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Transfer information helpful.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “EDP was hard at first but it was helpful and now knows what needs to be done in 2 years.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “LDP – helpful to ‘more spontaneous’ people to plan and see what could happen.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “EDP and LDP structure was helpful to be more studious.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It was nice having an advisor teach course (was able to answer advising questions that had not been addressed through another advisor and/or faculty advisor).”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The navigation through The College-Wired and the ability to set up my own classes was helpful.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Transfer unit was good.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Good information about transfer options.”
FACULTY — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N=0)
FACULTY — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=0)

Theme 3: Students’ increased financial literacy

Approximately 25 comments were offered by participants regarding the third course goal: to increase the students’ financial literacy. Of these comments, 16 were initially classified as being positive and the remaining 9 as providing negative, or critical, commentary. Table 10 provides this initial breakdown.

Table 10: Theme 3 results, Increased financial literacy

Note: * indicates several participants agreed with the statement; however, it was only ‘counted’ as one answer/response.

STUDENTS — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N =16) NUMBER OF COMMENTS = 14
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Budgeting was informative (but stressful since I now know how much money is needed).”

- “Budget information was hard to complete but very helpful. I did find some appreciation for parents and relevancy in budgeting.”
- “I’m budgeting everything now.”
- First Semester Students: “Budget packet was very helpful – worksheets were relevant.”
- “I thought financial part was helpful before you spent the money.”
- “Helped with money management (even though it wasn’t the primary focus.”
- “Budgeting was helpful to determine overall spending.”
- “Helped a little bit about financial impact (of transferring).”
- “Questioned relevancy of budget worksheet – it was helpful.”
- “I pay out of pocket for everything – so budget exercise was relevant. It does help raise awareness about the need to find ‘free money.’”
- “Why would you try to figure it (financial information) out until right before you transfer?”
- “Budget worksheet was helpful.”
- “Did find some financial information.”
- “Did get some financial information.”

STUDENTS — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=9)

- “Need more information on how to get money: scholarships, grant opportunities, loan completion.”
- *Several Students: “Assignment was not relevant since they don’t pay for anything now – rent, car, insurance, etc.”
- “Would have appreciated more information on other financial options (scholarships).”
- “Did not appreciate disclosing financial information (FERPA).”
- “Should help students get a job (while we’re in college) – why would I need to budget if I don’t have a job?”
- “I did have some difficulty in forecasting and applying information – student loan amount and scholarships.”
- “I would have liked to learn about credit card debt, but, in a different way other than a worksheet.”
- “Worksheets were not very relevant (I’m not paying for anything now). It really depends on where you are in life.”

NOTE: *Same split between traditional v. non-transitional students regarding the relevancy of budget worksheets

FACULTY — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N=2)

- *Several Instructors: “Liked the fact that we addressed financial literacy.”

- *Several Instructors: “Need to keep budget information in – ‘they don’t know what they don’t know’.”

FACULTY — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=0)

The findings in this category clustered around two diametrically opposed feelings: “budgeting information is very relevant” versus “budgeting information is not relevant because we don’t pay for anything now.”

Theme 4: Increase retention and completion

Approximately 8 comments were offered by participants regarding the institutional goal to increase retention and completion. Of these comments, 5 were initially classified as being positive and the remaining 3 as providing negative, or critical, commentary. Table 11 provides this initial breakdown.

Table 11: Theme 4 results, Increased retention or completion rates

Note: * indicates several participants agreed with the statement; however, it was only ‘counted’ as one answer/response.

STUDENTS — POSITIVE COMMENTS N = 5 (*Number of Comments = 4*)

- “I would not have taken classes for Spring but the assignment made me register.”
- Returning Student: “I didn’t want to take this class but there might be some things helpful in the future.”
- “Helped in retention.”
- “For people who failed – didn’t put enough into it and did not see what they could have gotten out of the class. They probably won’t be back regardless.”

STUDENTS — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=3)

- “Planned on coming back anyhow – I didn’t need the class.”
- “Personal issues could help determine if a student retains until next fall.”
- “Not enough choice for classes in the summer cause students to leave.”

FACULTY — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N=1)

*Several Instructors: “I think this will definitely make a difference in retention.”

FACULTY — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=0)

It is noted that during almost all of the focus group sessions, participants found it difficult to express either positive or negative comments regarding the ability of the FYE Course to assist in increasing overall retention of students at the college.

Theme 5: Effectiveness of course content

Approximately 82 comments were offered by participants regarding specific features related to the course content. Of these comments, 34 were initially classified as being positive and the remaining 48 as providing negative, or critical, commentary.

Table 12 provides this initial breakdown.

Table 12: Theme 5 results, Effectiveness of course content

Note: * indicates several participants agreed with the statement; however, it was only 'counted' as one answer/response.

STUDENTS — POSITIVE COMMENTS N = 34 (*Number of Comments = 32*)

- “Liked the EDP – and other information in the course.”
- “Could have used more information on time management.”
- “Made me do things that I would have put off.”
- “Also provided feedback from instructors – structure was good.”
- “Co-curricular and life-balance issues were also covered.”
- “I liked it because of light workload and it was cost effective to participate in class.”
- “Workload was great – because it’s more of an informational class rather than a content-related course.”
- “I liked how class showed us how powerful networking can be. We need to be open to networking.”
- “It was all very good information especially when you had to look back on things.”
- Helpful for learning ‘The College-Wired’.”
- “Having put things down on paper put things into perspective (big picture).”
- “Some of the terminology was helpful.”
- “Appreciated the workload (still learned a lot – what we did learn we can use for the next 5-6 years). Balanced out the workload – nice.”
- *Several Students: “The Instructor made information relevant and put an emphasis on the big picture after [attending] The College.”

- “Forced you to know information.”
- “Information was very self-motivating.”
- “All positive information about The College in general.”
- “Made us do things – we needed to know now (cut down on procrastinating).”
- “It was a good class because it saved me a year in knowing what to take, etc.”
- “Workload was fine.”
- “Liked journaling – made you think about things. Helped plan what issues you needed to address.”
- “Found out about resources (like the Library).”
- “Assignments were great.”
- “Information was relevant.”
- “This is Community College and the information is helpful for this type of student.” (This was said in response to a student who was complaining about the level of detail in information).
- Returning Students: “At first, I thought it was going to be useless but now after I’ve been through it, I thought it was good.”
- “I like professor’s feedback.”
- “Explained The College-specific requirements.”
- “I liked the trip to the Library.”
- “I like goal setting – was my time to think about what I wanted to do.”
- “It helped me improve my organizational skills – I will be able to apply this to other classes.”
- “Workload was fine.”
- “You can take out it what you want to.”

STUDENTS — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=48) (*Number of Comments = 37**)

- “Larger class – a few took over the class now and then.”
- *Several Students: “A lot of time to do little work.”
- “The Word of the Day work was difficult at times: I think the vocabulary list needed more structure in the assignment.”
- “This was just slapped together from week to week.”
- “First unit should be eliminated or at least slimmed down so more time could be devoted to more interesting topics.”
- “Learning styles inventory might be offered (MBTI was given and was interesting) – more of this.”
- “Doing more hands-on (scavenger hunt for Wired, team trivia where to find things). More fun activities – yoga thing was too random.”

- “LDP was unrealistic – journaling was frustrating, especially in relation to other ‘real’ classes.”

- “Alumni group that would tell students their experiences (Pizza with Pros at WMU). Do’s and Don’ts.”

- “Goals – Unit 1 needs to go! Could combine with budget exercise.”

- “Relevancy is important.”

- “I didn’t like the format of the course – a lot of down time. Instructor ONLY talked for 20 minutes and then you’re on your own.”

- “Thought faculty advisor assignment was a waste of time.”

- “Did not like appointment with faculty advisor.”

- “Inconsistency of information given out by counselors”

- “Some questions regarding the appropriateness of assignment - more relevant instead of ‘what do you smell’ 5 years from now.”

- “This class should not be a ‘fluff’ class – needs more content.”

- “Include room/meal plan information as a primer for students who will be transferring.”

- “Did not like the appointment with the academic advisor.”

- “Meeting with the faculty advisor and transfer day – I had to come back here twice – waste a time and gas.”

- “Worksheets were not very relevant since I’m not paying for anything. Really depends on where you are in life.”

- “More things could have been posted on moodle – on-line is so much easier! He didn’t even want hard copies but he was getting information late.”

- “When talking with faculty assignment – could be more structured.”

- “I’m not transferring and that’s what this course was about.”

- “I didn’t like faculty advisor assignment as a requirement.”

- “Group work didn’t seem relevant – got off topic a lot. It would have been helpful to let the instructor talk more and have more relevance too.”

- “Could have used information on time management.”

- “Could have covered a great deal more – the amount could have been condensed down to 4-5 classes.”

- “Not really very much to do – worksheets (you have class time to work on) were the same thing. “A lot of time to do very little work’. Due dates were continuously changed (moved back).” Furthermore, students were honest about not focusing on the course because they concentrated on ‘real classes’ first.

- “Seemed to focus on The College rather than on college in general.”

- “Some assignments were repetitive.”

- “Make classes more relevant, especially in term of assignments.”

- "Orientation should include everything on campus - Groups like Phi Theta Kappa."
- "Some of the worksheets were not relevant - they were just there to fill in the class. Re-evaluate all worksheets. Journals weren't necessary and were confusing (childhood dream, bucket list, yoga as part of tour of SAC)!"
- "Goals packet asked you to "visualize" - this seemed invasive on a personal level. It was also at the beginning of the course. I wouldn't eliminate the section but just not have it first."
- "Nice that it was an easy A - but you could have had more to do in each class."
- Returning Students (2): "I didn't like having to take the class."

FACULTY — POSITIVE COMMENTS (N=2)

- *Several Instructors: "Angie put a lot of work into this and I appreciated that all the materials for the instructors were provided"
- "I enjoyed being able to group advise during class (Music)"

FACULTY — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=11)

- Faculty Member: "I wanted more leeway in instructional material."
- "We should involve everyone (faculty) in course development."
- "Some of the worksheets were not relevant – need to reassess the instructional materials."
- "Goals (Unit 1) content needs to be re-worked."
- "Maybe keep Unit 1 (Goals) but move it to later in the course."
- "Course could have included more information (a lot of down time)."
- "Might want to look at the order in which the information is presented."
- "Could have included more academic success skills (e.g. test taking strategies, study habits, etc.)."
- "Materials were given to us week to week."
- *Several Advisors: "We should have communicated objectives and assignments to faculty."
- "I had several students who should have come to me for the faculty advisor assignment that did not - I hope they didn't get credit for completing the assignment!"

This category evoked the most responses from participants. In terms of the supportive comments, many general statements about the course content included: "forced you to know the right information," "made me do a lot of things I would have put off," "information was relevant," and "very self-motivating." In addition, several

comments addressed specific assignments or tasks, including organizational skills, journaling, MBTI survey completion, and goal setting.

A sub-theme emerged when participants were asked about the amount of content contained in the course. Several students expressed their appreciation for the “lighter workload” of this course. Many admitted that they were able to get valuable information while still being able to devote more time to their “real classes.” However, almost as many statements indicated they felt there was not enough substantive content to the course. The general thought of “a lot of time to do very little work” was pervasive in all of the focus group sessions. This serves as a strong indication that both the content, and the method of teaching, might need to be addressed in order to increase the perceived effectiveness of the course.

Theme 6: Institutional status of the course

Approximately 59 comments were offered by participants regarding the institutional status of the course; that is, if it should be required of all freshmen. Of these comments, 38 were initially classified as being positive and the remaining 21 as providing negative, or critical, commentary. Table 13 provides this initial breakdown.

Table 13: Theme 6 results, Institutional status of the course

Note: * indicates several participants agreed with the statement; however, it was only ‘counted’ as one answer/response.

STUDENTS — POSITIVE COMMENTS N = 38 (*Number of Comments = 27*)

- “I like it here.”
- “Because of this course I’m able to graduate a semester early. Helped get me where I needed to be – I’m very grateful for this class!”
- “Should try to sell the class – present data (or pre-course survey) of how at first we thought the class was stupid but now we can see the benefits.”

- “At first I thought this was a blow-off class but now that we’re done, I can see the relevancy of the information. And you should make other people take it.”
- Several “True Freshman” Students: “We really don’t have anything negative to say about this class.”
- “Contact created connection with advisors.”
- “Liked idea about ‘One-stop shopping.’”
- “GREAT CLASS – I learned a lot – You really should keep it.”
- “Tough love without condescending (very supportive)”
- “Learned about classes, completing homework, and showing up to work on time”
- “It was worth the money.”
- Returning Student: “I still learned a lot.”
- “I liked The Instructor–very supportive.”
- “It was very helpful.”
- “I wish I could have taken the class sooner – was able to get answers.”
- “Overall, I liked the course.”
- “You get out of it what you put into it.”
- “The class is very much worth it – at first I did not want to take it.”
- “I got a lot from the class- I have ADHD and I can get frustrated when trying to look at the big goal.”
- “Overall, I was happy with the course.”
- “Very beneficial –keep it! It was worth it!”
- Returning Student: “At first I wasn’t sure about the relevancy, but I still found it helpful.”
- “All people planning on coming back or transferring need this course –course helped make sense and added value.”
- “Was nice getting credit.”
- “I was new to college –earning credits for what I need to do was helpful.”
- “I liked having 2 instructors because you get two different perspectives. Also, liked the fact that advisors were instructors (I didn’t need an appointment to discuss things).”
- Most students thought it was cost effective – especially those who were “True Freshman.”

STUDENTS — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (N=21) (*Number of Comments = 20*)

- “Good for first semester at The College but not for returning students.”
- “Able to test out? Not just because you changed your major.”
- “Should not be required for ENGL 103 (especially if you’re not transferring.”

- “This is just a money-maker for the college!”
- Returning Students: “Should be mandatory for first semester rather than a co-requisite for ENGL 103.”
- “When I went to my faculty advisor – she was not helpful with all the things I had questions on. Academic advisory was excellent – will probably never go ask my faculty advisor anything.”
- “Class was a waste of money!”
- “I wouldn’t have paid for had I known what it was going to be.”
- “Could have been combined with another class: (Business 101 – no advising for Business courses or into Freshman English).”
- “Would like it shorter and for free.”
- “Freshman Seminar format seems attractive.”
- “Split class into two parts: The College (Career & Scheduling) v. Transfer (Money & Transfer)”
- Returning Students: “Did not like the course being tied to ENGL 103!!!! Very frustrating!!!!!!”
- “If we could test out that would be good.”
- “This was a waste of time and money! It should be offered for non-traditional and transfer students. EDP should be given to each student as they begin.”
- “Everything I learned in this class – I could have sat down with an advisor for an hour.”
- “Co-requisites need to be looked at.”
- "Class could have been replaced with Freshman Orientation."
- "Other instructors already remind us of deadlines (registration, tuition payments, etc.)."

NOTE: Non-traditional students could not come up with anything that could have been helpful

FACULTY — POSITIVE COMMENTS (*Number of Comments = 9*)

- “I liked that my class formed their own study group (even for other classes) – it would be nice if we could formalize/encourage this in some way.”
- *Several Instructors: “I enjoyed teaching the course.”
- “Overall this was a good course – I would like to see more of this offered to every student.”
- “As an advisor, I appreciate that I was given the opportunity to teach.”
- “Consider ‘learning communities’ with this as the main course for 1st semester students.”
- “We should require this of all first semester students.”
- “It was nice to team teach.”

- “Overall this was a good class.”
- “Students, like in all classes, get out of it what they put in to it.”

FACULTY — NEGATIVE COMMENTS (*Number of Comments = 1*)

- We really need to re-consider tying EDUC 120 to ENGL 103.*
-

Section II: Analysis of Focus Group Discussions

Each of the themes provided insight from students and faculty about the four course goals and additional suggestions related to the course content and the institutional status of the course. While the initial themes allowed the researcher to group the comments for easier access and analysis, when taken individually, they also indicate directions the institution should consider when moving forward with course development and improvement.

Theme 1: Students’ ability to think critically about their career choices

The majority of comments (15/19) were positive in regards to students, who complete the FYE Course, now thinking critically about their career choices. This point is extremely important when considering the larger issue of persistence and retention. By being realistic about one’s career choice, it will allow the student to ask questions about the relevancy of course selection and scheduling. Not only will it undoubtedly aid the student in pointing her in the right direction, it will also assist in decreasing the time of completion in regards to degree attainment.

Only four comments grouped in this theme provided negative or critical content. These comments seemed to reflect a personal challenge with choosing a major. In one case, the student had still not chosen her major even though she had been

attending the college [part-time] since 2009. It seems perhaps individual intrusive advising might be helpful for this student. In another case, the student did not need to exercise a higher degree of critical thinking skills, mainly due to the fact that she was already very sure of her choice in majors.

Theme 2: Students' ability to self-advise

This category, over all others, drew the most favorable comments. First semester students, as well as returning students, provided positive comments about several course components, including exercises involving the education development plan (EDP), the life development plan (LDP), and transfer information. Students and Instructors alike also commented positively about having academic advisors and/or faculty members serving as the instructor(s). As is evident from the following comments, this was clearly a positive aspect of the course:

- “The EDP was very helpful to know what you need at the college and even beyond.”
- “I was able to meet with my faculty advisor twice a week — this could not have been covered in an appointment with an advisor.”

Again, while most comments were positive, the relatively few negative comments were from students who felt comfortable in scheduling and planning for transfer because they were returning students.

Theme 3: Students' increased financial literacy

This theme drew mixed reactions from both students and faculty. As previously stated, the findings in this category clustered around two diametrically opposed

feelings: “budgeting information is very relevant” versus “budgeting information is not relevant because we don’t pay for anything now.”

The faculty’s feedback addressed this apparent dichotomy with several stating, “We should keep the financial literacy component in *since they don’t know what they don’t know.*” The faculty comments in this theme were entirely positive; they did not offer one negative or critical comment related to the course goal to increase financial literacy among FYE students.

Representative positive comments from students included these:

- “I pay out of pocket for everything, so the budget exercise was relevant. It does help raise awareness about the need for ‘free money’.”
- “I’m budgeting everything now!”

As reflected in the constructive negative comments offered by students were these points — many shared by the faculty — about how this goal of the course should be enhanced:

- “Need more information about how to get money: scholarships, grant opportunities, loan completion, etc.”
- “Learn about credit card debt etc., but in a different way other than worksheet.”
- “Need more information about how to get money: scholarships, grant opportunities, loan completion, etc.”
- “Learn about credit card debt etc., but in a different way other than a worksheet.”

These comments begin to point towards the sentiment of questioning the course *content* rather than questioning the validity of the course (goal) itself.

Theme 4: Increase retention and completion

As the data have indicated, both the qualitative and quantitative data are mixed in their ability to conclude as to whether the FYE course will have an influence on retaining students. One explanation might be the complexity of overall concept of retention: “A university’s success in educating its students is generally understood to revolve around ‘retention,’ a multi-faceted concept encompassing at least two distinct elements: continuation rates and graduation rates” (Retention & Graduation).

Representative comments were few and often expressed general, unsupported views, including the following:

- “I think this will definitely make a difference in retention” (several students, as well as, faculty agreed).
- “I would not have taken classes for Spring but the assignment made me register.”

From a more negative tone, the following (student) comments were gleaned:

- “I planned on coming back anyhow — I didn’t need the class.”
- “Personal issues could help determine if student retains until next fall” [not necessarily the class content].
- “Not enough choices for classes in summer cause students to leave.”

Theme 5: Effectiveness of course content

As evident from the results, this category evoked the most responses from participants. In terms of the supportive comments, many general statements about the course content included comments about both the course structure and the specific assignments: “forced you to know the right information,” “made me do a lot of things I

would have put off,” “information was relevant,” and “very self-motivating.” In addition, several comments addressed specific assignments or tasks, including organizational skills, journaling, MBTI survey completion, and goal setting.

While most students seemed to value the assignments and the course structure, a sub-theme emerged when participants were asked about the amount of content contained in the course. Several students expressed their appreciation for the “lighter workload” of this course. Many admitted that they were able to get valuable information while still being able to devote more time to their “real classes.” However, almost as many statements indicated several students felt there was not enough substantive content to the course. The general thought of “a lot of time to do very little work” was pervasive in all of the focus group sessions. When participants were asked to elaborate, the responses fell into three general sub-categories: (1) method of instruction (primarily worksheets), (2) class interaction, and (3) specific topics.

- (1) *Worksheets*. Participants offered many comments related to worksheets used in the course. The issue of relevancy in regards to many of the worksheets was mentioned in all sessions. Some students offered a specific observation that perhaps other methods of instruction should be employed.
- (2) *Class Interaction*. Most participants agreed with the comment “It would have been helpful to let the instructor talk more and have more relevance too.”
- (3) *Specific Topics*. Unit 1 (Goal setting) seemed to generate a great deal of negative comments such as: “First unit should be eliminated, or at least slimmed down, so more time could be devoted to more interesting topics” and “Maybe keep Unit 1 (Goals) but move it to later in the course.” Other comments referred to additional topics that might also address the issue of relevancy that was discussed previously: “We could have included more academic success skills, for example, test-taking strategies, study habits, and the-like” and “We should involve everyone (faculty) in the course development instead of having one person responsible for all the material.”

These observations could serve as a catalyst to relationship building between faculty and staff if the content was determined by a group of interested employees rather than that of primarily one individual. This collaboration, if performed prior to offering the course, could also help address comments, such as “this was just slapped together from week to week” and “I know this was the first time the class was offered, but we still had to pay for it.” It is noted that some instructors were appreciative of the efforts taken to develop the course content and were glad that they had the materials in front of them each week.

Theme 6: Institutional status of the course

Whether the institution should continue to offer the course, and more specifically, if the course should be required of all freshmen, drew many positive and negative comments. Positive comments included:

- “Because of this course I’m able to graduate a semester early. It helped get me where I needed to be. I’m very grateful for this class!”
- “Overall, I liked the class.”
- “At first, I thought this was a blow-off class, but now that we’re done, I can see the relevancy of the information; you should make other people take this course!”
- “Great class! I learned a lot! You really should keep it.”
- “I got a lot out of the class. I have ADHD, and I can get very frustrated when trying to look at the big picture/goal.”

One repeating sub-theme that became evident by students and instructors was the notion that “a student got out of the class what they were willing to put into the class.” Approximately twenty-four (24) participants’ comments related to this aspect. In addition, many comments voiced appreciation for the fact that instructors who taught the class were either a faculty or academic advisor. Many comments, approximately eight (8), expressed gratitude for having weekly access to these individuals and for the opportunity to connect with someone from the college. Many thought this would help them be successful during the entire career at the college. Instructors of the FYE Course also enthusiastically proposed continuation of the course.

Many of the instructors commented that they enjoyed teaching the course. Based on the comments collected during the focus group session, the overall evaluation was positive, one of support and a sincere interest to make continuous improvement in the course. Aside from evaluating the outcomes of this course, the faculty discussion generated a recommendation for the college to formalize study groups within this and other first semester courses. This discussion spurred interest in the institution re-establishing “learning communities,” with the FYE course serving as the main course for all first semester students. This recommendation will be addressed in Chapter Five, Discussion and Recommendations.

Of the negative or critical comments shared during all of the sessions, again, three sub-themes surfaced: (1) cost of the course, (2) student profile, and (3) length of the course. Each of these topics recurred across multiple comments in many of the sessions.

- 1) *Cost of the course.* A few students contended that “this was a waste of money,” “had I known what it was going to be like, I wouldn’t have paid for it,” and “This was a waste of time and money — EDPs should just be given to each student as they start.” One student commented, “This is just a money-maker for the college!” When asked to expound on her reasoning behind this statement, the student responded “Because I already know everything and they told me I could not take any other class until I took this one.”
- 2) *Student profile.* While the intent was to limit the FYE course, to first semester students, in reality, this was not the case. Not all students enrolled in the FYE Course were first semester students. Because this course was tied to ENGL 103 as a co-requisite, several of the students had already completed anywhere from one to many semesters at the college. Because of this, several comments expressed frustration with having to pay for a “freshman orientation” course. Also, many returning students were enrolled ENGL 103 because they had completed remedial courses for reading and writing during previous semesters. Their comments reflected a feeling that “they were still being punished” for not initially being able to test into ENGL 103. Some comments included a recommendation for the institution to provide a test-out option.
- 3) *Course length.* Many comments that were closely aligned with those categorized in Course Content (Theme 5) discussed the course length. Students commented that the course could have been shortened and/or combined with another first semester course.

Section Summary

In summary, all of the focus group sessions had a positive and supportive quality about them in regards to the FYE Course meeting the four course and institutional goals. Students as well as instructors offered suggestions for improvement. Table 14 summarizes the distribution of positive and negative comments represented by the Affinity Diagram analysis.

Table 14: Summary of positive and negative comments, by theme

THEME	TOTAL # OF THEME COMMENTS	# OF POSITIVE COMMENTS	%	# OF NEGATIVE COMMENTS	%	% OF TOTAL COMMENTS (N=237)
Students' ability to choose a major	19	15	78.9	4	21.1	8.0
Students' ability to self-advise	44	37	84.1	7	15.9	18.6
Students' increased financial literacy	25	16	64.0	9	36.0	10.5
Increased retention or completion	8	5	62.5	3	37.5	3.4
Effectiveness of course content	82	34	41.5	48	58.5	34.6
Institutional status of the course	59	38	64.4	21	35.6	24.9
Totals	237	145	61.2	92	38.8	100

Section III: Supporting Quantitative Data

Although rather limited in scope, comparative quantitative research indicators are also a part of the study's findings and suggest a somewhat positive correlation between completing the FYE Course and retention (The College, 2014):

Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 retention rate for first time in college freshmen	52%
Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 retention rate for the FYE Course completers	61%

As stated previously, the concept of student retention should be viewed as multifaceted and complex in nature. Although it would be convenient, for purposes of this study, to attribute completion of the FYE Course with a higher retention rate, this

would negate all other factors that go into increasing the retention rate. This improvement in the retention rate does however suggest that the FYE Course may be beneficial to those who are indeed first time in college freshmen.

Section IV: FYE Course Components

Best Practice “Gold Standard” Components

Although four-year colleges and universities have been developing FYE programs since the 1970s, many community colleges are in their infancy of developing and implementing FYE efforts. So the question becomes “Why not just copy the best practice examples from the four-year colleges and universities? According to Bers and Younger (forthcoming):

Despite the commonality in FYE approaches between two-year and four-year schools, it is important for institutional researchers at community colleges to focus on what is known about their effectiveness at community colleges. Quite simply, community college personnel are more likely to learn from and pay attention to the literature about FYE programs in community colleges because often they assume what occurs at four-year institutions has limited relevance to their domain. (p. 2)

As first discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, a more holistic first-year seminar is one in place at the University of South Carolina and has served as a prototype and national model for more than a quarter of a century. As quoted in Cuseo (2012), Jewler states: “University 101 subscribes to the belief that development is not a one-dimensional affair but must reach far beyond the intellect and into emotional, spiritual, occupation, physical, and social areas” (p. 1).

FYE courses have undergone many changes and developments over the past forty years, with the success of the University of South Carolina's University 101 course resulting in its label as the "gold standard" for FYE courses in four-year institutions. The components of this holistic approach to South Carolina's "gold standard" include the following. (Note: the abbreviations in parentheses will be used in the following discussion.)

- Academic Competency (AC)
- Communication skills (CS)
- Relationship building (RB)
- Orientation to campus resources (OCR)
- Intrusive advising (IA)
- Personal health and wellness (PHW)
- Community-Service Learning (CSL)

Following the University of South Carolina's lead, many institutions across the country have created their own versions of University 101. Successful iterations of this course are offered in both four-year institutions and in community colleges as well. While not discussed separately in the literature, many community colleges have implemented their own successful FYE courses with similar components. Using descriptions from online course catalogs and course descriptions, the following table (Table 15) summarizes course components from six community colleges, as compared to the University of South Carolina. As the table indicates, in some of the identified institutions, FYE activities are presented over an extended period of time, such as the

entire first- year, rather than during a singular seminar or one semester course. This approach to providing an FYE program has become so prevalent in both two-year and four-year institutions that it is now difficult to separate the course from the program. As the final column in the table below illustrates as FYE programs have developed, additional practices have emerged that strengthen student engagement and thereby support student success and retention goals. These practices include common reading programs, service learning, [and], mentoring” (Bers & Younger, forthcoming), learning communities, supplemental instruction, and the more “holistic” design as defined by Cuseo (2013).

Table 15: FYE course components in six two-year community colleges (compared to USC)

INSTITUTION	COURSE COMPONENTS							ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS
	AC	CS	RB	OCR	IA	PHW	CSL	
University of South Carolina	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code of Honor
Richland Community College	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CQI
Valencia Community College	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Community College of Denver	X	X	X	X	X	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information technology • Learning communities • CQI
LaGuardia Community College	X	X	X	X	X		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common reading program • Learning communities • ePortfolios
Palo Alto College	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free of charge (FYE Seminar) • Cultural diversity • Retention
Cuyamaca College	X	X		X	X	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information technology

Best Practice Components in the FYE Course

If these components are accepted as being the foundation of a successful FYE course or program, it is then useful to compare these to the components of the FYE Course being evaluated in this study. Of the seven “essential” components, the FYE Course includes only two. Table 16 compares the South Carolina’s University 101 components with those included in the FYE Course.

Table 16: The FYE Course components compared with University 101 (USC)

INSTITUTION	COURSE COMPONENTS							ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS
	AC	CS	RB	OCR	IA	PHW	CSL	
University of South Carolina	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code of Honor
The FYE Course under study				X	X			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of EDP and LDP • Financial literacy

Chapter Summary

A summary of the key findings as they related to each of the research questions is presented here.

Students’ ability to choose a major

- The course’s associated assignments and activities address choosing a career adequately.
- A solid majority of the students were able to identify or appreciate the opportunity to further research, their choice in careers.

Students’ ability to self-advise

- The course’s associated assignments and activities effectively encourage and promote self-advising.
- Students may have become more skilled in self-advising due to the fact that many of the EDUC 120 instructors were academic advisors.

Students' increased financial literacy

- The student's perception of how **relevant** financial literacy is to them personally impacted their ability to appreciate a need to understand the topic.
- Most students found the completion of a budget and the corresponding worksheets to be boring and/or irrelevant.

Increased retention and completion

- The indicators chosen in this study to measure the complex concept of retention may not be appropriate in regards to causation and granularity.
- Regardless of whether the students felt that they were better equipped to retain from fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall, the retention rates reflect a higher percentage of retention as compared to the overall population.

Effectiveness of course content

- A review of FYE best practice institutions could have provided additional options pertaining to course content, delivery of instruction, and institutional status of the course. It would have been beneficial to perform this review at the initial creation of the course rather than developing the course "in a vacuum."

Institutional status of the course

- Most four-year institutions enjoy a high enrollment rate in regards to non-mandatory FYE courses. The limited amount of research conducted in the area of community college FYE courses supports the views expressed by the FYE Course students and staff: the course should be mandatory for all first-time-freshmen-in-college students.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Introduction

As offered in Chapter Four of this study, “[t]he practical goal of data analysis is to find answers to your research questions. These answers are also called categories or themes of findings” (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, one of the preliminary steps in analyzing data was to separate the data into categories or themes of findings. Hence, study of a particular category or theme allows researchers the ability to interpret these data and draw conclusions. Furthermore, Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) state: “[t]he challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of large amounts of data — reducing raw data, identifying what is significant, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal. [...]. The challenge now becomes one of digging into the findings to develop some understanding of what lies beneath them — that is, what information we now have and what this really means” (p. 171).

While the previous chapter presented the results of each theme individually, and considered the initial impact of the data, this chapter will examine the themes more holistically and begin to point towards what they indicate in terms of the overall success of the FYE course and, ultimately, about student retention.

Chapter Organization

Section I of this chapter continues the discussion of the first three themes, all related to course goals. Focus group comments related to the course goals evaluated the following features:

- Students' ability to choose a major
- Students' ability to self-advise
- Students' increased financial literacy

Section II discusses the remaining three themes, all related to institutional goals. Focus group comments related to these institutional goals evaluated the following features:

- Increased retention and completion levels
- Effectiveness of course content
- Institutional status of the course

Section III provides recommendations for ways the college can best implement the Best Practice components presented in Chapter Four to all aspects of the FYE Course.

Section I: Evaluating the Course Goals

Before evaluating how the course offering met the course goals/outcomes it is important to verify that the course goals/outcomes matched the original institutional goals. In the course syllabus and academic catalogue, the course description is stated as:

Emphasis is on establishing one's own academic and career goals and using those to make a clear Educational Development Plan. Develops the skills and confidence necessary to navigate the various administrative offices and services associated with college. (Division of Academic Studies, 2012)

Furthermore, the syllabus for the FYE Course (see Appendix A) concentrates most of the classroom time on three distinct content areas. These content areas are listed in the following table, along with the estimated instructional time devoted to each content area:

Table 17: Content Area and Outcomes for FYE Courses

CONTENT AREA / OUTCOMES	INSTRUCTIONAL TIME
Choosing a major and developing both academic and life-time goals associated with the chosen major. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including development of Education Development Plan (EDP) and Life Development Plan (LDP). 	18 hours or 65%
Transfer options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including how to choose your school-of-choice and what this means financially to the student. 	6 hours or 21%
Navigating the various college departments, services, and policies associated with college success. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specifically how to register for classes 	4 hours or 14%

Source: Division of Academic Studies, 2012

When comparing the course description and time devoted to each content area, it is noted that the institutional goal of retaining students through completion is implied rather than overtly stated as a course outcome.

With this in mind, the first three themes, or evaluation questions of this study, attempted to measure the success of the course in meeting the three primary goals: the students' ability to choose a major, self-advise, and gain an increased level of financial literacy. As noted in Chapter Four, based on positive versus negative comments, all three goals were met. However, the negative, or critical, comments provide significant information about which areas can be improved or modified.

According to the syllabus, a great deal of time and effort is expended in regards to career choice for the student. It is a key concept repeated throughout the course. However, some students, primarily those who already felt quite confident with their career choice, could not take the next step in “thinking critically” about their vocational selection. They simply stopped at making the decision and did not appreciate the opportunity to research their career choice further.

As two of the tangible outcomes of FYE Course are creating an Educational Development Plan (EDP) and the ability to self-register for spring semester, successful completion of these activities ensure students are comfortable with self-advising. Furthermore, with many of the FYE Course instructors being academic advisors, this forum may have allowed the advisors to delve into the reasoning behind some of the advising policies and procedures with students. Prior to enrolling in FYE Course all students were expected to complete an EDP, usually during the one-hour initial session with an academic advisor. However, without knowing the purpose and linkage to career choice, this task might not have led to an increase in self-advising but rather posed more of a disconnect for students in regards to choosing a major and selecting courses.

All of the qualitative data suggested that the relevancy of financial literacy heavily influenced each student’s perception of its importance in decision-making. As discussed in Chapter 4, there were two diametrically opposed feelings: budgeting information is very relevant versus “the assignment (budget) was not relevant since we don’t pay for anything now (rent, car insurance, etc.).” In the focus group sessions, most students fixated on the issue of topic relevancy; therefore, it is difficult to assess

whether they will be able to apply the necessary information when making decisions related to their resultant debt. Perhaps the delivery of instruction (e.g. completion of worksheets) also influenced the student's perception of relevancy.

Recommendations

While some students' inability to consider career choices critically is not necessarily a weakness of the course design, the college may want to consider adding additional material/exercises that indicate how career choice will impact the student after graduation (e.g. earning potential, and requisite skills/competencies). Also, the college might consider course enhancements that would make the link between the student's career options and their EDPs stronger and more relevant for the student. In terms of the students' financial literacy, revisions in the course activities might address: (1) the relevancy of financial literacy to all students — regardless of their source of payment for college, and (2) the broader question of student debt, specifically asking students to think critically about how they, and those responsible for financing their education, should apply this information when making decisions relative to educational debt. These modifications would likely increase the course's success in meeting the first three goals.

It is recommended that the college consider revising how the information is given to the students (other than through completion of worksheets). In order to address this point, faculty should be involved in the development of the course and aware of the intended outcomes/expectations. Furthermore, leeway should be provided to course instructors in their approach to the course.

The college has a long-standing history of providing faculty and staff professional development. In order for integration of student success to become a focused initiative, faculty and staff development should be intentional and coordinated. Recent steps have been taken to coordinate attendance at national seminars that pertain to student retention. This, along with more intentional on-campus programming for faculty, should be initiated as not only to serve as a concentrated focus on student retention, but also, more efficient use of professional development funds. If faculty will be expected to advise students in the same manner as academic advising staff, they will need to be equipped with the appropriate tools. The same reasoning is said for placing academic advisors in the classroom.

Section II: Evaluating the Institutional Goals

The last three themes, or evaluation questions of this study, attempted to measure the success of the course in meeting the institutional goals: increased retention and completion levels, effective course content, and the institutional status of the course. Again, as noted in Chapter Four, based on positive versus negative comments, all three goals were met. Once again, the criticisms of these institutional goals provide important direction for the college in moving forward with the FYE course. These three institutional goals focus on very different aspects of institutional need: first, whether or not the course improves student retention and completion efforts, is a complex issue and is very difficult to determine, as discussed in Chapter Four. The connection between retention and completion to one specific course, while supported

positively by the qualitative comments from students and instructors, was not clearly illustrated by the institutional quantitative data.

While the focus group discussions provided some comments about the benefits of the course related to retention, overall, they were not effective in capturing data regarding the general topic of student retention. Due to time limitations, the facilitator was not able to elicit detailed feedback from students and faculty. As stated previously, the membership of the focus groups also contributed to the inability to obtain credible data pertaining to student retention. Again, students who have persisted in completing the course are not the most appropriate students to interview when exploring issues related to student retention. More valuable information would be likely be elicited from first-time freshmen who dropped or who did not register for the course.

As retention was a key element of this study, it might be helpful if Administration would lead a discussion with all constituents (students, faculty, staff, Board of Trustees, and the community) in regards to defining retention, delving into its importance (for both the student and college), and perhaps brainstorming ways to improve the retention rate. Based on the complexity of “retention,” if the college is serious about improving the retention rate, it should be included in the strategic plan, and thus, be given the appropriate resources towards achieving improvement.

The second and third institutional goals, the effectiveness of course content and the institutional status of the course, at their root both speak to the value or worth of the course in addressing larger college issues. As noted in the Chapter Four analysis, the comments related to both of these topics eventually circled around to issues of the

amount of time and money the institution would feel comfortable applying to FYE efforts. The numerous comments such as “a lot of time to do little work” specifically point to the fact that either more content should be included within the course or the credit allocation (time spent in class) should be decreased. It is recommended that more content be added that specifically strengthens the academic rigor of the course.

Furthermore, should the course be required of all students, or only of first-time freshmen who are unable to pass a competency test? If this issue of who is required to attend the FYE Course (only first-time-freshmen) were resolved, many of the negative comments would also be resolved. And, as was evident from the comments reported in Chapter Four, the college must consider the balance between long-term retention of students and the politically visible issues of reducing college costs and time-to-completion. The critics that propose that the “course is nothing more than a money-maker for the college” might have less credence in their position statement if these seemingly diametrically opposing forces were clarified for students, faculty and staff.

Recommendations

A follow-up study the college might consider would be to contact non-completers and non-continuing students for a wider range of feedback regarding retention and completion. As it moves forward with its continuous quality improvement efforts, the college should consider whether some components may be more effectively provided through year-long activities, and others through one-time communication. This would not only speak to the stated four organizational goals, but could also aid in enhancing academic rigor of this course, as well as, all subsequent courses at The

College. More specific recommendations, related to which “best practice” components might best be handled in alternative methods, are included in Section III.

It is further recommended that the college ensure that only first semester students are enrolled in the FYE Course or change the focus of the course to be more inclusive of returning students. The method by which students were identified in regards to registration for the FYE Course was not consistent with the intent of a FYE Course (several *returning* students were enrolled), nor was it consistently applied. The FYE Course needs to be a mandatory course for all first semester students. As part of a comprehensive retention and completion initiative, additional programming (not necessarily additional courses) needs to be developed in order to address transition issues affecting all students. Acknowledging the needs of subgroups is to appreciate an ever-increasing diverse student body.

To increase student retention efforts, the college may also need to consider assigning a senior member of administration to be responsible and accountable for student success initiatives. This person should report to the president and work across all organizational confines to ensure collaboration and integration. If retention were to be identified as a key strategy, the appropriate goals would then be established and monitored. In addition, the college needs to define a specific overall retention goal. Saying “student retention and success is everyone’s job” does not specify the perimeters needed to implement a key strategy. A specific institutional goal can then be measured as initiatives are implemented. With resources at an ever-increasing premium, return on investment must always serve as an indicator for success during program evaluation.

Section III: Best Practice Course Components

As was evident from discussions with college officials about the development process, the college may have missed an opportunity to develop the best FYE experience in its haste to implement corrective actions to its concern of improving student retention. Initial development of course outcomes and instructional materials was assigned to one individual. These standardized instructional materials were then provided to all FYE course instructors who represented both full-time faculty and advising staff. It is likely that the single developer lacked sufficient time to obtain input from students, advisors, and faculty or to perform a comprehensive review of successful FYE courses during the development of the College's FYE course. Such a review would provide descriptions of successful FYE courses, as well as additional options pertaining to course content and delivery of instruction. As discussed in Chapter Four, the components of "gold standard" FYE courses and those contained in the FYE Course differ considerably (see Table 15). Only two of the recommended seven course components — (Orientation to Campus Resources) OCR and (Intensive Advising) IA were reflected in the FYE course.

Recommendations

The college might consider adding materials and exercises pertaining to the following course components:

- **Academic competency** — reading comprehension, studying habits, note taking, and test taking strategies. Much has been written about the need to meet the students at the level at which they present themselves. While this is true, the other half of the academic challenge is then to set goals that are high, but attainable. The unspoken reality — that the college must also be concerned with

the level of academic rigor while retaining students and bringing them to completion — is often forgotten or underplayed. The expertise of each faculty member should be harnessed in a way to coordinate and amplify attempts to preserve academic rigor. As a FYE Course, expectations of working towards high academic standards would prepare students for a richer academic experience while attending the College.

- **Communication skills and relationship building.** These skills focus on the connections between students and staff/faculty and with each other: “Substantive, educationally meaningful student-faculty interaction just doesn’t happen; it is expected, nurtured and supported” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010). Again, intentional collaboration involving all faculty and staff needs to be initiated. Expectations regarding what encompasses “effective and intrusive counseling” needs to be developed and communicated to all employees. Deliberate steps by each employee, regardless of job classification, needs to ensure that each student identifies with someone on campus (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010). Retention and completion are not issues that can be relegated to the faculty alone. Everyone needs to connect with students. However, it is important to note that some individuals are better at this than others. Training or, at the very least, discussion forums between staff members should be offered in order to develop these skills. These skills should be included as a job performance expectation for each employee throughout the college.
- **Personal health and wellbeing.** This component focuses students’ attention to the whole self — the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of create a balanced life. While the college has a wellness course requirement, including this type of instruction together with other first-year expectations and opportunities may provide a more congruent view of how personal health and wellbeing is the foundation to learning and service.
- **Community involvement.** This component typically includes volunteerism and service learning. In many colleges, service learning can be limited to a single assignment, while at other institutions the component can be incorporated into a campus-wide service learning program. In service learning programs, the instruction and learning process are taken out of the classroom. Students learn important lessons while being submerged into their community. This service, or giving back, also helps strengthen the ties between the community and their college.

Thus, each of these “gold standard” components would enhance the FYE course by providing incoming students with a more holistic approach to their transition into college life.

An additional course component that was featured at two of the community colleges (Community College of Denver and LaGuardia Community College) is learning communities. Learning communities, while difficult to orchestrate due to scheduling and other factors, build a sense of academic and social community and increase engagement among students and faculty. Generally, two to three courses are linked and cohorts of students and faculty are linked into one learning community. Course content is coordinated between faculty and reach across the curriculum. The college has several courses that would lend themselves to a learning community structure developed around cohorts of residential students, students of a certain major, or any other grouping where students share similar characteristics and/or challenges.

A college-wide reading program could provide common materials from which to build other instructional content by utilizing a common book as the foundation for orientation, the FYE course, and other courses directly associated to the FYE such as those linked through learning communities. Additional activities connected to a college-wide reading program, such as a Meet-and-Greet the Author, or perhaps a related service-learning project could also involve the greater college community.

One valuable suggestion that was generated during the faculty focus group session was to incorporate organized study groups into the FYE Course. The organized approach of Supplemental Instruction has recently been implemented successfully in

several community colleges such as Baltimore County Community College. This peer-led academic assistance program can be implemented effectively with or without learning communities. While the college currently does not have a formal method for organizing study groups, the process can be initiated within individual courses or on a much larger scale through learning communities.

Chapter Summary

As colleges continue to struggle with the challenges of student retention and student completion, in the face of often conflicting missions, e.g., academic transfer preparation, vocational-technical education, continuing education, developmental education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), they have applied transition strategies, such as orientation programs and first-year programming, to help students transition into post-secondary education.

At *The College*, each student is encouraged to attend orientation. Orientation, like at most other colleges, consists of representatives from the student services department who orient or inform students about various topics. These topics tend to include items such as how to register for classes, a cursory review of “who’s who” at the college (key staff and contact information), and a tour of the college.

However, the college realized that the orientation program was not an effective method to integrate students into college life. Thus, the college created a FYE Course that would address the following four goals:

1. A greater number of students will think more critically about career choices and some will have focused upon a career choice (i.e., diminish the number of “undeclared majors”).

2. Most students will be comfortable self-advising, including selecting courses, selecting a major, and changing a major.
3. The majority of students will have a basic understanding of financial literacy that will influence their decision-making relative to student debt.\
4. Students completing the FYE Course will be more likely to be retained from fall to winter and fall to fall.

The FYE course serves as a commendable start to the college's efforts to improve incoming students' ability to transition into college-level work. Specific recommendations that will strengthen the course, as well as other interrelated program components, have been offered to enhance student retention and completion.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE SYLLABUS, EDUC 120

COURSE SYLLABUS
Fall and Spring Semesters/Session 2012/2013

COURSE TITLE: Educational Exploration and Planning **COURSE NO.:** EDUC 120

CREDITS/CONTACTS: Credit Hours: 2
Lecture hours/weekly: 2
Laboratory hours/weekly: 0
Weekly Contact Hours: 2

COREQUISITE: ENGL 103

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Emphasis is on establishing one's own academic and career goals and using those to make a clear Educational Development Plan. Develops the skills and confidence necessary to navigate the various administrative offices and services associated with college.

COURSE OUTCOMES:

At the conclusion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Navigate the various college departments, services, and policies associated with college success.
- Research unique academic opportunities and options available only to undergraduates
- Identify possible careers within one's chosen major cluster.
- Identify possible transfer institutions appropriate for one's career and academic goals.
- Adopt a responsible financial strategy for paying college cost. Demonstrate an awareness of responsible, secure, and stable personal financial planning
- Write an Educational Development Plan (EDP) based on one's SMC degree goal, transfer needs, and career goals.
- Demonstrate ability to create a schedule based on the EDP and register for classes.
- Create a Life Development Plan (LDP) which outlines the timeline for achieving life goals as established in class.

TEXTBOOK: REQUIRED: None.

LAPTOP: REQUIRED: Wireless internet capabilities required. Students will be asked to pay attention to class lecture and not to spend course time chatting, surfing, etc unless as instructed.

METHOD OF INSTRUCTION: Lecture, workshops, independent work.

EVALUATION METHOD: **The Portfolio: 1000 Points**

- Goal Packet (150 Points)
- Career Packet (150 Points)
- Transfer Packet (150 Points)
- Schedule Packet (150 Points)
- The Life Development Plan Packet and Presentation (400 Points)

GRADING SCALE: The following grading scale will be in effect for this course:

934 - 1000 = A
900-933 = A-

868-899	B+
834 - 867	B
800-833	B-
768-799	= C+
734 - 767	= C
700-733	= C-
668-699	= D+
634 - 667	= D
600-633	= D-
Lower or Plagiarism	= F

ATTENDANCE POLICY: Regular attendance by all students is essential to the success of this class. When students show up regularly and come on time, they know what is going on, feel as if they are part of a group, and usually keep up on assignments. Consequentially, 25 points will be deducted from a student's final grade for each absence after the second.

TESTING POLICY: There are no exams in this course. In lieu of a final exam, we have a portfolio process. Completing and passing the portfolio is a requirement for passing the course.

NOTICE: Representative student work will be used as a part of SMC's on-going curriculum assessment program.

ACCEPTABLE USE OF PERSONAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

All phones, iPods, etc. must be turned off or placed on vibrate mode and may not be brought out during class unless otherwise directed by the instructor.

HONESTY POLICY

Cheating or plagiarizing will absolutely not be tolerated at [redacted]. Any student found cheating or plagiarizing material in any manner may be assigned a failing semester/session grade in this course. A second such incident while at [redacted] could result in suspension or expulsion from the institution. A student found in violation of this section of the syllabus will not be allowed to drop this course. Additional detail regarding cheating and/or plagiarism may be found elsewhere in this syllabus. For more detailed information consult the [redacted] Code of Student Conduct.

NOTICE: Information in this syllabus was, to the best knowledge of the instructor, considered correct and complete when distributed for use at the beginning of the semester. The instructor, however, reserves the right, acting within the policies and procedures of [redacted] to make changes in course content or instructional techniques.

COURSE OUTLINE

Week One

Who and what to know : *An Introduction to learning resources, the business office, financial aid, the registrar, advising, bookstore, and other necessary offices and resources. Introduction to online resources*

Week Two

Establishing Personal, Career, and Academic Goals : *The first step in creating a Life Development Plan is to figure out what's important to you*

Week Three

Defining Personal, Career, and Academic Goals. Articulate your goals and desires into achievable steps.

Week Four

Goals Packet Due

Transferring to Your School of Choice : What kind of college degree do you need to get ? Where can you get it from ? How do you research this ? Mandatory Attendance : Transfer Day September 26 !

Financial Savvy: How much does it cost to attend a four-year college? How do other colleges calculate their cost of attending? What is flat rate tuition? What kind of scholarships are available to transfer students?

Week Five

Transferring to Your School of Choice : How do you navigate these waters ? What is MACRAO ? Should you claim your AA/AS before you go ?

Financial Savvy: Can you afford to commute to your college of choice? Should you live in student housing or off-campus? What is your cost of living? What will be your source of income?

Week Six

Transfer Packets Due.

Making the Most Out of Unique Opportunities Available to You: What is "the college experience"? Why are extra-curricular activities important? Special Opportunities: Field Trips, Study Abroad, Internships, Volunteerism, Summer Programs, etc

Week Seven

Your Future Career: Identifying your career field. Establishing a career path. Using a variety of resources to research your career.

Week Eight

Your Future Career: How feasible is this plan? Constructing a Plan B. Burning Bridges and Networking: People Places Things in Your Way/People Places Things Paving Your Way

Week Nine

Career Packets Due.

Spring 2013 Registration Activities What are you going to register for ? What problems could arise ? Where do you get help ? What's your EDP going to look like NOW ? Register. Show and Tell. Critique. Your EDP.

Week Ten

Spring 2013 Schedule Packets Due.

Putting It All Together: Reviewing your body of work. Evaluating your plan. Thinking critically as you craft your Life Development Plan

Week Eleven

Putting It All Together: Owning your LDP. Fear and How it Disables Us. Thinking critically as you craft your Life Development Plan

Week Twelve

LDP Presentations.

Week Thirteen

LDP Presentations. Final Week of Class. Wrap Up.

Week Fourteen

Finals Week. No final exam.

ASSIGNMENTS

Goal Packet (150 Points) (25 points per assignment)

- 1. Personal Inventory Worksheet**
- 2. Visualization Worksheet**
- 3. Developing Your Personal Brand Worksheet**
- 4. Free Writes/Journal Entries**
- 5. Peer Reviews**
- 6. Personal Mission Statement**

Transfer Packet (150 Points) (25 points per assignment)

- 1. Propaganda/Evaluation of Transfer Day**
- 2. Transfer School of Choice: Things to Do List**
- 3. Free Writes/Journal Entries**
- 4. Financial Plan for Transferring (School Fees)**
- 5. Financial Plan for Transferring (Cost of Living)**
- 6. Plan B Worksheet**

Career Packet (150 Points) (25 points per assignment)

- 1. Career Values/Brainstorming Worksheets**
- 2. Occupational Outlook Handbook Research Assignment**
- 3. Sample Job Ads**
- 4. Free Writes/Journal Entries**
- 5. Networking Opportunities Worksheet**
- 6. Dream Job Cost of Living Worksheet**

Schedule Packet(150 Points)

- 1. Copy of Schedule (25 points)**
- 2. Copy of EDP—Your Entire Career at SMC (75 points)**
- 3. Faculty Advisor Interview (25 points)**
- 4. Transferability Inventory (25 points)**

The Life Development Plan Packet and Presentation (400 Points)

- 1. EDP (25)**
- 2. LDP (50)**
- 3. Mini-Feasibility Report (100)**
- 4. Presentation Rubrics (25)**
- 5. Self-Evaluation (100)**
- 6. Presentation (100)**

ASSIGNMENTS

Goal Packet (150 Points) (25 points per assignment)

1. Personal Inventory Worksheet
2. Visualization Worksheet
3. Developing Your Personal Brand Worksheet
4. Free Writes/Journal Entries
5. Peer Reviews
6. Personal Mission Statement

Transfer Packet (150 Points) (25 points per assignment)

1. Propaganda/Evaluation of Transfer Day
2. Transfer School of Choice: Things to Do List
3. Free Writes/Journal Entries
4. Financial Plan for Transferring (School Fees)
5. Financial Plan for Transferring (Cost of Living)
6. Plan B Worksheet

Career Packet (150 Points) (25 points per assignment)

1. Career Values/Brainstorming Worksheets
2. Occupational Outlook Handbook Research Assignment
3. Sample Job Ads
4. Free Writes/Journal Entries
5. Networking Opportunities Worksheet
6. Dream Job Cost of Living Worksheet

Schedule Packet(150 Points)

1. Copy of Schedule (25 points)
2. Copy of EDP—Your Entire Career at SMC (75 points)
3. Faculty Advisor Interview (25 points)
4. Transferability Inventory (25 points)

The Life Development Plan Packet and Presentation (400 Points)

1. EDP (25)
2. LDP (50)
3. Mini-Feasibility Report (100)
4. Presentation Rubrics (25)
5. Self-Evaluation (100)
6. Presentation (100)

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP COMMENTS, RAW DATA

MASTER LISTING (RAW DATA) FROM FOCUS GROUPS

1	"The class made you print out schedule for the next semester."
2	"Took class later - makes planning easier (should be required)."
3	" I wish I could have taken the class sooner - I was able to get answers."
4	"When I scheduled classes the first time, I didn't have plans to transfer or a career path etc.."
5	"Did research in class that helped determine change in major (from veterinary medicine to coaching)."
6	"Even if you didn't switch your major, the research helped confirm it."
7	"Some changed their major based on the research of their career."
8	"The lack of direction did provide more time to investigate things more closely."
9	"Did get some financial information."
10	"I was already sure of my major - had already been shadowing etc.."
11	"Some assignments were repetitive."
12	"Not really very much to do- worksheets (you have class time to work on) were the same thing. A lot of time to do very little work. Due dates were continuously changed (moved back)." FURTHERMORE: Students were honest about not focusing on the course because they concentrated on their "real classes" first.
13	"Could have covered a great deal more - the amount could have been condensed down to 4-5 classes."
14	"Some questions regarding appropriateness of assignment - more relevant instead of "what do you smell" 5 years from now?"
15	"More things could have been posted on moodle - online is so much easier! He didn't even want hard copies but he was getting information late."
16	"Could have used information on time management."
17	"Taking this class made it easier to register on line rather than a visit with academic advisor."
18	"Just to make sure about transferring - still nice to make sure with an advisor."
19	"Assignment was not relevant since I don't pay for anything now (rent, car, insurances, etc.)."
20	"I did find some financial information."
21	" I did have some difficult in forecasting and applying information = student loan amount and scholarships."
22	"Why should you try to figure it out until right before you transfer"?
23	"Personal issues could help determine if a student retains until next fall."
24	"Transfer options made student want to complete Associates first."
25	"It was a good class - I'm glad I took this class because it save me a year in knowing what to take."

26	Make classes more relevant, especially in term of assignments."
27	"This should not be a 'fluff' class - needs more content!"
28	"Split class: <u>The College</u> v. <u>Transfer Information</u> Career Money Schedule - Advising Transfer options"
29	Majority now know what they want to do - a couple of students want to change. "Class was reinforcing to what I already knew"
30	"I was new to college - earning credits for what I needed to do was helpful"
31	Several returning students: "At first, I thought it was going to be useless, but now after I've been through it, I thought it was good."
32	New Student: "Transfer information was helpful."
33	"Transfer resources (were great)."
34	"Too much pressure regarding what you wanted to do, although, this was good because you need to know what you're going to do."
35	"Not very much information about transferring out-of-state (Indiana)."
36	"New student found it help, and, returning student already had her work done."
37	"Also felt more prepared when I did go in for an advising meeting."
38	"First unit should be eliminated (or at least slimmed down so more time could be devoted to more interesting topics."
39	"Budgeting was helpful to determine overall spending."
40	"Worksheets were not very relevant (I'm not paying for anything now). It really depends on where you are in life."
41	" I pay out of pocket for everything - so budget exercise was relevant. It does help raise awareness about need to find 'free money'."
42	"Helped make decision about transferring to FSU."
43	"Planned on coming back anyhow - I didn't need the class."
44	"Forced you to know information."
45	"Was nice getting credit for class."
46	"Able to test out? Not just because you changed your major."
47	"Nice that it was an easy A - but you could have had more to do in each class".
48	"Transfer unit was good."
49	"I think this will definitely help in retaining students."
50	Returning Students (2): "I didn't like having to take the class."
51	"Goals - Unit 1 needs to go! Could combine with the budget exercise."
52	"Should help student get job (while we're in college) - why would I need to budget if I don't have a job?"
53	"I liked the class - especially on registering because I didn't know how to do that before."
54	"I like professors feedback."

55	" I liked EDP - and other information in the course."
56	Returning Student (who will be transferring to FSU next fall): "The transfer information helped a lot."
57	"Explained <i>The College</i> -specific requirements."
58	"I liked to goal setting - was my time to think about what I wanted to do."
59	"I liked the trip to the library."
60	All people planning on coming back or transferring - "The course helped make sense and added value."
61	"Orientation should include everything on campus - Groups like Phi Theta Kappa."
62	"Because of this course I'm able to graduate a semester early. It helped get me where I needed to be - I'm very grateful for this class!"
63	"EDP and LDP - structure was helpful to be more studious."
64	"Budget worksheet was helpful."
65	"Career works was very helpful."
66	"Workload was great - because it's more of an informational class rather than content-related course."
67	"Workload was fine."
68	" You need to make some flexibility within the EDP to accommodate changes (e.g. class is full, you need to repeat a pre-requisite, etc.)."
69	"Doing more hands -on (scavenger hunt for <i>The college</i> -wired, team trivia where to find things). Add more fun things, however, the yoga thing was too random".
70	Several returning students: "The class should be mandatory first semester rather than a co-req to ENGL 103."
71	"When I went to my faculty advisor – she was not helpful with all the things I had questions on. Academic advisory was excellent –will probably never go ask my faculty advisor anything."
72	"Some of the worksheets were not relevant - they were just there to fill in the class. Re-evaluate all worksheets. Journals weren't necessary and were confusing (childhood dream, bucket list, yoga as part of tour of SAC)!"
73	"I would have liked more information on how to get money: scholarships, grant opportunities, loan completion, etc.."
74	"You should form an alumni group [of the class] that would tell the class their experiences (Pizza with the Pros at WMU: Dos and Don'ts)."
75	"Group work didn't seem relevant - got off topic a lot. It would have been helpful to let the instructor talk more and bring more relevance to the topic."
76	Returning Students: "Did not like the course being tied to ENGLE 103!!! It was very frustrating!"
77	"Include room/meal plan information as a primer for students who will be transferring".
78	"Overall I liked the class - it teaches you a lot (about yourself and career choices). I changed what my major will be."

79	"Course really helped me decide what to do."
80	"It was worth the money."
81	"Transfer information was very helpful"
82	"It was nice having an advisor teach the course (because you were able to get answers for advising questions that had not been addressed by another advisor and/or faculty advisor)."
83	"It made us do things - we needed to know now (cut down on procrastinating)."
84	"It helped a little bit about financial impact of transferring."
85	"I think it helped in retention."
86	"The EDP assignment was very helpful."
87	"I liked the journaling - it helped me think about things and plan what I needed to address."
88	"Workload was fine."
89	"You can take out of it what you want to."
90	"Overall - I was happy with the course."
91	"Very beneficial - keep it! It was worth it!"
92	"I questioned the relevancy of the budget worksheet - it was helpful!"
93	Returning student: "I wasn't sure at first about the relevancy [of some of the topics], but I still found it helpful."
94	"Freshman seminar format seems attractive."
95	"I would have liked to learn about credit card debt, but in a different way other than a worksheet."
96	All were already planning to attain an Associate's degree (with 1 going on for a Bachelors at FSU) - "We didn't need this information."
97	"You get out of it what you put into it."
98	"This class is very much worth it - at first I didn't want to go."
99	"I got a lot from the class - I have ADHD and I can get frustrated when trying to look at the big goal."
100	"It helped with money management (even though it wasn't the primary focus)."
101	"Assignments were great."
102	"Information was relevant"
103	"EDP - very helpful to know what you need at <i>The College</i> and even beyond."
104	"Should be required first semester."
105	"I found out about many resources - including the Library!"
106	"This <i>is</i> community college and I feel the information is helpful for our type of student."
107	" Information was very self-motivating."
108	"Transfer information was helpful."
109	"Would like it shorter and for free."

110	"Larger classroom (a few took over the class now and then)."
111	"If we could test out of the class - it would be good."
112	"I did not appreciate disclosing financial information (FERPA)."
113	Approx. 2 Non-traditional and transfer students: "This was a waste of time and money. The EDP should be given to each student as they start!"
114	NOTE: When asked, non-traditional students could not come up with anything that could have been changed to make the course more helpful.
115	"This is just a money-maker for the College!"
116	"This was just slapped together from week to week."
117	"Pre-requisites need to be looked at."
118	"Not having enough choices for classes in the summer cause students to leave."
119	"It seemed to focus on <i>The College</i> instead of college in general."
120	"The transfer session in the SAC was not helpful!"
121	"LDP was unrealistic - journaling was frustrating, especially in relation to other "real" classes."
122	"The transfer packet was helpful."
123	"Christy one-on-one time was helpful for advising (I didn't have to make an appointment to get my questions answered)."
124	"Format of course - a LOT of down time! The instructor ONLY talked for 20 minutes and then you're on your own."
125	"Inconsistency of information given out by counselors??"
126	"I didn't get much out of the Major section because I already knew where I was going."
127	"Class was a waste of money!"
128	"I wouldn't have paid for it had I known what it going to be."
129	"Could have been combined with another class: (Business 101 – no advising for Business courses or into Freshman English)."
130	"Class could have been replaced with Freshman Orientation."
131	"Other instructors already remind us of deadlines (registration, tuition payments, etc.)."
132	"I overall like the course."
133	"The course made me do things I probably would not have done - career choice."
134	"It helped me make Major-related decisions, as well as, transfer options".
135	Returning Student: "I planned and finished it out (I wouldn't have had anything down on paper)."
136	Returning Student: "I had an EDP and a LDP already done, however, this course made me stick to it."
137	Returning Student: "I didn't want to take this course at first, but, there might be some things that will be helpful in the future."

138	"The navigation through <i>The College</i> -wired and the ability to set up my own classes was helpful."
139	"Some of the terminology was helpful."
140	Three (3) students indicated that they had switched majors during the class.
141	"I thought the financial part was helpful before you spent the money."
142	"I didn't like meeting with my faculty advisor as a requirement."
143	"I'm not transferring and that's what this course was about. The College things were helpful (like meeting with my faculty advisor.)"
144	"Everything I learned in this class - I could have sat down with an advisor for an hour."
145	"Should not be required for ENGL 103 (especially if you're not transferring)."
146	"Meeting with faculty and transfer day - I had to come back here twice - waste of time and gas (I only come here once a week)."
147	"Would have appreciated more information on other financial options (e.g. scholarships)."
148	NOTE: Same split of relevancy on budget worksheet between traditional v. non-traditional students.
149	"It was very helpful".
150	"Instructor was very supportive"
151	Music Program Student - "I was able to meet with faculty advisor twice/week and this could not have been covered in an appointment with an advisor."
152	"Co-curricular and life balance issues were also covered."
153	"Still learned something." (returning student)
154	First semester students really like EDP, LDP and registration process
155	"Some new information re: major (like what it takes to be successful)."
156	"Budget packet was very helpful - worksheets were relevant (even to a first semester student)."
157	"Made me do things that I would have put off."
158	" <i>The Instructor</i> made information relevant put an emphasis on big picture after attending <i>The College</i> ."
159	"I would not have taken classes for Spring but the assignment made me register."
160	"Having put things down on paper put things into perspective (big picture)."
161	"I like it here!"
162	"I already had this knowledge (because I had researched this before) - but I still got something out of it. And it equaled out my schedule."
163	"Career path might be questioned (second guessing of major) but student felt confident about continuing on in music major."
164	"Good for first semester at <i>The College</i> but not for returning students."
165	"Helpful for learning <i>The College</i> -wired [learning platform]"
166	"Returning students - even though I knew some of the information, I still learned a lot (EDP and Transferring information)."

167	Returning student since 2009: "I still don't know what my major is."
168	"Undecided and may change occupation within same major."
169	"I'm budgeting everything now!"
170	"Transfer information helpful"
171	"It was all very good information - especially when you had to look back on things"
172	"Liked having 2 instructors because you get two different perspectives. Also liked the fact that advisors were instructors (I did not need an appointment to discuss things)."
173	"Major information/registration/EDP very helpful."
174	Most students thought it was cost effective - especially for first time students.
175	"I liked it because of light workload and it was cost effective if you participated in class."
176	"Also provided feedback form instructors - structure was good."
177	"Tough love without being condescending (very supportive)."
178	"I learned about taking classes, completing homework, showing up to work on time."
179	"The budget information was hard to see but very helpful - hard to complete. I did find some appreciation for parents and the relevancy in budgeting."
180	"The contact created connection with advisors."
181	"I liked the idea about 'one-stop shopping'."
182	"GREAT class - I learned a lot - you really should keep it."
183	"Goals packet asked you to "visualize" - this seemed invasive on a personal level. It was also at the beginning of the course. I wouldn't eliminate the section but just not have it first."
184	"The word-of-the-day work was difficult at times. I think that the vocabulary list needed more structure in the assignment."
185	"I am still unsure about my ability to transfer."
186	"I did not like the appointment with my academic advisor"
187	"I did not like the appointment with my faculty advisor"
188	"I like this class - it was very informative. Especially the registration and transfer information."
189	"It helped improve my organizational skills - I will be able to apply this to other classes."
190	"I like how the class showed us how powerful networking can be. We need to be open to networking."
191	"It confirmed by choice (provided more confidence in my decision) of transfer institution."
192	"Budgeting information was informative , but, stressful since now we know how much money is needed."
193	"EDP was hard at first, but, it was helpful and now I know what needs to be done for the next 2 years."
194	"LDP was helpful to "more spontaneous" people to plan and see what could happen."

195	"I appreciated the workload - (I still learned a lot and what we did learn we can use for the next 5-6 years)."
196	"At First, I thought this was a blow-off class but now that we're done, I can see the relevancy of the information. You should make other people take it."
197	"I am a lot more confident about registering for classes and completing my EDP."
198	"Good information about transfer options."
199	"All positive information about <i>The College</i> in general"
200	"I think this will definitely help in retaining students."
201	"I already had plans on whether to go for an Associate's degree v. transferring without a degree."
202	"We really don't have anything bad to say about the class."
203	"For people who failed - they didn't put enough into it and did not see what they could have gotten out of the class. They probably won't be back regardless of taking this class."
204	"Relevancy of information is important."
205	"You should try to sell the class - present data (pre-class survey) of how at first we thought the class was stupid, but now, we can see the benefits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Class alumni come back to tell new students •Share real-life attitudes/habits."
206	"I thought the assignment with the faculty advisor could have been more structured."
207	"I thought the faculty advisor assignment was a waste of time ."
208	"Learning styles inventory might be offered (MBIT was given and it was interesting). I'd like to see more of this."
209	"A lot of time to do very little work."
210	"I already felt very comfortable with self-advising (registration) - I remembered it from the 1st advising session."
211	"If you don't know your major, it's hard to pick a major."
212	"It was nice to team teach."
213	"Students, like in all classes, got out of it what they put into it."
214	"I had several students who should have come to me for the faculty advisor assignment that did not - I hope they didn't get credit for completing the assignment!"
215	"I wanted more leeway in instructional material."
216	"Materials were only given to us week to week."
217	"Angie put a lot of work into this and it was appreciated that all the materials for the instructors were provided."
218	"Overall this was a good class."*
219	"We need to keep budget information in - 'they don't know what they don't know'."
220	"I liked the fact that we addressed financial literacy."
221	"I enjoyed teaching the class."*

222	"I think that the Goals (Unit #1) content needs to be re-worked."
223	"We might want to look at the order in which the information is presented."
224	"I enjoyed being able to group advise during class (Music)."
225	"I would like to see more of this - offered to every student."
226	"Course could have included more information (a lot of down time)."
227	"I think the class could have included more academic success skills (e.g. test taking strategies, study habits, etc.)."
228	"I liked that my class formed their own study group (even for other classes) - it would be nice if we could formalize/encourage this in some way."
229	"As an advisor, I appreciated that I was given the opportunity to teach."
230	"We should have communicated objectives and assignments better to faculty advisors."
231	"We should involve everyone (faculty) in course development."
232	"We really need to reconsider tying EDUC 120 to ENGL 103."
233	"Consider "learning communities" with this as the main course for the 1st semester students."
234	"We should require this of all first semester students!"
235	"I think this will definitely make a difference in retention."*
236	"Some of the worksheets were not relevant - we need to reassess the instructional materials."
237	"Maybe keep Unit #1 (Goals), but, move it to later in the course."