

EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSE

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of college students enrolled in a first-year seminar course. This study addressed three areas: (a) what were college students' experiences in the first-year seminar course? (b) how will college students apply experiences gained from the first-year seminar course? and (c) what additional resources do first year students need to be successful in college?

A phenomenological qualitative design was utilized in this study that included seven volunteer participants enrolled in a first-year seminar class. Data was collected in the form of individual interviews, a focus group, and written statements. Eight themes and two subthemes emerged from the use of an inductive analysis: course satisfaction, value of the instructor, course components, friends/social networks, knowledge of resources, study review/study habits and techniques, structure of the triad, and transition from high school to college.

Conclusions emphasized the importance for colleges to create a learning environment that can assist first-year students transitioning from high school. First-year seminar programs were viewed as capable of preparing students so they can address educational and personal live challenges. In addition, beyond enhancing academic skills, first-year seminars were seen as providing opportunities for students to build relationships that create a sense of belonging, leading to the development of social and educational networks.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Jacob Riley and Abigail Rose. You have made me stronger, better and more fulfilled than I could have ever imagined. You are the reasons that I have worked so hard to accomplish this goal. I hope that this journey, that we have pursued together, will set an example for you, to understand that anything can be accomplished with hard work, determination and perseverance. Always know, that whatever you do, Mommy will ALWAYS love and support you.

I love you to the moon and back! To infinity and beyond!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	ix
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study	4
Research Questions	5
Significance of the Study	5
Theoretical Perspective	7
Researcher Background.....	9
Methodology	11
Sample/Population.....	11
Recruiting Participants	11
Design of Study	11
Data Collection	12
Individual interviews.	12
Focus group.	12
Written statements.	12
Data Analysis	13
Limitations	13
Definition of Terms.....	14

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	16
Introduction	16
Transition from High School to College	17
Attrition of Students from Their Freshman to Sophomore Year	19
First Year Seminars: History and Content	22
Research	26
Research on First-Year Seminars	26
Quantitative Studies	28
Qualitative Studies	32
Summary	35
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	36
Introduction	36
Rationale for Conducting Qualitative, Phenomenological Research	36
Methods	38
Participants and Setting	38
Participant Selection Logic	38
Selection Criteria	39
Role of the Researcher	39
Lens of the Researcher	40
Data Collection	41
Individual Interviews	41
Focus Group	42
Written Statements	42

Data Analysis	42
Data Management.....	44
Trustworthiness	44
Credibility	45
Transferability	46
Dependability.....	47
Confirmability	47
Summary	48
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	49
Theme 1: Satisfaction with the Seminar Course	50
Theme 2: Value of Seminar Instructor	52
Theme 3: Course Components	54
Theme 4: Friends/Social Network.....	57
Theme 5: Knowledge of the Resources	58
Theme 6: Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques	61
Theme 7: Structure of the Triad	64
Theme 8: Transition from High School to College	66
Summary	67
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	68
Discussion of Findings	68
Satisfaction of the Seminar course	68
Value of Seminar Instructor	70
Course Components.....	72

Friends/Social Network	73
Knowledge of the Resources	75
Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques.....	76
Structure of the Triad.....	77
Transition from High School to College	79
Limitations	80
Implications for Institutes of Higher Education	81
Future Research.....	83
Summary and Conclusions.....	84
REFERENCES	86
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	105
APPENDIX A: Consent Form	106
APPENDIX B: Demographic Data Form.....	108
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions	110
APPENDIX D: Focus Group Statement Prompts	111
APPENDIX E: Written Statement Template	112
APPENDIX F: UCCP 1101 First Year Seminar Syllabus	113

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For many first-year students, beginning their college experience is a pivotal time that will determine their success in higher education, including whether they will complete their degree. First-year students look for guidance within the university; therefore, it is important that colleges develop programs and courses to assist students in adjusting to their new environment, successfully navigate their college experience, and complete their program of study. Research confirms that the first-year college experience is challenging and also is a time when large numbers of undergraduate students drop out of school (JPF, 2015; Schackmuth, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), the attrition rate between first- and second-year college students is 24.5% indicating that nearly a quarter of all college students do not return for their sophomore year. Researchers who study college retention have discovered that they are encouraged to hear students' discuss their experiences of the first-year seminar course as related to academic success (Cuseo, 2015; Permzadian & Cred'e, 2016; Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, & Plumb, 2016)

Most first-year college students encounter challenging issues. Throughout the first-year, students gain new knowledge and experiences which assist them in gaining a new understanding of who they are; which is often times accompanied by many hardships including, homesickness, depression, inability to fit in, and financial instability (Millet, 2015). Additional challenges include social relationships, cultural differences, competition, and managing stressors at home and school (Schackmuth, 2012). These challenges pose a threat to students completing a degree. In addition to parents helping their sons and daughters adjust to college, it is imperative that colleges provide support services and guidance to mitigate first-year student attrition (Stewart, Doo, & Kim, 2015).

Freshmen in college often find it difficult to adjust from a comfortable home life to residing in a new environment and being independent for the first time. Student service administrators are aware of the types of typical difficulties experienced by first-year students in college and, therefore, have offered programs that emphasize increasing student retention rates (Clemson, 2015; Weaver 2018). One popular program is the First-Year Seminar (FYS) which is specifically designed to help students transition from high school to college. Some FYS courses are brief and extend over a few weeks at the beginning of the term. Others may consist of regular class meetings and stretch for the complete first year. (Permzadian & Credé, 2016).

The first-year learning communities—and especially the Seminars—are designed to help students achieve success, academically and socially, as they make the transition from high school to the university. The teachers in each learning community invest considerable time and energy developing and scheduling shared assignments and activities, choosing readings, and developing connections among their courses. (TAMU-CC, 2018, para 2)

An estimated 89.7% of accredited four-year colleges and universities in the United States offer a FYS course or program to their first-year students (Padgett & Keup, 2011; Young, 2018). It is important that these transitional seminars be offered in the student's first year of college, considering the attrition rate has been reported as highest between the students' freshman and sophomore years (DeAngelo, 2014).

Most FYSs are semester long experiences with the purpose of providing a comprehensive orientation for incoming freshman. The orientation typically includes becoming familiar with campus activities and resources that might help students transition into the college environment. FYSs are smaller classes than most other undergraduate offerings (Keup & Petschauer, 2011;

Padgett & Keup, 2011; Sobel, 2018; Sperry, 2015). There tends to be greater student-faculty interaction and more experiential educational activities in the seminars. Classroom teaching methods include student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction, collaborative assignments, and problem-based learning (Cuseo, 2015; Everette, 2015; Keup & Petschauer, 2011; Padgett & Keup, 2011; Sobel, 2018). FYS courses focus on college success strategies that address the major reasons for students dropping out of college. Research findings (Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, & Hamouda, 2018; Edwards, 2018; Middleton, 2016; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013) indicate that FYSs can have a positive effect on a student's grade point average and college retention. Furthermore, Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns (2015) and Leary and DeRosier (2012) have cited evidence that FYSs have a significant effect on the students' transition from high school to college.

Studies assessing FYS programs, for the most part, have focused on examining the effect programs have on grades and attrition. FYS advocates recommend that when researchers assess FYSs, they should study participants' learning, their ability to apply what has been taught, and their ability to retain new information or strategies (Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, & Hamouda, 2018; Skipper, 2017). Unfortunately, relatively few researchers have examined outcomes other than grades and retention. Expanding research to examine students' impressions and feelings about their FYS experiences and reflecting on the learning that has taken place while they were in FYS courses would allow for a better understanding of the impact of programs focusing on student retention. There is a need for research utilizing qualitative designs that report the voices of students who have participated in the FYSs.

Statement of the Problem

Students entering college intend to complete a degree and gain employment after graduation. According to CollegeAtlas.org (2018), 30% of college freshmen drop out after their first year of college. FYSs are supportive in helping to reduce the dropout rate of college students by providing a transition. First-Year Seminars are currently offered at almost 90% of institutions (Padgett & Keup, 2011). More than half of these institutions have reported that over 90% of their students enroll in these courses (Young & Hopp, 2014). The vast majority of FYS studies are quantitative in nature, focusing on data-based outcomes produced from seminar participants. The majority of existing studies use student grades, adjustment, and retention, as seminar performance indicators. (Angrove, 2017; Jaijairam, 2016; Permzadian & Cred'e, 2016).

There is a need for in-depth investigations examining the lived experiences of college students who participate in FYS courses: "Although the gap in research on more complex outcomes represents the primary limitation of the body of work on FYSs, other aspects of the research are also in need of attention particularly with respect to the consideration of context and means of impact of these courses" (Padgett, Keup & Pascarella, 2013, pp.136). Qualitative studies on students' perceptions of their experiences in FYS courses, how their experiences can help students adjust to college, and what additional resources are needed to help them succeed can perhaps lead to greater understanding of first-year college seminars and the students' experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to understand how college students experience FYS courses. I sought to gain information about what students experienced and how they felt it related to their experiences in college, how they can apply what was learned, and what additional

resources they needed to succeed. The phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of students who participated in a FYS course. In addition, it examined their perceptions about what they learned and what additional resources they believed they needed to succeed.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of college students who participate in a FYS course?
2. How will first-year students apply experiences gained from participating in a FYS course?
3. What additional resources do first-year students need to be successful in college?

Significance of the Study

The FYS design has evolved over time to meet the changing interests and needs of many diverse college students. Programs may be offered more frequently including a variety of themes for first-year college students (Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Padgett & Keup, 2011; Young & Hopp, 2014) because college administrators recognize that the courses are impactful on students. With the increases in the number and diversity of students pursuing a higher education degree, not only is there an increased need for colleges to provide programs designed to assist incoming freshman but there is also a need for institutions to conduct research on participants' experiences in these programs (Black, 2013; Wilkin, 2014). With an array of possible setbacks faced by incoming college students, it is imperative to conduct research designed to understand the complexities and nuances associated with the academic lived experiences of first-semester undergraduate students transitioning from high school to college (Florence, 2017).

This study intended to obtain an in-depth understanding of how college freshman perceive and apply the information and skills obtained in a FYS course. For several decades,

full-time, first-year students have been required to enroll in FYS courses during each of their initial two semesters. The FYSs play a central role in establishing a learning community. The learning communities provide a sense of being in a smaller group setting within a large college environment. The small class size increases the likelihood of active learning, small group interaction, social bonding, student participation, and a closer relationship with the faculty (Jafree, 2008). Learning communities also allow for students to network socially, as they are enrolled in mostly the same courses. This, in turn, assists and enables students to be successful at the university level. Peer mentors in the learning communities assist fellow students with finding the appropriate academic support when needed, help develop social and cultural opportunities, serve as a liaison between students in the community and the coordinator/faculty member, and help with the overall transition of the students to college life (Hill & Woodard, 2013).

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate FYS courses, but to understand the lived experiences of students participating in these courses. Data obtained from participants could help when administrators review seminar offerings, thus providing benefits to FYS instructors and future students. Furthermore, findings from this study could enlighten FYS administrators and instructors regarding their students' experiences in first-year seminar courses. The design of this investigation involved interviews with students about their experiences and how they might apply what was learned in a FYS course throughout their college career and beyond. Individual interviews and a focus group provided the opportunity for students to reflect upon their experiences in a FYS course. In addition, students had the opportunity to share in writing how the seminar experiences might be of help to them throughout life. Research findings provide in-depth information, adding to the literature concerning first-year seminar courses designed for

under-prepared college students transitioning from high school to college (Bers & Younger, 2014; Jenz, & Chen, 2007; Haning, Donley, & Eckard, 2002; Newman, 2016;)

Researchers agree that there is a need to investigate the experiences of college students who participate in first-year seminar courses (Demirian, 2010; Permazadian & Cred'e, 2016; Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, & Plimb, 2016). Qualitative studies of the perceptions of college students' experiences in FYS courses, how their experiences can be applied in current and future situations, and what supplementary support students need can possibly provide extra insight and a better understanding of first-year college seminars. As a result of students being involved in a qualitative study, the researcher discovered what was important to them and what their experiences were in the first-year seminar.

Theoretical Perspective

Qualitative investigations allow the researcher to gain an insight into the perspective of a subject's experiences. According to Mohajan (2018), qualitative researchers are interested in people's beliefs, experience, and meaning systems from the perspective of the people themselves. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of college freshmen enrolled in a FYS course. Previous studies involving first-year college students have made an effort to predict the student's level of performance by utilizing quantitative research designs. The student's grade point average is often the dependent variable. However, a meta-analysis of these investigations (Permzadian & Crede, 2016) reported only a small average effect of FYSs on first-year grades and one-year retention rates.

There are a limited number of qualitative studies attempting to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of students enrolled in FYS courses. Researchers have conveyed the need to conduct studies focusing on perceptive factors related to students enrolled

in first-year seminar programs, (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennet, Traver & Shotland, 1997; Demirian, 2010; Permazadian & Cred'e, 2016; Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, & Plimb, 2016).

The theoretical foundation of this investigation is based on the constructs of social constructivism. The purpose and design of this study aligns closely with social constructivism, (Vygotsky, 1978), suggesting that knowledge is constructed in a social context and then appropriated by individuals. Social constructivism states that knowledge is co-constructed and that individuals learn from one another by participating in learning experiences together and providing social emotional support. It is called a social constructivist theory because in Vygotsky's opinion the learner must be engaged in the learning process. Learning happens with the assistance of other people, thus contributing the social aspect of the theory. (Jung, 2019; Kim, 2001; Knapp, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978)

First-year learning communities provide both academic and social support, and the socially supportive peer group environment has been seen as key to many positive benefits (Priest, Saucier, & Eiselein, 2016). Spooner (2015) explains, "Social constructivists believe that each student shares the point of view that collaborative elaboration will result in the learners building content understanding that could not be achieved individually" (p.70). Collaborative elaboration allows students together to develop an understanding that would not be possible alone. Furthermore, social constructivism emphasizes the importance of engagement of the learner in the learning process, which is present in the FYS curriculum.

Alzahrani and Wollard (2013) explained that the instructor's role in a social constructivist classroom is to help students build their knowledge and to control the existence of students during the learning process in the classroom. In the social constructivist classroom, the

instructors are seen as facilitators who help the learner to get to his or her own understanding of the content (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Social constructivism is the theoretical foundation of this investigation that studies the experiences of students enrolled in a FYS course. This study will assist in the understanding of how students construct and make meaning of their experiences.

Researcher Background

In a qualitative study, the researcher plays an important role. It is imperative that the researcher be aware of and discloses potential biases that may surface throughout the study. I experienced the FYS course as an undergraduate student. There is, therefore, a degree of subjectivity or bias related to my values and views of the FYS course that is based upon previous experiences. My own experience was positive and my beliefs about the FYS course were that it was helpful and provided me with many skills and techniques that I could use in both my educational environment and in my personal life as well. Noble and Smith (2014) explain the importance of disclosure: Bias exists in all study designs, and although researchers should attempt to minimize bias, outlining potential sources of bias enables greater critical evaluation of their search findings and conclusions. Researchers bring to each study their experiences, ideas, prejudices and personal philosophies, which if accounted for in advance of the study, enhance the transparency of possible research bias (Noble & Smith, 2014).

My former employment as an Intervention Specialist with Student Support Services at the university also impacts my beliefs about first-year college students' experiences. Working with first-year college students provided me with the opportunity to understand the challenges and barriers students encounter. It also contributes to my thinking about these obstacles and ways they might be successfully addressed. Prior to working with Student Support Services, my employment as an Intervention Specialist with the bridge component of the Title V program

Upward Bound afforded me the opportunity to meet with high school graduates who were transitioning into the college environment. As the Intervention Specialist, I had the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the challenges and difficulties, as well as the successes and rewards, of the immediate transition from high school to college student. My role was to provide guidance and assistance in creating a smooth transition. In both of these settings, I worked with college-age students. These experiences certainly affect my thoughts about participants and their experiences in FYS courses. It is extremely important that all research, particularly qualitative research, be conducted in an ethical manner that openly discusses the potential of researcher bias. Given my experiences with not only participating in the FYS course but also working closely with students who were participants in these same courses, there is a potential for preconceptions of my values and beliefs of the seminars and students themselves to impact my responses and analysis, therefore, bracketing is required. In addition, how my experiences influence how I manage the progress and results of the study could be a concern. According to Tufford and Newman (2012),

Bracketing is a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project. Given the sometimes close relationship between the researcher and the research topic that may both precede and develop during the process of qualitative research, bracketing is also a method to protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material (pp.81).

Applying the bracketing method to my own experiences allows for any preconceived assumptions that may influence the research process to be set aside.

Methodology

Sample/Population

This study consisted of a sample size of seven first-year students enrolled at a South Texas University. The criteria for inclusion were

1. The participants had to be university students enrolled in a FYS course at a Hispanic-Serving Institution,
2. All participants had to be able to speak and read in English. English was an essential requirement because the assessments were in English,
3. All participants had to be the minimum age of 18 years.

Recruiting Participants

To recruit participants, I met with the FYS coordinator late in the Fall semester in 2017. Together we selected a Seminar Instructor and course from which I would ask for volunteers. I arranged with the seminar instructor to attend class sections of the first-year seminar. The seminar instructor and I introduced the information about the research in two separate first-year seminar classes and I answered any questions students had. During the class visit, an informed consent document was provided and reviewed. Students who were willing to participate in the research study signed the consent form. Students who agreed to participate were asked to complete a demographic form. Upon completion of the demographic forms, I collected all the documents and stored them according to required practices.

Design of Study

I utilized a phenomenological design in this study. Phenomenological methodology is appropriate because the study focuses on the lived experiences of freshman students in the FYS course. By utilizing a phenomenological design, I obtained a better understanding of the

participant's lived experiences that helped me comprehend the FYS course and how students perceived the impact of the course. Data were collected from the individuals who were enrolled and actively participating in the first-year seminar course. As recommended, (Creswell, 2018) data was collected in this phenomenological study by interviewing participants.

Data Collection

Obtaining multiple sources of data is necessary when conducting a qualitative study. With semi-structured interview questions, I conducted face-to-face interviews with students to learn about their perceptions of their first-year experience. I also conducted a focus group and collected written statements provided by the participants. Data was obtained by using these three methods.

Individual interviews. Upon receiving eight volunteers, the process of interviewing began. I arranged interview times that were convenient for the participants to engage in face-to-face interview. A semi-structured interview (Appendix C) was conducted on campus in a private room.

Focus group. Participants agreed to meet on a date and time that was convenient for all of them to attend the focus group. Participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary. The participants were encouraged to speak freely about whatever occurred to them in responding to the questions (Appendix D), to keep their responses as open as possible, and to let their ideas, views, and stories emerge as much as possible in their own words.

Written statements. The third form of data collection involved a written statement (Appendix E) from students. Some students provided handwritten survey responses and

submitted a hardcopy document to me at the end of the focus group. Other participants chose to complete the survey electronically and email the completed document to me.

Data Analysis

This study was conducted using a phenomenological method of qualitative research (Creswell, 2018) to collect, analyze, and report data about students' lived experiences in FYS. Patton (2014) stated that there is a foundational question of phenomenological inquiry, questioning what are the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people? Patton also described a phenomenological study as one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience. Interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed using the Nvivo transcription software, along with the participants' written statements; the data was manually coded to examine the thoughts of the participants. Three cycles of coding were conducted. The initial cycle of coding was administered to identify important units of meaning. The second cycle of coding was conducted to group the units of meaning into initial preliminary themes. In the third and final sequence of coding, a blending of some of the initial themes resulted in a new and final set of themes, in addition to subthemes, which are described in further detail in Chapter IV.

Limitations

A limitation of my study, potentially affecting the results, is that, of the seven participants, one student was enrolled in a different FYS course section. Perhaps if there was more of a balance of the participants in each of the FYS course sections, the results would have been different. Although all FYS instructors have the same syllabus template, their teaching methods may vary. The instructors teaching style could have affected how participants perceived the course information and experienced class activities. As a result, the participant's experiences

may have been different, based upon the instructors teaching style. The research study was also limited to a single FYS program at a South Texas University. It is possible that students' experiences would have been different at another university in another region of the country. Different environments and demographic backgrounds may yield results that vary from those from this study. In addition, there exists an inherent bias in the selection of interview questions as well as the role of the researcher who had previously experienced the FYS course. The interview questions could be interpreted as being leading and therefore influenced student responses. The structure of the interview questions did not leave room for negative responses.

A final limitation of the study involves the responses of participants. It is possible that information provided could be skewed, perhaps by participants wanting to please the researcher. As the researcher, I attempted to establish rapport with participants and create a non-judgmental environment, allowing students to openly express themselves and share their experiences.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

First-Year Experience Program (FYE): A program designed to help first-year students prepare for the transition to higher education and explore academic, career, and co-curricular opportunities. First-year programs may include first-year seminars, student support services, academic success centers, and first-year orientations (National Resource Center, 2018).

First-Year Seminar Course: A course designed to enhance success in college by assisting students in obtaining life skills necessary to their educational, career, and life objectives (National Resource Center, 2018).

Academic Success: "Engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition

of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance” (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 5). In this study academic success is measured by completion of an undergraduate degree.

Learning Community Structure: By definition, learning communities involve the linking of "two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 67). All full-time first-year students are required to participate in a learning community during their first two semesters to ease the transition to the university. (TAMUCC, 2018). This is also referred to as a triad at a South Texas university.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The number of first year college students has grown exponentially over the past several decades. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (May 2018), “Between 2000 and 2016, the total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 28 percent (from 13.2 million to 16.9 million students). By 2027, the total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 17.4 million students.” With the growing rate of first-year college students, there is a need for programs that can assist students who are making the transition from high school to college. It is imperative for students to receive guidance regarding social and academic adjustment, so that they will continue to be successful throughout their college experience and reduce the rates of attrition. Colleges have been focusing more on the implementation of the FYS course to assist with student success in higher education. One of the major strategies adopted by this institution was to implement a “first-year experience” initiative to assist first-year students to adapt to college life and to give guidance to those who are underperforming. The “first-year experience” initiative has included programs and activities such as student orientations, first-year seminars, and success workshops (Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, & Hamouda, 2018).

This chapter provides information about first year-college students, including the issues they face during their transition from high school to college. An in-depth literature review of the first-year seminar course includes a review of the establishment and history of the first-year experience program and the first-year seminar course. The following chapter will also provide extent research examining their effectiveness and an array of literature, both quantitative and qualitative that pertains to this research study.

Transition from High School to College

The transition from secondary education to university is a particularly challenging experience for freshmen, requiring them to adjust quickly to this new academic context (De Clercq, Galand, & Frenay, 2017). In addition, the importance of a successful transition is vital in order to reduce the risk of stress and physical and psychological issues (Hicks & Heastie, 2008).

High school students transitioning to college face a complex set of challenges and experiences that can eventually lead to leaving the university. The transition to college can be an exciting, albeit stressful, time in students' lives as many move away from friends and family and must adapt to new and increasingly demanding academic, social, and financial pressures, all while adjusting to life in an unfamiliar environment (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Not only do students have to adjust to the high demands of academic work, but they also face challenges such as being home sick, which often leads to depression. Wyatt, Oswalt, and Ochoa (2017), regarding mental health and academic performance of first-year students, conducted a study analysis. Findings indicated that although first-year students experienced less impact of mental health issues than upper-classmen students, the study indicated that it is important to address the issues of stress and anxiety, as well as other mental health issues with-in the first year of college, as to prevent a greater risk of more extreme mental health issues in the future. In another study, Hjorth et al. (2017) utilized a 12-Item Short-Form Health Survey to examine 3146 Danish citizens who varied from ages 16–29 years. The survey provided demographic data on participants' gender and level of education. Results of the study indicated that students enrolled in higher education and vocational schools, had mental health issues that significantly contributed to dropout. Findings further indicated that males in higher education who reported poor mental health had five times the risk of dropout as compared to females. For many students,

this is their first time away from home and having to adjust to living away from parents and doing things for themselves. The consequent, depressive symptoms can negatively affect the personal and academic lives of college students.

First-year college students face academic pressures and expectations that are considered greater than what they experienced in high school (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Being away from home and distant from close family and friends can pose a huge problem for a first-year college student. It is especially difficult for international students being in an entirely new country. Senyshyn (2019) conducted a mixed methods study of international students and their perceptions of the FYC course assistance in transitioning to higher education. “The study contributes to the literature on the first-year academic and social adjustment of international students. Findings endorsed needs-based academic programming and meaningful out-of-class engagement with domestic peers and international students. International students perceived success in adjustment and intercultural learning.(Senyshyn, 2019, p.166)” The results also indicated that to assist international students in adjusting to higher education and developing intercultural communication competence, interaction with native peers is essential, thus demonstrating the need for diversity in first-year seminar classes.

New college students experiencing intensive homesickness are reported to be lonely, express insecurity in their ability to make close, trustworthy friends, and not feeling socially accepted (Paul & Sigal, 2001). For these and other reasons, it is extremely important that first-year students have a strong social and academic support system within, as well as outside of the university to assist in the success of continuing their higher education. A study conducted by Pittman and Richmond (2008), discovered that when 79 students were surveyed at the end of their first year of school, the value of the friendship and psychological adjustment was

significantly and positively correlated. The authors also found that first-year students experience several transitions adjusting to college, which can have a significant effect on their self-worth. Pittman and Richmond (2008) explained that first-year students who do not have quality friendships and do not feel a sense of belonging will experience increased levels of stress and emotional distress in their first year of college. The high levels of stress and anxiety of first-year students exemplifies the need for support services to assist student's transitioning to college (Wong, Cheung, Chan, Ma, and Tang, 2006).

The need for institutes of higher education to provide programs to assist first-year students successfully transition to college is of significant importance. Johnston (2010) indicated that academic, social-psychological, financial, and practical obstacles must be considered when teaching freshman in college. Furthermore, schools, both high school and college play an important role in the preparation of the student success, and the earlier the process begins, the more likely it will have a positive result on their students.

Attrition of Students from Their Freshman to Sophomore Year

A number of students discover that the demands of college are much more daunting than anticipated. When the demands become unmanageable, the result is not returning to a second year of higher education. For this reason, student retention is the one of the most important factors facing higher education institutions. According to the NCES (2018), for first-time degree-seeking students who enrolled at 4-year institution in fall 2015; the retention rate (i.e., the percentage of students returning the following fall) was 81 percent. Student attrition can be tied to four areas: academic, motivation, psychosocial, and financial (Cuseo, 2012). An interpretation of this statement is similar to saying that students drop out of school because they are not

adequately prepared for academic requirements, unenthusiastic, have low levels of dedication, possess social and emotional problems, and experience financial difficulties (Cuseo, 2012).

Inadequate preparation for college can have a huge impact on a student's decision to continue with their higher education. Many students whose parents attain a higher education are more readily prepared for the transition from high school to college (Nui, 2015). Parents who are highly educated often have similar expectations for their children, hoping they will attain the same level of education. These parents often have available resources to assist the child in obtaining a college degree and offer their help in completing a degree (Olivarez, 2018). While underrepresented students are more inclined not to be as prepared and eventually decide not to continue their education. Griffin (2008) researched personal factors such as absent, unemployed, or illiterate parents as risk factors for students for attempting to complete a college degree. In a related study, Finkelstein (2014), through student interviews found that personal factors such as coming from a broken home, a family in conflict, and where alcohol abuse was present were issues that negatively affected ones' pursuit of a college degree. Students from underrepresented circumstances may be particularly predisposed to attend college underprepared because they may not comprehend or not know much about their own academic or career objectives (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004) It is concluded that all students, coming from a wide range of backgrounds can benefit from participating in First-Year Seminars.

Research has identified many other factors that may be related to inadequate preparedness for college including minimal guidance from high school counselors, not enrolling in college preparatory courses, and lack of support from one's high school. Lack of motivation to pursue a higher education degree is also a factor that may play a role in the attrition of college students (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Commitments to employment and the urgency to obtain

income may create an absence of motivation to pursue a higher education. Surveys suggest that employment interests are becoming more prevalent for college students rather than pursuing a higher education (Brint & Cantwell, 2010; Nonis, Philhours, & Hudson, 2006). Many students may begin to believe that pursuing a college education is irrelevant and therefore chose to pursue fulltime employment.

Adjusting to the college environment is crucial to the success of attaining a higher education. Many students may find it difficult “fitting in” and building social relationships. These relationships are important because students who find others who care about their success eventually learn to use this social support system as a resource when they encounter a difficult situation (e.g., being homesick, poor exam performance) that that could potentially cause them to decide to drop out (DeBerard et al., 2004; Pike, 2003). Without these social support groups, students may feel that the college they are attending was not the right choice for them or they may have a difficult time adjusting from being away from their home environment and being independent. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) utilized two questionnaires and a self-report assessment to measure sense of belonging, academic attitudes, and academic persistence. Researchers examined how sense of belonging and motivation impact a student’s aspiration to continue beyond the first-year of college. Results indicated that faculty and peer support increased a student’s sense of belonging and motivation to continue pursuing a higher education degree (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

One of the issues often having a significant effect of attrition is not having the financial means to continue one’s education. McKinney and Burrige (2015) hypothesized that students become discontent with acquiring loans to pay for their education and could intensify a student’s disappointment and lead to dropout. Not having the financial means to pay for college leads to

additional stressors in a college student's life. Research has found that between 2001 and 2009, more students borrowed money for college, and more of these borrowers are dropping out of college altogether (Nguyen, 2012, p. 2). It is of great importance to understand that attrition rates are at their highest at the end of the student's first year of higher education. According to Martinez, Sher, Krull and Wood (2009), "It is of the utmost importance to understand the phenomenon of attrition such that informed efforts can be made to decrease the rate of its occurrence." With the hope of reducing attrition rates in the university, many First Year Experience (FYE) strategies have been implemented. According to Hunter (2006),

Programs and initiatives commonly considered to be a part of an institution's first-year experience efforts include, but are certainly not limited to, recruitment and admissions efforts; new student orientation programs; welcome week activities, rituals, and traditions; first-year, summer, or common reading programs; first-year seminars; academic advising; academic support centers; supplemental instruction; undergraduate research initiatives; learning communities; service learning; and residence education initiatives.

The most common of these programs, is the FYS course, which is the center of this research study. With these attempts, student retention rates have increased for the universities and the students have gained a sense of academic and social belonging by building relationships with peers and faculty.

First Year Seminars: History and Content

FYS courses are small enrollment courses that assist first year college students, typically freshman with the adjustment and transition of the academic and social aspects in the student's new college environment. FYS courses have been in existence for many years; however, the

initial first-year orientation seminar was launched in Oregon at Reed College in 1911. They offered a course separated into men-only and women-only sections that met 2 hours per week for the year (Gardner, 1986).

During the 1970s's, after a plethora of campus riots, the president of the University of South Carolina, Thomas Jones, along with faculty developed a new approach for undergraduate education. Jones' goal was to help students appreciate the university and not destroy it (Schroeder, 2003). History professor John Gardner helped develop what eventually became known as the First-Year Experience, or FYE (Schroeder, 2003). Gardner, in an interview with Schroeder (2003), defined FYE as a national and international effort to improve the first-year, the total experience of students - and to do this intentionally and by rethinking the way the first-year was organized and executed' (p. 10). University 101 became the model for institutions of higher education to implement a first-year experience program to assist students. In 1981, Gardner held the initial First Year Experience Conference and as a result of its immense success, it was decided that it would become a recurring annual event.

During the 20th century, institutions of higher education changed their focus to creating a university with appeal in effort to entice students and increase their enrollment numbers. Due to the changes in recruitment efforts, the desire for programs that targeted first year students increased dramatically. Therefore, the focal points of the first year programs changed. Gardner (1986) illuminated factors that influence the success or failure of first-year programs. For example, without altruism in an educational setting, which is defined as the genuine concern of the faculty and staff for new students; the effectiveness of the program would be unsuccessful. Therefore, the focus became on providing the best first year experience for students in hopes of retaining their enrollment.

In more recent years, the typical college freshman is no longer characterized as a student who is a recent high school graduate or 18 years old. The number of nontraditional students, older, married, and working students continue to increase and many institutes of higher education are aware and modifying their first-year seminar course to address the needs of all first-year students. According to previous studies (Allegrini, 2015; Archer et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2011; Read et al., 2003), it was found that non-traditional students experience, a sense of being the ‘other’ while the ‘normal’ student is perceived to be a white, middle-class or upper-class male. Read et al. (2003) found that the non-traditional students (in terms of age, class and ethnicity) preferred to attend institutions with a student population with people like themselves, and, abstained from applying to enter elite institutions although they were qualified to do so. Still, even having entered an institution that appeared ‘friendly’ and with other students like themselves, the non-traditional students’ encounter with the university culture made them feel alien and non-authentic (Read et al., 2003). As a result of the increased enrollment of non-traditional college students, institutions were coerced to address the needs of all types of first year students to help adjust to the demands of college experience.

The most critical time of a college student higher education are the initial weeks. This is the time when a student truly understands if they have a place in college. Gardner (1986) highlighted the importance of programs that focus on the first few weeks of college when many students make the decision to drop-out. It is at this perilous time that students begin to develop a sense in individuality and independence and builds traits that will assist them throughout their college career. Gardner (2001) also noted that during this time students make judgments about faculty and their major, although the latter is apt to change. A number of actions can improve the freshman year including curriculum modifications, enhanced academic advisement, faculty

(instead of graduate student) teaching freshmen level courses, extended/continuing orientation, living/learning environments, peer counseling, and special freshmen administrative units (Gardner, 1986). This is why first year seminar courses are of high importance to grab the student's interest, build a solid relationship with the peers and faculty and feel a sense of belonging to continue pursuing a higher education.

Since the implementation of the first-year experience programs, it has become a foundation of the new student experiences at campuses across the country and in some universities internationally. When Gardner (1986) found that freshmen who complete orientation courses were retained at a higher rate than those who did not take such a course, the demand for first-year services led to the establishment of a National Resource Center based at the University of South Carolina. At the 24th annual FYE conference in 2005, over 1200 administrators, faculty and students were in attendance. It was then that, The National Resource Center for First-Year Experience & Students in Transition produced The Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition. At Brevard College in North Carolina, October 1999, The Policy Center on the First Year of College (FYI) was originated. The Policy Center presently referred to as the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, was established as an addition of the National Resource Center. In unification with the National Resource Center, the Policy Center staff work supportively on the issues of concern for first-year students, most prominently first-year assessment procedures. With the development of these First Year Experience initiatives, the First Year Seminar course became a pertinent required credit-course that assists freshman students adjust and continue to pursue higher education.

Additionally, the terms used to identify the FYS has changed over the years. In the 1990s, according to Hunter and Linder (2005), the name of the class that was created to assist new

college students, faced a change. In addition, Hunter and Linder (2005) proposed that there are two reasons for the change of the title. First, using the term seminar instead of course signaled an escalation in scholastic rigor and endorsement from the academy. Secondly, the elimination of the term freshman illustrated a progression “to a more gender-inclusive and respectful terminology” (p. 279).

Research

Research on First-Year Seminars

Previous research of FYs will possibly help provide additional information that is pertinent to understanding college students’ first year experiences. Research regarding the effectiveness of FYS has been conducted for several years. Initial investigations examined the impact of FYs on the retention of students after their first year in college. These studies have measured students’ academic performance as the dependent variable.

Most research studies on FYs focused on retention and performance of students, (Barefoot, 2000). Research (Hendel 2001; Erickson & Stone 2012) found there was no direct impact of FYs on student retention to their second year of college despite earlier studies indicating a positive findings of FYS’s on student retention and performance (Strake et al., 2001; Lang, 2007; Jamelske, 2009; Sidle and McReynolds, 1999). Reaves & Marchant, (2010) reported that improvement in retention of students has been related to FYS courses. Additional investigation, (Barton and Donahue 2009, Hendel 2007, Jamelske 2009, Strayhorn 2009), found no significant effect of FYs on retention rates.

Several studies (Berry, 2014; Newman, 2016; Vaughan et al., 2014, and Winnie, 2012) examined the impact of FYs on students’ GPA and retention, producing mixed results. Research, (Lang, 2007; Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013; Miller and Lesik, 2014) reported that

following enrollment in the FYS course, there was an increase in student retention and graduation rates.

Studies conducted by Cuseo (2010) and Padgett et al. (2013), found that FYSs had an effect on first-year students motivation and academic achievement. Other factors have also been utilized to investigate the effectiveness of the FYS course, including social and academic engagement (Angrove, 2017). Some of the most common factors, when evaluating FYSs were the effect that the course had on social and academic engagement, motivation of the student, and the students' outlook regarding their college as well as their participation in social and academic activities. Studies have substantiated that partaking in a FYS not only enhances retention rates and GPA scores, but moreover creates a positive influence on student satisfaction with their entire college experience, faculty communication, engagement in extracurricular activities, and various academic, personal, and social skills (Barefoot, 2005; Tobolowsky et al. 2005). The results support the notion that FYSs can improve both academic and social college experiences. Research findings conclude that participating in the FYS can result in the improvement of relationships and an increase in the number of interactions with pertinent college affiliates (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010; Porter & Swing, 2006). It has also been confirmed, that an increase in students utilizing campus resources has resulted from students participating in a FYS course (Hendel, 2007; Jamelske, 2009; Sanchez et al., 2006). FYS participants were found to have more contact with faculty outside of the classroom, according to a study conducted by Porter and Swing (2006). Yale (2000) also found that students who participated in the FYS had more interaction with teachers and peers outside class, utilized used campus resources and services more often, and had a greater commitment to accomplishing goals.

FYS participation has often been associated with student's contentment of their overall college experience. Barefoot et al. (1998), as cited in Hunter and Linder (2005) found that FYS attendance positively influenced student's social involvement and attitudes toward higher education. Similar studies by Sanchez et al. (2006), Hendel (2007), and Jamelske (2009) reported that FYS participation was associated with overall satisfaction with the first year of college, as well as increased involvement in campus activities and events. According to studies by Laudicina (2014) and Lafferty (2015), FYS attendance led to higher academic skills and better social integration. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2005) revealed that, in comparison to students who did not participate in FYS, the first-year seminar students "were more challenged academically, more likely to be involved in active and collaborative learning activities, interacted more frequently with faculty, perceived the campus environment as being more supportive, gained more from their first year of college, and were more satisfied with the college" (National Survey of Student Engagement Report, 2005, p. 15).

In summary, research regarding FYSs is important to the future of these programs and the impact they can have on the student's first year experience. Research has indicated that FYS courses can influence student retention. However, findings have indicated that student retention rates have been affected both negatively and positively for participants in the FYS courses. The majority of cited studies have utilized quantitative research designs. There has been fewer investigations of a qualitative nature exploring the students lived experiences regarding the FYS and how their experiences effect their perception of their first year in college.

Quantitative Studies

As the number of first year seminars now offered at universities continues to grow, the need for current and updated research is of vital importance. Findings from extant studies have

produced positive correlations between first year seminar participation and student retention, graduation rates, academic success, and social and academic integration to college life. Majority of the studies that have been conducted have been quantitative, using an approach of comparing students who participate in FYSs with non-participating students and using the many variables previously noted. Although these studies provide very useful information regarding the effects that FYSs have on first-year college students, these studies do not come without limits. These studies yield important information such as providing empirical evidence that supports the FYS and demonstrates their positive impact. More importantly, these studies emphasize the need for qualitative investigations that can provide a deeper understanding of the student's perspective towards the FYS.

Student retention is the most widely utilized variable in research studying FYSs. There has been a plethora of studies emphasizing the impact first year seminars have on the likelihood of students' continuing in college after their first year. A study using a quantitative design, Edwards (2018) investigated the differences in retention rates and GPA between first-time-in-college (FTIC) students who completed and those that did not complete a FYS class. The researchers reported similar retention rates and institutional GPAs for FTIC students who participated a FYS course as compared to those who did not. Additional quantitative investigations (Ben-Avie et al., 2012; Miller, Janz, and Chen, 2007) found statistically significant higher retention rates for students who participated in FYS courses. A quasi-experimental study, (Klinkenberg, 2013) investigated how participating in a student success course is related to student academic progress and persistence. Participants were first-time degree-seeking students who entered a community college in fall semesters 2011 or 2012. Quantitative analyses revealed that students who successfully completed the course have a higher

level of academic progress and were more likely to persist than students who did not participate in the student course.

Lafferty (2014) employed a cross-sectional post-test only control design utilizing a questionnaire. Findings indicated that students who participated in a FYS course reported being more involved academically. Moreover, students reported frequent utilization of campus resource and attending campus events, as well as being more committed to complete their degree. A comparative study by Weaver (2018) examined the impact of participating in a FYS course on student retention and graduation rates. Findings indicated significantly higher rates of retention for students who participated in a FYS course as compared to students who did not. Several research studies revealed that enrollment and completion of a FYS course is beneficial for both the students and the institution in areas of retention, graduation rates, GPAs, and student satisfaction (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Padgett & Keup, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Studies exploring the impact of first year seminar courses on academic success have often used student's GPA as the criterion variable. Ben-Avie, Kennedy, Unson, Li, and Mugno (2012) examined whether a FYS course influenced one-year retention rates and student academic performance. Findings indicated that students who participated in the FYS had statistically significant higher one-year retention rates, statistically significant higher GPAs, and had earned statistically significant more credit-hours than their peers who did not take the seminar (Bel-Avie et al., 2012).

Mental health is often addressed in studies assessing FYS courses. Several factors can lead to the decline of first-year student's mental health, including poor academic performance, an inability to adjust to the college environment, and a sense of not belonging. Wyatt, Oswalt, and Ochoa (2017), studied mental health and academic performance of first-year students. Findings

indicated that although first-year students experienced less impact of mental health issues than upper-classmen, it was suggested this group of students needs to address issues of stress and anxiety, as well as other mental health problems to prevent a risk of extreme mental health issues.

Research regarding FYs has also assessed the course's effectiveness on achieving academic and social adjustment. Pittman and Richmond (2008) surveyed 79 students at the end of their first year of school and found that friendship and psychological adjustment were significantly and positively correlated. The authors further discussed their findings by explicating that first-year students experience several transitions during their adjustment to college. These transitions can have a significant effect on the student's self-worth. In a mixed methods study, Senyshyn (2019) investigated the perceptions of international students regarding the FY course assistance in transitioning to higher education. Senyshyn reported, "The results indicated that to assist international students in adjusting to higher education and in developing intercultural communication competence through interaction with native peers, an effective first-year seminar with an integrative component must be implemented" (2019, p.166).

Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, and Hamouda (2018), examined the influence of various academic, social, and environmental aspects on the overall satisfaction of first-year students. The study concluded that students were satisfied with the first-year seminar course. In addition, the researchers identified factors that contributed to the overall satisfaction by students. The findings suggested that a sense of belonging and citizenship knowledge were factors most linked to student satisfaction.

Previous research has provided an abundance of empirical data supporting the effectiveness of FYs indicating that, participating in a FY can affect student retention,

graduation rates, academic success (GPA), and social and academic integration to college life. Although these studies yield important and useful information in regard to the value and effectiveness of the FYS, there remains a need for in-depth investigations of the lived experiences and perspectives of students that have participated in FYSSs.

Qualitative Studies

Most research has focused on statistical attributes of the effectiveness of the FYS. However, it is equally important to hear the voice of students enrolled in the seminars. Studies that explore students' perception of their lived experiences in FYS courses perhaps can help instructors as they prepare to teach the seminars. The additional data could help instructors in deciding to retain current course activities or modify the seminar content.

The motivation for a student to learn is required in order to succeed in higher education. At a Midwestern university, Jessup-Anger (2011) used qualitative methods to explore how students enrolled in the FYS were motivated to learn. The author 's goal was to examine how the classroom setting and environment could affect how students interpret their college experiences. The data was then analyzed, creating themes: personal connection to the subject matter, motivation to learn, and pedagogical strategies (p. 106). Findings indicated that students were less motivated to participate in the FYS course and learn since the class was only one-credit and pass/fail. In addition, it was found that if the instructor could promote a personal connection to the presented material, the students were more inspired to learn. In addition, Strickland (2018) reported that a caring instructor with various teaching methods assisted in making the FYS course beneficial.

Social and academic adjustment is important factors related to students transitioning to higher education. A sense of belonging and building relationships with the instructors as well as

with peers provides the student with a support system. Feelings of being alone and not belonging has consequences as mental health issues, physical health issues, and withdrawal, occur, leading to dropping out of school. Fischer (2007), utilized data from The National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen. Interview data of approximately 4,000 students over a sequence of visits during their first year of college and through their junior year concluded that students who had a high rate of retention interacted more with faculty/staff and peers both in and out of the classroom setting. In a similar study by Awang, Kutty, and Ahmad (2014), explored first-year student experiences in establishing a social support system related to their ability to adapt to the university philosophy. It was also reported that social support for academic, social and emotional adjustment among students was significantly associated with student's well-being, and that student adjustment is dependent upon the ability to receive socio-educational support from peers and family. The findings also revealed that student's wellbeing was influenced by parents and valued social relationships.

Conducting studies that allow an understanding of the students' lived experiences can assist in the modification of FYS courses. Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) studied the experiences of a group of first-year students to gain a better understanding their social integration and the causes of attrition. The findings from individual interviews revealed a plethora of factors germane to retention. Three themes emerged: (a) lack of social support (e.g., unable to create significant relationships with peers, lack of confidence, incapable of making connections with university faculty/staff); (b) academic factors (e.g., lack of study skills, poor attendance, unsatisfied with courses taken); and (c) material factors (e.g., distance from home and living in a dormitories). In many of the interviews, the strongest theme was social support. The authors

suggested that social integration, as well as academic factors should be considered when planning strategies for retention of first year students.

Transitioning into a college environment can be a difficult process for students. Many students who are alone need resources provided by the university. First-year college programs were implemented to assist with the transition from high school to college. A qualitative study, Nester (2016), sought to understand the transition and integration experiences of freshmen who participated in a first-year experience program at two higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. Data collection consisted of three concept maps followed by a semi structured in-depth interview. Three areas were mentioned frequently by students: friends, family, and organizations/clubs. Successful transition and integration into college were based upon a broad support system, appropriate environment, and involvement in enjoyable on campus activities. An insight of the lived experiences of first-year student transition and integration was provided to the university administration as a result of this study.

Wolfe and Kay (2011) conducted research at a mid-sized university in the southern United States. They studied the perceived impact of a first-year experience program on first-year college students. Program goals of the study included: dedication to the institution, inform participants about the transition to college, encourage personal growth, and establish relationships with peers and faculty. The data collection included participant field notebooks in which students journaled their daily thoughts and feelings. Wolfe and Kay concluded that program participants had positive perceptions of their experiences in the seminar and that discovered themes provided evidence that goals of the program were accomplished.

Meyer, Spencer, and French (2009), studied 52 college freshmen at a small liberal arts university gathering data from interviews. The researchers reported that many of the first-year

students had preconceived thoughts regarding classes, the university, and the amount of work required in courses. Students had expectations that the workload during their first semester was going to be extremely challenging. However, after the seminar experience, a large number of students changed their preconceived notions about the university and courses being offered.

Summary

In summary, based upon extant research on FYSS a strong argument can be made for expanding these student support programs in higher education. When the FYSS's are implemented correctly, the students' assimilation into college life is often a smooth and enjoyable process. Students' experience a sense of belonging, which in turn can improve retention. Moreover, the FYSSs provide the students with a plethora of resources and services they can use throughout their college career. Several FYSS programs assist students in creating social relationships with peers, while others are more academic focused. However, the overall goal of all FYSSs is to assist first-year students with their adjustment to the college environment. Based on the literature, the focus of extant research of FYSSs has been on the use of quantitative designs measuring the effectiveness of seminars using retention as the dependent variable. It is suggested that FYSS programs be examined using qualitative designs to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of students participating in the FYS course. A secondary purpose was to understand their perceptions about what they learned and what additional resources they believed they needed to succeed. In this chapter, the following topics are discussed: (a) rationale for conducting qualitative, phenomenological research; (b) research questions; (c) role of the researcher; (d) methodology; (d) data collection and analysis; and (e) trustworthiness.

Rationale for Conducting Qualitative, Phenomenological Research

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because phenomenology allows researchers to study how people experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Edmund Husserl (1965) laid the foundational groundwork for the phenomenological method. According to Creswell's (2018) description, phenomenology is a suitable method to understand how various participants create meaning in response to a context. According to Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey (2016),

Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant. These data are usually not amenable to counting or measuring. Qualitative research techniques include "small-group discussions" for investigating beliefs, attitudes and concepts of normative behaviour; "semi-structured interviews," to seek views on a focused topic or, with key informants, for background information or an institutional perspective; "in-depth interviews" to understand a condition, experience, or event from a personal perspective; and "analysis of

texts and documents,” such as government reports, media articles, websites or diaries, to learn about distributed or private knowledge (p. 499).

In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to understand the experiences and perceptions of the students who were enrolled in the FYS course. According to Creswell (2018), Elements of an efficacious and inclusive phenomenological study include: (a) a researcher having knowledge and comprehension of phenomenological research, (b) participants who have been carefully selected for the study to make sure that they have experienced the phenomenon, (c) a researcher who efficiently reserves all presumptions, which demonstrates bracketing . . . his or her experiences . . . relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience, and (d) a description of the researcher’s personal background (pp.52).

For the in-depth analysis of first-year students’ experiences in the FYS course and for the fulfilling of the answers to the research questions, qualitative research methods were appropriate. Moreover, this research design was appropriate for this study because it allowed for the ability of the researcher to interpret the participants’ lived experiences as well as manage her beliefs that may emerge during the research. A phenomenological emergent design allows for the research to flow freely and develop rather than permitting the researcher to fit data into preconceived thoughts. Mohajan (2018) explained that the purpose of qualitative research is to describe and interpret a phenomenon from the point of view of the population of the study and to create new concepts and theories.

Methods

Participants and Setting

The participants were selected from first-year students who were participating in the FYS course at a university in South Texas. As Patton (2014) describes, purposeful sampling was employed to identify students whose experiences that related to this study and could provide rich data about the phenomenon under study. Criterion and convenience sampling were the purposeful sampling approaches utilized for participant selection (Patton, 2014). The goal of criterion sampling is to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2014). Convenience sampling is a purposeful sampling strategy that involves using individuals who are conveniently available to participate in a study (Patton, 2014).

Participants were recruited from two sections of a FYS program. Thus, those who participated were students who were currently living the experience. The two seminar courses that were utilized for participant selection were designated by the director of the FYS program at the South Texas University. The director, along with the two FYS instructors, agreed to allow me to present the details of the research study to the two FYS sections. The seven students who agreed to participate in the study self-identified as one African-American female, age 18; two Hispanic males, ages 18 and 19; two Hispanic females, both age 18; and two White/Non-Hispanic females, both age 18.

Participant Selection Logic

Participants who were considered for this study were first-year college students enrolled in the FYS course during the fall semester in 2017 at a South Texas university. According to Creswell (2018), participant selection must also be heterogeneous in opinions, skills, and viewpoints. For this study, eight participants initially agreed to participate; however, one

participant withdrew prior to the interviews. With this sample, I was able to gain the perspectives of the effectiveness of the FYS course from participants of different backgrounds (i.e. ethnicity, gender).

Selection Criteria

The participants of this research study were required to meet the following selection criteria:

1. The participants will be university students enrolled in a FYS,
2. All participants must be able to speak and read in English as both individual interviews and focus group were conducted in English,
3. All participants must be the minimum age of 18 years.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to design the study; collect data via interviews, a focus group, and written statements; and to analyze and explicate themes in the data in order to amplify participant voices. The investigator has been described as the instrument in qualitative research (Creswell, 2018). I attempted to create an individual, significant relationship with the participants of the research study to create a rapport that would help generate genuine responses to the interview questions. It was critical that I built rapport, demonstrated respect, and conveyed to participants that their opinions, experiences, and perceptions mattered (Patton, 2014). I strove to demonstrate a nonjudgmental attitude about the answers they provided. A contributing factor to gaining participants' trust is that the researcher does not pass judgement based on the responses given by the participants when they answer research questions. Creswell (2018) stated,

We are more sensitive today about the nature of the interview process and how it creates a power imbalance through a hierarchical relationship often established between the researcher and the participant. This potential power imbalance needs to be respected and building trust and avoiding leading questions help to remove some of this imbalance (p. 57).

To facilitate trust, I reviewed the purpose of the study, role of the participants, and the interview process prior to each interview and offered to address any additional questions participants had. As the researcher, I conducted the interviews and the focus group and provided the template for the participants' written statements. All phases of the data collection were controlled by me, the researcher. I also analyzed the data and developed themes. As the researcher, I strived to ensure that every participant felt that their perspectives were an integral asset to this study. At the end of each interview, I made sure to allow the participants to disclose any other experiences that they would like to share and allowed for any questions. I also conveyed my appreciation to the participant for participating in the research study.

Lens of the Researcher

Being a graduate of a FYS course, naturally, my own experience impacts my thoughts and beliefs about the topic. My own FYS course was enjoyable and beneficial. What I learned there helped me throughout my college experience. The ability to create friendships with other students and to develop social networks was helpful to me. Large lecture classes were a bit intimidating; it was comforting to be able to attend a smaller, more personal course that provided the opportunity to get to know other students. In fact, my positive experience with and views about the FYS were part of what inspired my desire to further understand FYS from students'

perspectives. Thus, it was important that I bracket my own beliefs about the experience to ensure I amplified the voices of participants rather than my own.

Data Collection

I gathered information by conducting individual interview and a focus group and collecting written statements. Individual interviews were completed first, followed by the focus group. The written statements were distributed at the conclusion of the focus group and the participants were given the opportunity to complete them then or take them home and submit them electronically.

Individual Interviews

Initially, upon proposing my study to the two sections of FYS, I was able to recruit eight students willing to take part in the research study; however, prior to the interviews, one participant withdrew. On this same day, each participant agreed to a meeting date and time. The location of the interviews was already pre-determined, which was also convenient for the students, as it was on campus. A demographic data form (Appendix B) was presented to and completed by each individual at the beginning of their scheduled interview. A semi-structured interview was the primary data-gathering tool used in this study. Interviews lasted between 30 to 40 minutes. I utilized a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions (Appendix C) developed in consultation with my dissertation chair. The interview guide was used to ensure each area of discussion about participants' experiences in the FYS course was addressed in each interview and provided the opportunity for follow-up question as needed to clarify or deepen responses. All individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Focus Group

I conducted a focus group one week after the individual interviews were completed. All seven participants were in attendance. I utilized pre-determined questions based on general information gleaned from the individual interviews. (Appendix D). The purpose of the focus group was to gain a deeper understanding of the students' responses when they were presented with the perceptions and experiences of other participants. The focus group also served as an opportunity to follow up or expand on previous responses that the participants provided during the individual interviews. As with the individual interviews, the focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Written Statements

At the conclusion of the focus group, the participants were provided with a document to provide written statements (Appendix E) regarding their experiences in the FYS course. This allowed the participants to provide responses that they did not feel comfortable disclosing during the individual interviews or focus group. The written statements also provided the opportunity for the students to offer any additional information or experiences they wished to share. The written responses were numbered according to participant and stored in a secure location.

Data Analysis

According to Sutton and Austin (2015), "If, as suggested earlier, doing qualitative research is about putting oneself in another person's shoes and seeing the world from that person's perspective, the most important part of data analysis and management is to be true to the participants. It is their voices that the researcher is trying to hear, so that they can be interpreted and reported on for others to read and learn from" (pp. 28). The process of analyzing the data occurs throughout and well after the collection of data. Interpreting and

analyzing the participants' experiences thoroughly allows for the emergence of significant themes of the data collected. Cropley (2019) described,

The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to discover the general abstract meaning underlying a group of related statements – the gist of what the respondent wanted to say about the object of study. “Meaning” in this sense goes beyond the specific content of concrete individual statements. It is inferred from overlaps among numbers of specific individual statements. Thus, qualitative data analysis is essentially a procedure for discovering latent structures of meaning in overlapping statements. It answers the question: What more general – but not directly observable – structures in the person’s mind (such as attitudes, values, feelings, wishes, judgments, understandings of the world) generated this group of related specific statements? (p.115).

Initially I began the coding process utilizing the coding software, Nvivo. The first coding sequence resulted in 350 significant units of meaning from the seven transcribed individual interviews and focus group. Upon completion of the first coding sequence, I was unsure how to proceed to the second coding sequence using the Nvivo® software. I made the decision to switch to manual coding due to being unfamiliar with the process of the program. This allowed me to become more familiar with the data. I included the written statements and read and re-read all the transcripts and the written statements. I manually highlighted significant units of meaning from the collected data, which resulted in approximately 350 units of meaning. Continuing the coding process, during the second coding sequence, I re-read the units of meaning and re-categorized them into 11 initial themes. Finally, after once again re-organizing and re-categorizing the 11 initial themes, the third coding sequence resulted in eight significant themes with two subthemes, which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter IV.

Data Management

It was important for me to find a way to manage the data that worked for me. According to Ranney et al. (2015), “Determining how to transcribe and code pauses, verbal inflections, etc., is actually a decision about data analysis. Early-stage qualitative researchers who are learning the methodology will benefit from transcribing one or more sessions initially, as it provides insight into the qualitative process and logistics of recording data and allows data collectors to be self-reflective about their data collection techniques” (pp.1109). After attempting to use software, I determined that printing transcripts and keeping them in a binder where I could highlight them was more effective for me. In regard to data storage, all paper copies were kept in a locked cabinet in my house. All electronic documents and audio recordings were securely kept in a password-encrypted electronic file on my personal laptop that was then locked in a safe area in my house. All data will be destroyed three years following completion of the study. Of utmost importance, the confidentiality of the participants was maximized during and after the completion of the study. To protect confidentiality of participants, participant numbers were assigned to the participants on the transcripts. No one had access to these electronic file folders or to the hard copy data. An electronic copy was stored in an encrypted file and a paper copy was kept safe in a locked cabinet.

Trustworthiness

Establishing the trustworthiness of a study is another significant role of the researcher when conducting a qualitative study. Trustworthiness, or rigor, of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study (Pilot & Beck, 2014). It is of utmost importance that these factors be established, so that the research supports the claim that the study’s findings are worthy of attentiveness. Each qualitative

research approach has specific techniques for conducting, documenting, and evaluating data analysis processes, but it is the individual researcher's responsibility to assure rigor and trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Throughout the entire research study, principles of research must be implemented in regard to obtaining and assessing information, controlling the researcher's biases, delineating the participants' roles in the study, and informing truthful findings. Achieving trustworthy qualitative research encompasses more than fulfilling an established guideline of methods. To establish genuineness in this study, four elements of trustworthiness recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used: "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (p. 300).

Credibility

According to Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey (2016),

"Credibility is the criterion for evaluating the truth value or internal validity of qualitative research. A qualitative study is credible when its results, presented with adequate descriptions of context, are recognizable to people who share the experience and those who care for or treat them" (p. 500).

Patton (2014) stated triangulation enhances the quality of the emergent research design.

Triangulation is a qualitative technique that consists of validating information from several participants or different kinds of data. The researcher analyzes all collected data and categorizes units of meaning to validate the manifestation of themes, and, in so doing, substantiating the trustworthiness of the research. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that, "Triangulation is the way in which one explores different levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon. It is one method by which the validity of the study results are ensured" (p.1411). In this study, I utilized triangulation of data by collecting three different types of data: individual interviews, a focus

group, and written statements. Persistent observation was demonstrated by my reading and rereading the collected data and then coding and recoding the information until I was satisfied that I was accurately representing participants' voices. Korstjens and Moser (2018) described persistent observations,

Developing the codes, the concepts and the core category helped to examine the characteristics of the data. The researchers constantly read and reread the data, analyzed them, theorized about them and revised the concepts accordingly. They recoded and relabeled codes, concepts and the core category. The researchers studied the data until the final theory provided the intended depth of insight (p.122).

In utilizing both the methods of triangulation and persistent observation, I was able to establish and account for the credibility of the research study.

Transferability

Transferability has to do with providing clear information about the research so that readers can determine whether the results may be applicable to different environments or other groups of people. The researcher is responsible for presenting clear descriptions of processes, participants, and other data so that others can make their own decisions about the transferability of results to their particular contexts. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), "thick description of the participants and the research process enable the reader to assess whether your findings are transferable to their own setting; this is the so-called transferability judgement" (p. 112).

In this study, I utilized thick description and purposeful sampling to enhance transferability (Patton, 2014). To create a thick description of the participants' experiences in the FYS program, I used qualitative research methods, such as recording participant interviews,

conducting a focus group, creating written transcripts of interviews, and collecting written statements. I utilized people who were living the experience in the moment, and who were thus able to provide thick descriptions of the phenomenon. I utilized semi-structured interview questions to obtain the participants' narratives of their experiences in the FYS course. I also used prompts to gain a more in-depth description of participants' lived experiences.

Dependability

In a qualitative study, dependability is the determination that the study, if performed several times, maintains its consistency. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), dependability is the stability of the results over time that involves participants' evaluation of the findings, interpretation, and recommendations of the study such that all are supported by the data as received from participants of the study. A technique that can be generated to review the researcher's choice of methods is an audit trail. An audit trail involves an examination of the inquiry process and product to validate the data whereby a researcher accounts for all the research decisions and activities to show how the data were collected, recorded and analyzed (Bowen, 2009). An audit trail for this study was created by maintaining the following items: (a) digital recordings of all interviews and the focus group, (b) transcriptions of each interview and focus group, (c) copies of written statements, (d) interview and document analysis, and (e) documentation of data collection and analysis.

Confirmability

Finally, the last strategy used to establish trustworthiness in this study is conformability. Conformability deals with the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers and is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but clearly derived from the data

(Korstjens and Moser, 2018). This element of trustworthiness allows for the readers to assess whether the findings of the study are based on the participants' experiences and perceptions rather than the researchers' own beliefs and biases. To establish conformability, I utilized the method of bracketing which allowed me to set aside personal beliefs and perceptions of my experiences in the FYS course. This specifies that all information collected in the study can be followed to its derivation, and descriptions about themes and findings of the study are distinct and clear (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Comparable to dependability, confirmability can also utilize an audit trail to transparently describe the research steps taken from the start of a research study to the development and reporting of the findings. The records of the research path are kept throughout the study (Korstjens and Moser, 2018).

Summary

In this chapter, I identified my rationale for choosing this research design. Due to the minimal amount of qualitative phenomenological research designs regarding students' perceptions of their experiences in FYS courses, I chose to pursue this study. This chapter goes into considerable detail regarding research questions and the process of sample selection of participants. A detailed account of the data collection and analysis was also provided within this chapter. Furthermore, I discussed my role as the researcher and the importance of understanding and acknowledging my biases and personal thoughts. Finally, I discussed the importance of establishing trustworthiness and the various methods utilized within this research study. Chapter IV includes the results from the research study.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter consists of the results of the data analysis from the individual interviews, a focus group and the written statement responses from seven first-year students who shared their lived experiences of participating in the First-Year Seminar (FYS) course. Utilizing the fundamentals of qualitative data analysis, I sought to understand and interpret the participants' experiences in the FYS course and to report the results accurately. This chapter begins with a brief summary of how the data was analyzed and interpreted, resulting in the emergence of themes. Next, direct quotes from the participants convey their experience and provide support for the identified themes.

Three base research questions were used as a guide in relation to the themes that were identified:

1. What are the experiences of college students who participate in a FYS course?
2. How do the first-year students say they will apply experiences gained from participating in a FYS course?
3. What additional resources do first-year students need to be successful in college?

To begin data analysis, I manually transcribed all interviews and the focus group comments. I initially utilized a qualitative data analysis program, NVivo®, to assist in coding and discovering themes within the data for the first round of open coding. NVivo® was purchased May 27, 2019 with the intention to utilize the software not only for transcription but also the analysis of the data to reach the themes of the study. The time involved with transcribing the collected data was lengthy, thus limiting the amount of time available to review the method of analysis by NVivo® and to conduct the comprehensive review of the data. Because of the

complications required to use Nvivo for the analysis, I decided to review the data manually. Proceeding with the analysis of the data, I repeated the first round of coding, highlighting significant statements from the individual interviews, the focus group, and the written statements to identify units of meaning. Approximately 350 initial units of meaning were highlighted and organized into categories. I then utilized focused coding to look for patterns in the data and to determine whether initial categories could be combined or reorganized to better reflect participants' voices about their experiences. Subsequently, eleven categories were identified. I repeated this process a third time and arrived at the final eight themes and two subthemes, which are listed as follows:

- Satisfaction with the Seminar Course
- Value of Seminar Instructor
- Course Components
 - Fun and Exciting
- Friends/Social Network
- Knowledge of Resources
- Study Review/Study Habits
- Structure of Triad
 - Relationship of Seminar Course to Triad
- Transition from High School to College

Theme 1: Satisfaction with the Seminar Course

Satisfaction with the seminar course emerged as a theme because many of the participants frequently described the FYS course as being a course that provided beneficial assistance with their first-year experience. Moreover, many of the participants described the

course as being valuable and very informational. The students described several helpful aspects of the course: the seminar instructor, the course activities they participated in, and the campus resources that course highlighted. Overall, the participants disclosed that the course in general was beneficial to them.

One of the main purposes of the FYS course is to assist the first-year students' transition into the college environment and to help them become familiar with the offerings of the university, both academic and social. Being a first-year student can be very stressful; having a course to help alleviate some of the stressors of acclimating to their new environment was valued according to the participants. The participants of the study reported that they found the FYS course to be supportive throughout the entire semester. During the individual interview, Participant Five reported,

I think some of the experiences I think seminar has really helped me. She [the instructor] or the class has been very informational on where I can go for help. For whether it is emotional help or help studying academically or just you know certain areas. Overall, it helped me learn more about the campus and where I can locate things... and they did offer good help with having financial aid presentations and it was helpful in that sense.

Participant Six disclosed in the individual interview that the FYS course was helpful because students learned valuable information that would assist them throughout their college experience, "Seminar class in general was really helpful and really useful in the sense that we learned what we needed to do rather than like the information that wouldn't help us later on in our college career." Similarly, in the individual interview, Participant Seven expressed, "My experiences in the seminar class, it's been very nice. We learn lots of like useful information for real life." The

same participant disclosed in the written statement, “My experience in the first year seminar class was great.” Participant Eight simply stated, “I feel like it was not a waste of time.”

Although most of the participants stated that the course was helpful for them throughout the entire semester, some participants began the course with the mindset that it would be a waste of time. When interviewed, these participants, in hindsight, reported that their perception of the FYS course experience had evolved throughout the semester. Participant Three divulged, “At first I didn't really think it was a necessary class. But then as you get along, the professor will get into techniques to help you cope with stress or to help you study better, better studying habits, better, better well-being for your health.” In the same way, Participant Four, when interviewed, reported, “Overall I would say it's a pretty good experience. I would have to say though, at first I was really skeptical because I thought it was going to be a waste of time and I thought I was like, why can't I just take like an actual class that I'm going to need instead of this seminar. But it actually was very helpful because like I said, it explains a lot.”

The majority of the participants indicated that the course provided all-encompassing information that will guide them in a successful college career. Based on the experiences of the participants, the FYS course resulted in being a rewarding experience that provided helpful and useful resources that were beneficial not only for the educational setting but also for life experiences.

Theme 2: Value of Seminar Instructor

Another theme that emerged from the analysis of the collected data was the value of the seminar instructor. This theme has to do with participants' perceptions about the value students placed on the FYS instructor's ability to provide information and resources to them. In addition, participants in this study expressed that they appreciated the relationship that they had with their

instructor. The notion that the instructor genuinely wanted the participants to succeed played an important part in the participants' perceptions of the class in general. Many participants expressed that they appreciated the instructor's motivation and, overall, that the instructor was very good.

During the individual interview, Participant Five described the seminar instructor as effectively advising them about important campus information by stating, "The seminar teachers really did a good job with or at least my class did a good job with keeping us informed on different events and stuff." Additionally, Participant Six revealed in the interview that the teacher's lesson planning was valuable in assisting with the course with which the students were having difficulties by stating, "Really good planning on her part because we didn't need as much help with the other class and I definitely think that she chose well to focus on the class that we were probably having more troubles with. So I thought that she planned the lessons very well." The seminar instructor had a positive effect on the students by providing support and motivation for the students to do well in school. When interviewed, Participant Seven specified, "Some other things I liked about the class, personally, were our instructor. She was very good." Similarly, Participant Eight stated, "I think it's just that the instructor really wants us to do good." In another part of the interview, Participant Eight again reported, "I think it's mostly the instructor that's like the best part of the class because she doesn't give up on us."

The FYS instructor was viewed as an essential aspect of the course. He or she is the disseminator of the valuable information that is provided for first-year students to utilize throughout their college experience. The instructor assisted students with their adjustment to the university setting. The instructor's teaching methods and prioritizing of the assignments and

activities played a big role in the effectiveness of the course. Overall, the participants emphasized the importance of the instructor in motivating the students to be successful.

Theme 3: Course Components

Many elements contributed to the creation of the theme, Course Components. Course components refers to the different teaching methods, such as class activities, learning community events, and group projects provided by the instructor to convey the learning material. Several of the participants disclosed that the assignments they were required to complete for the course were to participate in class activities. The experiences the participants described illustrated the perceived value of the information they learned from the course activities. From this theme, emerged the subtheme, Fun and Exciting. When describing some of the components of the course, many of the participants referred to them as being a fun way to learn, and they made learning the lessons exciting.

Participating in class activities was one of the main sources of providing information to the participants in the FYS course. Participant One reported in regard to an introductory activity,

It's it will do a [sic] helpful like in the beginning for the seminar we would introduce ourselves to each other and names or hobbies or whatever. So I think that was good and we actually go around and you know, name each persons, it was like a memory game. So you know we have tons of games that were beneficial to us especially if you know, they're classmates you supposed to know their name.

Participant Six disclosed that she gained information about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle while attending college, "I know we did this little like circle chart where we had to fill in like how we ranked in this category of our health and how we think we did and which area we could improve on. Umm, a lot of, it is kind of busy work but at the same time it helps us learn stuff."

An activity that several of the participants described as eye-opening was related to privilege. As a response to this activity, participant Seven described in an individual interview,

We did an activity about the power of privilege. So everyone sitting in the room and then we all took out a sheet of paper and we crumpled it up and then our instructor put the trash can at the front of the room and there were people that were sitting right in front the trash can and there are people like in the back corners and stuff. And so we all just had to try to throw our paper ball into the trash can. And like the people in front could just drop it in there but the people in the back had to try really hard. Yeah. And that was like a pretty good exercise to figure out like what privilege means. I like that exercise.

Other participants saw the benefits of attending Learning Community events not only to participate and explore the many cultural and community events that the university offers but also to earn extra points towards their grades. During the focus group, Participant One expressed, “I guess the best experience was it was sort of out of class actually but it was for the class like the learning community points, the fact that you get to go to these events and they actually count as a percent of your grade towards other triad classes.” The participant went on to say that the most memorable learning community event that she attended was the orchestra, and because of this event, she was interested in learning to play the violin. She expressed, “I’ve been to a few but I think the most memorable one was the orchestra. Well it was the one here but yeah, because I’ve decided I want to play the violin.” Also, Participant Eight reported, “We have like these learning community things and you have to go to Hispanic Heritage Month and go help out the community and write about it for some points. I mean it's up to you to go or not. But if you want the points go but we can, you can.”

Another component of the course was group projects. All but one of the seven participants reported that the group project experiences of the FYS course were beneficial. Participant One revealed during the individual interview, “I feel like we did a lot of group, a lot of group projects. I feel like we should have maybe did less of those just because there would be like some people who don't really do work.” Participant Three described a benefit of working in a group: “We'd get into groups and do like assignments to work on the vocabulary that we had been given in another part of the triad.” Similarly, participant Seven reported,

Yes, we get into groups, she'd give us like ... she would give us like three words per group and then we'd have to get the definition and then put it on the wiki page. And then other times there would be open, discussion questions and we get into groups and we'd write it on a big sticky post it and put it on the wall and share it with everybody. So that's how I would review for tests.

Having fun and enjoying the assignments were reported by all participants. As a result of the instructor implementing enjoyment and fun in the assignments, the participants were able to remember certain activities. For example, in regard to an activity where the students wrote responses to discussion questions on big pieces of white paper that were taped to the wall, Participant Six expressed, “We had a lot of fun with that because we could like write comments down on others and sometimes they were funny or sometimes they were happy. But they were mostly beneficial and they definitely helped improve and they made that activity kind of fun.” The same participant later commented in her interview, “Yeah I think just people learn better when they're doing something or excited about something.” Participant Seven recounted, “We did a little activity where we went around the school in small groups and we figured out where all the buildings were at. I was very sweaty. It was fun though. Participant Three expressed, “It

was a fun class and it helped ... helped me make new friends from the class, you know to help study with and you know to ask questions.”

Theme 4: Friends/Social Network

Throughout the data collection, it was apparent that building friendships and forming social networks were important to all participants. The theme Friends/Social Network is defined as creating a connection and building a relationship with other students in the FYS seminar course. The participants found that by initiating these friendships, they formed a social network inside and outside of the classroom. For many of the students, they had to leave their family and friends and come to a new environment not knowing anyone. So it was important to them to establish relationships and build friendships to gain a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment. In this theme, the benefit of creating both social and educational networks is discussed.

In regard to inside the classroom benefits of friendships, Participant Seven revealed, “I can really tell the difference between like doing it by myself and doing it with friends and I feel like the class, creating those friends is what like enables the group setting in order to work.” In addition, Participant One revealed, “Well it's really good to I guess to meet other people who are in your triad you know if you need study groups or just other students in general that you want to hang out with and because you know you are all of you'll have the same three classes.” Two of the participants described similar experiences regarding the benefits of formulating friendships in the first-year seminar course that may otherwise not have been possible. Participant Five stated, “That experience really I enjoyed it because I'm not a very social person so it forced me to pair up with someone and me and that person now are really good friends so.” In the same vein, Participant Eight admitted,

Talk to some random person that you don't know, just to be confident in doing it. Finding friends being social, it's hard for some people. Social anxiety is a real big thing and some of my friends just they didn't talk to me first, I talked to them and you know they're exciting people they're just scared.

A benefit of making friendships in the FYS course allowed for students not only having relationships in the classroom but also outside of the classroom. Participant Three explained, "It's good to hang out with friends like, like every like, you know, every chance you get; you know it helps relieve stress. You know to feel comforted by other people around you." Four out of the seven participants wrote responses in their written statements regarding their experiences with developing friendships and creating social networks. Participant Five stated, "I remember most when we got paired up in groups and got to know more people and be friends. That impacted me because usually I'm not a very social person." Similarly, participant Six reported, "I think the biggest advantage was to have friends that were in most of my classes." Along the same line, participant Seven disclosed, "It was a perfect class for me to make new friends." Participant Eight expressed, "I met my best friends in this class who are open-minded."

Building friendships and creating social networks, according to the participants' experiences, is beneficial for first-year students because they provide support in the educational setting. They also allow for students to have an outlet for recreational and outside activities away from the university. For many of the participants, the FYS course offered the opportunity for them to meet and establish these bonds that assist in adjusting to the new environment.

Theme 5: Knowledge of the Resources

The theme Knowledge of Resources is best explained as the useful information that the participants acquired during class sessions throughout the semester, they were enrolled in the

FYS course. Knowledge of the resources included aspects of the FYS course such as guest speakers, presentations, and skills acquired throughout the semester. One of the advantages of participating in the FYS course is the many resources that were provided. Guest speakers and presentations from resources throughout campus were given the opportunity to present their services to the students. The participants were informed of many services provided by the university that they may not have discovered on their own. Another benefit is that the students acquired many skills that will also be valuable throughout not only the FYS course but also their entire college experience.

Presentations were conducted by guest speakers from different resources provided to students at the university. All participants reported some type of appreciation for the presentations that were provided in the course. For example, participant Four expressed,

It's just really nice being aware of what's offered because as a freshman sometimes ... sometimes you don't really know, like all the resources you maybe you've heard about it but you don't know where it is or you don't know exactly what it is. And it was really nice just to have people come in and explain exactly what it is because as a freshman you don't know what.

According to the participant responses, many topics were covered during the presentations, however, the most common topic that was reported was suicide prevention, which was provided by the Counseling Center. Participant Six shared,

Also, like mental health, we did have a guest speaker come in to talk about like suicide prevention. And I do think that's a really important skill that we should be learning especially in college right now. The counseling, I believe the counseling department. Just

to have people come in and explain exactly what it is because as a freshman you don't know what.”

During the focus group, Participant One reported,

The presenters that came in, like the financial aid person or the career services just, hey this is this. Even though I might, I plan on utilizing it maybe. So that was sort of helpful, that I'm sort of getting inside where things are because you know we are freshmen were just coming in. We just don't really know where things are. At least I didn't, so I feel like that was helpful.

A plethora of skills was conveyed by the FYS instructor. Participant Three said, “But then as you get along with, the professor will get into techniques to help you cope with stress or to help you study better, better studying habits, better well-being for your health. Other tips to stay healthy mentally, physically.” Participant Six stated, “It teaches you more social skills and like college school skills than more of the class stuff in it. You go more in depth on about social and other issues or topics about like college in general more than the actual topics of the classes themselves.” During the same interview, Participant Six also disclosed, “Like just general life skills. Yeah, like dealing with stress or like making healthy choices in life. Which I feel like a lot of us know how to do already but it's still good to reiterate it at this point and in like a college experience because people forget how to take care of themselves.” A common skill that was appreciated by some of the participants was time management, most importantly when studying. Participant Five expressed, “I think the most beneficial thing I'm going to take out of my seminar is going to be, it taught me the foundation of setting side and setting time aside to do specific things for different and managing my time.” In a description of their experience, participant Five explained, “One day we set aside time and the professor handed out this time sheet with different

times and it was like a grid and you would lock in different um, you'd set aside a time for studying and you set aside time for yourself and just, really setting a schedule.” Participant One stated, “From my experience seminar I would try to focus more on time management and, you know studying for my classes. This semester I really didn't do any of that stuff, so I feel like if I actually sat down and had a set plan then I'd do better next semester better than I did this semester. I didn't do that bad, but I could do better next semester.”

Theme 6: Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques

The theme Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques describes the participants’ experiences in regard to reviewing study material for the Triad courses. Study habits and techniques, with regard to this research study, pertains to the participants’ methods for reviewing the material.

Based on the data collected, six out of the seven participants believed that there should have been more time spent on reviewing for the exams during the first-year seminar course. Participant One disclosed,

I know she said we can't, you know, go over material that we're actually going in our other class, but we can actually like study for it. We can get the review questions. I feel like we should have did more. That could be one he did do one [review] ... But umm more study reviews and I feel like we did a lot of group.

Additionally, Participant Three said, “I think I have to say um, more like, more reviewing on the exams. Like the harder portion of the exam. But um, discussion questions.” Similarly, Participant Four simply stated, “I would have more days where we reviewed.” Participant Five said,

It's just I feel like we could have done a little more reviewing a little more in advance because we would only start reviewing for exams the week of and we only have two

classes. Actually, we only have one class which is we only use one class period to review. Because then the next day or the next time we'd have class. We'd already have taken the test so that would be my only thing. Just a little more review time.

During the focus group, Participant Seven disclosed, "I would improve it's just more time studying because it feels like everyone else said like we would study maybe once and then we go to the exam. I feel like it just wasn't enough like school time study." Also, during the focus group, Participant Eight reported, "I would do more of the reviewing and studying because as a student right now I would like to have more study because it's already it's already hard." However, during the individual interview, Participant Eight also expressed, "Studying you should do on your own." For the most part, data collection revealed that the study reviews were appreciated and beneficial for all students.

Another important factor that was reported by most of the participants was the teaching of study habits and implementing them for their preparation for the exams. Participant Three stated, "I'd say using the, better studying habits. Like um, not studying so late or cramming the day before a test. Studying like progressively through the lesson and all the way to the test to familiarize yourself with the contents of the exam and then to maintain a good sleeping schedule." Further into the interview, the participant then mentioned, "Showing us some stress relief activities that we might not, might not have known or studying habits that we might not have known yet, that could benefit us greatly." In the same way, Participant Five reported, "And it also helped with different study techniques which helped because we were taught or she the professor had told us like cramming isn't the best." In addition, as a response on the written statement, Participant Five wrote, "It helped me learn how to study for exams and it helped me find resources that I will use through at my college career." When discussing the participants'

best experiences in the FYS course, participant Seven expressed, “the best experience I've had with the class is definitely the reviewing techniques that we've learned like what we do is we get all the discussion questions from our topics from our other class.” Participant Six also discussed experiences of types of study methods, stating, “And like focusing on the preparing for quizzes and reviewing and stuff like that. And then ... Quizlets, we did a Cahoot over that, umm we did some review activities with like around the room writing paragraphs or practicing the short response parts of the problems.” Similarly, Participant Seven reported, “We get in pairs and we all go and write down our answers to the discussion questions and then our seminar leader will go and see if they're correct or not. And I really like that because then you can just go around and read everyone's and it's very helpful because like at home, you go ahead and do all those discussion questions yourself.” Moreover, Participant Eight also reported study technique experiences, stating, “The instructor gives us big pieces of paper and we have to write like a definition for political science and we have to have key terms on it and we write all over the class and everybody in the class goes and studies it and that helps. According to the responses on the written statements, four students reported their experiences of learning study habits in the first-year seminar course. Participant Four stated, “I can apply what I learned about studying exams and use it to help with other exams.” Participant Five expressed, “Also better studying habits. I think I know how to space out my time in studying and time management.” Regarding the same context, Participant Seven explained, “It also taught me about useful skills to use outside of the class such as study habits and real-world knowledge.” Lastly, Participant Eight expressed, “My seminar to me was like a tutoring class and I enjoyed every day of it. I was shown new ways of studying and even doing work.”

Theme 7: Structure of the Triad

The next theme that was identified, Structure of the Triad, refers to the way program is built. The most common components of the Triad that were discussed by the participants were the size and the fact that it was more condensed, which made it less intimidating. For example, Participant One reported, “I mean not in a huge lecture classes but it’s a small seminar class, so.” Participant Five reported, “Seminar, it's really condensed and its 20, 20 people instead of 200. It's less intimidating.” Participant Eight also disclosed, “I like that the classes are small.....They’re not too many people.” As reported in the focus group, Participant Three stated, “I like the seminar class because it's more condensed than lectures.” Also, during the focus group, Participant Four mentioned, “There's less people in it and it's easier to voice your opinion rather than in a big lecture.” Participant Seven expressed that the class environment was more relaxed because of the size of the class. He mentioned, “It's not really like 100 percent professional type of class... It's like laid back but still getting stuff done.”

Another aspect of the theme, structure of the triad, was that the students wished that the class were more organized. In interview sessions, some students said the course was not major specific, meaning that the class was comprised of a diverse group of degree majors. For example, Participant One stated,

Everyone who is in my seminar class they all have different degrees you know are for nursing, there's some for business, kinesiology. This all its all types but we all have to since all freshmen you know everyone in the university actually has to do the core curriculum so we're just, they're basing us on what classes we signed up for. So we all signed up for these three classes then. We're in the same triad. Which was confusing when you're you know registering for the second seminar. I couldn't register by myself.

Participant Five disclosed,

My triad it's really a mixed group of different majors so I know there are different triads that are specifically for your major like there's a nursing triad and different specific major triads And I think that would be my only my only thing is that I would have I would have liked it to be like a core specific or a major specific triad.

The subtheme, Relationship of the Seminar Course to the Triad refers to the lack of connection between the seminar course and the large lecture courses within the Triad, especially the communication between the seminar instructor and the Triad lecture class professors. Many students expressed their concerns and described their experiences. Participant Four said,

The seminar teacher was just explaining what they were told by the other instructors and about how the project has to be done because this project counts for multiple classes.

Those three classes, not just seminar or government, count for everything and so we're frustrated we're like freshman and are stressed out because this thing counts for everything. And then on top of that we don't know the exact instructions on how to do it because it's the seminar instructor would say something else and then we would go from there to our next class and it would be different. It would be. Like not major differences but enough to where we were like, whoa whoa oh yeah.

In addition, Participant Five explained, “There were just a few minor things that could have been better, the communication between the triad teachers and professors could have been better but it's understandable they only they only meet once a week and everything.” It was also disclosed by Participant Six, “I would say one of the confusing parts of the triad that I experienced was the assignments that were linked between all three classes. I feel like the teachers didn't have a very connected feel and they were all giving us different information. So in some ways it could

actually be confusing with those assignments especially.” During the focus group, Participant Five stated, “Bring in the SI teacher one day to help review because the seminar teachers don't, aren't really knowledgeable on the exact triad that they're assigned to. So they bring in someone who actually knows what's going on in the class to help review.” To the same effect, Participant Six said during the focus group, “There wasn't very much communication to and from the teachers between the triads. Therefore, I think it would probably help a lot more if there was better communication.

Theme 8: Transition from High School to College

The final theme that was identified in the data collection was Transition from High School to College. In this theme the participants disclosed their experiences regarding how the FYS course was helpful in their transitioning from high school to college. The participants also expressed how the FYS course activities reminded them of high school, and that helped with the transition into the collegiate environment.

During the individual interview, Participant One stated,

Basically, it's like a backbone for the other classes to make sure you're upright and you know because you're transitioning from high school to college. So I guess I'm trying to help you giving you these useful tips and you know we're places where things are in a school like the career services and things.

However, in the focus group, Participant One reported, “I get that it's like a transitional class but at the same time it was too much doing transition like you come into college you're supposed to. You know it's going to be harder than high school.” When discussing an introductory activity in the course, Participant Seven said, “It was kind of nice because we were transitioning from high school to college and that's something that you would do in high school.”

In Participant Six's written response, "I remember the first day; the name game was comforting because it helped transition from high school to college."

The transition from high school to college can sometimes be a difficult process. The FYS course is often referred to as a transitional course that assists students with adjusting to the college environment. In this research study, the participants reported that the FYS course provided a sense of high school elements that were beneficial to the transitioning to higher education.

Summary

Seven first-year college students volunteered to be interviewed, participate in a focus group, and provide a written statement about their lived experiences in the FYS course. Qualitative research methods commonly utilized for conducting a phenomenological study were used to analyze the transcribed individual interviews, focus group, and written statements. Eight themes were identified from the data collection analysis: Satisfaction with the FYS Course, Value of Seminar Instructor, Course Components, Friends/Social Network, Knowledge of Resources, Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques, Structure of the Triad, and Transition from High School to College. Two subthemes emerged from the eight themes to provide a thick description of the student's lived experiences. In the final chapter, a discussion of the findings of my research study, limitations found within my study, implications, and recommendations for further research are shared.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings as related to the extant literature on first-year college seminar courses. A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to examine and understand the lived experiences of students enrolled in a first-year seminar course, (FYS). Research questions guiding this study included: (a) What are the experiences of college students who participate in a FYS course? (b) How will college students apply experiences gained from participating in a FYS course? and (c) What additional resources do first-year students need to be successful? This chapter includes a discussion of the research findings, limitations of the study, implications, and suggestions for further research.

Discussion of Findings

As the result of data analysis, eight themes were identified: satisfaction of the seminar course, seminar instructor effectiveness, course components, friends/social networking, knowledge of resources, study review/study habits and techniques, structure of the triad, and transition from high school to college with two subthemes.

Satisfaction of the Seminar course

The first theme that emerged as the result of data analysis was the students' satisfaction with the seminar course. Although this is not an evaluation of the FYS course, the seven participant's responses were reflective of their experience. During in-depth interviews, participants shared their perception of the FYS course as a great overall experience. Some participants began the course with the pre-conceived perception that it would not be beneficial. However, during the semester, their perceptions were altered as they found the course to be valuable.

Participants provided numerous examples of their FYS course experiences, discussing how the course could be beneficial during and after their first year of college. The discussion included how helpful the course was when navigating through their first semester of college. Satisfaction with the FYS course related to whether participants found the course as helpful. The participants disclosed a belief that the course was a great experience and they appreciated the resources received. A recent study (Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, & Hamouda, 2018) also found that students were satisfied with a first-year seminar class. In addition, the researchers identified factors that contributed to their overall satisfaction. Two factors, a sense of belonging and citizenship knowledge were linked to student satisfaction. In addition, participants indicated the FYS course provided several skills that could be useful throughout their college career. Findings from the Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, & Hamouda study (2018) correlate with the results of the current investigation.

In another study, (Legasa & Bondar, 2015) as cited by Jaijairam (2016), students participating in a FYS course expressed satisfaction with the support they received throughout the tenure of the class. Results from student surveys in spring of 2014, reported 97% of participants were very satisfied or satisfied with their advisors willingness to help. In fall 2014, 93.9% of FYS students reported being very satisfied or satisfied with their “First Year Program” advisement experience.” This study correlates with the finding of the current investigation.

As a transitional program, one of the main objectives of the FYS experience is for students to gain valuable information to help them adjust to college life. Based on the results of the current study, many of the participants expressed that the seminar course was a great experience providing the appropriate skills needed to be successful in college. A nonexperimental/quasi-experimental research design using descriptive statistics conducted by

Lafferty (2015), produced findings indicating that 45% of students who participated in the FYS course were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied. Furthermore, only five participants, (1.7%) indicated they were dissatisfied with the course. In addition, 55% of the participants were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the seminar. These findings align with the current study with a higher percent of students rating the FYS course satisfactory or useful than not satisfied. In the current study, only one participant indicated that they did not believe that the course was needed.

The theme satisfaction of the seminar course is not an evaluation of the course itself; however, the student's responses indicated that they felt that the course, overall, was a great experience that provided useful information to assist with the transitioning to higher education.

Value of Seminar Instructor

Another theme that identified from the data collected was value of the seminar instructor. According to the findings from this study, participants viewed the seminar instructor as an integral part of the FYS experience. They disclosed that the best part of the course was the teacher. Many participants believed the instructor's ability to convey the lessons and motivate students to be successful was significant.

Findings, (Clemson, 2018), suggested that purposefully utilizing a proactive approach to teaching first-year students the skills necessary to be academically successful in college was helpful for students to assimilate to the campus. Based on the findings of this mixed methods study, the implementation of a student success seminar for all new freshmen appeared to be a strategy that might assist in the university's retention efforts. In the current study, participants indicated the instructor's efforts and motivation provided them with the desire to be successful. Kelley (2017), used critical incident and semi-structured interview questionnaires as forms for

data collection, which detailed what first-year students perceived to be the most important and impactful moment in their first-year seminar. Results from this study indicated that,

“The most important affective course component perceived by participants was their FYS instructor. The FYS instructor facilitated their integration into the campus culture, provided initial support, and for many, served as a personal confidant. Several participants described challenging academic, social, and personal circumstances that they did not perceive they could have endured without the support and counsel they received from their FYS instructor. Participants did not view their instructor as someone whose only job was to make them aware of campus resources and teach basic study skills. Participants regarded their first-year instructor as one of the most important individuals they encountered during their academic careers. (p.146)”

Participants’ experiences with the FYS instructor in the current investigation were also described as being one of the most important components of the course. Furthermore, they described the instructor as being a strong motivator for their success. Findings from a study (Edwards, 2018), indicated that instructors teaching the FYS courses assist first-year students in developing key learning strategies that they will need to be successful in college. This finding is congruent with the current investigation since participants reported the FYS instructor taught them valuable information and presented resources that will help them throughout college and further in life. Strickland (2018) found that seminar participants cited their instructor as caring as well as using diverse teaching methods to make the FYS course beneficial. These findings align with the present study that reported the instructor’s way of teaching the lessons and keeping them informed was excellent.

Course Components

Course components is a theme that emerged from the analysis of collected data. Factors representing this theme are activities that were assigned to students, their participation in the learning community events, and group projects. This theme also is indicative of the participant's enjoyment of the activities.

Jaijairam, P. (2016) reported that the FYS course can reduce the number of students who obtain poor grades, while increasing the percentage of students who participate in events on campus and engage in group study. Jaijairam's findings are congruent with those of the current study as many students indicated they enjoyed participating in learning community events on campus. They also indicated that by being enrolled in the FYS course they were informed and kept up to date with events on campus. In a study conducted with international students, Senyshyn (2019), found that participants believed the second most useful part of the seminar course were the structured activities. Furthermore, the students indicated their involvement both in and out of class, in study groups and attending events on campus, presented valuable opportunities that eased the transition process. Congruent with the current study, participants stated that participating in activities and outside events assisted with adjusting to the college environment. Kelley (2017) shared results that indicated students perceived the FYS course components to have increased their motivation and confidence. Several affective course components inspired motivation, and a combination of perceptive and affective components increased students' self-confidence. This study aligns with the current research as the participants found the course components to be of value and were perceived to provide the resources to be successful.

One of the most important values of the current FYS course were the benefits received from the course components, which were described by the participants as class activities, learning community events, and group projects. Previous research aligns with the notion.

Friends/Social Network

An important theme that emerged was the participant's ability to build friendships and create social networks with peer in the FYS course. According to participant responses, this aspect of the course was significant. They disclosed that in establishing these relationships, they became part of a support group both in and out of the educational setting. A study by Awang, Kutty, and Ahmad (2014) proposed that students interpret positive peer relationships, as useful support networks in terms of study, as resources of discovery, and sharing. They further stated that students helped each other in various ways and viewed themselves as 'helpful', 'always accessible', and a 'reliable informer.' These findings are in alignment with the current research as participants expressed they view peers as someone they can depend on for assistance, clarification on assignments, and lessons that were misunderstood.

Al-Sheeb, Abdulwahed, & Hamouda (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental investigation with findings conveying that students who participate in the FYS course, revealed a somewhat better rate of interaction with seminar instructors and friends. This occurred also in the present study, as findings were congruent with those of Bothaina, Mahmoud, & Abdel (2018). Participants indicated that the value of the FYS course was that it provided them with the opportunity to establish relationships with faculty and create close friendships with their peers. A mixed-methods study conducted by Clemson (2018), indicated that students who completed a survey revealed an increase in confidence in their ability to interact positively with their peers since beginning college. The primary comment referred to an increase in confidence to make

friends since enrolling at the university. In the current study participants expressed characteristics of being anti-social and that as a result of being enrolled in the FYS course, they learned to be more open to creating friendships.

Arends and Petersen (2018), conducted a study using an educational excursion as a method of establishing a social relationship with peers. Findings revealed the excursion, which is a two-day, off-campus extension of the first-year experience, was beneficial in assisting students navigate through differences and find shared commonalities as a foundation for social assimilation. Although the present research study was not conducted as an excursion, findings align with the notion that building social relationships within the first year of college is beneficial to students' adjustment to a new environment. Building social relationship and friendships creates a sense of belonging for students. For many participants of the current study, they believed that having a sense of belonging both in and out of the classroom setting was important. Strayhorn (2012) claimed that a sense of belonging came from the students' insights regarding social support, feeling connected, and of being accepted, respected, and valued by others in the school community. In the present study, a major factor of building friendships and social networks was to feel accepted and valued. Many of the students expressed how much they valued their new friendships both in an educational and social environment.

The emergence of the theme, Friends/Social Network, was a major factor of the collected data and was highly valued by participants. All of the participants of the current study indicated that establishing friendships and social networks in the FYS course was extremely important because they may not have made the connections otherwise. Research findings align with the notion that belonging to a social community is very beneficial for students and their success.

Knowledge of the Resources

According to the participants in this study, a favorite component of the FYS course was discovering campus resources. Several participants stated that learning of the many campus resources and acquiring useful skills was important to them and contributed to their adjustment to and success in college.

Reiss (2016) utilized two surveys to investigate the impact of the FYS course of a Hispanic Serving Institute. The results from the initial survey indicated that first-year students most often expected their seminar course to inform them about campus resources, help them get involved with on-campus activities, and help them manage their time effectively. Results from the second survey indicated that first-year students most often perceived that the seminar experience course informed them about campus resources, helped them create friendships with other students, helped them feel connected to the University, and informed them about University policies and procedures. Reiss' (2016) results are congruent with the results from the current study as they both discuss the students' expectation of receiving campus resource information provided by the FYS course. Also reported in the current study was that the participants developed time management skills. Nasser (2008) studied the relationship between the student satisfaction and their awareness of university services and programs and found knowledge of resources to be a significant factor in student satisfaction. Similarly, participants in the current study reported that they were pleased with the information provided by the FYS instructor regarding the campus resources because it provided awareness of what is available to them.

Hanssen and Solvoll (2015) examined which campus facilities had the most impact on student satisfaction and found that the most valued facilities were the social areas, the

auditorium, and libraries. The results of the current study found that the most valued facilities on campus were student services, such as the counseling center, financial aid office and the tutoring center. Both studies noted that the resources provided by the university were beneficial to the students' fulfillment of their college education. The participants of the present study also disclosed that they understood and appreciated that the FYS course would teach them skills that would assist them in successfully transitioning into college. In a study by Bosscher (2018), students indicated that they want a first-year program that prepares them for and provides skills to continue their college academic experience after the first-year program has ended.

Acquiring the necessary skills and the awareness of essential campus resources, according to the research, are important to the first-year student's success and continuation of pursuing a college degree. In the theme, Knowledge of Resources, participants acknowledge that the skills and resources acquired in the FYS course are valuable, for not only their freshman year in college but throughout their entire college experience and perhaps into life beyond the collegiate setting.

Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques

The participants in the current study noted their appreciation for study review and forming good study habits and techniques. Many of the participants acknowledged that they gained useful information from the study reviews and study groups provided by the FYS course. In fact, the majority of the student responses indicated that they desired an increase in study time, more in-depth review of Triad lessons, and would prefer that additional study materials be provided in the FYS. Moreover, the participants greatly appreciated the study habits and techniques that they acquired from the course.

In 2016, Reiss conducted a study in which participants credited their First-Year course with encouraging the development of academic skills. Of these skills, the most common were study habits, note taking and time management. Participants in the current study noted that the FYS course taught them great study and time management skills and assisted them in learning how to prepare for exams. Like Reiss' study, participants of the current study also credited the skills taught in the course to being better prepared for the exams in the Triad lecture courses. According to analysis presented in Jajairam (2016), FYS courses may also provide strategies for emphasizing vital information on handouts, and the instructor most likely will present students with techniques that will help them take more efficient notes during lectures. In accordance with these findings, the participants in the present study indicated that the instructor taught them time management skills that helped them prioritize study time, and presented the students with various methods to study, such as creating study cards. Cancado, Reisel, and Walker (2018), performed a study that reported on the impact of study groups in first-year mathematics courses. They found that participation in study groups is significantly associated with increased student retention in engineering studies through the first 3 years of college. Similarly, participants in the current study also revealed that participation in study groups was beneficial and they will continue to utilize this method throughout their college experience.

Structure of the Triad

Several of the participants disclosed that they cherished the smaller classroom size of the FYS course as opposed to the large lecture classroom setting; this resulted in formation the theme, structure of the triad. The participants indicated that the larger classroom size was intimidating and did not allow for relationship building. Within this theme a subtheme formed- relationship of the seminar course to the triad. The participants reported a feeling of disconnect

between the FYS course and the Triad course. For example, several students noted that they received different directives on course assignments by the FYS course instructor versus the Triad course lecturer, which resulted in confusion about the assignment.

In a research study conducted by Reiss (2017), participant responses noted that students were able to interact more personally with the faculty members due to the small size of the course. This resulted in the students viewing faculty as being more approachable outside of the classroom setting. Contrary to Reiss' study and the findings of the current study, Strickland (2018) reported that students in the larger lecture classes reported making connections at greater rates than those in a smaller class setting. This study does not align with the results of the current study as participants in this study noted feeling intimidated by the larger class setting, therefore they felt more comfortable connecting with other students or the instructor in the smaller class setting of the FYS. Reid (2009) noted that the seminar setting should include a limited class size, which is expected to allow for increased interaction. Furthermore, a limited class size provided increased opportunities for student discussion regarding course expectations. Participants of the current study appreciated the smaller classroom setting as it allowed them to have more of a voice and express their feelings freely, without intimidation of the larger class size.

In this theme, a subtheme emerged regarding the connection between the seminar instructor and lecture class professor. Students reported that they would have liked if the two had increased communication with regard to providing directions for class projects. This concept aligns with a study by Clemson (2017), which found that the collaboration between the [FYS] instructor and lecture instructor would provide more resources for the students during their transition to college, thus, reducing the failure rate of the transitions courses.

Findings from this study indicate that the small size of the seminar class provides the participants with the opportunity to build relationships and communicate freely with the instructor and other students. The participants perceived the smaller class size to be a less intimidating environment, which allowed for increased participation. It was also found that a strong relationship between the FYS instructor and the lecture professor would provide the students with the appropriate explanations and resources to be successful.

Transition from High School to College

One of the important findings of the current study was the participants' transition to college and how the FYS course assisted in their adjusting to the new environment. Many of the participants expressed that the course made them feel as though they were still in high school by some of the activities that they participated in; however, they understood that college is a different environment and needed to adjust to the new educational setting.

According to Johnston (2010), consideration of academic, social-psychological, financial, and practical obstacles to college completion are areas that may affect college success. The findings of this study indicate that participants are aware that the FYS course aims to provide skills and resources that will assist in their transition to college and aid in the success of their college endeavors. Findings from a study performed by Leary and DeRosier (2012), suggest a way in which faculty and administrators may structure students' FYS and orientation programs to promote the most positive development and outcomes during students' adjustment to college life. Similarly, the current study also suggests that FYS assists in the transition of the students to the college environment.

The need for significant support services to assist student transition to college is emphasized by the levels of stress and anxiety of the first-year students (Wong, Cheung, Chan,

Ma, & Tang, 2006). In this study, most participants indicated that the use of activities that reminded them of high school assisted in the ease of the transition process. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), indicated that, “FYS participation has significant and substantial positive effects on a student’s successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year (p.403). Participants in the current study indicated that they had positive experiences and the course provided the adequate resources and skills to successfully transition and successfully complete a degree in higher education. The FYS course is useful in assisting first-year students in their transition to the college environment and is important to the retention of students to their second year of higher education.

Limitations

A limitation of my study, potentially affecting the results, is that, of the seven participants, one student was enrolled in a different FYS course section. Perhaps if there was a balance of participants from each of the FYS course sections, the results would have been different. Although all FYS instructors have the same syllabus template, their teaching methods may vary. The instructors teaching style could have affected how participants perceived the course information and experienced class activities. As a result, the participant’s experiences may have been different, based upon the instructors teaching style. The research study was also limited to a single FYS program at a South Texas University. It is possible that students’ experiences would have been different at another university in another region of the country. Different environments and demographic backgrounds may yield results that vary from those found in this study. In addition, there exists an inherent bias in the selection of interview questions as well as the role of the researcher who had previously experienced the FYS course. The interview questions could be interpreted as being leading and therefore could have

influenced student responses. The structure of the interview questions did not leave room for negative responses.

A final limitation of the study involves the responses of participants. It is possible that information provided could be skewed, perhaps by participants wanting to please the researcher. As the researcher, I attempted to establish rapport with participants and create a non-judgmental environment, allowing students to openly express themselves and share their experiences.

Implications for Institutes of Higher Education

The participants of this study provided in-depth information about their personal experiences in the FYS course. Understanding the lived experiences of first-year students in a FYS course is important as it provides useful information that can assist students as they transition into the college setting. As institutions provide an education to students, it is important that university administrators increase their understanding of the issues and challenges that first-year students encounter. It is also important for them to have knowledge of what programs and resources are beneficial for the students. Many of the participants reported that they valued the seminar activities. From these reported experiences, it can be implied that the university administration should continue to focus on active learning and high impact practices in the FYS course.

Overall, the students indicated that they had a positive experience in the FYS course. Many students expressed that they found the FYS course helpful as it informed them about useful campus resources, provided an opportunity for the students to build friendships that were beneficial both socially and educationally, and acquired skills that they will utilize throughout their college experience. Knowing this information implies that the students find the FYS course highly beneficial and the continued offering of the FYS course to first-year students is valuable.

The participants reported many favorable aspects of the FYS course, including: the skills they learned from the course components, the positive and negative components of the triad structure, and the overall benefit of the seminar experience. According to participants, collaborative course activities helped students develop communication, and both educational and life skills that may assist the students in other classes as well as throughout their lives. The participants stressed the importance of time-management and study skills to be successful in college. Considering that the participants heavily described the importance of having enough time in class to study for exams and the importance of having a connection to the triad, it is suggested that institutions consider providing increased interaction between the FYS instructor and the lecture course professors.

One of participants shared that they thought the course was a “waste of time.” The same participant went on to say that she did not do as well academically as she had anticipated, but that she would utilize the study skills she was taught in the FYS course to improve her grades next semester. She and a few other participants stated that they hoped for more hands-on activities to better engage them in the lessons instead of presentations from campus resources. Implementing a more interactive teaching style may promote more interest from the students and may assist in students’ learning and retention of the information taught. Additionally, increased interaction may assist in enhancing the peer-faculty relationship. Subsequently, this study may assist colleges and universities with making adjustments to the first-year student curriculum. As participants of this study reported, the values and skills learned in the FYS course was beneficial to their first-year college experience both inside and outside of the classroom.

Future Research

At the university where the researcher's sample was drawn, first year students are required to participate in two FYS courses during their first year of enrollment. It is recommended that future research consider longitudinal studies extending throughout the entire year of college experience. For example, conducting an interview at the beginning of a student's college experience would allow the researcher to gain insight about initial perceptions of a FYS course. A second interview could be conducted after the students complete their first year at the university. Conducting this interview would provide insight as to whether the students' perceptions have changed and may aid in understanding student needs at this stage of their college experience. Lastly, an interview prior to the student's graduation would assist in understanding how valuable the students found the FYS course and whether or not they continued to utilize the skills and resources they learned at the beginning of their college experience.

With respect to conducting interviews during the span of one semester, it would be beneficial to understand what the students are gaining from the FYS course and if they are utilizing this information. Conducting a pre-test may assist in gaining an understanding of how students felt about taking the course and what skills and resources they were already aware of. Similarly, administering a post-test may assist the researcher to understand how the student's perceptions have changed, what resources and skills they utilized the most, and which may not have been beneficial for them. A study of this nature might also assist with gaining insight from the students about what aspects of the FYS course may be changed to better meet their needs. Further recommended research may involve a qualitative study exploring the experiences of the seminar instructors, as students in the current study believed the instructors to be a tremendous

asset to the total first-year college experience. It would be interesting to understand the instructor's perspective of the FYS course. It may also be helpful to understand the instructor's teaching methods and whether instructors place emphasis on the same assignments that the students perceived to be beneficial.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of first year students in a FYS course. The study was aimed to comprehend the FYS seminar lived experience from the perspective of the students to be aware of the effectiveness of the course. Sources of data that were utilized to understand the participants lived experiences were individual interviews, a focus group, and written statements. The data collection was analyzed and eight themes were identified:

- Satisfaction of the FYS course
- Value of Seminar Instructor
- Core Components
- Friends/Social Network
- Knowledge of Resources
- Study Review/Study Habits and Techniques
- Structure of the Triad
- Transition from High School to College

Additionally, two subthemes emerged from the identified themes. A definition in relation to this study was provided for each theme, as well as direct quotes from the participants expressing their experiences. The results of this study are consistent with the results of previous studies

regarding first-year students in a FYS course. The results of the study provide important information that may be an inspiration for future research into similar intervention studies.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study and the related literature. A review of the literature of First-Year Seminars points to their exponential growth as FYS have been developed at universities, colleges, and community colleges across the United States and abroad. The main reason for implementing First-Year Seminar courses is to retain students and decrease attrition, specifically between the student's freshman and sophomore years of college. An extensive amount of research has taken place assessing the seminar courses. The vast majority of research on First-Year Seminars has employed quantitative designs examining the effects of the seminar courses. Findings indicate that FYS have been effective in helping students transition to college, increase social contacts, learn skills to assist in academic courses, increase grade point average, and help students graduate. A lesser amount of research has been conducted using qualitative designs. Findings from this limited research pool, point to the success of FYS from the students' perspective. Findings from the current study support extant qualitative studies.

It is concluded that FYS are a worthy investment and should be implemented to assist freshman who are transitioning from high school to college. Due to the importance of instructors, programs should employ effective, creative, faculty who have excellent relational skills to teach FYS classes. Courses should help students to become familiar with campus resources and infuse group activities that encourage student interaction. Due to some mixed results pertaining to FYS, research should be continued, emphasizing model FYS programs and courses.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Consent Form.....	106
APPENDIX B: Demographic Data Form	108
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions.....	110
APPENDIX D: Focus Group Statement Prompts.....	111
APPENDIX E: Written Statement Template.....	112
APPENDIX:F: UCCP 1101 First Year Seminar Syllabus.....	113

APPENDIX A: Consent Form

Experiences of College Students' in a First-Year Seminar Course

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project involving your experiences in the first year seminar class. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of college students who are enrolled in a first-year seminar course. . You were selected to be a possible participant because you are currently enrolled in a first-year seminar course.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic paper. You will be asked to participate in an interview at the end of the course and a focus group. The interview and focus group are anticipated to last about 30 minutes. You will be asked to complete a Student Final Written Statement related to your experiences in the First ear Seminar Class. Extra credit for your involvement will be at the discretion of your instructor. To ensure confidentiality, you will be asked to use a pseudonym.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life. Participation is strictly voluntary. While no distress is expected from participation in this study, if during the course of the study you experience any stress due to the nature of the study, please stop and arrange to speak with a counselor. If you do take part in the study but then change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, your participation may provide potential modifications for future first year seminar courses that may enhance the success of the first year seminar courses.

Do I have to participate?

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?

Your name will not appear in any publication or report produced from this study. Records from this study will be kept confidential. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in

any report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only the principal investigator will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the principal investigator will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for three years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Belinda De La Garza (bdlg3@yahoo.com) or Dr. Robert Smith (robert.smith@tamucc.edu).

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?

This research study has been reviewed by the Research Compliance Office and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Research Compliance Office, at (361) 825-2497 or send an email to "IRB@tamucc.edu".

Signature

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study. You also certify that you are 18 years of age or older by signing this form.

Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name: _____

APPENDIX B: Demographic Data Form

Age: _____

Biological Sex: (circle one)

Male Female

Ethnicity: (circle one)

African American	Asian American	Hispanic or Latino(a)	Native American or Alaskan	White, Non- Hispanic	Biracial	Other
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Student Status: (circle one)

First Generation *you are
first person in family to
attend college*

Second Generation
Parent attended college

Third Generation
*Grandparents attended
college*

Academic Load (i.e., how many credit hours are you taking this semester): ____

Living Situation: (circle one)

Live on campus
with a roommate

Live off-
campus with a
roommate

Live on-
campus by
yourself

Live off-
campus by
yourself

Live at home
with family

Working Situation (circle one):

Not currently
employed

On-campus employment
(work-
study/assistantship)

Off-campus
employment
(30+ hrs.
/week)

Off-campus
employment (less than
30 hrs, per week)

Financial Aid Status (circle one):

Pell! Grant Student Loan Scholarship No financial aid Other: _____

Performance rating (circle one)

I would rate my overall performance in college as 1 –low; 2 –below average; 3 –average;
4 –above average; 5 –excellent

An estimate of my grade average is; (circle one of the numbers below)

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 1.00 + between a D and a C |
| 2 | 2.00 + between a C and a B |
| 3 | 3.00 + between a B and an A |
| 4 | 4 point averages an A |

Thank you

APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

- Tell me about your experiences in the first-year seminar course. (In general)
 - Specifically about the seminar class.
 - Would you like to add anything else?
- What are your most memorable experiences in the first-year seminar course?
 - What did you like most?
 - What would you like to have more of?
- How will you use what you learned in the first-year seminar course throughout your college experience?
- What would you like to see in future first-year seminar courses?
- What else would you like to share about your first-year seminar course experience?

APPENDIX D: Focus Group Statement Prompts

1. I liked the seminar course because...
2. I will use this from my seminar course experience...
3. The seminar course would be better if...
4. My best experience in the seminar course was...
5. If I was teaching the seminar course I would...
6. The seminar course would be really great if it covered...
7. The seminar course would be phenomenal if it covered...

APPENDIX E: Written Statement Template

Final Written Statement

1. How would you describe your experiences in the First Year Seminar class?

2. What do you remember most about the First Year Seminar class?

3. How will you apply what you learned in the First Year Seminar class?

APPENDIX F: UCCP 1101 First Year Seminar Syllabus

UCCP 1101: First-Year Seminar I (Triad/Tetrad/Dyad ?)

Department of Undergraduate Studies ~ Fall 2017

Instructor Name: YOUR NAME

Office Location: FC ?

Office Phone: 825-XXXX

Office Hours: TBD

Email Address: first.last@xyz.edu

Website: <http://www.xyz.edu/wiki/FirstLast/Home>

Course Information: UCCP 1101.XXX TIME LOCATION

Course Description

First-Year Seminar is a two-semester course sequence required of all full-time first-year students. As the central component of a learning community, Seminar helps students achieve success, academically and socially, as they make the transition to the university. Seminar provides students with opportunities for meaningful interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters as well as timely, constructive feedback about their learning. Students are immersed in an active learning environment with a purposefully integrated and contextualized curriculum, fostering the development of transferable skills and engaging them in the academic community. In UCCP 1101, students are introduced to college level work and responsibilities, and provided with appropriate support and resources to navigate their first semester.

Course Objectives

The objectives of First-Year Seminar I are to advance the six intellectual and practical skills defined by the Texas Core Curriculum:

- Critical Thinking Skills
- Communication Skills
- Empirical and Quantitative Skills
- Teamwork
- Social Responsibility
- Personal Responsibility

Student Learning Outcomes

- Reflect and integrate learning from learning community courses, including development of critical thinking skills, social and/or personal responsibility.
- Interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters through daily activities and discussions.
- Demonstrate competence of knowledge related to the learning community discipline(s) in a public forum.

Evaluation

PORTFOLIOS – 30%

Two portfolios, each worth 15% of your course grade, will be due during the semester. The midterm portfolio will be due on **TBD (Week 7/8)**, while the final portfolio will be due on **TBD (Week 14/15 or Final Exam week)**. See the online portfolio descriptions for more information.

PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE – 30%

It is vital that you attend each and every class. There is nothing that we will do in here that is not important to your success in this learning community. To encourage attendance, I will be taking up something from you (daily writings, quizzes, group tasks) every time we meet. However, you are allowed **two** absences. Use them well. After the second absence, any extra absences will affect your grade.

INTEGRATED ACTIVITIES – 30%

Most of the work we will do in this course will relate to your other courses in the learning community. To reward and encourage success on learning community assignments and projects, many will also count for credit in Seminar.

FIRST-YEAR SYMPOSIUM – 10%

All learning community students will participate in First-Year Symposium (FYS) at the end of the Fall 2017 semester. First-Year Symposium is an opportunity for students to share their academic work with the campus community. More information will be provided in the form of class discussion and an online assignment description.

Important Dates

Tuesday, September 12	Last day to register/add a class
November 22-24	Reading Day/Thanksgiving Holiday
Monday, November 27	Last day to drop a class
Wednesday, December 6	Last day of classes
December 8-14	Final Exams

Online Schedule

A detailed schedule for this course can be found at:

<http://www.tamucc.edu/wiki/FirstLast/Fall2017ClassPlans>

Late Work

Any major assignment (such as a portfolio) will be accepted late, at a penalty of a half a letter grade per calendar day late. Please contact me in advance if there are extenuating circumstances that will cause you to miss a major due date. There will be no make-ups for missed daily grades.

Electronic Device Policy

Please refrain from the use of electronic devices during class, as it is distracting to not only you, but also to your instructor and peers. Laptops will be permitted for particular activities as deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Academic Honesty

University students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the highest standards of academic honesty. Academic misconduct for which a student is subject to penalty includes all forms of cheating, such as illicit possessions of examinations or examination materials, forgery, or plagiarism.

Notice to Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please call or visit Disability Services at (361) 825-5816 in CCH 116.

Notice to Student Veterans

If you are a returning veteran and are experiencing cognitive and/or physical access issues in the classroom or on campus, please contact the Disability Services office for assistance at (361) 825-5816.

Dropping a Class

I hope that you never find it necessary to drop this or any other class. However, events can sometimes occur that make dropping a course necessary or wise. ***Please consult with your academic advisor, the Financial Aid Office, and me before you decide to drop this course.*** Should dropping the course be the best course of action, you must initiate the process to drop the course by going to the Student Services Center and filling out a course drop form. Just stopping

attendance and participation WILL NOT automatically result in your being dropped from the class. **November 27** is the last day to drop a class with an automatic grade of “W” this term.

Grade Appeal Process

As stated in University Rule 13.02.99.C2.01, Student Grade Appeal Procedures, a student who believes that his or her final grade reflects academic evaluation which is arbitrary, prejudiced, or inappropriate in view of the standards and procedures outlined in this class syllabus may appeal the grade given for the course. A student with a complaint about a grade is encouraged to first discuss the matter with the instructor. If the student believes the matter is not satisfactorily resolved at the student-faculty level, an appeal of the final grade in the class may be submitted, in writing, to the Chair of the Department of Undergraduate Studies. For complete details, please visit: http://academicaffairs.tamucc.edu/rules_procedures/index.html.