

COLLEGE SUCCESS: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF STUDENTS'
BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR PLAYED IN THEIR
RETENTION AND SUCCESS AS THEY PERSIST TOWARD GRADUATION

by

ZEKETRA M. GRANDY

(Under the Direction of ELAINE ADAMS)

ABSTRACT

The first-year seminar was developed to help students successfully navigate the first year of college and persist to graduation. The concept of the first-year seminar is to address the challenges students face in their first year and help them adjust to the expectations of college life both academically and socially. Past studies have mostly been quantitative in nature and have not gone deeper to understand the impact of the first-year seminar on student persistence to graduation using qualitative methods. Guided by the phenomenological research approach, this study aimed to add to the qualitative literature on first-year seminars. The study explored the lived experiences of college students who took the course, remained enrolled, and persisted toward graduation. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 5 students, who were still enrolled at a post-secondary institution in the south examining their beliefs about the role of the first-year seminar in their college retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. Participants described feeling that the first-year seminar had no influence on their

retention and decision to persist toward graduation, I was able to find evidence that the first-year seminar did have a positive influence on students' success in college.

INDEX WORDS: first-year seminar, persistence, success, graduation, retention

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ZEKETRA M. GRANDY

BA, MS, Arkansas State University, 2005, 2008

M.Ed., University of Arkansas, 2013

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ZEKETRA M. GRANDY

Major Professor:	Elaine Adams
Committee:	Robert Branch
	John Mativo

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Interim Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2020

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mom. She is no longer present with me on earth, but she still inspires me daily. I give her credit for the woman I have become. I hope she is smiling down on me and proud. I love you mom.

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None of this would be possible without the love and encouragement of my amazing family and friends. I want to acknowledge their unwavering and unconditional support throughout this journey. Thank you for taking this journey with me. It has been long, but it has been worth the ride. I love you all tremendously.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For several decades retention and persistence to graduation has been the primary goal of higher education institutions (Reason, 2009). Retention and graduation rates are significant metrics when assessing progress and success, using first-time freshmen as study participants (Millea, Willis, & Molina, 2018). Universities lose thousands of dollars in tuition revenue when students leave before degree completion. Students lose potential for better career options and higher earnings. Success of the university and the student goes hand in hand (Millea et al., 2018). Factors affecting a student's decision to withdraw before completion of the first year maybe influenced by institutional factors, external factors, or specific attributes of the student.

Inquiry into reasons students persist began in the 1980s (Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Tinto (1987) called attention to the importance of helping students adapt to their new environment and academic expectations to prevent withdrawal during the first year. The need for changes in the way institutions dealt with the first-year of college stemmed from the changing profile of incoming freshmen, poor academic preparedness, federal recruiting and retention mandates, changing demographics, and commitment to improving the quality of education received in the first-year (Gardner, 1986; Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Precollege characteristics, academic preparedness, and social experiences impact first-year students differently. Differences in goals, motivation, and

academic achievement affect how likely students are to persist through college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The first year of college is a critical period for first-time college students. This is the time where attitudes, identities, goals, beliefs, values, adjustments, and college success are influenced the most (Rentz, 1988). The impact and importance of the first-year seminar has long been recognized in studies conducted on the topic (e.g. Barefoot & Gardner, 1998; Cuseo, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These studies highlighted the need to support students in dealing with the transition to the college community and adapting to the rigors of college life (Astin, 1984; McPherson & Schapiro, 2006). Positive correlation was established between participating in the seminar and outcomes related to retention, graduation rates, academic success, and social and academic integration (Astin, 1993; Barefoot & Gardner, 1998; Bean, 1990; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). McPherson and Schapiro (2006) found that non-cognitive factors are also influenced by participating in the first-year seminar. Such factors are increased peer interaction, participation in campus clubs and organizations, developing a sense of belonging, and frequently using student support services (Astin, 1984; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Martin, Swartz-Kulstad, & Madson, 1999).

First-year seminars are not a recent curriculum innovation in higher education (Gordon, 1989). After losing and then regaining popularity, first-year seminars have gained a strong hold in American higher education. Over the past three decades, the first-year seminar has become a commonly used tool in the learning and development experiences of first-year college students (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). More

colleges and universities are implementing first-year experience programs, with the first-year seminar as their centerpiece (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

Barefoot (1992) defined the purpose of the first-year seminar as a course intended to enhance the academic and social integration of first-year students. The common goal of first-year seminars is to increase academic performance and persistence through academic and social integration with the long-term goal of increased degree attainments (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). First-year seminars vary in design across institutions; however, these courses share some of the same general structural elements as the driving force for addressing persistence and degree completion (Greenfield et al., 2013).

The three most reported objectives in practice of the seminar are developing academic skills, developing a connection with the institution, and providing an orientation to campus resources and services (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Classes are kept small to foster teaching methods that promote engagement, meaningful discussions, and encourage collaboration among students (Swing, 2002). Topics typically include campus resources, study skills, academic planning, and critical thinking. The focus is on successful transition into college life. No matter the type or size, the main goal of first-year seminars across institutions is assisting students in their academic and social development (Upcraft, Barefoot, & Gardner, 2005).

After teaching a first-year seminar course for a year, my personal observations and feedback from the students led to my interest in conducting the following study. What I encountered from each class of students was different. The reactions were mixed concerning the need for the course. Some thought they could and would benefit, citing

the making connections assignment and other lessons promoting engagement as the reason. Others questioned why the course was needed and considered it a waste of time.

Although, the seminar, worth three credit hours, was designed to be fail-proof, several students failed each semester. I began to wonder if the seminar, designed as an early intervention strategy to keep students enrolled past the first year, was effective. There is a lot of research about the first-year seminar, which is outlined in chapter 2. However, I wanted to know about the impact of the first-year seminar from the points-of-view of students, who have taken the course, remained enrolled consistently, and persisted toward graduation.

Statement of the Problem

The common goal of first-year seminars is increased academic performance and retention accomplished through academic and social integration (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Reports of findings from studies conducted on the first-year seminar concluded that there is a positive relationship between participation in the seminar and expected student outcomes for the course such as enhanced freshman success (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Keup and Barefoot's (2005) longitudinal study also indicated that the first-year seminar is effective in facilitating overall college success. Other expectations include enhanced retention aided by knowledge about campus activities and services through the first-year seminar (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Additionally, more meaningful interactions with faculty and other students as well as involvement in extracurricular activities occurred more frequently (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Results from a study by Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, and Plumb (2016) found that persistence and success rates improved for students who took the first-year seminar. Although, positive results

have been reported, few qualitative studies (i.e., Demirian, 2010; Reid, 2009) have been conducted to seek a deeper understanding of students' experiences regarding the impact of the first-year seminar and its role in their retention as they persist toward graduation.

Andreatta (1998) found that although studies have used qualitative methods to gather students' perceptions and experiences, those studies have focused only on short-term effects. In those studies, students were usually interviewed, and data collected in the last few weeks of the semester in which the first-year seminar was taken (Rhodes & Carifio, 1999). Therefore, it is important to examine the long-term impact of the first-year seminar to gain a deeper understanding of its role. One way to examine the long-term impact was from the perspectives of students who had taken the course, remained enrolled in college, and were approaching graduation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of students who had taken the first-year seminar, remained enrolled, and were persisting toward graduation. Limited studies have been conducted exploring students' perspectives; therefore, further qualitative studies are needed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1993) found that examining student retention programs such as the first-year seminar is important to capturing the complexity and deeper understanding of the experience from the students from their points of view. This study may contribute to the existing literature on first-year seminars and influence research on continued efforts to help students face the challenges of the first year of college. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) asserted that more qualitative studies will provide greater sensitivity to the complexities of college impact than traditional quantitative studies.

This study sought to understand the experiences of seniors attending one post-secondary institution in the south and the role the first-year seminar played in the students' retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. The study provides a basis for further examination of the role of the first-year seminar through qualitative methods. The findings of the study will contribute to supporting or challenging existing literature and influence future research on first-year seminars and student persistence. Additionally, this study adds insight into the influence of Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1975) student integration theory. Each theory serves as the standard for developing theoretical foundations for college persistence and are widely cited in research related to first-year seminars (Montero, 2009).

Research Questions

1. How do participants describe the first-year seminar's impact on their overall college experience as they persist to graduation?
2. How do participants describe their precollege experiences and transition to college?
3. How do participants describe their involvement in campus activities and support services?
4. How do participants describe their social and academic connections and their commitment to the institution?

Research Design

The study used qualitative interviews that were exploratory and guided by the phenomenological approach to research. Phenomenology is concerned with the descriptive experiences of a phenomenon by an individual (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, I was more focused on getting first-hand descriptions of lived experiences than finding out why something occurred. These descriptions present how the

participants experienced the phenomenon. I sought to find the essence rather than measurements (Hirsch, 2015). By definition phenomenology is the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from a first-person point of view (Smith, 2007). Therefore, the task of phenomenological research is to uncover the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Hirsch, 2015).

The study focused on the wholeness of experiences and the inseparable relationship of the phenomenon and the person experiencing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The primary objective of phenomenological studies is to explicate the meaning, structure, and the essence of the lived experiences of one individual or group around a specific phenomenon of interest (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). The use of qualitative methods allowed for a greater understanding of students' experiences of the phenomenon of interest, which is whether the first-year seminar played a role in students' retention and success as they persisted toward graduation.

The phenomenon of study was not being measured or defined through a lens of accepted reality; instead, an understanding of how participants made sense of experiences was sought. A potential disadvantage was researcher bias (Patton, 2002). To combat this issue a statement of bias, beliefs, and values related to the phenomenon of study has been provided as suggested by Janesick (2011). The process of collecting and analyzing data can be very time consuming (Janesick, 2011; Patton, 2002). Atlas.ti software was used to help shorten the data analysis timeframe. A third disadvantage to this study was the amount of time that has passed since the participants had taken the first-year seminar. Students may not have been able to recall some details or describe how the seminar was linked to retention and their persistence toward graduation. An advantage to using

qualitative interviews was gaining first-hand knowledge about the experiences of the participants through broad and open-ended questions (Maxwell, 2013; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Another advantage was that the results of phenomenological studies provide direct descriptions of experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

It is vital for researchers to conduct qualitative studies in a rigorous manner that provides meaningful results (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The data analysis should be precise and consistent and provide enough detail for the reader to determine if the process is credible. Good qualitative research is dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four constructs of trustworthiness were applied to establish credibility. These four constructs are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility is determined when the audience is confronted with the experience and they recognize it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Member checking was used to bolster credibility of the study. These checks helped to establish the accuracy of the data by having the participants to read the interview transcripts to determine whether the words matched what they intended to say, even with the use of a tape recorder (Shenton, 2004). Participants were invited to review their transcribed interviews to check for errors and to be sure what they intended to convey is accurate. Transferability refers to the generalizability of the study and is concerned with applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). It is found in the thick rich descriptions taken from the participants' experiences and the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It is important that thick descriptions of the phenomenon are provided to give readers a proper understanding of it and allow them to make comparisons of instances of the phenomenon to described to

those they have seen (Shenton, 2004). Dependability establishes the research process as logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). It means consistency of the analysis process and accepted standards are used (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In order to address dependability, the processes in the study have been described in detail. The depth allows the reader to assess whether or not proper research practices have been followed (Shenton, 2004). Confirmability is recognized when credibility, transferability, and dependability have all been achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). An audit trail, which provides transparency in the research process, can show both dependability and confirmability in qualitative research (Roulston, 2010). This was accomplished in providing detailed descriptions to allow the readers to trace the process of the research through each step, through procedures described, and the decisions made over the course of the study.

The desired population was college students, who enrolled as first-year students, completed a first-year seminar, remained enrolled consistently, and were persisting toward graduation at the time of the study. Qualitative interviews conducted face-to-face were used to collect data. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Participants were provided with an explanation of the purpose of the study and the process in a consent form that they were asked to sign before the study began. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for the data analysis process for which thematic analysis was used. It is most commonly used in qualitative studies (Roulston, 2010); and is another way to ensure credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). This process followed Braun and Clark's (2006) six phase guide as a framework. The six phases are getting familiar the

data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and the final write-up (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Pascarella and Terenzini's review of theoretical frameworks, (1991; 2005) concluded that there are multiple forces in multiple settings influencing student learning and persistence. Similar to Terenzini and Reason (2005) this study uses a theoretical framework and conceptual model, shown in Figure 1, based on Astin's (1984, 1993) student involvement model and Tinto's (1975; 1993) student integration model. The theoretical framework synthesized these models, while examining the effects of the first-year seminar on student persistence. The conceptual model was created to highlight key factors from each theory believed to be the core influences on persistence in college students. As with Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005) the goal was to encourage higher education researchers, specifically those examining the role of the first-year seminar on college experience to look at all factors affecting how students persist to graduation.

According to Tinto's (1975) student integration theory students who can integrate completely into the college environment both socially and academically has decreased their likelihood of leaving the institution. It is important to focus on the first year of enrollment when applying the student integration theory (Tinto, 1999). Providing information and advice, support, involvement, and learning are all institutional conditions, which promote persistence and retention. Additionally, Tinto (1999) believed that students who were more actively involved were more likely to remain at the institution past the first year.

Astin's (1984) student development theory asserted that students learn best when they are involved in both the social and academic sides of college. He believed more student involvement both in and out of the classroom created better learning experiences (Astin, 1984). The theory of student involvement can be used to improve learning environments and enrich student development (Astin, 1999). The core concept of the theory focuses on student input, their experiences, and the outcome (Astin, 1999).

Both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) placed emphasis on student involvement to fully integrate and persist to graduation. Much of the analysis conducted on persistence and retention has been guided by these (Hicks & Lewis, 2015). Each theorist thought that persistence and a greater commitment to college was achieved through social and academic integration (Braxton, 2000). Initially, first-year seminars were not based on student development theories, however these theories are used to measure and justify retention strategies, such as the first-year seminar. Each of these theories plays some part in the theoretical foundations for college persistence (Montero, 2009).

Using these theories as a guide, I was able to draw understandings from the descriptions shared by the interview participants. The conceptual model assisted me with identifying emerging themes, coding, naming categories, and explaining the data collected from participants' responses. I was able to explore how the students made sense of their experiences based on assertions made by Tinto (1975; 1993) and Astin (1984; 1993). The conceptual model shown in figure 1 incorporates the constructs believed to be the greatest influences of persistence.

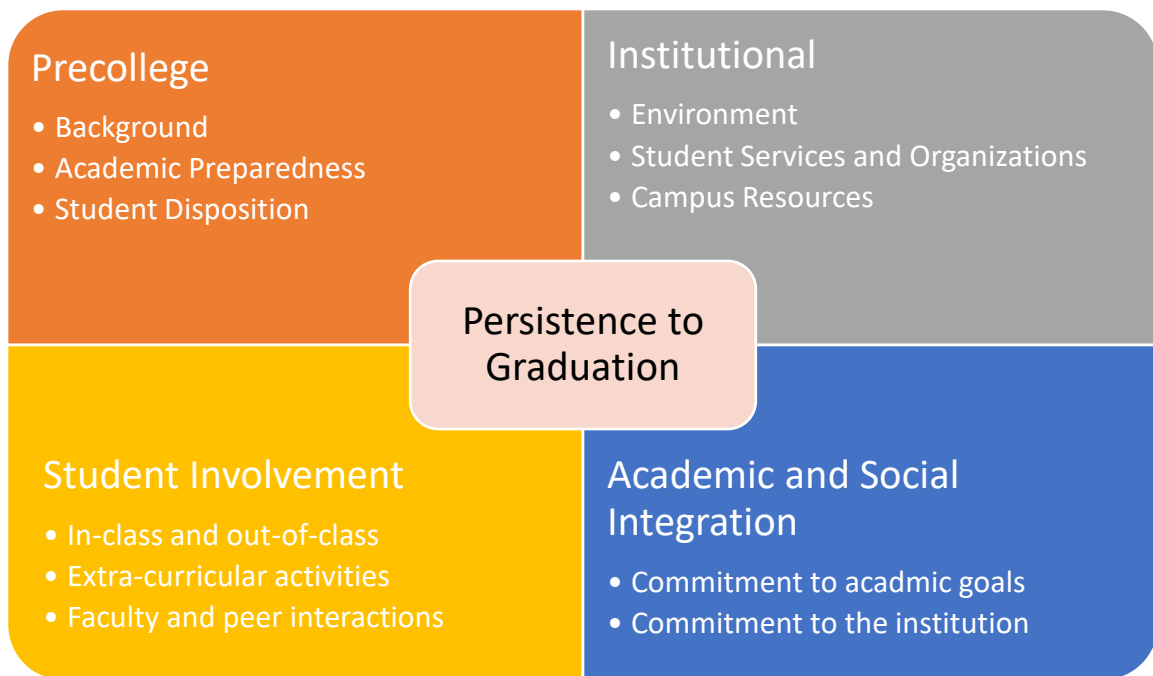


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Influences on Student Retention and Success

Significance of the Study

In terms of significance, this study answered the need for more qualitative studies of the first-year seminar. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) asserted that more qualitative studies will provide greater sensitivity to the complexities of college impact than traditional quantitative studies. This study also provided context for improving practice and extending knowledge of the first-year seminar course through examination of students' experiences. Tinto (2012) stated that a university has a responsibility to help students persist to graduation and the results of this study were able to provide insight into the continued efforts to successfully assist students in persisting past the first year to graduation.

The main goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how the participants of the study experienced the first-year seminar and its long-term impact. The study asked students approaching the end of their college career to discuss what role the first-year

seminar played in their retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. Instead of focusing on short-term results of interviewing students at the end of the semester the course is taken, the focus was on whether or not the students believed the first-year seminar gave them the tools needed for retention and success as they approached degree completion.

Assumptions of the Study

Trustworthiness of the study was answered through the research design. The constructs of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba, (1985) were applied. The constructs are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility is determined when the audience is confronted with the experience and they recognize it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Credibility was established through member checks. Participants were given a copy of their interview transcript to determine if what they intended was expressed accurately. Transferability refers to generalizability of the study and is concerned with applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was established through the thick-rich descriptions given by the participants about their experiences and the research process. Dependability establishes the research process as logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Bagley, 2004). Detailed outlining of the research process established dependability. Confirmability is recognized when credibility, transferability, and dependability have all been achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Providing an audit trail through detailed documentation of the research process and decision made throughout the study established confirmability.

The use of qualitative interviews is an appropriate method for gaining detailed descriptions about how the participants' experienced the phenomenon of study. Qualitative interviews rely on rapport between the interviewer and the participant; therefore, each interview was unique (deMarrais, 2004). The open-ended questions provoked thick descriptions of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. The participants were given copies of their transcribed interviews as a means of establishing credibility through member checking. Based on the member checks the answers provided during the interview by the participants are what they intended to express. None of the participants indicated that changes were needed. The sampling criteria assured that each of the participants have experienced the phenomenon of interest similarly. Categories of interest and themes emerged from participant responses and were used to develop a more profound understanding of the phenomenon. Recordings of the interviews were helpful in reviewing the data collected and creating an accurate reporting. Atlas.ti software program proved useful in doing initial coding and creating categories of data. Details are provided in chapter 3.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations of the study to consider. First, the study was conducted at one post-secondary institution in the south. The number of participants was small. Initially, the study sought 8-10 participants. After, reschedules and then cancellations, the final sample included 5 participants. Transferability refers to generalizability of the study and is concerned with applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017) therefore, these findings may be unique to this institution, student participants, and its first-year seminar, and may not apply to other first-year seminars at other institutions.

Because the sample had the minimum suggested for qualitative interviews, any generalizations made may apply only to the students who participated. Although, the interview questions are open ended, participants may not have been completely forthcoming with their honest perceptions and opinions. Participants were asked to recall information from the very beginning of their college experience and may not have been able recall everything well. Additionally, this study did not focus on the specific characteristics of the participants such as their gender, race, and backgrounds. This is important because previous studies outline the ways in which these characteristics affect the first year of college enrollment (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Sciarra, Seirup, & Sposato, 2016).

Another limitation to this study is the absence of a second credibility criteria. Only member checking was used. Although, strongly suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a vital technique for establishing credibility in qualitative data it has drawbacks. Participants may choose not to participate in member checking. If participants agree to participate, they may concur with the researcher's findings without reviewing. Only 3 of the 5 participants of this study agreed to participate in the member checking process. Each of them responded that they had no changes or additions, saying what was communicated during the interviews is what was intended.

Lastly, as the researcher, I am an influence that may create limitations with the study. I am not necessarily speaking about my own personal feelings or opinions about the value of the first-year seminar, rather I am speaking about my ability to establish trust and build a rapport with the participants. While my influence may have been minimal,

the openness of the participants depended on how comfortable they felt talking to me and answering the questions I asked.

Operational Definitions

1. **Academic and Social Integration:** Students integrate academically and socially to college life, committing to their academic goals and the institution (Tinto, 1975).
2. **First-Year Students:** Students who are enrolled in and attending a post-secondary institution for the first time (Barefoot, 2005).
3. **First-Year Seminar:** A course designed to help students to develop academically and socially and in their transition to college (Hunter & Linder, 2005).
4. **Retention:** Refers to the continuous enrollment of students from one semester or year to the next (Fowler & Luna, 2009).
5. **Student Involvement:** Refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy students invest in their college experience including academics, extracurricular activities, and peer and faculty interaction (Astin, 1984).
6. **Persistence:** The act of an individual student persisting to a goal (Reason, 2009).

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation contains six chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction and brief background of the study. It includes the statement of the problem, purpose and signification of the study, summary of the theoretical framework, research questions,

assumptions, limitations, and definition of terms. Chapter two is a review of relevant literature key to the phenomenon of study including a historical overview, findings from past studies, related theories, and a detailed description of the theoretical framework. Chapter three describes the research design and methodology used, including participant selection, data analysis and collection, establishing trustworthiness, and ethical standards. Chapter four provides profiles of the participants and detailed narratives from the interviews. Chapter five provides a description of the findings from the interviews. Chapter six provides a discussion of the findings along with discussing implications for practice and recommendations future research of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an attempt to increase student retention and success, over the years, colleges and universities have tried implementing several strategies such as supplemental instruction, academic advising, and first-year seminars (Permzadian & Crede, 2015). First-year seminars were developed as a way to provide new students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to overcome the challenges faced in the first year of college (Permzadian & Crede, 2015). These first-year seminars are designed to help students successfully integrate into and adjust to the college environment in the first year (Jaijairam, 2016). Within the structure of the course first-year students are introduced to school, life, and career success skills meant to have a long-term impact and promote continued enrollment through graduation (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013).

The significance of the first year of college on students and the institutions has long been recognized (Buyarski & Landis, 2014). Over the past few decades, first-year seminars have found homes at colleges and universities of every type and size (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Institutions believe these seminars play a vital role in student success. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005) provide an overview of the research and an agenda for future research. As the number of studies done about first-year seminars increase, substantial evidence points to an increase in persistence and student success after taking first-year seminars (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Historical Overview

For over a hundred years, post-secondary professionals have acknowledged that freshmen face unique challenges. Boston College pioneered the first freshman orientation class in 1888 and then Iowa State in 1900 (Gardner, 1986). Each institution recognized the need to address the unique needs and experiences of incoming students. Reed College in Portland, Oregon was the first post-secondary institution to offer an orientation course for credit in 1911.

As the course gained momentum, by 1915-16, four other American colleges followed Reed College and offered first-year orientation courses for credit. By 1925-26, eighty-two American colleges and universities also began offering the course for credit including Princeton, Indiana, Stanford, Northwestern, Johns Hopkins, and Ohio State (Brubacher & Rudy, 1956). The 20th century saw an increase in competition for students, so institutions began to focus on meeting the needs of entering students in an effort to make their institutions more appealing (Gardner, 1986). By 1928, well over a hundred colleges and universities offered semester long freshmen orientation courses (Gordon, 1989). By 1938, nine out ten newly enrolled freshmen were required to take the course (Gordon, 1989). The course, however, began to lose momentum as the 1930s ended in both number and scope. This was due largely in part to faculty objection to offering the course for credit believing the course to be remedial and non-academic in scope (Gordon, 1989).

According to Gordon (1989), the course nearly disappeared in the 1960s, with colleges leaving students without proper guidance in navigating their first year of college. Renewed interest came about in the 1970s (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Concern for the

quality of undergraduate education sparked new interest in exploring the impact of the first year on newly entering students. Schools once again, began to seek ways to help new students transition successfully into college life (Gordon, 1989).

The start of the contemporary first-year seminar is associated with the beginning of the first-year experience or FYE course started at the University of South Carolina (Hunter & Murray, 2007). In 1972, the modern-day form of the first-year seminar was born after Thomas Jones, President of the University of South Carolina (USC), at the time, called for the development of innovative ways to rethink undergraduate education (Bigger, 2005). In 1986, Gardner found that freshman who completed the freshman orientation courses were retained at a higher rate than those who did not take the course.

John Garner, who was a history professor at the time, assisted in developing the FYE (Schroeder, 2003). Gardner viewed the FYE as a national and international effort to improve the first year and overall college experience of students by rethinking how the first year was organized and executed (Schroeder, 2003). Over time, the necessary efforts to retain the students recruited had increased because of declining revenues and higher enrollment standards. Additionally, the changing nature of the term “freshman” had been noted due to the increased number of non-traditional, older, married, and working students enrolling (Gardner, 1986). Institutions realized they must meet the needs of incoming students who are considerably different from the traditional freshman, including those entering after high school with a poor academic foundation (Bigger, 2005).

The increased demand for the course led to USC establishing the National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience in 1986 (Hickinbottom-Brawn &

Burns, 2015). This encouraged research, publication, and the identification of best practices, in addition to trainings and conferences. The National Resource Center is now recognized as the leading source of information about the first-year experience (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). With the growth of the first-year seminar came the additional establishment of the Policy Center on the First Year of College at Brevard College in North Carolina in 1999 (Bigger, 2005). The Policy Center on the First Year of college, now known as the John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, was established as an extension of the resource center.

Both organizations work collaboratively to address the issues concerning first-year students (Bigger, 2005). Although first-year seminars vary in form and function across institutions, they have become quite prevalent (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Most share a common goal of aiding students in developing skills needed to persist to attain their college degrees (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

The persistence of first-year students has long been a topic of interest in American college and universities (Crissman -Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Research reveals that the largest proportion of students leaving an institution occurs during the first year of enrollment. According to Gardner (1986) institutions begin to change how they dealt with first-year students because of an increased understanding of the need to challenge and support students admitted. Attention needed to be directed at students' needs as they adapted to the new environment (Gardner, 1986).

The Policy Center on the First Year of College (2002) conducted a study and found that 94% of American accredited four-year colleges and universities offer a first-year seminar to 90% or more of their first-year students. Most are offered for credit and

are mandatory, while others may be non-credit or optional instead of a requirement. First-year seminars are usually offered for the full semester. However, most two-year institutions will typically offer them for only part of the semester in a mini course (Porter & Swing, 2006).

It has been decades since the inception of the freshmen orientation course and the eventual development of the modern day first-year seminar movement. Since then, first-year seminars have been well integrated into the American higher education system (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Upcraft et al., 2005). The course serves as a crucial component of the movement for college student retention past the first year and persistence to graduation. The course is offered at almost every American college and university and serves as the foundation of first-year initiative programs (Upcraft et al., 2005).

The growth of the first-year seminar is attributed to the unprecedented rise in enrollments at post-secondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). By 1995, eighty-two percent of participating post-secondary institutions reported a significant focus on the first-year experience (Gardner, 2001). The first-year seminar has become a mainstay in higher education in the 21st century. The specific nature of the course varies across institutions with the common goal of improving student retention (Barefoot, 2005).

The First Year

Colleges and universities began focusing on the first year of college to retain students and improve graduation rates (Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, 2002). The first year of college is the most critical to the undergraduate experience. It is a time of transition. This transition presents challenges to academic and social integration into the

college environment (Crissman-Ishler & Schreiber, 2002). During this time students develop learning skills, begin to adjust to the rules and practices of their environments, and build relationships with other students and faculty at the institution (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005). Unfortunately, some students withdraw from their institutions voluntarily in the first six to eight weeks of the academic year (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1986; Tinto, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005).

Some of the issues that students deal with are choosing a major, learning to navigate higher level curriculum, time management, and building new relationships (Gardner, 2001). Entering freshmen have little to no academic planning experience. Many of them are not aware of the resources and opportunities available to the (Astin, 1975, 1999; Braxton, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005).

Traditional aged first-year students face shifts in their identity. There is a new-found level of independence as they move from adolescence to adulthood. They also face being separated from family and past peer groups (Hanger, Goldenson, Weinberg, Schmitz-Sciberski & Monzon, 2012). Those most at risk for failing academically or early withdrawal are those who enter the institution with poor academic preparation. These students likely performed poorly prior to transitioning (Terrion & Daoust, 2012).

The expectations and experiences of students during their college life are influenced by many variables (Nadelson et al., 2013). Students transitioning into their first year at an institution of higher education bring with them a range of their own expectations (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). Students' projected image of the institution upon arrival set the tone for these expectations (Nadelson et al., 2013). A student's

expectations may not be aligned with the mission and vision of the institution (Crisp et al., 2009). The reality of time, effort, and financial implications make their expectations different from their actual experiences (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000).

Individual personality traits, self-concept, and intrinsic motivation are likely to affect a student's successful integration into college (Andrade, 2008). While the decision to attend college is also influenced by these factors, it is the academic experience that greatly influences their decision to remain enrolled. Many students are unprepared for college. They enter postsecondary institutions lacking the skills, experiences, and training necessary to integrate successfully (Schrader & Brown, 2008).

Transitioning from high school to college is recognized as a period of significant change in a student's life (Boroch & Hope, 2009). To ease the transition, post-secondary institutions provide support by facilitating student social connections, academic success, and connecting to the institution (Bottoms & Young, 2008). Transitional interventions such as the first-year seminar are used to target the academic and non-academic needs of students (Bailey & Karp, 2003). They are designed to improve students' academic performance and social engagement with the purpose of retaining them through graduation (Braxton, 2002; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft et al., 2005).

Persistence

The influential work of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), Astin (1984, 1993), Kuh (2007), and Hu (2011) have been used as a base by colleges and universities to study factors that affect persistence (Sciarra et al., 2016). From these studies they have been able to create and implement programs that support student success, transition, and

persistence. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) found that the following variables are included in most persistence and retention models. These variables are student background characteristics, institutional characteristics, interaction with peers, faculty, and staff members, student perception of learning environment and quality of effort devoted to activities (Kuh et al., 2007; Sciarra et al., 2016).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that higher integration into social systems of campus life had positive effects on persistence and eventual degree completion. Participation in extracurricular activities and the quality of interaction with their peers had a significant influence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The following variables are also noted by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) as impacting persistence. Such variables are academic performance in the first-year, academic support programs like the first-year seminar, financial aid and expenses, faculty and peer interaction, residence, learning communities, and level of social involvement.

Tinto (1975) focused on how academic and social integration of the student impacted their decision to persist. Tinto (1987) looked at how other factors such as transitioning from high to college, separation from home, and assimilation into the college culture impacted persistence. Tinto (1993) addressed the need for different retention programs and support services for different groups of students and institutions to support persistence. Students enter post-secondary institutions with varying traits, experiences, and expectations, which are continuously modified as students interact with their peer groups and institutional staff and faculty (Tinto. 1993).

Astin (1993) asserted that student persistence had a positive link to involvement in academic and social activities. Interaction with faculty and peers were included as

well. Astin's theory of student involvement is rooted in the concept of academic and social integration as a significant factor in learning and development (Sciarra et al., 2016). Astin, believed that the amount of time and energy a student devotes to academic and social aspects of college life determines their outcomes and persistence (Astin, 1984). Studies conducted by Hu and Kuh (2002) and Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) support Astin's view that there is a positive link between student involvement and college persistence. A student who is actively involved with their institution is more likely to put forth an effort to be successful than a student who is not involved.

The call for colleges and universities to be more accountable to student persistence to graduation placed emphasis on the importance of the first year of college (Sciarra et al., 2016). Initiatives of student support programs such as enhanced orientations, learning communities, and first-year seminars were implemented as a result. Academic skills acquired through participation in the first-year seminar is a powerful predictor of persistence (Hunter & Linder, 2005). The likelihood of students persisting past the first year is increased with participation in the first-year seminar (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Multiple studies examined the impact of the seminar on academic performance, retention, and persistence to graduation and results indicated a positive impact (i.e., Barefoot & Gardner, 1998; Fidler, 1991; Fidler & Moore, 1996; Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

Retention

Retention and completion rates of students are challenging issues in higher education (Manyanga, Sithole, & Hanson, 2017). There is pressure on post-secondary institutions to develop strategies for supporting student success from initial enrollment

through graduation, while maintaining high academic and accreditation standards. The journey to developing more competent ways of promoting student success remains a vital goal of every higher education institution (Swail, 2004; Braxton et al., 2005).

Retention is complicated by diversity, which includes traditional and non-traditional students, two-year and four-year students, online learners, transfer students, minority students, and more (Bean, 1985; Bryant, 2001; Rovai, 2003; Seidman, 2005; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). Generalizations regarding retention can be misrepresentative because of the uniqueness of each institution (Manyanga et al., 2017). The main difficulty seems to be a lack of integrated efforts to better understand student retention and the involvement of stakeholders in modifying programs for retention. Further complications include not having a set of uniform standards defining student success as predictors may vary (Bean, 1985). Such predictors might be student intent to persist, student commitment, institutional policies, academic history, and academic and social integration.

Academic challenges, social issues, and financial hardships are all reasons a student might dropout (Berger & Lyons, 2005). Included in the mix is varying educational and socioeconomic backgrounds among students and anything they bring to the learning environment. Today's student is different from the past and is constantly evolving (Levine & Dean, 2012). Typical students today might have completed coursework at multiple institutions or return to school to enhance workforce skills, not necessarily focusing on graduating (Manyanga et al., 2017). As a variety of factors might impact degree completion, adaptive and evolving student-centered approaches are important for student success. Institutions must modify the agenda for retention from the

traditional idea of completion to reflect the complexity of the institution's characteristics, culture, practitioners, and students (Manyanga et al., 2017).

College administrators work to develop programs and support tools to increase retention rates (Derby & Smith, 2004; Jacobs & Archie, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Most students, who do not persist in college leave the institution by the end of the first year and do not return (Tinto, 2002). To combat dropout rates post-secondary institutions increased efforts to develop, improve, and sustain first-year student programs (McPherson, 2007). First-year students have a diverse combination of experiences, personal traits, backgrounds, and varied learning styles. Their unique characteristics can enhance or hinder students' successful integration into the institution (Choy, 2001). Therefore, academic, and social integration are the most significant factors to predicting persistence from the first to the second year (Ishitani, 2003). Interaction with other members of the college community, such as faculty, staff, and other students is also essential to retention (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 2002). According to Nava (2010) institutions have developed first-year programs designed to encourage and support the academic and social aspects of college life.

Academic and Social Integration

First-year students are challenged socially and academically as they transition to college life (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). Students are typically not equipped to make a successful transition (Hunter, 2006). Academic and social competencies are important to helping students achieve their personal goals, institutional goals, and expectations of becoming contributing members of society (Tinto, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005).

One major challenge is that they must rely more on themselves or other students for self-care as opposed to parents or other family and past peer groups. For students to be successful beyond the first year they must successfully integrate academically and socially into the college environment (Tinto, 1975; 1993). There are several institutional and environmental variables that factor into integration. These variables are major, student effort, faculty and peer interactions, student satisfaction, finances, extracurricular activities, and GPA (Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Course content addressing both academic and social competencies is necessary to the student's total college experience (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013).

When it comes to academics some first-year students are not adequately prepared to handle college level work, which may result in being dismissed from the institution (Braxton, 2002; Tinto, 2002). Prioritizing becomes an issue with new-found independence, making time management a challenge. This results in low academic performance (Upcraft et al., 2005; Tinto, 2002). Loss of confidence occurs, compounded with financial and other pressures, students may start to question their choice of major and decide to withdraw from the institution (Tinto, 2002).

Addressing the issues faced in the first year of college allows a nurturing relationship between the student and the institution to form (Upcraft et al., 2005). This will help to strengthen the student's commitment to their academic success. Students begin to gain the confidence in themselves and their new environment. The integration process is strengthened along with the student's commitment to the institution (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft et al., 2005). The first-year seminar is a common tool used to help with successfully integrating (Schrader & Brown, 2008).

Bean and Eaton (2001) supported first-year seminars as a way to help students with academic and social integration. The first-year seminar has been adopted extensively as an intervention because it is flexible enough to meet the growing needs of the changing student demographic for first-year students (Gahagan, 2002). Universities offer first-year seminars for various reasons like retention, but the overarching desire is to help new students successfully integrate into campus life. Colleges and universities are always looking for ways to foster retention of students (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). Difficulties in the social and emotional sphere can impact the skills in the academic sphere. Addressing both through the first-year seminar strengthens each one and enhances persistence (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013).

Social and emotional competent learning content further facilitates the goal attainment for academic and personal success of college (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). Since the beginning first-year seminars have been defined as small, highly engaging courses, aimed at enhancing academic and social integration (Barefoot, 1992). These courses facilitate a number of student outcomes including academic achievement, civic engagement, multicultural awareness, positive relationships, involvement in campus activities, and increased graduation rates (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Greenfield et al., 2013; Griffin & Romm, 2008).

The First-Year Seminar

According to Gardner (1986) the purpose for development of the first-year seminar was to help students gain knowledge and understanding of the mission and culture of the institution. Additionally, students would be introduced to essential success skills and the importance of campus resources to facilitate increased persistence to the

second year, and progress to graduation. The three most reported objectives in practice of the first-year seminar are developing academic skills, developing a connection with the institution, and providing an orientation to campus resources, and services (Padgett & Keup, 2011). To achieve these outcomes first-year seminars focus on certain class topics such as an overview of campus resources, study skills, academic planning, advising, time management, and critical thinking.

First-year seminars are typically smaller in size than other courses (Padgett et al., 2013). The smaller class sizes foster more student-faculty interactions and peer relationships. The curricular practices of the first-year seminar contain service learning, problem-based learning, interdisciplinary instruction, and experiential education (Padgett et al, 2013). Also included in the first-year seminar are links to other intervention strategies such as learning communities and residential life programs. Students are encouraged to fully engage in classroom discussions, work together, and be productive during class time (Keup & Petschauer, 2011; Padgett & Keup, 2011; Swing, 2002). Although class sizes are typically small, some institutions may enroll up to thirty students in their seminars.

First-year seminars are offered by eighty percent of all four-year and sixty-two percent of all two-year institutions as the most common curricular strategy designed and implemented for first-year students (Barefoot, 2005). They are one of the most researched and most measurably successful of all the first-year initiatives employed by American universities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tobolowsky and Associates (2008) describes five types of first-year seminars. The five types were first identified by Barefoot (1992). Extended orientation seminars present content intended to introduce

campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, strategies for learning, and student development (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). Academic seminars with generally uniform academic content across sections are often interdisciplinary or theme-oriented courses. They may be part of the general education requirements and focus primarily on an academic discipline (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008).

Academic seminars on various topics are similar to the previously mentioned academic seminar, but it focuses on specific topics varying from section to section. Pre-professional or discipline linked seminars are designed to prepare students for the demands of their chosen major and the profession. These are usually taught within a professional school of specific disciplines, such as engineering or health sciences (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). The basic study skills seminar is offered to students who are academically underprepared. It focuses on basic academic skills such as grammar, note taking, and reading. A sixth type, hybrid seminars, was added to the list in 2006 because multiple iterations of the other five seminars may be combined (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008).

Although, the first-year seminar is usually associated with being an extended orientation course, there is more than one type of seminar at use at higher education institutions (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Many are like the University 101 course offered at the University of South Carolina, which is an extended orientation course. Other seminars, such as the one offered at Princeton University, focus on intensive study of an academic topic or theme (Koch & Gardner, 2014).

Regardless of the size and type, the common focus of all first-year seminars is assisting students in their academic and social development as they transition successfully into college. First-year seminars specifically help students focus on a subject or a combination of subjects. Students learn about themselves and the institution, which increases their ability to be successful and ultimately graduate (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Today's first-year seminar is multifaceted. It addresses the academic, social, and personal needs of first-year students (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Curriculum used in first-year seminars emphasize preventative intervention techniques to maximize academic and social engagement of students. These two components have been found to be related to the likelihood of a student's persisting to the second year (Habley & McClanahan, 2004).

For better practices, first-year seminars have started to become more centrally located between academic affairs and student affairs, instead of being solely aligned with student affairs (Greenfield et al., 2013). This shift moves toward inclusion of more traditional academic content to balance life skills topics. The shift also brings the inclusion of tenured and tenured-track faculty into the administration and instruction of the course (Hunter & Linder, 2005). First-year seminars often serve as anchors for development of other first-year program initiatives (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). They are deemed the cornerstone of integrated and comprehensive first-year experience programs.

Higher education institutions that are purposeful in promoting student activities and student involvement tend to create more successful students (Upcraft et al., 2005). The time and effort students contribute to coursework and extracurricular activities

contributes to student success. The resources and services provided by the institution should encourage participation, foster engagement, and promote student success (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Previous Research on First-Year Seminars

First-year seminars are the most researched course in undergraduate curriculum (Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, & Roberts, 1998; Cuseo, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, these studies are primarily quantitative and do not provide the needed first-hand accounts of students' experiences with the seminar's impact on their success. This research helped to establish first-year seminars as one of the most important instructional methods for achieving learning and development objectives of undergraduate education (Padgett et al., 2013). Many of the studies conducted examined how the course influenced how well students performed academically, retention, and student persistence to graduation. Results yielded indicated a positive impact of the first-year seminar on these particular outcomes (Fidler, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that participation in first-year seminars had a significant effect on students successfully transitioning to college and persisting past the first year through degree completion.

Goodman and Pascarella (2006) concluded that first-year seminars have provided positive benefits to students. Additionally, the seminars are a good all-purpose method of intervention to increase persistence beyond the first year. Research has shown that students who participate in first-year seminars earn higher grades and are less likely to be placed on academic probation. Research also reported higher levels of participation in on campus activities and services (Cannici & Pulton, 1990); with students also making

more out of class connections (Fidler, 1991). More commonly noted benefits of the course are critical thinking, increased self-awareness, cultural awareness, social skills, becoming self-motivated, self-disciplined, and more confident (Cuseo, Thompson, & Fecas, 2008).

Participation in first-year seminars was associated with improved academic and social adjustment during the first year (Schwitzer, McGovern, & Robbins, 1991). Andreatta (1998) examined the role of the first-year seminar on academic and social integration of first-year students. The study concluded that the first-year seminar played an important role in integration. Students who enrolled in the course participated more in supportive activities, interacted with faculty and other students more, and experienced more satisfaction with services provided by the institution (Andreatta, 1998). Evidence further indicates that both male and female students; minority and majority students; students of various ages; students across majors; students living on or off campus; regularly admitted students, and those at risk benefit from the first-year seminar (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991;2005) synthesized over 2600 post-secondary studies on the impact of college programs and experience on student development. They concluded that evidence supported the first-year seminar has a positive link to freshman year persistence and degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991;2005). Hunter and Linder (2005) conducted a similar review of literature on the first-year seminar. They reviewed first-year seminar research published in the *Journal of First-year Experience and Students in Transition*. Additionally, they reviewed 3 volumes of studies published as monographs by the National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina (i.e.

Barefoot, 1993; Barefoot et al., 1998; Tobolowsky, 2005). The vast majority of the research conducted revealed there is a positive effect on retention, GPA, credit hours completed, degree completion, student involvement, and student perception of higher education (Hunter & Linder, 2005).

Strumpf and Hunt (1993) conducted a study at the University of Maryland. They found that students randomly assigned to enroll in the first-year seminar demonstrated significantly higher retention rates throughout their freshman and sophomore years than students randomly assigned to a control group who did not participate in the course (Strumpf & Hunt, 1993). A study conducted at Northern Michigan University determined that students who participated in the first-year seminar were more likely to persist in their third and fourth year of college than those who did not participate in the course (Verduin, 2005). At State University of New York, a study was conducted matching students who did not take the course based on their gender, race, test scores, high school GPAs, and choice of program (Lang, 2007). It concluded that when compared to those students who had not participated in the first-year seminar, students who participated in the course graduated at higher rates (Lang, 2007).

The Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy in Sacramento, CA conducted a study following a large group of students attending a community college in California over a period of time (Moore, Shulock, & Offenstein, 2009). The study found that participation in a first-year experience course proved to be a factor connected to students accomplishing key educational milestones such as avoiding withdrawals and successfully passing college level math and English within two years (Moore et al., 2009).

Through the Division of Community Colleges, the Florida Department of Education conducted an examination of the impact of first-year experience courses across the state (Cuseo, 2015). The study found that students who participated in these courses had significantly higher rates of continuous enrollment, degree completion, and transfer to four-year schools within the state (Florida Department of Education, 2006). Both students who were considered college ready and those who were considered developmental upon enrollment were found to have been impacted positively from taking the course. Another study conducted by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University in New York revealed similar findings. This study controlled for a variety of student demographics characteristics for analysis (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

A longitudinal study was conducted at North Dakota State University. 1700 students from 4 cohorts of new students were matched with some participating in the first-year seminar and some who did not. Students were matched based on a number of precollege characteristics (Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003). Using Chi-square tests, it was revealed that the 4-5-year graduation rates were higher for those who took the course than those who did not. Significant differences were found at the end of each year of enrollment (Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003).

One of the most cited objectives of the first-year seminar is to increase use of campus resources and student involvement (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Studies on specific campuses indicated that the first-year seminar does increase student use of campus resources and student involvement. Students' utilization of the learning resource center and tutoring services at Champlain College in Vermont, was consistent and

substantially higher among students who participated in the first-year seminar, than those who did not (Goldsweig, 1998). Students who participated in the first-year seminar at the University of California-Santa Barbara were found to have attended campus events and participated in the student government at higher rates than those who did not take the course (Andreatta, 1998). Reeve (1993) reported that the University of Wyoming saw an increase in the use of the library and student services after the institution adopted the first-year seminar as a required course. Students who participated in the first-year seminar during their first year at Indiana University of Pennsylvania were shown to have consistently used campus resources throughout their college enrollments. These rates were double those who did not take the course during their first year of enrollment (Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989). These findings were a strong indication that the impact of the first-year seminar extends beyond the first year and can have a growing and continuous influence on students' use of campus resources throughout their undergraduate experience (Cuseo, 2015).

Setting the foundation for commitment to the institution early through the first-year seminar increases a student's knowledge and awareness of their campus environment (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Promoting and increasing early commitment of students to their institution reduces attrition and may increase student involvement. Davis and Murrell (1993) found that students who believed their institutions were committed to them by offering practices or experiences, such as the first-year seminar, would put more effort into becoming academically and socially involved in college life. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2005) uncovered that student engagement has a positive relationship with student perceptions of campus support, meaning the first-

year seminar may improve students' perception of support from the institution, increasing their level of engagement and persistence (Cuseo, 2015).

Studies indicated a positive relationship between participation in the first-year seminar and increased GPA in the first year, while the risk of being placed on academic probation decreases (Barefoot et al., 1998; House, 2005; Jackson, 2005; Porter & Swing, 2006; Soldner, 1998; Wahlstrom, 1993). Keup and Barefoot (2005) asserted that academic performance improved for students who participated in the first-year seminar. Participation in the course facilitated an increased likelihood of students speaking up in class, increased interaction with faculty, and attending class regularly (Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Blowers (2005) provided further evidence that students who participated in the first-year seminar demonstrated a positive change in their academic performance.

Studies conducted at the University of South Carolina, Ramapo College in New Jersey, and Widener University in Pennsylvania concluded that participation in a first-year seminar has a positive link to college retention rates (Jaijairam, 2016). Studies at the University of South Carolina conducted on first-year students enrolled in the first-year seminar found that for 16 consecutive years, student who participated in the course were more likely to persist to their second year than students who did not participate in the course. Fidler (1991) Found that these differences reached statistically significant levels in 11 of the 16 years. This was in spite of the fact that students who participated in the course carried higher course loads and had lower projected academic success based on their test scores for admission (Fidler, 1991).

Studies from Ramapo College used a time-series design during a five-year period soon after the course became a requirement to show the average retention rates for

students participating in the course and persisting to their sophomore year. Results demonstrated there was a significantly higher average retention rate than for students who had enrolled in the three-year period before the course was adopted (Starke et al., 2001). Results from the Widener University study showed that students who participated in the first-year seminar had a return rate 18% higher than their predicted return rate, based on their SAT scores (Bushko, 1995).

A survey was conducted at Bronx Community College in the fall of 2014 with 570 students who participated in the first-year seminar and 27 peer mentors (Jaijairam, 2016). The survey asked about their experiences with the program and its effect on their academic experiences. Results yielded a high percentage among both groups reflecting a positive impact on their academic experiences (Efthimiou, Hizmetli, Ramos, & Ritze, 2015).

Longitudinal data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education measured the impact of the first-year seminar on the life-long learning orientations of college students (Padgett et al., 2013). The findings suggested that participation in the course enhances life-long learning orientations. The findings provide proof that the first-year seminar can positively impact complex learning (Padgett et al., 2013).

Studies conducted on first-year students highlight the challenges associated with transitioning to college life (Everett, 2013). First-year seminars have been found to help students successfully integrate by helping them deal with their newfound independence, campus living, homesickness, and identity (Cashmore, Green, & Scott, 2010). Swing (2002) conducted a large-scale comparative study of outcomes associated with various types of first-year seminars. The seminars that focused on academic and non-academic

topics and developing the student holistically performed best overall. Similarly, Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) found that student success in the first year is facilitated by first-year seminars that emphasize both academic and non-academic components of college life. The classes are kept small as a way to foster teaching methods that promote engagement, meaningful discussions, and encourage collaboration among students (Swing, 2002). Students who participate in the first-year seminar have a more positive perception of their academic performance. They also demonstrate an increased satisfaction with their college experience (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Student Development Theories

When it comes to the use of student development theories, college impact models are important frameworks for understanding the changes students experience during college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). These models of student development help to explain institutional factors that may cause students to leave college. Theories serve as a starting point for understanding and relating to first-year college students (Skipper, 2005). Basic understanding of student development theories provides context for course goals and guide assessment efforts for the first-year seminar (Skipper, 2005). The following theories are only a few potential student development theories related to the phenomenon of study but were most reflective of the intent of the study.

Chickering's Identity Development Theory

Arthur Chickering (1969) upon recognizing the need for a systematic framework, developed the identity development theory on which the core idea focuses on identity development as crucial to adapting and developing competencies essential to college success. The basic assumption of the theory is that formation of a student's identity is

one of their greatest struggles throughout their years in college (Evans, 1995). The theory consisted of seven vectors theorizing tasks students must go through while developing their identity (Chickering, 1969). These seven vectors are developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. The seven vectors consider the intellectual, interpersonal, emotional, and ethical aspects of identity development (Evans, 1995). The purpose of the seven vectors was to show how students' development in college could affect them emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually in a college environment.

According to Chickering (1969) development involves differentiation and integration as students struggle to reconcile their new positions as well as ideas, values, and beliefs of others with their own. Chickering's identity development theory increased the importance of understanding student development and success from theoretical and practical perspectives (Ortiz, 1999). Ortiz (1999) finds that application of Chickering's (1969) identity development theory increases leadership and interpersonal skills of students who are new to college life. The belief is that students who successfully move through the seven vectors of identity development learn better and are more fully involved in social, academic, and extracurricular activities (Chickering & Kytle, 1999). Active involvement is important to building those crucial competencies needed for college success both inside and outside the classroom (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

There are weaknesses to Chickering's theory. One of the major drawbacks addressed by critics of the theory is that research from Chickering (1969) seemed to focus exclusively on white-middle class male students (Straub & Rogers, 1986). It does not

provide an accurate description of the identity development of women (Straub & Rogers, 1986; Straub, 1987). Additionally, it seems to exclude students of color and their identity development in its assessment (Taub & McEwen 1991).

Schlossberg's Identity Theory

Schlossberg, defined transition as any event or non-event resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Developed in 1981, Schlossberg's transition theory was initially described as a model. It focused on analyzing adaption to transition, which is affected by the individual's perception, pre and post transition characteristics, and characteristics of the individual experience (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg developed her transition theory because she recognized the need for a systematic framework to facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and the need for coping skills (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Although it is considered an adult development theory, Schlossberg's transition theory can be applied to traditional aged college students (Evan et al., 2010). Transition provides opportunities for growth as the individual adapts to their new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006).

According to Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) there are three types of transitions. These three transitions are anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents. Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) explained the transition process of college in three phases, which are moving, moving through, and moving out. Beginning college and moving into a residence hall is a considered as a major change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). Situation, self, support, and

strategies are four major factors important to helping to cope with transitioning (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). Although a student may have chosen to attend college and move into the residence hall, meaning they chose their situation, this does not remove the challenge in adjusting. Students need to consider self as they explore which characteristics might help with their situations. This not only applies to the move, but with the more intense academic expectations and full integration into college life (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995).

The support and strategies factors are the most important and most applicable to first-year transitions for students. There are university resources geared toward support and strategies such as orientations and other campus programs. These efforts create a sense of belonging and a supportive environment for students by helping them to connect with each other as well as with staff and faculty (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995).

Schlossberg's transition theory has been applied to a number of studies. Although, this is the case, Evans et al., (2010) asserts that studies related to supporting its validity are scarce, particularly in higher education. Research could benefit from more studies on the theory's ability to increase understanding and assist with the transition experiences of students as they move in, move through, and move out of higher education settings (Evan et al., 2010).

Sanford's Challenge and Support Theory

In 1962, Sanford brought forth the idea of challenge and support (McEwen, 2003). It is a psychosocial theory, considered to be important to the world of student affairs. Sanford found that college students go through significant personal growth and development. The college environment influences such growth and development, not

only inside the classroom, but outside the classroom as well (Sanford, 1962). The basic assumption of the theory is that for personal growth and development to happen, students need a balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1966). A weakness of encouraging the use of challenge and support is the difficulty finding the balance of the two. If a student receives too much support, they will never truly learn what is necessary to develop and grow. Too much challenge creates frustration in the student and may lead them to quitting (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004).

Sanford (1966) added the additional readiness element. Students cannot grow unless they are ready both physically and psychologically. Growth and development in a student have occurred when they experience discomfort through the challenges they face but, have the necessary support to process through and grow from the discomfort (Sanford, 1968). Sanford's focus was on the holistic development of students and making college activities student centered again (Sanford, 1968). He believed learning can occur once students understand their own identities. This means they have been positively supported through environmental factors or other challenges students face in the first year (Evans et al., 2010). Application of challenge and support is providing a healthy level of challenge to foster movement through the college experience and prepare students for young adulthood (Sanford, 1962). An example of the concept of support is inclusivity in the institution and the value placed on learning (Evans et al., 2010)

Tinto's Student Integration Theory

Tinto's (1975) student integration theory, sometimes called the theory of departure, asserts that students who fully integrate into the college environment both socially and academically will increase their commitment to the institution and goals

making them more likely to graduate. He believed the first principle of effective retention programs is commitment to students (Tinto, 1993). Tinto theorized that freshmen adapt to college life by going through three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1987).

First, students go through a separation stage during which students move away from their home and past environments. Although this can be a tough adjustment, most students move on to the second stage, transition (Tinto, 1987; 1993). In the transition stage, the student may be stuck between their old life and their new life and searching for ways to connect the two. In the final stage, incorporation, students begin to fully integrate into the social and academic communities of the institution (Tinto, 1987; 1993). They establish connections with other students, faculty, and staff successfully completing all stages (Tinto, 1993).

When applying the student integration theory, it is important to start in the first year (Tinto, 1999). Tinto (1999) suggests four institutional conditions to ensure student retention by providing information and advice, support, involvement, and learning. The first condition is providing clear and consistent information about institutional requirements. The second condition is to provide academic, social, and personal support (Tinto, 1999). The third condition is to make students feel like valued members of the institution. The fourth condition, considered the most important, is that institutions should actively work to foster student retention. Each of these conditions contributes to student persistence and retention. Students who are actively involved in learning activities are more likely to complete the tasks, more likely to learn, and more likely to stay (Tinto, 1999).

One drawback to Tinto's student integration theory is that it is not entirely clear in its applicability to minority students (Tierney, 1992). It appears to neglect the transitional experiences of minority students, specifically those attending predominately white institutions. Critics also mention the theory's limited application to two-year institutions (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2008).

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Astin (1984) developed the student involvement theory. He theorized that students learn and develop best in college when they are involved in both the social and academic aspects of college life. The assumption is the greater the student involvement inside and outside of the classroom, the better the experiences will be for learning and personal development (Terenzini et al., 1996). Kuh and Pike (2005) found that student involvement has a positive correlation with retention and academics. Because of this, universities have been encouraging increased student involvement (Kuh & Pike, 2005).

Astin (1985) presented five basic postulates about student involvement, the first of which, is the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to their academic experience (Astin, 1999). This includes study time, participating in student organizations and interactions with faculty and other students. Secondly, Astin (1985) argued the amount of time and energy spent on involvement varies from student to student. Thirdly, he believed involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features (Astin, 1985). Next, what a student gains from their involvement is directly affected by the extent of their involvement. Lastly, Astin (1985) assumed academic performance has a correlation with student involvement.

Astin (1999) declared, the theory of student involvement is simple and can explain most of the empirical knowledge about environmental influences on student development. College administration and faculty can use the theory of student involvement to develop and implement effective learning environments (Astin, 1999). This involvement, he professed, enhances all aspects of the student's development while in college. It is appealing because of its simplicity and broad range of application. It explains knowledge in a variety of disciplines and can be used by researchers in designing effective learning environments (Montero, 2009). Another important application of the student involvement theory is the decrease in focus on content and teaching techniques and an increased focus on what the student is actually doing (Astin, 1999). The core concept of the theory is based on three elements: input, environment, and outcomes. Student input refers to their demographics, background, and previous experiences (Astin, 1985). Student environments account for all their college experiences. Student outcomes cover their characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, values, and beliefs after the student has graduated (Astin, 1985).

There are limits to student involvement. The type of activities and level to which a student is involved should not be ignored. Guiffrida (2004) found that over involvement, particularly with African American students at Predominately White Institutions, had a negative impact on academic performance. If a student becomes overly involved in extra-curricular activities, this could prove harmful to academic success and persistence, particularly in women (Ridgewell, 2002). Both Guiffrida (2004) and Ridgewell (2002) found that limitations of student involvement must be considered,

specifically when accounting for the impact of race and gender. Table 1 provides a summary the key concepts of each theory.

Table 1

Student Development Theories Related to the Study

Theory	Author	Key Concepts	Year Introduced
Chickering's Identity Development Theory	Arthur Chickering	Believes identity development is necessary for adapting and developing competencies essential to college success	1969
Schlossberg's Transition Theory	Nancy Schlossberg	Analyzes adapting to transition and the need for coping skills	1981
Challenge and Support Theory	Nevitt Sanford	Students need a balance of challenge and support is needed for personal growth and development to happen	1962
Student Integration Theory	Vincent Tinto	Students who fully integrate both academically and socially are more likely to commit to personal and	1975

		institutional goals	
Theory of Student Involvement	Alexander Astin	Students learn and develop better when they are academically and socially involved in the college community	1984

Theoretical Framework

Astin's (1975) book "*Preventing Students from Dropping Out*" and Tinto's (1975) theory of integration/departure serve as foundational knowledge related to retention in higher education (Reason, 2003). Both Tinto and Astin emphasized the importance of involvement for academic and social integration to achieve retention. These two theories have been the guide for much of the analysis for retention and persistence in higher education (Hicks & Lewis, 2015). Astin studied the individual characteristics of students such as their gender, age, and place of residency. Tinto's theory incorporated student commitment to an institution, degree aspirations, and integration into college life (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1987). Astin and Tinto believed high levels of integration into college life led to greater commitment and persistence (Braxton, 2000). Astin believed it is about what the student does and how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement (Astin, 1984). Likewise, Tinto (1993) expanded to detail the importance of the interaction between behavior and perception related to the social and academic integration of students.

Astin (1984) described involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to their academic experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). He believed both quality and quantity of involvement is important to determining student outcomes and development (Astin, 1984). Astin proposed that the more academically and socially competent students are the more likely they will be involved in these aspects of college life (Long, 2012). Astin's involvement theory is rooted in his longitudinal study of college student persistence (Astin, 1975). He found that factors contributing to student persistence were related to their involvement in college (Berger & Milem, 1999). Additionally, factors contributing to a student's departure from college indicate a lack of involvement.

Similar to Astin, Tinto's (1993) revised model of student integration also supported student involvement in promoting positive academic and social outcomes for college students (Berger & Milem, 1999). Tinto (1993) emphasized two constructs, social integration, and academic integration. According to Tinto's theory, these two constructs are necessary for a student to become acclimated to the institution (Kuh & Love, 2000). The extent to which students are doing reasonably well academically and feeling comfortable in their environment influences their overall performance and college experience (Kuh & Love, 2000). Tinto believed that if students do not achieve some level of academic and social integration, they are more likely to drop out of school.

First-year seminars were not initially based on theories of student development. Today, student development theories serve as the standard for measuring and justifying retention strategies and first-year seminar courses (Montero, 2009). Astin and Tinto, are seen as being primarily responsible for developing the theoretical foundations for college

persistence. Each theory is widely cited in research related to the first-year seminar (Montero, 2009).

The diversity of students entering college continues to grow, as their needs evolve. The first-year seminar was created to be flexible to meet these needs and to address the changing demographic (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). There is a large body of research of research regarding the first-year seminar and its impact on student success. These studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between taking the first-year seminar and an increase in persistence and student success (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). The literature review provides a historical overview of the origins and purpose of the course and details the disappearance and return of the first-year seminar as new interest in meeting demands to increase retention and persistence to degree completion were sparked. The review of the literature provides information important the current study and a theoretical framework. While, there is a large body of research conducted on the first-year seminar, few qualitative studies exist address the long-term impact based on students' beliefs about the role the first-year seminar played in their retention and success as they persist toward graduation. For this study, a qualitative approach was used. The next chapter details the methodology used in the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides details about the process necessary for completing the study and more specifically, how the research problem identified was addressed. The chapter begins with a restating of the purpose, research questions, and research design. The chapter concludes by providing details about information related to the target population and sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of students who had taken the first-year seminar, remained enrolled, and were persisting to graduation. Specifically, this qualitative study sought to examine students' beliefs about the role the first-year seminar played in their retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. Limited studies have been conducted on this topic exploring student beliefs; therefore, further qualitative studies are needed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1993) found that examining student retention programs such as the first-year seminar is important to capturing the complexity and deeper understanding of the experience for the students from their point of view. Additionally, this study will contribute to the need to add qualitative studies to the existing literature on first-year seminar research and provide valuable insight into continued efforts to help students face the challenges of the first-year of college as they persist to graduation. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) stated that more qualitative studies will provide greater sensitivity to the complexities of college impact than traditional quantitative studies.

This study sought to understand the experiences of seniors attending a post-secondary institution in the south and the role of the first-year seminar in their retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. This study provides a basis for further examination of the role of the first-year seminar through qualitative methods. The findings of this study will contribute to supporting or challenging existing literature and influence future research on first-year seminars and student persistence. Additionally, this study will add insight into the influence of Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1975) student integration theory. Each theory serves as the standard for developing theoretical foundations for college persistence and are widely cited in research related to first-year seminars (Montero, 2009).

Research Questions

1. How do participants describe the first-year seminar's impact on their overall college experience as they persist to graduation?
2. How do participants describe their precollege experiences and transition to college?
3. How do participants describe their involvement in campus activities and support services?
4. How do participants describe their social and academic connections and their commitment to the institution?

Research Design

Qualitative research is a process where information derived from personal interpretation of observational findings are demonstrated through purposeful sampling, open-ended data, texts, pictures, and figures (Creswell, 2014). There are a few basic types of qualitative research. These include phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, and case studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative

research does not focus on numbers, the researcher's point of view, theory tests, structure, generalizing, hard data, or artificial settings (Lee, 2014). Qualitative interviews were used to explore student experiences with the first-year seminar and their beliefs about its role in their retention and success as they persisted to graduation. The interviews were guided by the phenomenological research approach. Phenomenology is concerned with the descriptive experience of the phenomenon by the individual (Creswell, 2013). It is more focused on first-hand descriptions than resolving why an individual experiences something the way they do (Hirsch, 2015).

As the researcher, I sought to understand what the student experienced and how the student experienced the phenomenon. This study was focused on how the students interpreted their experiences and the meanings attributed to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Creswell (2013) phenomenology focuses on the essence or underlying structures of a phenomenon. Since the study explored lived experiences, the treatment of the problem is defining essence (Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956).

Research questions used in phenomenological studies are generated based on the researcher's need for information from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I sought to understand the long-term impact of the first-year seminar on persistence from the participants' descriptions of their experiences. The data collected was first-hand detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of participants. As with most qualitative studies, this study was concerned with making sense and meaning of the phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Establishing trustworthiness of the data

Quantitative research is described as the collection of numerical data and analyzing it using statistical methods (Muijs, 2010). Unlike qualitative research, it argues that there exists only one single reality about a phenomenon, which is not influenced by the researchers in any way (Muijs, 2010). Data is typically gathered through surveys and experiments. Analysis is conducted through statistical tests. Quality in quantitative research is assessed through internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Internal validity determines if a causal relationship does or does not exist between one or more independent variables (Heffner, 2017). External validity illustrates the ability to generalize a study (Trochim, 2006). Good sampling is important since it is impossible to measure an entire population (Landreneau, 2009). Reliability means repeatability. Reliability is achieved if the measure will always provide the same result (Trochim, 2006). Objectivity asserts that researchers should remain distanced from what is being studied to ensure the findings will depend on the nature of the subject and not the personal values or beliefs of the researcher (Payne & Payne, 2004).

Qualitative research has become increasingly recognized and valued (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, it is vital for researchers to conduct these studies in a rigorous manner to produce meaningful and useful results (Nowell et al., 2017). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) good qualitative research is dependable. Qualitative researchers must show precise and consistent data analysis conducted comprehensively to provide enough detail for the readers to determine if the process is credible.

There is no straightforward test that can be applied for reliability and validity in phenomenological studies (Patton, 2002). This creates difficulty of the researcher's responsibility to prove credibility and reliability (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Credibility in qualitative research refers to trustworthiness (Tracy, 2010).

Trustworthiness is made possible when the study has been conducted with integrity and consistency (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Validity in qualitative research is the appropriateness of methods, the process, and data analysis (Leung, 2015). With an increase in the acceptance of using qualitative research methods to explore human experience comes an increase in the demand for employing criteria, strategies, and tools to assess validity (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). This is to ensure the rigor and quality of the methods used. To provide a set of criteria for use in establishing quality in qualitative research Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a parallel set of criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Outlined in table 2 are Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four constructs of trustworthiness compared to quantitative labels. These were applied to establish trustworthiness of the data for this study. A detailed description of each is provide further is this section.

Table 2

Terminology for Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Four Criteria for a Trustworthy Qualitative Study Compared to Quantitative Labels

Qualitative Terminology	Quantitative Terminology
Credibility	Internal Validity
Transferability	External Validity
Dependability	Reliability
Confirmability	Objectivity

Credibility

Researchers attempt to establish that an accurate depiction of the phenomenon of study is being presented (Shenton, 2004). According to Lincoln (1995) ensuring credibility is one of the most significant factors in establishing trustworthiness.

Credibility is determined when the audience is confronted with the experience and they recognize it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The fit between the readers' interpretations and the researcher's illustration of them are addressed through credibility (Tobin & Begley, 2004). There are a few techniques suggested to address credibility. Member checking was used to address credibility in this project.

Member checking, considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be the most essential technique for strengthening a study's credibility, addresses the need to show accuracy in the data (Shenton, 2004). Member checks are frequently used by researchers (Roulston, 2010). They allow for demonstration of an adequate understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. It is believed that allowing participants the opportunity to review the research means the researcher would be able to assert that the data collected represents what was intended (Amin et al., 2020).

There are two ways member checking can be performed, informal and formal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informal member checking involves the recordings being played back for the individual participants or returning the transcripts to them for review (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informal member checking assesses if the information provided is what the participant intended to provide. It also gives the participants the opportunity to add additional points, correct errors, or provide context (Amin et al., 2020). Formal member checking uses a team to conduct member checks.

The team is comprised of different individuals involved in the study (Amin et al., 2020). Feedback is obtained through different modes based on the nature of the study and the participants (Birt, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Depending on the researcher's request the feedback may be in written form or a face-to-face meeting (Amin et al., 2020). Member checking is not a perfect process for establishing credibility. There is the possibility that participants may refuse to participate in member checking (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Even if they do participate, they could simply agree with the researcher's findings without reviewing the data. This study used informal member checking.

Member checks for this study were accomplished in a few ways. Each participant received an email requesting their participation in two parts for member checking. They were asked to review their transcribed interviews and then review the final report of the data. Each participant acknowledged receiving the email by replying whether they had decided to participate or not. While 3 of the participants agreed to do the member checks, 2 declined to review their transcripts and the final report.

Participants were given a copy of their interview transcriptions to check (Roulston, 2010; Shenton, 2004). The emphasis is on participants considering whether their words line up with what they intended, even with the use of a tape recorder (Shenton, 2004). Participants were also given a copy of the research report and invited to comment on it. No differences emerged between the researcher's findings of the final analysis and the participants' ideas of representation of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the study and is concerned with applicability (Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My responsibility as the researcher was to provide thick descriptions of the participants' experiences and the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Thick descriptions are in-depth illustrations explicating culturally situated meanings and concrete details (Bochner, 2000; Geertz 1973). Thick description requires the researcher to account for complex specificity and circumstances of their data (Geertz, 1973). To illustrate, the complexity of data must provide enough detail that readers may draw their own conclusions as opposed to telling the readers what to think. Researchers use immersion and concrete details to establish inferred knowledge from unspoken, contextual understanding that is usually expressed with nods, silences, humor, and nuances (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

These descriptions will allow the readers to determine if the findings are transferable to their own settings. It is the reader, not the researcher, who makes the transferability judgment because the researcher cannot not know which sites that may wish to transfer the findings (Tobin & Begley, 2004; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Hidden assumptions and meanings guide an individual's actions whether explicitly stated by the participant or not. Inferred knowledge has a significant role beyond what is spoken, written, or lengthy material. Researchers must be present and observant to take notice of things like cultural values or expressions (Tracy, 2010). Good qualitative research probes beneath the surface to explore matters assumed, implicit, and part of the participant's common sense. Observing, examining, and unpacking inferred knowledge is important to understanding interaction and behavior (Tracy 2010).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability establishes the research process as logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Dependability means consistency in the analysis process and ensures accepted standards are used (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Readers are able to determine dependability of the research through examination of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is recognized when credibility, transferability, and dependability have all been achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Confirmability clearly establishes the interpretations and findings as being derived from the data and not the researcher's imagination (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The in-depth descriptions provided allows the reader to judge the extent to which appropriate research practices have been followed. Readers will develop a thorough understanding of the process and its effectiveness (Shenton, 2004). An audit trail can show both dependability and confirmability in qualitative research.

An audit trail provides transparency in the research process (Roulston, 2010). The process has been documented in such detail that it can be replicated by other researchers. Evidence of decisions made concerning theoretical and methodological issues through the process is provided as part of the audit trail (Koch, 1994). A study and its findings are considered auditable when another researcher can clearly follow the decision trail (Sandelowski, 1986). This includes providing interview guides in the final report, support assertions with sufficient data, and documenting the analytical process. Additionally, records of notes, transcripts, and raw data aid in demonstrating a clear audit trail has been maintained (Halpren, 1983). A subjectivity statement has been provided to

address any potential bias in relation to the phenomenon of study and how these biases may have affected the findings.

Ethical Standards

Ethical standards are important to qualitative research. Being ethical occurs when the researcher considers procedural ethics, situational and culturally specific ethics, relational ethics, and exiting ethics (Tracy, 2010). For this study human subjects were used, which is covered by procedural ethics. Procedural ethics refers to ethical actions dictated as universally necessary by institutions or governing bodies. The study was reviewed and approved by an Internal Review Board (IRB) for both the external site chosen as well as the University of Georgia. Procedural ethics mandates that researchers do no harm, avoid dishonesty, negotiate informed consent, and ensure privacy and confidentiality (Sales & Folkman, 2000). To protect participants from undue exposure all personal data was secured by locking flash drives and printed files away and saving online material under password protection (Sales & Folkman, 2000). Furthermore, any personal identify information was excluded and pseudonyms were used.

Procedural ethics also covers the importance of correctness and avoiding fabrication. Additionally, procedural ethics includes taking care to avoid fraud, omission, and contrivance (Sales & Folkman, 2000). Participants were informed of their right to know the nature and potential consequences of the research and have a clear understanding that their participation is voluntary (Tracy, 2010). Having explicit consent allows the researcher to avoid poor data and help to build a trusting relationship with the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Addressing ethical concerns leads to ensuring credibility of the data. Detailed consent forms were provided to participants explaining

the nature, methods, and any possible consequences. Participants were allowed to ask questions for clarity about the study before being asked to sign.

Methods and Procedures

This study was designed to explore the lived experiences of students who had taken the first-year seminar, remained enrolled and were persisting to graduation at the time the study was conducted. The study specifically focused on the students' beliefs about the role the first-year seminar played in their retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. A description of the target population, how participants were selected from that population, and the data collection process and instrument used is provided in this section. This section also provides a detailed outline of the analysis process used and a researcher's subjectivity statement.

Target Population and Participant Selection

The desired population was college students who were enrolled as first-year students, completed a first-year seminar, remained enrolled consistently, and were persisting toward graduation at the time of the study. The criterion for participation in the planned study was, the sample from the aforementioned population. With the help of the college's registration office, a list of students meeting the specified selection criteria was generated. All students on the list were emailed a request for participation along with a detailed consent form. The email sent to invite students for participation in the study is provided in Appendix A. The detailed consent form is provided in Appendix B.

Eight to ten participants were desired for the sample. From the students emailed, 7 responded and were chosen to participate in the study. The sample from those responding included 6 female students and 1 male student. Of the 7 chosen participants 4

were white and 3 were African American. Follow-up emails were sent to confirm interview dates and to answer questions. Of the 7 participants chosen, the final participant count was 5. Two of the students decided not to participate.

Typically, researchers select people who have knowledge and experience about the particular focus of the study. It is a good idea to select from a larger population of participants because there may be many people who could be interviewed about the topic or phenomenon (deMarrais, 2004). For this study, I used criterion-based selection, to develop a list of characteristics the participants must possess. The criterion-based strategy best for this study was comprehensive selection. Under comprehensive selection a specific number of participants were identified based on the specific characteristics outlined in the research (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

The final number of participants for the study was 5 students. Phenomenological studies typically do not have a large number of participants because the data collection process involves in-depth study of human experience (Hirsch, 2015). These in-depth interviews are not concerned with generalizing to larger populations (Dworkin, 2012). Phenomenological studies require fewer than 10 interviews, however these numbers are estimates (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). These studies, however, still need enough participants to offer varying experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Hirsch, 2015). Creswell (1998) recommended 5-25 participants for phenomenological studies; Dworkin (2012) recommended 5-50 participants.

Data saturation is thought to be the most important factor when considering sample size in qualitative research (Mason, 2010). Saturation is the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data (Dworkin, 2012). Dworkin

(2012) asserted that the number of participants depends on when the researcher believes saturation has been reached. To make this determination the researcher must decide if there is enough in-depth data showing the patterns, categories, and variety of the phenomenon being studied (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I determined that with the recommended minimum of 5 participants (Creswell, 1998; Dworkin, 2012) there were sufficient categories, patterns, and varying of experiences required to meet data saturation.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol detailed here was developed based on the research questions. A table breaking down the interview protocol is shown in chapter 4. An outline of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix C. Prior to the arrival of each participant, a check was performed to ensure the recorder was working properly.

Similar procedures were used in each interview. The interviews began with an introduction of myself to the participants and they introduced themselves to me. After the introductions, participants were reminded that the interviews would be recorded. I confirmed that I still had their permission to record. Once, I had their consent to record, I turned on the recorder and began the interview process.

I began by explaining the purpose, the process, and reviewing the consent form sent to them through email in detail. Each participant was given an opportunity to ask questions. The participants were asked to sign the consent form. Once, the forms were signed, I began the interview with the first question from the interview questions developed to guide the interview.

The interview questions were developed to answer the research questions first outlined in chapter 1. Questions 1-3 served to obtain background information and details

about the participants' precollege experience and readiness for transitioning to college answering research question 2. Descriptions gathered from questions 4-8 answered research question 3. Descriptions gathered from questions 9-14 answered research question 4. Question 15 allowed the participants a chance to share anything they might have missed during the interview and served as a transition to bring the interview to a close. A culmination of the descriptions provided from each of the questions served to answer the first research question. At the end of each interview, participants were thanked for their participation and presented with a \$10 visa gift card.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The purpose of phenomenological qualitative interviews is to obtain data about the complexity and context of lived human experiences (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002). Information or data typically collected from these interviews in particular is detailed, in-depth descriptions of human experiences. Questions are generated to collect detailed information concerning these experiences through participant responses to the phenomenon being studied (Roulston, 2010). Researchers using phenomenological interviews want to understand participants' feelings, perceptions, and understandings. The focus is to elicit the direct description of a particular phenomenon or event as they lived it (Adams & van Manen, 2008).

Based on the research questions explored by this study, a set of interview questions were written as a guide to the conducting the interviews. I used 15 open-ended questions. The questions were worded in a way that motivated the participants to provide full and honest answers. Probing questions were asked when necessary to provoke detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences with first-year seminars. The

questions were ordered to help the interview flow as naturally as possible. The final question brought the interview to a close, encouraging the participants to share any extra information not covered by the interview questions. These questions are available in Appendix D.

In depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant selected. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes. Length of time included introductions to build rapport with participants, an explanation of the study, and allowing time for the participants to ask questions. Participants were not given time limits on responding and were encouraged to elaborate on answers through probing. The interviews took place in multiple locations to accommodate participants' schedules. Prior to conducting each interview, the purpose of the study, the rights of the participants, and compensation was explained in detail. This information was also contained in the consent form which, was distributed and signed beforehand. Participants first received the consent form by email to review. Students were compensated \$10 in the form of Visa gift cards for their participation.

Each interview was recorded using an audio recording device with permission of the participant. Each recording was saved to a flash drive and labelled identifying each participant by their pseudonym. Interviews were transcribed, saved to a flash drive, and printed. Each transcription was read at least twice for initial observations and notes. Emerging themes were identified and coded based on their relevance such as repetitive phrases, concepts, attitudes, opinions, or anything deemed relevant.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis. They make judgments about coding, theming, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Although each qualitative research approach has its own specific techniques for the data analysis process it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the process (Nowell et al., 2017).

The interviews were recorded. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. To save time I used a transcription company to transcribe the interviews for me. The audio for each interview was uploaded into rev.com. Transcriptions were returned within 48 hours in a downloadable and editable format. I used data analysis software Atlas.ti to further save time in the data analysis process. Atlas.ti is a software program created to assist researchers in analyzing data (Silver & Lewins, 2007). It provides tools for locating codes, interpreting findings in principal data collected, evaluating importance, and analyzing complexities (Silver & Lewins, 2007).

I decided to use Atlas.ti software to help with the coding during the analysis process. I only used the software for the first and second stages of the coding process. Because of how well the data was reduced in the first and second stages of coding with Atlas.ti, I realized I could do the final stage of coding by hand. During the third stage of coding I reviewed and refined the findings from the first and second stages to develop final themes. Coding took place in phase 2 of the thematic analysis process detailed below.

Data analysis for this study was achieved through use of thematic analysis for qualitative research. Using thematic analysis was another way to ensure credibility of the research (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is most commonly used in qualitative data analysis (Roulston, 2010). Thematic analysis usually includes data reduction through applying codes to the data or the elimination of repetitive or irrelevant data allowing the researcher to define and categorize data. This is accomplished through sorting and classifying data into codes, groupings, or clusters (Roulston, 2010).

To achieve this process, I followed Braun and Clark's six-phase guide as a framework for conducting thematic data analysis. The steps included in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide are first, to become familiar with the data. The next step is to begin organizing data through initial coding. In the third step themes are identified from patterns in the data. Fourth, the themes identified in step three are reviewed and modified. In step five, these themes are defined and finalized. The sixth and final step is to complete the final write-up of the analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The steps are explained in detail later in this section.

Braun and Clark (2006) defined thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. According to Clark and Braun (2013) the goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes or patterns in the data that are important or interesting. The themes identified are used to address the research or phenomenon of study. It goes beyond mere summary of the data to interpret and make sense of it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The interview questions were not used as the themes in order to avoid falling into the pitfall of summarizing (Clark & Braun, 2013).

When analyzing the data, the first step was to read and re-read the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This is how the researcher becomes familiar with the data collected. It is important for the researcher to immerse themselves in the data searching for meaning and patterns (Braun & Clark, 2006). As a key to this step in the process, interview data was transcribed into written form, verbatim (Braun & Clark, 2006). The entire data set was read through at least twice before coding began because this is where the ideas of the researcher and possible patterns start to emerge. I made note of these ideas and patterns to begin forming codes.

Step 2 involved generating initial codes. This is where I started to organize data in a meaningful and significant way (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The process of coding aided in reducing data. Codes identify semantic or latent features of the data. Coding draws out the parts that appear to be the most interesting information that can be assessed in a meaningful way to describe the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). Since I used data analysis software, coding was done by tagging and naming selections of text within each data set (Braun & Clark, 2006). The software helped shorten analysis timeframes, provided more thorough and rigorous coding and interpretation, and provided me with enhanced data management.

I began the initial stage of coding by uploading the transcribed interview documents into the software. A file was created so that all the transcripts could be included in a single project file. During the first coding stage open coding was used. Small sections of the data were analyzed and compared to one another. Codes in this stage are descriptive and present ideas of interests to be reviewed later in the analysis process (Silver & Lewins, 2014). All data considered relevant should be coded in the

first stage (Silver & Lewins, 2014). I highlighted the text in sections for coding. As I moved through the coding process, I noted some repetitive codes. To organize codes, they were dragged and placed near the proper highlighted text. As suggested by Fries (2014) I avoided creating too many codes in this initial phase to prevent difficulty of the analysis process.

I continued with Atlas.ti into the second stage of the coding process. In this stage I began to organize similar codes into categories. Some codes were eliminated in this stage as they were found to be irrelevant. Codes with different names, but represented the same concept were combined under a single newly named code. I conducted the final stage of coding by hand. After conducting the first and second stages of coding in Atlas.ti the data had been significantly reduced. During the third stage I revisited the data and codes created to search for themes. At this point I was able to link multiple codes and statements from the interviews. I began to separate these identified patterns into themes.

When comparing the initial coding notes made before the interview transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti, I realized the software proved more beneficial than just reducing time of the data analysis process. As I reviewed the transcripts and made initial notes of patterns, I identified early codes. After uploading the transcripts into Atlas.ti and reviewing the codes the software highlighted I noticed that it generated more codes than I would have been able to if I had only coded by hand. It found codes that my initial review did not, for example I failed to note the specific levels of preparedness and the relationships with advisors in my initial coding. I conducted the final coding stage by

hand; however, this was made possible by the detail Atlas.ti provided through its coding process.

In step three, I continued to search for themes. Themes draw on interpretive analysis of the data and arguments regarding the phenomenon are made (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clark (2006) make a distinction between two levels of themes. These are semantic and latent (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Semantic themes do not look beyond the surface of what the participant has stated in the interview. Latent themes look beyond the surface and examines underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies (Braun & Clark, 2006). Analysis of data from this study aimed for identifying latent themes.

At this point there is a long list of the different codes that have been identified. I refocused on analyzing the data at a broader level of themes and sorting the list of codes into themes. In this step codes were analyzed and combined to form overarching themes. Initial codes began to form main themes, others formed sub-themes, and some were discarded.

Step four included the reviewing of themes. Preliminary themes were reviewed, modified, and developed (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). I assessed whether or not the themes made sense and gathered all data relevant to each theme. I also noted themes that overlapped, subthemes, and whether there are other themes in the data. It was important that I avoided trying to fit too much into a theme (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The use of software in this step was useful in making the process quicker and easier. Reviewing themes involved two levels. Level one was reviewing themes at the coded level, meaning I read all the organized extracts for each theme and considered whether they formed a

clear pattern (Braun & Clark, 2006). If the themes formed a clear pattern, I moved on to the level two.

In level two, consideration was given to the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set. Consideration was also given to whether or not the visualizations reflected the meanings in the data set as a whole (Braun & Clark, 2006). The purpose of reviewing was to determine if the themes worked and to code additional data that may have been missed in the early coding stages. Any themes that did not fit were reconsidered with some being established as problematic. Some themes had to be reworked, or a new theme was created. Some themes were removed. Once this was done, four major themes emerged. They were precollege/transition, student involvement/support services, connections/commitment to the institution, and role of the first-year seminar. The themes are discussed further in chapter 5.

Step five in the process involved a final defining of themes. In this step the aim was to identify the essence of what each theme is about (Braun & Clark, 2006). Themes were organized into a clear and consistent account, with narrative accompanying it. Each individual theme had a written analysis identifying its story and how it fits the overall story being told by the data as it relates to the research questions. This was another opportunity to avoid overlap (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The sixth and final step was writing up the report. At this stage themes were fully worked out allowing for me to move on to the final analysis and writing the report. Writing up the final report entailed telling the story of the data in a way that persuades the reader on the credibility of the analysis. Evidence has been provided to validate prevalence of themes. This was accomplished by providing rich examples that captured

the essence of the data. The write-up goes beyond providing data. Extracts have been inserted within analytical narrative that clearly illustrates the story being told through the data and making an argument relative to the research questions (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

I taught the first-year seminar at a technical college for a year. My personal observations from the students I taught sparked my interest in getting a deeper understanding of the true role of the course in college retention, success, and persistence. I wanted to get the views of students who had taken the seminar and were persisting to graduation. I considered the possibility that my experience with teaching the course may influence my research. I do have my own thoughts and opinions about the relevance of the course and ways to improve it. I opted to conduct my study at another institution, a four-year setting, rather than the technical college to minimize researcher bias. I thought this would be best since I was still employed with the college in another role at the time of the study.

Although, efforts to minimize bias were made it is impossible for me not to have an opinion because of my experience teaching the course. This experience has influenced my thoughts of its role in persistence. When a person has experienced a phenomenon in some way there is always a chance of preconceived ideas influencing the research. While, I should not allow my experiences teaching the first-year seminar to influence my study, I do not believe they should be suppressed. It is better they are acknowledged so they will not impact the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 4

THE PARTICIPANTS

Through this study, the participants provided insight into their lived experiences with the first-year seminar and their beliefs about its role in their retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. Four main themes emerged: precollege/transitioning, student involvement/support services, connections/commitment to the institution, and the role of the seminar. Participants expressed how the first-year seminar helped them in adjusting and other benefits gained from taking the course. Participants also described the believing the first-year seminar to be useless in some ways. Each of them found the most value in the relationships and social connections built through resources introduced to them through the course. Each participant acknowledges that the seminar introduced them to academic resources, which they used, and were helpful to their struggles. However, participants do not feel the seminar served them academically. Although they provided descriptions of using services learned about through the course, participants still expressed that the first-year seminar had no impact on their academic performance. There are similarities in some of the participant responses, however, each of their lived experiences is unique.

Although, 8-10 participants were desired, the final sample included 5 participants. Initially, 7 students agreed to participate and scheduled interviews. Two of the participants decided not to participate. The interviews took place over the course of two weeks in late January 2020. The interviews were conducted in various locations to accommodate the schedules of the participants. The narratives in this chapter provides answers to the research questions. Each narrative is presented with an introduction

sharing a description of the student and my observations. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym. The following table shows the research questions and pertinent interview questions developed to guide the interviews. The interview protocol was detailed in chapter 3.

Table 3

Interview Questions Mapped to the Research Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
How do participants describe the first-year seminar's impact on their overall college experience as they persist to graduation?	Culmination of descriptions provided from participants answering each of the interview questions 1-14.
How do participants describe their precollege experiences and transition to college?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about your precollege experience. (Your time in high school) 2. How well do you think you were prepared for the transition from high school to college? (Grades, school activities) 3. Tell me about your first year of college? (Finances, making friends, differing academic expectations)
How do participants describe their involvement in campus activities and support services?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What type of student support services were available to you and how did you utilize these services? (Social organizations, counseling, disability services) 5. What type of academic support services were available to you and how did you utilize these services? (tutoring, study groups, mentoring) 6. What type of relationships did you build with faculty and staff during your first year? (comfortable seeking assistance, speaking up in class, engaging outside of class)

	<p>7. What type of connections did you make with other students during your first year? (connect outside of class, lasting friendships)</p> <p>8. Did you participate in the first-year seminar in your first semester? If after the first semester, why?</p>
How do participants describe their social and academic connections and their commitment to the institution?	<p>9. Did the first-year seminar help you adjust to the expectations of college life both socially and academically?</p> <p>10. In what ways did it help you set and commit to goals?</p> <p>11. What did the first-year seminar offer in addressing the learning needs of first-year students?</p> <p>12. In what ways did it encourage you to remain enrolled past the first year? Did it influence your persistence to graduation?</p> <p>13. Is there anything you learned from the first-year seminar that you continue to apply?</p> <p>14. What are your thoughts on how the seminar might be improved?</p>

Participant Profiles

The participants in this study were enrolled at a four-year college located in the south. Each of them met the desired selection criteria for the study. The criteria included that students were in their senior year, had completed the first-year seminar, remained enrolled consistently, and were persisting toward graduation at the time of the interviews. The final sample included 5 participants; 3 White and 2 African American; 1 male and 4 females. Each of them identified as first-generation college students. Table 4 provides brief introductions to the interview participants.

Table 4

Brief Introductions of the Participants

Participants	Introductions
Allen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White male, interested in computer repair • Identified as a first-generation college student • Participated in work-based learning in high school • Hardest adjustment was the academic content • Utilized tutoring and other academic resources • Believes the FYS helped him connect socially, not academically to the institution
Tiffany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black female, majored in Exercise and Sports Science • Identified as a first-generation college student • Completed basic required courses for high school graduation • Did not feel prepared to transition to college • Discovered useful academic resources and made friends • Believes the FYS helped her connect socially, not academically to the institution
Jessica	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White female, interested in attending law school • High school honor graduate, initially enlisted in the army • Identified as a first-generation college student • Was not prepared for the transition to college • Finally utilized resources recommended and got involved • Believes the FYS helped her connect socially, not academically to the institution

Kasey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White female, interested in psychology and counseling • Identified as a first-generation college student • Actively involved in high school • Felt prepared for the transition to college • Adapted well socially • Believes the FYS helped her connect socially, not academically to the institution
Marie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black female, interested in health sciences • Identified as a first-generation college student • Active and well known in high school • Had no guidance and did not feel prepared to transition • Utilized social and academic services learned about through the FYS • Believes the FYS helped her connect to the institution both socially and academically

Allen

Allen, a white male, is a senior from a small town in Georgia, where he was born and raised. In high school he participated in work-based learning courses, which led to his interest in computer repair. He currently works part-time for a company helping to repair computers. It started as an internship leading to him being retained part-time. He is hoping he will be hired on full-time upon his graduation. Allen expressed that transitioning for him was not too difficult. The hardest part was adjusting to the new academic expectations, the difference in the academic content, and being away from home for the first time. He was able to make friends throughout his first year and things started to get better socially. He was fortunate to have a scholarship, but worried about

maintaining the required GPA. As he discovered tutoring and other academic support services, he began to adjust and feel like he would be able to succeed. It was important to him as a first-generation student.

Allen was the first student to respond to the email inviting students to participate in the study. He was on time for the interview and genuinely seemed interested in participating. We met at the library in a quiet room that I had reserved for privacy and to block outside noise from being recorded during the interview. I introduced myself and confirmed that he was okay with being recorded during the interview. After his confirmation, I turned on the recorder and placed it in the middle of the table. I began by explaining the purpose, process, and reviewing the consent form with him. I asked if he had any questions. He stated that he did not. He was asked to sign the consent form, which he did. He had to be probed on most of the questions but was relaxed with answering. As the interview closed, Allen was given a chance to add any details he may not have mentioned earlier. He stated that he did not have anything more to add. I thanked him and presented him with a gift card for participating. Throughout the interview I could tell Allen was at ease answering the questions. He really believed in his view of the first-year seminar, believing that while it played a role in him being able to connect to the college through social interactions and involvement, it did not help him to connect academically.

Speaking about his precollege experience, Allen, describes being involved in work-based learning classes and finding his passion for computers. He was not heavily involved in extracurricular activities. He always knew what he would choose as a major. When asked about transitioning into college Allen, recalled that the transition was not as

hard as he initially thought it might be stating, “the main difference was the academic content.” Allen spent his first year in college working off campus. He was awarded financial aid and found it easy to meet people. Although, the academic content was a challenge he found that “the small school and class sizes helped my learning process.” When asked about his experience with the first-year seminar in relation to transitioning and his first-year experience Allen replied:

Looking back, I do not know that it really helped me all that much academically. I will say it helped more socially because of some of the activities and introduction to campus events and resources. I get the reason the course is offered and what they hope students gain, but I don’t think I needed it and I can’t say that it had any real impact on how I moved from high school to college.

I asked how he felt about the seminar being required, Allen stated, “it should be an option for students who believed they need extra help with the first-year, not mandatory for everyone.”

Allen describes how learning about support services helped him to speak up more in class. The most useful resources for him were learning about the clubs and organizations. He got involved not only on campus, but in community service as well. When probed further about how the support services available to him at the college helped Allen said:

I did not talk a lot in class and was not very good at writing emails. I really learned to communicate better by finally realizing I could talk to my advisor and other faculty. I found tutoring to be the most helpful. Math has never been my

strong point. I engaged more through study groups and finding help for harder courses.

As we continued, Allen was asked to expand on his involvement in support services and extracurriculars on campus. He responded:

As I learned about new things, I developed new interests. I used the resources that were available, but I did not need counseling or anything. When I joined clubs, I tried to take on leadership positions. I found some people who could be like mentors for me. One of the things I realized was that I had to be careful joining too many activities because it could affect how much you study. The more I participated, the more I really came out of my shell. I like that we get introduced to activities in order to have the full college experience.

When probed further about the academic resources he was introduced to through the first-year seminar he replied:

The class made me aware of some useful tools, but I do not think I could say it helped my academic performance. There was nothing that made the class worthwhile other than making some friends. A student with no exposure might find it useful, but I thought it was unnecessary.

Allen believes the support services increased his chances for success because he stopped being afraid to talk and adjusted to his new environment and life. Allen, described his relationships with faculty as:

Now, I do have better relationships with faculty. They progressed over time. At first, I really just communicated through email. I did not go to their offices and I did not talk to them after class. I would go to a computer and email back and

forth to get what I needed. I will say I was always encouraged to meet with them face- to-face. As I have grown, I realize how much better face to face is and now I feel more comfortable speaking to faculty. Even in small classes, which I like, I found it hard to speak up.

He went on to discuss connections with fellow students saying:

I think I made some great friends and social connections. It is always great to be involved in something with other students and friends. We can come together for the common goal of helping or creating awareness of something. And we can just come together to just have fun. That has been the best part, having the whole college experience, with supportive faculty and friends. I think that is how anybody succeeds. And with family too.

On his commitment to the institution and graduation Allen stated:

I did what was needed to make the necessary adjustments and to open up more. Once I felt like I belonged, I was ready to take on college life full force. Making time for relationships, having fun, and using my time wisely has kept me in school. Resources showed me I can get help when I need it, so that is less stress.

I asked Allen about the first-year seminar and its impact on his adjusting to college life.

He responded:

I do not think the class offered any real advantages for me. There were a few things that were helpful, but I do not think it is necessary for a whole semester. I think I said this already, but I did not find anything that made the class worthwhile. A whole class is not needed.

Going further, I asked about the ways it may have met his learning needs in the first year.

He stated:

I think it attempted to show the difference between high school and college coursework. For someone who has never had any exposure to college it might be useful. I do not think it addressed ways to learn or anything like that. Maybe that is the idea and if so, they missed the mark.

When discussing the first-year seminar and its role in his remaining enrolled and if there is anything he still applies, Allen feels:

I have not remained here because of that class. I remember being genuinely annoyed by it. You take it because they say you must. You get it over with. It has a few things that served me well like the social aspect. I guess that is what I still use, but nothing else. I wonder when they will decide it is not doing anything special.

As we talked about ways it could be improved, Allen was also asked to share any other feelings he had about the first-year seminar. Allen stated:

If they have to offer the class, I think it should be optional. I don't think it should be counted toward credit hours or maybe less than 3 hours. I believe we could get what the course offers accomplished in a week for social and academic stuff. And it should be organized by major. I do appreciate my professors and the experience I have had here. At least the class is over and done in the first year. Beyond helping me to make some connections socially and with faculty, I do not think it offers students any real benefits.

Allen's overall expression was that while the course helped him to connect socially in college, but it had no bearing on his academic standing.

Tiffany

Tiffany, a black female, was a typical teenager growing up in one of Georgia's largest cities. She took the basic high school classes required for graduation. She did not take any specific college prep style courses or AP classes, but she always knew she would attend college. She was the first in her family to enroll in college. She did not have anyone to help her navigate the process. She felt she was not as prepared as she could have been by her high school counselors with filling out applications for admissions and scholarships. The college orientation was helpful to her by making her aware of college resources and promoting the full-college experience. She built friendships in her first year which, she maintains today. She enrolled as an undecided student, ultimately choosing to pursue Exercise and Sports Science.

I interviewed Tiffany second. We had a conflict with the initial date and time selected for the interview and had to reschedule. There was also an issue setting up a meeting place. She wanted to meet at a coffee shop. I thought this might be too noisy depending on the customer traffic in the shop, especially with recording. I wanted to be flexible to fit her schedule, so I offered some suggestions and took into consideration her suggestions. After some discussion, we agreed to meet at a dining hall located on UGA campus. There are quiet spaces to meet, without needing a reservation and she would be able to have coffee. When she arrived, I introduced myself and asked if she was still okay with the interview being recorded. Once, I had her confirmation, I turned on the recorder, placed it in the middle of the table, and got started. I explained the purpose,

process, and reviewed the consent form. I asked Tiffany if she had any questions before we started. She was curious about how the information would be used. She seemed a little nervous about being exposed, so I went over the consent form again more carefully. I reassured her that I was not collecting any personal information and she would not be identifiable. She signed the consent form and the interview began. Initially, she seemed hesitant to answer and was not very open. When I probed her, I was able to draw out details. As the interview continued, she did start to relax. I noticed that she watched the clock a lot. I wondered if she had somewhere else to be because she asked how many questions were left at one point. As the interview closed, I gave her a chance to add anything she thought she may have missed. She indicated she had no more to add. I thank her for participating and presented her with a gift card. Tiffany was firm in her belief that the first-year seminar is not responsible for her deciding to remain enrolled and persisting to graduation. She does, however, believe it served to help her connect to the college socially and to get more involved in college activities.

Tiffany, expressed that she “was not as prepared for college as she could have been.” She did not take any college prep courses or participate in any programs to get ready for college, but always knew she would attend. She further talked about being a first-generation college student and not having any assistance with finding scholarship opportunities or the admission process. She had always worked and would have to even as a college student. Tiffany described herself as an introvert who was not able to open up to people easily. So, she did not make friends as easily, but did manage to build some lasting friendships. She found the use of campus resources such as the library very beneficial for computer use to get assignments done. In talking about the first-year

seminar and its impact on her transitioning to college and first-year experience her views mirror Allen's. Tiffany says:

It introduced me to student life where I found a number of clubs and organizations to participate in. I began to meet new people and start to come out of my shell a lot. I spent a lot of time in the student center. I believe it helped me develop social skills. I do not think it did anything for me academically. On my own I have always been a good student. I went to tutoring when I needed to but, I feel like I made the best academic decisions for myself.

Asked if she thought the first-year seminar should be mandatory for first-year students, Tiffany declared, "only within the specific programs so students can be introduced to their major of study, faculty, and peers so they have a true idea about how they will spend their college years. But I do not think it should be worth 3 hours. That's a lot"

Tiffany describes being able to get involved in campus activities and leadership opportunities after learning about student life and culture through the first-year seminar.

She was also introduced to academic resources such as tutoring and using the library

When asked to tell me more about her use of the academic resources she learned about in the first-year seminar she stated:

They were useful, especially the library and computer labs because I did not have my own computer during my first year. The writing center was great because I struggled with English and writing assignments in general so, I was very glad to know about that. It was not just the class, I also learned about student activities when I was looking into support services.

Continuing, I asked Tiffany to talk more about the support services she used and her involvement on campus. She responded:

Well I did not need counseling or anything like that. I was happy to find out about career services. That service helped me when it came to looking for a part-time job, an internship, and now as I am looking for a new job. As far as clubs and stuff, I have been active right from the start. I enjoy planning events for the campus and taking on leadership roles, especially those that involve my program of major. The events present opportunities to socialize, and to bring in more students. As the older student now, I serve as a mentor to students coming behind me. They can get a real idea of what to expect from college and the program. It is fun.

Tiffany believed finding out about support services and getting involved on campus helped her to be less introverted and more active. Tiffany, described her relationship with her faculty advisor as the most important stating:

He basically guided my academic life. He introduced me to the program and other key faculty members to build relationships with who could help me. Over time as I came out of my shell, I talked to faculty more and really built relationships with them. I cannot express enough how this has served me moving through my program. I have had a few struggles even since my first year and although, I never quit, there have been times I thought about it and the relationships are what pulled me through.

Tiffany, speaks of connections with other students saying she believes:

Connecting with other students made the difference. Being introduced to clubs and activities early in my college career probably sustained me as much as faculty relationships. You need friends and you need to be a friend. After studying and working hard it is good to know I can go unwind and have people to kick back with. Some of these friends are the same people I get to make a difference with, by helping other students find what I did.

When we talked about her commitment to the institution and graduation she stated:

You really cannot be shy with faculty or other students if you want to stay in college. I know that building those relationships on both sides is why I am still here today. When I was feeling a little like an outcast in the beginning, finding ways to meet people and get involved did wonders for me. I do not think a person can make a true commitment to the college without these relationships. They make you want to stay. Now I get to graduate.

Tiffany gives the first-year seminar credit for opening up socially and being able to connect with her faculty adviser, but believes beyond the required orientation, there was no point for the course. For her it felt like a longer orientation. I asked her about how the first-year seminar helped her to adjust to college life. Like Allen, Tiffany gives credit to the first-year seminar for her social connection to the college and none for her academic commitment. She responded:

I found it useful in some respects socially, and I found some help in financial planning. Academically, I do not think it had an impact. I feel like my advisor and instructors had more of an impact on that front. I found it more useful for

improving my social skills for networking, especially because I tend to be introverted.

When asked about how it may have addressed her learning needs as a first-year college student, she said:

Mostly, it provided resources. I learned where I needed to go for computer access or other technology, I may not have had access to. It gave some study suggestions, but these were things that I was already aware of anyway. I think as students we find our own ways of learning what works best for us.

When addressing her continued enrollment and if there is anything, she learned from the course that she still uses, Tiffany replied:

I do not think the class played any major role in my staying in college. It reinforced a sense of community, but it did not have any great influence on me. Remaining in school was more of a personal mindset. There are things I still apply. It is mostly the social stuff and applying the networking stuff to my professional life. I came out of my shell and got comfortable with being active and engaging.

When talking about ways the first-year seminar might be improved and last thoughts, Tiffany said:

Tie it in to the programs so that students can be paired with people who will continue on the journey with them. These are the people who will share and understand your experience and it could address diversity more. Find a way to tie it into the degree. Create a partnership with career services. I think that aspect could be stronger. Career skills are what we need in the end and being able to

network is important. I also think the class could do more for student engagement. Maybe it should expand to a whole year program.

Tiffany sees value in the first-year seminar from the social benefits, but feels it had no major influence on her academic decisions and commitment to degree completion.

Jessica

Jessica, a white female, is a first-generation college student, who chose to major in Criminal Justice. She aspires to attend law school and become a part of criminal justice reform. She was a top ten graduate at her school in Georgia's largest city. She always thought going to college would be easy since, she was such a good student in high school, involved in various activities, and had a job. She had already earned college credits through a local technical college. She found that even with all these things she was not fully prepared for college life, socially or academically. Jessica expressed that she believed studying would come easy to her. She initially, decided to enlist in the army reserve and missed the orientation. Her grades took a dive in the first semester. Because she was considered to be smart, she was too embarrassed to ask for the help she needed and almost lost her scholarship due to poor grades. As she started to make friends, college life started to get better. Her grades improved as she got more comfortable seeking help and she will graduate with a good GPA. Jessica identified as a first-generation college student.

Jessica was my third interview. She was very nice and perky. She arrived about 5 minutes late because she had an issue finding parking. We met at the same dining hall located on UGA campus as I did with Tiffany. It proved to be a quiet space, even with other students moving about. I introduced myself and confirmed that I had her

permission to record the interview. I turned on the recorder and placed it in the middle of the table. I started by discussing the purpose, process, and reviewing the consent form. I asked if she had any questions. Jessica stated that she did not have any questions. She signed the consent form and we began the interview. She was very thorough with her answers. She seemed very relaxed and talkative. She glanced at her phone a few times throughout the interview, but it was not disruptive. As the interview ended, I gave her the chance to share any details she might have missed in answering the questions. She did not add any new detail but reiterated her view of the uselessness of the seminar. I thanked her for participating and presented her with a gift card. She explained after the interview that she had a meeting to get to. I walked her out to show her how to get back to her car and she talked to me about being excited about her upcoming graduation.

Jessica, believed that because she was a good high school student, college would come easy to her. Jessica describes, “I was on top of the world. It was like everything I touched turned to gold. I graduated number 7 in my class, and I was involved in everything.” She discovered she was not prepared for the transition to college or the rigors of college curriculum, even as a dual enrollment student. As her grades slipped during her first semester, she was in danger of losing her academic scholarship. She had to get a job to cover nonacademic expenses. Jessica stated, “things got worse because I was too embarrassed to ask for help because I was supposed to be smart enough already.” Adding to her stress was the fact that she missed her orientation because she had initially decided to enroll in the Army Reserves before college. She came to college with friends she had known her whole life, which helped with transitioning. I asked her to describe

how the first-year seminar helped with her transitioning and having a successful first-year, Jessica responded:

It was my desire to succeed that got me through the first year and beyond. I had the will to do better. I admit the first year was not easy and I learned the hard way how different high school and college are. We were connected to mentors through the class and that was helpful for socializing. I joined student organizations and became active on campus. I learned about tutoring and writing help from the class but, I decided on my own to stop being afraid to ask for help.

During my second semester I turned my first year around before I flunked out. I asked what she thought about the seminar being mandatory and Jessica replied: “I don’t really have an opinion about it. I can say I don’t think I needed it, but I think it might help some students who have real struggles.” When prompted to elaborate on what she meant by “real struggles” Jessica, said “you know students who are scared to move away from home and need extra motivation.”

Jessica talked about her struggles during her first year and the challenge to leave who she was in high school behind and embrace her new life as a college student. Jessica, describes being assigned a student development specialist through support services in her first year stating:

I was struggling. I can admit that. It really helped me to navigate my college experience. I found out about the service through the class. As good as it was, I do not think I used it as much as I should have. The services helped ease my struggle, but I think I became too focused on other things.

I probed Jessica, on what she meant by other things. She continued:

I got pretty active. In my first year I did exactly what I did in high school. I tried to be involved in everything. You always hear that being involved is good. I learned the hard way you can be too involved. It did me no good to be super involved, but flunking. I knew better by my second semester.

We continued talking about what other resources she was made aware of through the first-year seminar. She stated:

I went to tutoring for writing help. That was pretty useful especially for editing. I was not ready for college writing at all. I learned about different study styles and learning techniques. In the beginning I did not utilize any of the resources presented to me as much as I should have. I did back out of some of my clubs and other social commitments. I had really rebounded by my second semester. Being too active and not using helpful resources available to me almost cost me my college education. I had to leave my high school mind set behind.

Jessica learned to balance being active with studying to get the most success. Once she moved on from high school she started to perform better as a college student.

Jessica, recalls of her relationships with faculty:

I did not build relationships with faculty. I had more relationships with support staff than I did with faculty. I was not ready to be honest about my true experience early in my first year. I needed everyone to believe I was doing great. I was not even completely honest with support staff. I sat in the back of class when I attended, and I never spoke up. These relationships did not start to form until later. Even as I started to overcome those first-year struggles, I was still trying to do it on my own. I still had not grasped that I did not have to.

Jessica, spoke of making lasting connections with other students she met saying:

I really made some lasting friendships during my first year and we are still friends today. We took classes together, were roommates, ate together, and took trips.

We just bonded so well, and I really believe making connections with other students during my first year was probably the most successful part for me. I turned my poor grades around, but my social life took off right from the start.

When Jessica spoke of her reasons for committing to the college and persisting to graduation, she laughed, saying:

If I am being honest, I had no real goals set in the beginning. I thought college was going to be an easy good time. I was not honest with my struggles, so I did not get the help I needed and when it was offered, I still resisted. Making friends was the first thing that made me want to stay. I met people I wanted to be around. Getting involved and joining groups made me want to stay. I participated in activities that kept me wanting to come back. It was at this point, as I am going through my first year that I realize I just wanted to be here. I really wanted to complete my degree and fulfill my dreams. I may not have written any goals down, but I finally realized I did have goals.

Jessica felt pretty strong in her views that the first-year seminar had no merit. I asked if she thought it helped her to adjust to college life. She expressed her dislike for the course, saying:

I did not enjoy the class and it was not beneficial to my college experience. I made connections to other students, but it did nothing for helping me

academically as far as grades. I did not make or commit to any goals because of it.

As we discussed the seminar's role in addressing her learning needs, she asserted:

It was supposed to help navigate college life, I guess. Maybe it was supposed to prepare me for the hard work, but it just felt like it was another class. As I was trying to turn my academic performance around so, I did not flunk out, I found nothing to benefit me in that process from this course. We were told about resources, but even then, I did not fully utilize anything in the beginning.

I probed, by asking, is it that the course was not useful, or that you did not use what was presented to you? She responded simply, "it wasn't useful."

I asked Jessica, to think on it and tell me what her feelings are about why she remained enrolled consistently and if there is anything at all that she still applies from the first-year seminar. She responded:

It did not encourage me to remain enrolled. It has in no way influenced my reasons for staying. Like I said, it was just another class. I took it because I had to. I cannot think of anything I apply. I continued to be resilient and work on my own. I did not then, and I still do not see the benefit of the class.

When asked her thoughts on how the seminar might be improved and final thoughts, she replied:

Most of us showed up because it was considered an easy "A." They stressed the importance of building relationships, but what was taught is something I could have gotten in a shorter presentation or over the course of a summer week-long orientation. Just because it did not help me, does not mean it did not help

someone else. I guess I will not say it should not be offered, but maybe just change who they offer it to. Is a whole semester necessary?

Early in the interview, Jessica acknowledges the first-year seminar had some impact on connecting socially with the college, but not academically. However, it seems overall, she saw no real benefit from taking the class.

Kasey

Kasey, a white female, is originally from Alabama but moved to Georgia as a high school freshman. The transition to a new high school was difficult at first, but once she made new friends, she started to enjoy her new environment. She was very involved in high school, even working a part-time job. Kasey felt she was ready for the transition from high school to college because she was ready to move to the next level. She took college courses over the summer before the fall semester began and felt like this prepared her to handle the tougher academic expectations. Kasey expressed being excited during her first year, creating friendships that have lasted. She initially decided to major in Criminal Justice believing she wanted to attend law school. She ultimately decided to pursue psychology, with a desire to pursue a master's degree and become a licensed counselor. She is a first-generation college student.

I interviewed Kasey, fourth. We met at the library. I could not get a room this time, but we were able to find a quiet space with no one else around or other sounds to interfere with recording the interview. I introduced myself and confirmed that I had her permission to record the interview. We each sat in a chair. There was no table available, but there was a small stand nearby. I used this to hold the recorder to ensure we were both recorded clearly. I turned on the recorder and started with an explanation of the

purpose, process, and reviewing the consent form. I asked her if he had any questions. She said she could not think of anything she needed to ask. She signed the consent form and the interview began. She seemed very at ease and opened up on each question. A few times during the interview, it was almost like we were just chatting as opposed to being a part of a study. I had the easiest rapport with Kasey. As the interview concluded, I gave Kasey the opportunity to add anything she had not already shared. She did not have anything more to share. She did assert that the first-year seminar felt like a waste of time. I thanked Kasey for participating and presented her with a gift card. After, the interview ended, Kasey and I spoke a little while longer about her plans for the future and her moving on to obtain a master's degree.

Kasey is the only participant to have a good transition and first-year experience. Kasey expressed that her first-year of college was exciting. Although she was away from home, she was excited to start a new journey. Kasey had already made a tough transition in her life when her parents decided to move to another city during her freshman year of high school. She had to start over, but once she made friends and got involved, she adjusted well. She had taken classes over the summer at a technical college and "felt prepared to tackle college courses once the regular fall semester began." Her feeling is that she made friends easily and other than being nervous about a new environment, she fit in pretty quickly. She values the friendships she has built, especially the one with her roommate, which she sees lasting a lifetime. She found that finances as a college student were different. She was not eligible for financial aid, and outside of a small scholarship, her parents had to take out loans to cover the costs. She continued working to cover

nonacademic expenses. I asked if she believed the first-year seminar had any impact in her transition to college and having a successful first-year, Kasey stated:

Well, I was already good at making friends, plus I took college courses before I actually started my real first semester. I did not feel I gained anything useful out of it. I think students who cannot make friends or have never had college classes need it more than I did. I was nervous at first, but not for long. I always knew I would have to work because I did in high school. I had to learn how to be more responsible with money. One semester in a class did not give me all the skills I needed to move forward. I think my own determination has kept me in college. I am here because I want to be.

When Kasey, was asked if she believes the seminar should be mandatory, she replied, “I did not find it useful, but some people might. I feel like it should be offered, but optional.”

Kasey talked about using student support services and how it impacted the ways in which she got involved on campus. She utilized the counseling center resources and really appreciated having someone to talk to about some of the challenges of the first year. She discussed her experiences with support services saying:

At first, I thought I would never go to a counseling center because I did not have problems, except trying to process the difference in the way finances worked.

This really gave me headaches. My parents were already covering the costs of tuition, so I had to take care of myself financially.

I probed further about how it impacted her getting involved. She further explained:

The counseling center was so great that I started to volunteer, not for them but in my program and in the community. I became a listening ear to students who needed one. I joined other organizations and have done a lot on campus. These things were good for leadership opportunities and just meeting people. When I was no longer stressing over money, I felt better about getting out more and doing more things. I have always enjoyed being active in programs.

As we continued talking, I inquired about other resources she used and the benefits. She said:

I took advantage of using the tutoring center as well. I joined study groups. I did some tutoring and led some study groups. I definitely performed better once I started getting help in the areas I struggled. Connecting with students in the same major also helped to build sort of a cohort and we looked out for each other.

We were an unofficial club.

Kasey believes that support services and being involved are connected. She got involved because of the support she received and decided to use her experience to help other students. Kasey interacted with faculty before her first fall semester of enrollment because she took college courses the summer prior. She remembers feeling comfortable with faculty interaction saying:

Since I was able to take college courses before fall, I was comfortable seeking assistance when I did not understand something or otherwise needed assistance. I was not the best at math and because of this I asked a lot of questions. I was not generally too outspoken but being comfortable asking for help made my

classroom engagement stronger. It probably helped me with outside of class interactions as well.

When discussing connections with other students, Kasey, said she made friends easily, but being in a new place made her nervous, but she stated:

Being able to make great connections and new friends made it easier for me to be comfortable in my new environment. My roommate was a stranger when I met her, but now she is one of my best friends. I have made many lasting friendships. I participate in multiple campus activities and have made even more connections. I have just had fun. When you get to a new place for the first time, especially moving away from everything you have always known, it can be intimidating. Connecting to people can make the experience fulfilling. You start to look forward to the new adventure.

Kasey, says of connecting and committing to the institution:

I adjusted pretty well; I think. I think everything combined plays a role in why I am still here. My own drive included. I have reasons to come to campus, to participate in activities, and to be around friends. I want to complete my degree. That is the main reason for my commitment to being here and being disciplined. The student activities add another layer because I enjoy them. I like being involved. I always have and I am glad I did not lose that after high school. I took on too much in the beginning, but then I learned balance. All the relationships I have built contributed to my connecting, but my own ambition got me to commit.

Kasey expressed that she felt the usefulness of the first-year seminar was limited. While discussing the role of the first-year seminar in helping her adjust to college life she said:

I did learn how a social life in college is different from the one I had in high school. And it was good to know I was not the only one feeling some nervousness. I learned about the resources available on campus and that there were people I could reach out to if I needed assistance. If it helped me adjust, it was by helping me connect with people. That class did nothing for helping me adjust academically. I did that work on my own.

When asked if the first-year seminar helped to address her learning needs, she responded:

I guess it did in a way by pointing me toward resources to help if I needed assistance. The counseling center comes to mind again. I used that a lot when I was struggling. I cannot think of any real ways it addressed learning needs. I think that is something we always figure out as we go.

Kasey was asked about the role of the first-year seminar in her remaining enrolled and what she learned that she still applies. She expressed:

I do not think it encouraged me to remain enrolled. I think my drive and determination was the reason I remained enrolled. I knew I would be the first in my family to graduate from college, so that was an added incentive to stay. I think it has helped me now as I set professional goals. I never got any grand academic benefits. I can say I will be a better professional because I learned how to communicate and talk to people.

Asked to give her ideas on improving the first-year seminar and final thoughts, Kasey said:

My only thought is that if it is going to be mandatory it should be restructured in a way that makes it impactful all around. I think it is supposed to have some

academic benefit, but it falls short. I believe it might work better in context of offering the class with the programs. You know base it on the different majors.

That might be more useful.

Kasey does not believe the first-year seminar benefitted her long-term academically. She does believe there are aspects she will take with her into her professional life.

Marie

Marie, a black female, born and raised in a college town, initially had no interest in attending college. She was well known in high school and participated in various activities. She did not feel prepared to attend college at all. She is a first-generation college student and had no idea how to navigate the process. All her high school friends had long decided to attend college and they all had parents who had attended college. Marie's decision to attend college stemmed from the need to get away from the environment she grew up in. Since, she was not an honor student, the guidance counselors did not provide her any help with the college admissions process, and she had to figure it out on her own. The first year was tough when it came to being financially responsible and maintaining grades. She was living carefree. Marie rebounded and declared a major in health sciences.

Marie was the fifth and final participant to be interviewed. After some discussion back and forth about what would best fit her schedule, we decided to meet at the library. This time I was able to get a room as I had when I interviewed Allen. Marie arrived at the interview late and told me that she needed to leave at a certain time because she had another engagement to attend. After, I had introduced myself, I confirmed that she was okay with being recorded. Once I have her confirmation, I turned on the recorder and

placed it in the middle of the table. I explained the purpose, process, and reviewed the consent form. I gave her an opportunity to ask questions. She said she had no questions for me. Once, she signed the consent form the interview started. She seemed interested in participating and gave good answers to the questions. She opened up about her initial struggles and how the seminar helped to turn things around. I noted that she was the only participant who believed the first-year seminar to be valuable. I watched the time occasionally because I knew she had to be at another meeting after the interview. We were able to get through the interview with plenty of time for her to make it to her next location on time. As the interview ended, I asked her to share any detailed she had not mentioned throughout the interview. She did not have anything new to add. I presented her with a gift card and thanked her for participating. Marie was the only participant who believed the first-year seminar help her to connect both academically and socially to the college.

Marie, decided to go to college to escape the town she lived in. She attended a college preparatory high school. Marie describes, “I really enjoyed high school, I initially had no interest in attending college.” Although, she is from a college town, she made the decision to attend college away from home. She expressed that as a first-generation college student, she had no help from her family when it came to the admissions process. Since, she was not an honor student, the guidance counselor at her high school were not interested in helping her. She was not at all prepared to make the transition. Her finances during the first year were in shambles and she relied on her refund checks, without thinking long-term about having to pay the loans back. She found her first-year to be a learning experience. The one thing that came easy was making

friends, but she almost flunked out her first semester because she was, as she described, “living carefree with no guidance or common sense.” Marie is the only participant, who believes she benefited from the first-year seminar holistically. When asked about the role of the first-year seminar in her transition and first-year experience she stated:

I for sure would have flunked out of my first year without it. Going into the second semester it gave me the restart that I needed. I made use of the resources I learned about like tutoring and study groups. I learned how important it is to prioritize my academics and balance it with my other responsibilities. Making friends was always easy for me, but the class introduced me to campus resources and organizations and encouraged me to get involved. Using the resources on campus for sure turned my first year around.

Her views on whether or not the first-year seminar should be mandatory are, “I benefited from it and I am glad it was required. If it were not required, I likely would not have taken it. I believe all students will benefit from it and it should be mandatory.”

Marie opened up about adjusting and being able to bond with other students over shared experiences of the first year and reminding herself that needing help was nothing to be ashamed of. She started talking about utilizing support services saying:

I learned about the services, but I did not immediately take advantage of them. You get embarrassed. I am the first in my family to go to college so, once I met another person with the same experience it motivated me. When I took the step to seek guidance for time-management and budgeting, I realized just how much was available to me.

I probed further asking about the types of resources she used. She replied:

Tutoring for sure. I needed it. I was having a rough first year and if I had not gotten over being ashamed, I definitely would have flunked out. I hate to think about it. I took advantage of study groups. These were lifesaving, having another person to share and compare with. I did not have a mentor, but my advisor was amazing and has really guided me on this journey.

I asked Marie, to tell me about her involvement in campus activities and how it affected college life for her. She talked about being excited when she started meeting people, she had things in common with saying:

The student organizations made me feel right at home. I had a voice. It was cool getting to know older students at the time because they provided great insight, especially those in my program. I did not feel comfortable being a mentor when I was asked, but I planned programs and I lead study groups. I feel like being involved on campus helped me to fit in and form lasting relationships. This is one of the main ways I met people.

Marie believes using support services and becoming involved pushed her through the first year of college and she became a stronger student going forward. Marie speaks of building on truly great relationships with faculty, which she will maintain even after graduation. She says:

During my first year the only faculty relationship I built was with my advisor. I will continue this relationship after I am no longer a student. He became like a mentor and was more than an advisor. He was vital to my success. He has been a driving force in my life. I struggled in the first year and he helped keep me here.

I can reach out to him for advice at any time with no problems. He is always on hand to help. This relationship has been a lifeline for my college experience. Marie, described making friends as “always coming easy to me.” She believes she has made lasting connections with her college friends, stating:

I made friendships in my first year that have lasted, and I believe they will continue after graduation. I cherish these people. We have introduced each other to new things. We have pulled each other out of comfort zones. My experience here has been better because of them. I came here just because I thought I needed to get away from the city I grew up in. Once I got past my initial struggles, being here has been so fulfilling and I know the people I have connected with made that possible.

Marie, described connecting and committing to the institution as hard initially, but says:

Creating such a bond with my advisor was what I needed to feel like I could succeed here. I was not college bound when I graduated high school, so this was not my dream. I really struggled and more than once thought about quitting. My advisor encouraged me and mentored me. Through his guidance I began to feel connected to my program and the college. Add to that making new friends and getting involved, I started to feel like I fit. I came to a place of knowing I belonged here. It may not have been my dream in the beginning, but once I made these connections, I committed.

Marie, discussed the role of the first-year seminar in her remaining enrolled and what she learned that she still applies, saying:

It helped me remain enrolled because when I took the class, that is when I truly transitioned from high school to college. I enhanced my writing skills and study skills. I got my priorities straight. I really have been a better student because of it. I still apply everything. I know where to go when I feel overwhelmed. I can communicate what I need.

Asked about ways the first-year seminar could improve and to give final thoughts, Marie said:

There is always room for improvement, but I think the first-year seminar is great. I hope it continues for students who need the support to keep them from dropping out. I have a great advisor, but not all advisors provide the necessary support and guidance needed for students to be successful. It can be extremely stressful when you are a first-generation student leaving home for the first time. It was just overall, a great experience. I am a better learner and I engaged more.

Marie believes the first-year seminar had a role in her remaining enrolled and equipping her with the resources she needed to persist to graduation.

Conclusion

The narratives provided by the participants regarding the first-year seminar gives a glimpse into their experiences with the course and how they perceived its role in their college success and decision to persist toward graduation. Although, the participants describe learning about social and academic resources through the course, they believe that the course did not influence their decision to persist. Based on the descriptions provided, there is evidence that the first-year seminar has a positive impact even if they do not see it. In chapter 5, I present the finding from the research.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Contributing to understanding the experiences from the participants' points-of-view are detailed descriptions provided in chapter 4 as illustrations of their lived experiences with the first-year seminar. Informal member checks were used to establish credibility. Participants were invited to review copies of the transcripts of their interviews and the final report to check that what they described during the interviews is what they intended to express. Only 3 of the 5 participants agreed to participate in the member checks. None indicated that any changes were necessary. Therefore, no differences emerged between the finding of the data analysis and the participants' ideas of representation of the findings. A sample of 8-10 was the desired number of participants, however of the 7 who responded and were chosen, 5 decided to participate.

Data analysis began with reviewing the transcripts. Each transcript was read, going line by line identifying possible initial codes. To save time, data analysis software Atlas.ti was used to help in the coding process and to generate codes missed by the initial analysis. I only used the software during the first and second stages of coding because I realized I could do the final stage of coding by hand because the data had been significantly reduced. The themes and subthemes were taken from the descriptions provided by the participants during the interviews. I reviewed and refined the codes by forming categories. Narrowing the code list down to the most relevant, four major themes emerged: precollege/transitioning, student involvement/support services, connections/commitment to the institution, and the role of the first-year seminar. Figure

2 illustrates a breakdown of the 4 major themes and the subthemes that emerged during the analysis of data.

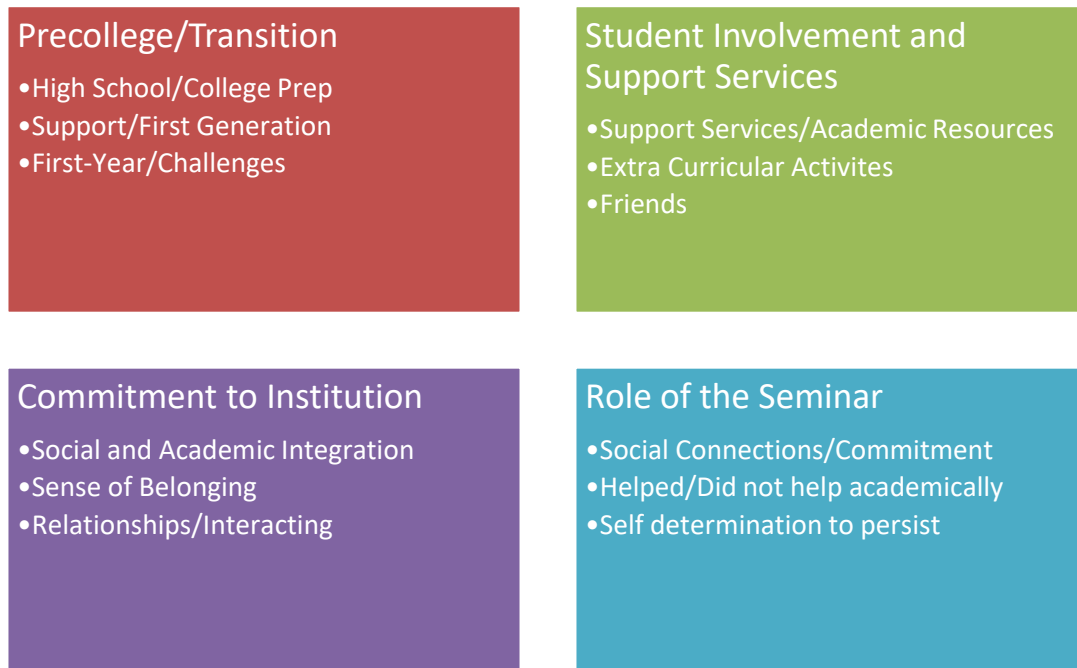


Figure 2. Four Major Themes and Subthemes

Precollege/Transitioning

First-year students enter college with various precollege characteristics and levels of academic preparedness (Reason, 2009). Traditional-aged students have a new-found level of independence and identity shifts. They are also faced with being separated from their families and past peer groups for the first time (Hanger et al., 2012). Additionally, their socio-demographics such as gender, race, age, parents' education level, and family income all matter to their retention and persistence to graduation. Many minority students are first-generation students. They are least likely to graduate and twice as likely to depart before the second year of college (Choy, 2001; Thayer, 2000). Parents of first-generation college students are often unfamiliar with processes such as completing admissions applications, financial aid, or any process associated with successfully

navigating higher education. These students often come from low-income families and are more likely to have to work, making it harder to integrate academically and socially and persist to graduation (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

The First Year/Challenges

The first year of college is a transition period with challenges to academic and social integration (Crissman & Schreiber, 2002). Transitioning from high school to college is recognized as a period of significant change in a student's life (Boroch & Hope, 2009). Some of the challenges that students face is choosing a major, learning to navigate higher level curriculum, time management, and building new relationships (Gardner, 2001). Many students enter college with no academic planning experience and are unaware of the resources and opportunities available to them (Astin, 1975, 1999; Braxton, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005). It cannot be assumed that any single intervention will work for all students, nor can it be assumed that interventions will be experienced the same way by students (Reason, 2009). First, students go through a separation stage during which students move away from their home and past environments. Although, this can be a tough adjustment, most students move on to the second stage, transition, and finally integration (Tinto, 1987; 1993).

Students bring with them a range of their own expectations (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). Their expectations and experiences are influenced by many variables. The reality of time, effort, and financial implications make their expectations different from their actual experiences (McInnis et al., 2000). The first-year seminar is used as a transitional intervention to target the academic and nonacademic needs of students (Bailey & Karp, 2003).

High School/College Prep

Academic performance is most likely the strongest predictor of persistence to degree completion (Reason, 2009). Individual personality traits, self-concept, and intrinsic motivation affect a student's successful integration into college (Andrade, 2008). The decision to attend college is mostly influenced by these factors, however it is the academic experience that greatly influences a student's decision to remain enrolled. Those most at risk for failing academically or early withdrawal are those entering a higher education institution with poor academic preparation, likely performing poorly prior to transitioning (Terrion & Daoust, 2012).

Adelman (2006) found that a rigorous high school curriculum had significant impact on college persistence, most significantly early in a student's college career. The quality of a student's prior academic instruction and preparedness for college level instruction and assignments greatly influences whether or not a student will be successful (Bean, 1980). Many student enrolling in colleges and universities are unprepared for college level curriculum (reading, writing, and math) and must first complete remedial courses (Swail, 2004). Successful completion of a strong high school curriculum is a major predictor of undergraduate success and retention. Indicators positively related to retention are high school grade point average and class rank (Adelman, 1999).

Support/First-Generation

The number of first-generation college students enrolling at post-secondary institutions is rising (Irlbeck et al., 2014). These students typically face struggles when transitioning to college life. They lack knowledge about their new environment. Many do not have the support systems needed to be successful (Irlbeck et al., 2014). First-

generation college students are defined as students whose parents have a high school diploma or less (Chen, 2005). They enter college without reference to the terminology, traditions, and expectations as they have little to no family connection to the college lifestyle (Irlbeck et al., 2014). They are usually less prepared to make informed decisions about colleges and involvement because of a lack of support from family (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Allen described his transition to college experience as not being as difficult as he expected especially because he is a first-generation college student. He found the hardest part of transitioning to be the course content. When taking the first-year seminar he felt the small class sizes made the difference in his learning process. He worked, but being awarded financial aid helped offset the costs, so he did not feel a financial strain. Allen credits the first-year seminar with introducing him to campus resources, which he used but does not feel it helped with his transition, specifically academically, from high school to college.

Tiffany expressed not feeling as prepared to make the transition as she could have been. She did not take any college prep courses or participate in college readiness programs. She described being a first-generation student and not having any assistance with the processes associated with college. She discussed having to work in college because she had always worked. She does not believe the first-year seminar helped in her transition academically, believing it helped more socially.

Jessica believed that being a good high school student would be enough for her to be a good college student. She is a first-generation college student and did not have family support in preparing for college life. She described being an honor student,

graduating 7th in her class, and realizing that she was not prepared for the rigors of college curriculum, even though she had been a dual enrollment student. She dealt with bad grades in the first semester and the probability of losing her scholarship. Although, there were resources on campus that would help she was too embarrassed to ask for help. Asked about the role of the first-year seminar in helping her to persist past the first year, she expressed that it was her own will to succeed.

Kasey is the only participant to describe a positive experience transitioning from high school to college. She expressed being excited about her first year. She credits having already made the tough transition of changing schools when she was in high school with preparing her for transitioning to college. She indicated that she was a first-generation college student but, believes taking college courses the summer prior to her fall enrollment as preparing her for college level work. She had to work since she was not eligible for financial aid. Receiving a small scholarship helped with the cost of tuition. Her parents took out loans to cover the rest. Kasey describes being a good student and her own determination as the reasons for her successful transition, not the first-year seminar.

Marie's reason for attending college was to escape her hometown. She described enjoying high school and being active. She talked about being a first-generation college student who had no help from family when it came to the admissions process. She received no guidance from her high school counselor because she was not an honor student. Marie did not feel prepared for the transition from high school to college. Her finances were terrible, and she relied on refunds from financial aid without giving thought to the fact those loans would have to be paid back. She almost flunked out her

first semester. She credits the first-year seminar with giving her the restart she needed going into her second semester. She made use of the resources she learned about and learned to prioritize.

Tiffany, Jessica, and Marie describe transitioning to college as challenging, acknowledging their unpreparedness. Jessica also described a period when she was finally able to move on from high school. Allen found the greatest challenge to be academic expectations but found the small class sizes helpful. Kasey, expressed excitement in transitioning and feeling prepared to start college and like Allen, did not perceive the transition to be as hard as initially believed. Each of them identified as first-generation students.

Student Involvement and Support

Tinto (1999) believed that when students are more actively involved, they are more likely to remain enrolled past the first year. Astin's (1984) theory of student development believes in enriching students learning environments and student development through involvement. A student who is actively involved with their institution is more likely to put forth an effort to be successful, than a student who is not involved. Active involvement increases student success, particularly when student engagement is part of the learning process. The amount of time and energy a student invests both inside and outside of the classroom matter to student success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Students who engage on campus are more likely to be retained (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Social integration is important for student success. Establishing friendships with other students and connecting with mentors and faculty are

identified as important factors to student integration (Swail, 2004). It is important for students to connect to campus culture early in their academic experience. This is accomplished by participating in student organizations and in campus social traditions, positively influencing student commitment and retention.

Support Services/Academic Resources

Tinto (2004) suggested readily accessible academic and social support services to improve undergraduate retention. He also believed linking academic support services to everyday classroom learning of credit courses means students would be more likely to use the services and be successful (Tinto, 2004). Interactions with academic and support personnel influences students' feelings of connection to institution and assists them in navigating campus culture, meet expectations of college life, and obtaining their degree (Tinto, 2004). Positive interactions between students and faculty as well as taking advantage of resources promoting academic success such as tutoring and office hours has been proven to positively influence retention (Habley, 2004; Wyckoff, 1998).

Extracurricular Activities and Friends

It is a common belief that the more students are involved in college life, the more likely they will be to persist (Reason, 2009). Student involvement is defined as the extent to which students are invested in learning both physically and psychologically (Astin, 1985). The greater the student engagement in college, as measured by time and effort put into educationally purposeful activities, the more likely the student will be to persist (Reason, 2009). Participation in extracurricular activities and the quality of interaction with their peers has a significant influence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Friendships

Making friends in college can serve as a mechanism to counteract the challenges faced when making a major transition because they are sources of support (Tokuno, 1986). The multiple functions that friends fulfill and their provisions of support indicates that having close friends during stressful experiences can help individuals cope (Boute et al., 2007). This may be especially true during the transition to college (Kenny, 1987). Loss of friendship can occur in the shift from high school to college as a decrease in satisfaction, commitment, and support from old friends causing those friendships to dissipate (Oswald & Clark, 2003). Developing new friendships is important.

Participants described being introduced to student activities, support services, and academic resources through the first-year seminar. This information led to them becoming actively involved in campus activities and making connections to staff and faculty. They began utilizing the support services available to them and attending social events. Allen, for example described being active on campus and in the community after being introduced to support services and campus activities. He credits these services with helping him to be more vocal in class. He expressed learning to communicate better both written and orally and being able to build a relationship with his advisor and other faculty. He went to tutoring for math and became more engaged through student groups. Although, he believes the support services he learned about in the first-year seminar increased his chances of success he described not finding the course worthwhile.

Tiffany getting involved in campus activities and leadership opportunities she learned about through the first-year seminar was impactful. She also utilized the academic resources she was introduced to in the course. She found the library, writing

center, and career services to be the most beneficial. Finding out about support services and getting involved on campus helped her to feel less introverted and become more active, joining clubs, and taking on leadership roles in organizations.

Jessica spoke of her struggles during the first year and finding it hard to leave her high school identity behind. She was assigned a student development specialist through support services and admitted that it helped her navigate her college experience. She acknowledged finding out about services through the first-year seminar and how they helped ease her struggles. She described becoming too focused on other things and tried to be involved in everything, which served her no purpose if she was failing her classes. By the second semester she knew better. Although, not initially using resources she learned about, she rebounded in her second semester and did well. She learned that being too involved could be harmful.

Kasey utilized the resources she learned about in the first-year seminar, specifically the counseling center. She appreciated having someone to talk to about the challenges of the first year. She did not think she would ever go to counseling, but counseling led her to volunteering as mentor in her program of study and in the community. She joined other campus organizations and took on leadership roles. She believes joining study groups and connecting with students with the same major was beneficial and she appreciated being able to build a cohort of support. Kasey expressed that she believes support services and being involved are connected because receiving help increased her desire to help other students.

Marie had to remind herself that needing help was nothing to be ashamed of. She spoke of utilizing support services, but not utilizing them immediately because she was

embarrassed. After seeking help with time-management and budgeting she realized how much help was available to her. She began using tutoring services after having a rough first semester, acknowledging that without it she would have failed. She did not have a mentor but described her advisor as a great help in her journey. Joining student organizations made her feel like she belonged and that she had a voice. Being involved on campus helped her to fit in and meeting older students gave her someone to look to for insight about college life and her program of study. She credits the first-year seminar with introducing her to support services and her becoming involved.

When it comes to involvement and support services the participants described taking advantage of academic resources like tutoring and the writing center learned about through the first-year seminar. They recognized that these resources helped them improve academically. Still, participants believe the first-year seminar had no role in their academic improvements although they were made aware of the resources through participation in the course. Each participant found the support services useful for networking, making connections, and learning to navigate college life. They each found benefit in being involved. Allen, Jessica, and Kasey learned the negative impact of too much involvement. Marie believes the first-year seminar helped her both socially and academically. Although, the course led to the participants getting involved in campus life and finding the necessary support, participants believe using the support services and getting involved increased their chances for success and not the first-year seminar itself.

Connections and Commitment to the Institution

Academic and social integration are the most significant factors in predicting persistence past the first year (Ishitani, 2003). Commitment to the college environment

both academically and socially decreases the likelihood of students leaving (Tinto, 1975). Students are typically unprepared to make a successful transition from high school to college, which may result in them being dismissed from the institution (Braxton, 2002; Hunter, 2006; Tinto, 2002). When unpreparedness is combined with finances and other pressures faced in the first year, students may begin questioning their choices and decide to leave the institution (Tinto, 2002). Many institutional and environmental variables factor into integration such as major, student effort, faculty and peer interaction, finances, GPA, student satisfaction, and extracurricular activities (Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005).

Academic and Social Commitment

Building academic and social competencies are important to helping students integrate successfully (Tinto, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005). Difficulties in the social and emotional sphere can impact the academic sphere. It is important to address both through the first-year seminar to enhance persistence (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). When the institution addresses the issues faced by students in the first year a nurturing relationship develops between the student and the institution (Upcraft et al., 2005). Students begin to gain confidence in themselves and their new college environment. The process of integration is strengthened as is students' commitment to the institution (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft et al., 2005).

Relationships and Interactions

By establishing connections with other students, faculty, and staff, students successfully complete their transition to college (Tinto, 1993). These relationships are meaningful for social and academic success. Student interaction with peers, faculty,

staff, and administration influences their intent to remain enrolled (Wyckoff, 1998). To meet the needs of students in transition, collaboration across campus departments is recommended. Anderson (1997) asserted that academic advising is essential to undergraduate retention because it keeps students motivated, stimulated, and working towards the meaningful goal of degree completion. Tinto (1999) believed academic advising to be an integral part of a student's first year of college and should promote student development.

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging in students is defined as perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, being accepted, respected, valued, mattering, and being important to the group (Strayhorn, 2012). The feeling of belonging is best supported by perceived faculty and peer support on campus (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keefe, 2013). Wilson and Gore (2013) asserted that students feel like they belong when they believe they matter to someone on campus. Developing this sense of belonging in the first year of enrollment influences whether or not a student will be retained since 56% of student departures occur after the first year (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). It is important that students cultivate a sense of belonging during their first year, with the first-year seminar being an ideal place to begin. Hoffman et al., (2002) determined that first-year seminars facilitate the development of relationships and helps students to create bonds defined as support systems.

Allen's relationships with faculty progressed and improved over time. He moved from mostly communicating through email to seeing the benefit to personal interactions.

He expressed his enjoyment of making social connections with new friends as he became more involved on campus. He opened up more once he developed a sense of belonging because of the meaningful interactions he had with his peers and faculty made learning fun. A sense of belonging helped him to commit to the institution.

Tiffany described her relationship with her advisor as the most important relationship she built. She believed he guided her academic life and helped her build other important relationships. She believes connecting with other students made a difference as well. These connections helped to sustain her as much as her relationships with faculty. Tiffany recognized these relationships as being a part of why she remained in college believing that a person cannot make a true commitment to college without these relationships.

Jessica did not build relationships with faculty. It was her relationships with support staff that served her well. She expressed her belief that making connections with other students during her first year was likely the most successful part of her experience. Although, she had no real goals initially because she thought college would be easy, she changed her tune. Making friends in the beginning is what made her want to stay because participating in social activities kept her wanting to come back. Her social connections had the most influence on her commitment to the institution.

Kasey began developing her relationships with faculty prior to her first semester of enrollment. Having taken courses the summer prior, she felt comfortable seeking out assistance. She did not consider herself outspoken but developing a comfort with asking questions improved her classroom engagement and she believes her out of classroom interactions as well. Making new friends and connections made adjusting to her new

environment easier. Participating helped her make even more meaningful connections and made her experiences more fulfilling. For Kasey, everything combined played a role in her connecting her to the institution.

Marie developed great relationships with faculty, which she plans to maintain after graduation. Her faculty advisor became a mentor for her starting in the first year. She credits him as a vital part of her success and helping her to persist. She described the relationship as a lifeline. Making connections and getting involved pulled her out of her comfort zone. Connecting with people made her experience more fulfilling. Creating a bond with her advisor helped her to commit because with his guidance she felt connected to her program. Making connections made her feel like she belonged, making it easier for her to commit to remaining in college.

Participants described being involved and making new friends, believing these two things to be important to their transition and adjustment in the first year for them. When discussing making connections and committing to their education, the participants described the relationships they formed remembering this a essential to their success. Each of them remembers social connections with new friends as beneficial to creating a sense of belonging and wanting to stay in school.

Role of the First-Year Seminar

Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) both believed high levels of integration academically and socially, leads to greater commitment and persistence (Braxton, 2000). The first-year seminar is a common tool used to help with successful integration (Schrader & Brown, 2008). It was developed as a strategy to provide new students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to overcome the challenges of the

first year of college (Permzadian & Crede, 2015). They are designed to help students successfully integrate into and adjust to the college environment in the first year (Jaijairam, 2016). Institutions believe these seminars to play a vital role in student success. Studies point to an increase in persistence and student success after taking the first-year seminar (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

First-year seminars are typically smaller in size than other courses (Padgett et al., 2013). The smaller class sizes foster more student-faculty interactions and peer relationships. Students are encouraged to fully engage in classroom discussions, work together, and be productive during class time (Swing 2002; Keup & Petschauer, 2011; Padgett & Keup, 2011). Although class sizes are typically small, some institutions may enroll up to thirty students in their seminars. Regardless of the size and type, the common focus of all first-year seminars is assisting students in their academic and social development as they transition successfully into college. First-year seminars help students focus on a subject or a combination of subjects. Students learn about themselves and the institution, which increases their ability to be successful and ultimately graduate (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Social Connections/Commitment

Leaving their home environment for the college environment is viewed as a rite of passage for young adults (Thomas & Hanson, 2014). The process is complicated by the need of great emotional resilience in order to adjust (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, McCune, 2008). The assumption is that students have the ability to make such a social transition effortlessly, but this is complicated by student expectations and how their interpretations of their experiences are shaped. They may lack what is necessary for a

successful integration (Leese, 2010). There are strong links between informal social interactions and learning. Social networks tend to be a source for social and academic resources for support (Hommes et al., 2012). It is suggested that post-secondary institutions should give more attention to facilitating social integration to help students fit in and to provide opportunities to connect with other students to develop relationships so they can achieve full integration into university life (Leese, 2010; Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali, & Rogers, 2012; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009).

Self -Determination to Persist

Astin (1984) asserted that the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic and social aspects of college life influences their outcomes and persistence. Astin (1999) suggested that the time and effort a student directs to achieving particular goals is significant to student development. Academic goals, academic self-efficacy, and a student’s sense of academic skills are related to persistence (Robbin et al., 2004). A strong positive link was found between self-efficacy, educational goals, and persistence (Brown et al., 2008). Tinto (2017) described persistence as another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that permits a person to continue pursuing a goal even when challenges present themselves (Tinto, 2017). Students have to want to persist to degree completion to apply the effort necessary to do so (Tinto, 2017).

Although Allen, appreciates the small class sizes, he does not believe the first-year seminar offered him any real advantages. This is contrary to his descriptions on how the resources he learned about through the course helped with his academic struggles. He does believe it had more benefit to his social connections. His view is that the first-year

seminar is not responsible for him persisting. His opinion is that the course should be optional and proposed a week-long orientation organized by programs of study.

Tiffany gives the first-year seminar credit for helping her to open up socially and make connections. She believes the required orientation was sufficient, feeling that the course was just a semester long orientation. While she gives the course credit for helping her socially, she believes it had no merit for her academically. She feels her advisor and instructors filled that role. She acknowledged that it led her to resources she found helpful. Overall, she does not believe the first-year seminar had a role in her remaining enrolled to graduation. She believes persistence is a personal mindset. Her views for improving the course is to tie it into the programs. This way students can meet other students who will likely continue the journey with them and share similar experiences. She also suggested expanding it to a full first-year program.

Jessica felt strongly that the first-year seminar had no merit. She expressed her dislike of the course. Although, she acknowledged that is it responsible for her social connections and being involved on campus, she denied any academic benefit. For Jessica, it felt just like any other class. Her belief is that she turned her struggles around on her own, even though she described learning about resources through the course that she ultimately used and found helpful. Her view is that she remained enrolled on her own with no influence from the course. Her overall, belief is that it did not influence her academically. She believes it should optional and maybe only required for some students.

Kasey believed the usefulness of the first-year seminar was limited. She does not believe it had any benefit to her academically, however she credited it with helping her to

make social connections, find resources, and get involved. Her view is that her own determination is responsible for her remaining enrolled. She expressed that the first-year seminar should be restructured but, gave no suggestions on how and what needs to be restructured. She did suggest that it might work better if it were offered related to the programs of study. Although, she does not believe it helped her academically, she believes there are aspects she might take into her personal life.

Marie is the only participant who believes the first-year seminar helped her to connect to the institution academically and socially. She described it as helping her to adjust in and out of the classroom. She expressed being grateful for the course and the learning techniques and tools that helped her turn her academic performance around. The first-year seminar helped her to start seeing college as more than an escape from her hometown. Marie credited the course with helping her to remain enrolled, getting her priorities straight, and becoming a better student. She offered no specific suggestions for changing or improving the seminar, but believes the course is necessary for providing support.

Participants expressed their beliefs about the role the first-year seminar played in their success and retention as they persisted toward graduation. Allen described being genuinely annoyed with the seminar and finding it not to be worthwhile. He does not believe it played a role in his persisting to graduation. Tiffany, expressed finding it useful for social skills, networking, and providing resources, but denied it had any major role in her remaining in college. Jessica, felt strongly in her view that the first-year seminar had no merit, expressing that she only showed up because it was an “easy A.” She feels nothing about the class benefitted her academically. Kasey, felt the usefulness

of the seminar was limited, believing it has more benefits for social skills than academic skills.

Each participant acknowledges still applying some form of what they learned in the first-year seminar today, mainly the social aspects. Tiffany and Kasey found it useful to their professional lives and believe they have developed skills they can continue to use in that avenue. Each participant credited the first-year seminar with helping them to connect socially and commit to the institution in that way, but not academically. Only Marie, believes the seminar had a significant impact in helping her to connect fully to the college. The others believe it was their own self-determination responsible for their remaining enrolled and persisting.

When discussing final thoughts and suggestions for improvement the participants shared their ideas for the future of first-year seminars. Allen's, belief is that it should be optional and worth less than 3 hours. Tiffany believes it will be more useful tied into the programs of major so students can connect with people who will be able to relate to their journey. Jessica's, view is that they should change who it is offered to. Kasey does not think there is enough academic benefit to the course and believes it needs to be restructured. Marie believes the first-year seminar is needed to provide support for students to prevent dropouts.

Summary

Through this study, the participants provided insight into their lived experiences with the first-year seminar and their beliefs about its role in their retention and success as they persisted toward graduation. Four main themes emerged: precollege/transitioning, student involvement/support services, connections/commitment to the institution, and the

role of the first-year seminar. Participants described being first-generation college students. They expressed how the first-year seminar helped them in adjusting and other benefits gained from taking the course. Participants also described the believing the first-year seminar to be useless in some ways. Each of them found the most value in the relationships and social connections built through resources introduced to them through the course. Each participant acknowledged that the seminar introduced them to academic resources, which they used, and found helpful to their struggles. However, overall, the participants do not believe the seminar served them academically. The participants express that the first-year seminar had no impact on their academic performance or their decision to persist.

The insight from reviewing the literature associate with the first year of college and the first-year seminar will serve me well in my new role. The insight provided by the participants during the interviews will be just as beneficial. I am currently serving as a facilitator of success for newly entering first-time students transitioning from high school to college. I will be guiding them throughout their college career to graduation. The descriptions from the participants in this study taught me that as educators, we view things differently than our students. While we may clearly see the positive benefit to interventions such as the first-year seminar, our students may not, even if evidence supports it.

How we develop and implement these programs can be greatly benefited by looking at things from the students' perspectives. This means their learning process will be valuable to them from the beginning to the end. Another lesson this study has taught me is that students are the experts in knowing what they need. Although, I may know of

proven interventions for guiding their success, it is important that there is a dialogue so we can create their success plans together. This is what I will apply in my role of guiding them to graduation, listening to them. My study contributes to the importance of acknowledging the importance of the student voice. No matter what research supports, their descriptions of their experiences matter to continued efforts to increase retention, persistence, and degree completion.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Getting to the point of being able to conduct the study had unexpected difficulties. The first set back happened when the initial college I was interested in decided not to assist me in getting participants for the study. I had gone through the IRB process for the college and had received approval from them and UGA in fall 2019. This is important because the population I wanted to study would be graduating in May 2020. I began working on getting participants. I reached out to multiple people associated with the first-year seminar program and the registrar's office. My phone calls and emails went unanswered. When I was finally able to get the director of the first-year seminar programs on the phone, she admitted to me that she had intentionally ignored my emails and phone calls.

After, speaking with her, I learned there is a separate office of research that assists persons conducting IRB approved studies at the college that handled the process of getting me access to contact emails for the population of students I was interested in interviewing. She agreed to get in touch with the research office, copying me to the email. About one week later I received an email from the head of research office stating that they were busy for the foreseeable future and could not help me. I responded to the email for clarity. I was confused since I was approved by the IRB. I received no response and any further attempts to communicate with the college failed.

At this point I was without a school at which to conduct my study. I decided to work on finding another school. I contacted and completed the IRB process for multiple schools across a few states. Only one did not have an IRB process. A person only

needed to go through the IRB if they were a student at this college. Still, the struggle was getting in touch with the appropriate people to get access to the population of students I wanted to interview. As for the other IRB processes I completed for the different colleges, I did not hear back from them immediately. Most of those response came after I had finally found a college to conduct the study. Only one of the colleges responded to before the end of fall 2019, but I was informed I would not know whether or not I was approved before January 2020. This was because we were close to the end of the semester.

In the midst of trying to find a another college to conduct my study I had to update the IRB at UGA to keep them in the loop and to be sure I understood what changes would need to be made to the process at UGA. In mid-January 2020 I was informed that I was approved by the IRB at a small college in the south, with the President of the college giving final approval. This college's IRB and registrar's office was very helpful. When I asked who I needed to contact for access to the population I wished to interview, the chair of the IRB informed me that she had already contacted the registrar's office and told me they would contact me. The registrar's office emailed me for clarity on some of the details of the target population. Once we communicated clearly what I was seeking, the registrar compiled a list of names and email addresses of students matching the criteria for the target population. Finally, I began emailing potential participants.

After I had the list of names, I sent out the first email invite. I also attached the consent form. I had some immediate responses. My desired number for the population was 8-10 participants. Seven students responded with interest in participating. These 7

students were chosen. I worked with the students to schedule the interviews. I had to be very flexible with time and location to accommodate the participants. My final sample number was 5 because 2 of the participants decided not to participate..

Based on the four research questions guiding the study, four major themes emerged: precollege/transitioning, student involvement/support services, connections/commitment to the institution, and the role of the first-year seminar. This chapter provides a discussion of the struggles to get participation and the findings as well as implications for practice and recommendations for future research..

This study was particularly interested in the participants' lived experiences with the first-year seminar. As the researcher, I sought to gain a better understanding of students' beliefs about the role of the first-year seminar in their retention and persistence to graduation. Consistent with previous studies, the results of the current study seem to confirm that the first-year seminar does have a positive impact on students' college experiences.

Precollege/Transitioning

Making the transition from high school to college is a significant period in a student's life (Boroch & Hope, 2009). Students face numerous challenges in learning to navigate the expectations of college life. How prepared a student is academically influences whether or not a student will be successful (Bean, 1980). The students most at risk for failing are those who enter the institution the least prepared (Terrion & Daoust, 2012). This is especially true for first-generation college students. Their parents are often unfamiliar with the processes of college such as admissions and financial aid, making them unprepared to provide the necessary support needed (Demetriou &

Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). They are twice as likely to depart before the second year of college (Choy, 2001; Thayer, 2000).

Each of the participants identifies as a first-generation college student and not having the family support necessary to help with the transition to college life. They all described being able to make social connections in their first year, giving credit to the first-year seminar for helping guide them in making these connections through information about campus activities. Although, each participant acknowledges learning about academic resources through the first-year seminar, only Marie, believes it had an impact on her academic transition. The other participants admit using the resources learned about through the seminar, but do not believe it had any impact on their academic transition. Each participant expressed gaining assistance with other first-year struggles like time management, finances, and needing support, although Jessica, acknowledges not fully using the support initially, but ultimately admitted to needing help. While Allen and Kasey did not find transitioning as hard as expected, Tiffany, Jessica, and Marie described having difficulties moving from high school to college acknowledging that they were unprepared.

Each participant credits the first-year seminar with easing their social transition to college. The participants described using the academic resources learned about through the course, but overall do not believe it impacted their academic transition or their persistence.

Student Involvement and Support Services

Student involvement is the extent to which students are invested, both physically and psychologically in learning (Astin, 1985). Tinto (1999) asserted that the more

actively involved students are the more likely they are to persist past the first year. Astin (1984) believed students learning environment and student development is enriched through involvement. Participation in extracurricular activities and having quality interactions with peers has a significant influence on persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Readily accessible academic and social support services is important as is interactions with academic and support personnel. (Tinto, 2004). Access to these services and interactions influences retention and helps students to navigate the expectations of college life (Tinto, 2004).

Each of the participants expressed being able to speak up more and socialize, with peers. They described the relationships they were able to build by utilizing support services and academic resources introduced to them through the first-year seminar as impactful. Each of them expressed that being involved enhanced their college experiences and made them better students because they were able to establish relationships with other students, faculty, and staff. They were provided with opportunities for leadership roles and developed a sense of feeling valued.

Participants also described taking advantage of the academic resources presented to them, specifically the tutoring services. They found the writing center to be helpful as well as finding help in their math struggles and joined study groups. The participants found the support services useful for networking and learning to navigate the college climate. Jessica expressed that getting involved helped her to move on from high school. Jessica also learned there is a negative impact as she found herself too involved in activities and not using academic resources enough. Allen and Kasey also learned that getting too involved could have a negative impact. Guiffrida (2004) and Ridgewell

(2002) warn about the consequences of over involvement and the negative impact on academic performance. Marie recognized support services and involvement as helping her to become a stronger student. Astin (1993) asserted, students persistence had a positive link to involvement and social activities. Each participant believes support services and getting involved increased their chances of success and influence their decision to remain enrolled.

Connections and Commitment to the Institution

Difficulties in the social and emotional sphere can influence academic performance (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). It is important to build academic and social competencies (Tinto, 2002). Addressing both through the first-year seminar strengthens each one and increases persistence (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). When students are able to establish connections with peers, faculty, and staff they can complete their transition to college (Tinto, 1993). These interactions are meaningful and influences a student's intent to remain enrolled (Wykcoff, 1998). Students develop a sense of belonging when supported by faculty and peers on campus (Hoffman et al., 2002; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keefe, 2013). When students feel like they matter to someone on campus they feel like they belong (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Developing a sense of belonging during the first year, influences if a student will depart (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

Participants remembered social connections with friends as creating a sense of belonging. Kasey, credits making connections with new friends as helping her to adjust to her new environment. Jessica describes making connections and lasting friendships as the most successful part of her first year. Relationship with faculty, specifically advisors, were described as important and critical to their academic success. Allen built

relationships with faculty that progressed over time, as he got more comfortable with communicating. Tiffany views her relationship with her advisor as her most important relationship at the college. Marie described her relationship with her advisor as vital to her success. Getting involved on campus led to making these connections and helping them adjust to college life. While each participant believes the first-year seminar had a role in their committing to the institution through building relationships with staff and faculty and making social connections, only Marie believes it helped her commit academically. The others believe it is their own determination that caused them to persist and commit academically to the institution. Each participant had unique descriptions of their experiences. The common determination is that creating these new relationships were important to their commitment to the institution and persisting to graduation.

Role of the First-Year Seminar

The three most reported objectives in practice of the first-year seminar are developing academic skills, developing connections with the institution and providing an orientation to campus resources and services (Paget & Keup, 2011). The goal is increased academic performance and retention through social and academic integration (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). During the interviews, students were asked about specific experiences with the first-year seminar, their overall thoughts, and suggestions for maintaining or improving current practices.

Participants described how their involvement on campus led to making connections. These connections were critical to their being able to adjust to college life. They were able to form essential relationships with faculty, staff, and other students. Academic skills acquired through the first-year seminar is also a powerful predictor of

persistence (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Marie is the only participant to express her belief in the first-year seminar as the reason for her academic success and commitment to the institution. The other participants feel strongly against it as a reason for their persistence academically, even though they described how utilizing the academic resources learned about in the course helped to improve their academic performance.

Allen, Tiffany, Jessica, and Kasey believe it was their own self-determination that caused them to persist academically. Participants credit the course mostly for their social connections and commitment to the institution. The participants believe being involved and making new friends to be important to their transition and adjustment in the first year for them. When discussing making connections and committing to their education, the participants described the relationships they formed. Jessica recalled that she did not form relationships with faculty members early on instead forming better relationships with the staff in support services. Each of them remembered social connections with new friends as beneficial to creating a sense of belonging and wanting to stay in school.

The consensus of the participants is that it is the services and involvement, and not the first-year seminar itself that provided what was necessary for persistence. Only Marie, credits the first-year seminar with helping her to stay enrolled past the first year, acknowledging that it helped her move past her academic struggles a. Astin (1984) argues that the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to their academic experience drives their student success. This is how he defines involvement. Therefore, the participants are correct in believing their own determination is essential to their persistence. However, involvement includes both academic and social, for which tools for success with both were provided through the first-year seminar.

Based on responses given by the participants, one might be tempted to say there is no positive connection with taking the first-year seminar and persisting to graduation. Participants insisted that the first-year seminar had no impact on their remaining enrolled believing, that it was their own determination causing them to persist. Their determination very likely played a significant part, but their insistence that the first-year seminar played no significant role is contradicted by their descriptions about the use of resources and other tools learned about through the course. There is a positive impact even if they do not recognize it.

The participants gave credit to the seminar for helping to improve their social skills and introducing the student activities and organizations. Each one believes it had a role in their being able to connect socially at the college. Although, the participants each describe getting involved with tutoring and other academic resources through participation in the first-year seminar, they do not credit the seminar with integrating to the college academically. Even though, they acknowledge the usefulness of the tutoring services, particularly math and writing, they themselves believe there is no connection between their increased academic performances in these areas and the first-year seminar. Instead, they credit themselves for being motivated to continue past the first year.

Summary

Retention and persistence to graduation has long been the primary goal of higher education (Reason, 2009). As the profile of incoming first-year students began to change, the way institutions dealt with the first year of college also began to change to deal with the unique needs of the students (Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Gardner, 1986). The first-year seminar is not a new innovation in higher education curriculum

(Gardner, 1986). It is a commonly used tool in learning and development experiences of first-year college students (Greenfield et al., 2013). Multiple studies have found there is a positive impact on academic performance, retention, and persistence to graduation (i.e., Barefoot & Gardner, 1998; Fidler, 1991; Fidler & Moore, 1996; Starke et al., 2001; Tinto, 1993). The likelihood of students persisting increases with participation in the first-year seminar (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

I concluded, based on the descriptions given, that although, the participants assert the first-year seminar had no significant impact on their persistence toward graduation, there is evidence showing there is a positive impact from taking the course and can be connected with their retention and persistence. Referring to the theoretical framework, Astin (1984) believed students learn best when they are both academically and socially involved. He believed this created better learning experiences. Tinto (1975) asserted that students who can integrate completely into college, both academically and socially, decreases their likelihood of leaving the institution. Utilizing the tools learned about in the course such as math tutoring, the writing center, the library, and computer labs led to improved academic performances. It also led to increased social connections and involvement on campus. Therefore, the course helped students to adjust academically and socially and fully integrate into college life. It was beneficial to them even if they cannot see its impact.

The findings from this study only gives a small glimpse into what students believe about the role of the first-year seminar in their retention and persistence toward graduation. The insight comes from the detailed descriptions provided by the students in their own words. They recalled their experiences with participating in the first-year

seminar and how it impacted their successes. Although overall, they do not believe the first-year seminar helped academically, each student describes appreciating and using the academic resources learned about through the course. Students give the course the most credit in helping them to adjust socially and build important relationships with other students and faculty. These connections came about with the introduction to support services and campus activities, which led to them being able to open up and speak up more. Both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) placed emphasis on student involvement to become fully integrated both academically and socially. Involvement in social activities on campus and use of academic resources to enhance academic performance led to these students being able to fully integrate and committing to the institution. They learned about these resources through the first-year seminar.

Implications for Practice

The lived experiences of students provided valuable insight about the importance of support services, involvement in campus life, and commitment to the institution. The participants were vocal about their beliefs the first-year seminar did not have an impact on their retention and persistence to graduation. The descriptions they provided during the interviews contradicts this. While they expressed that the course is not the reason, they remained enrolled and persisted to graduation their descriptions of their experiences with the course indicates otherwise. Supporting findings from past studies (i.e. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) report a positive relationship between participating in the first-year seminar and students' persisting to graduation. The positive impact of the first-year seminar increases the likelihood of student retention and persistence.

The following are suggested practices for first-year seminars based on the literature and descriptions provided by the participants.

- Requiring students to attend campus events and activities can be a way to promote involvement in campus organizations and the use of campus resources.
- Students should be encouraged to get involved early because this is significant to promoting student engagement (Keup & Barefoot, 2005).
- Perhaps, more institutions should use more student teaching assistants as instructors for the first-year seminar.
- First-year seminars should be offered more within program requirements than a general extended orientation.
- A form of mentorship could also be established by connecting first-year students with juniors and seniors who can share their experiences with them and prepare them for what to expect.
- Maintain the first-year seminar as a first-year requirement. Make it required, not optional.
- Offer multiple types of the first-year seminar across institutions.
- Maintain smaller class sizes.
- Establish first-year programs with the first-year seminar as the anchor.

Responses from the participants described how the first-year seminar was responsible for introducing them to campus resources and organizations, which they ultimately participated in. They found the course beneficial to increasing their involvement on campus and helping them to build friendships. They were also able to build important relationships with faculty and staff.

One of the participants described becoming a peer mentor after finding help through support services on campus. Students tend to relate more to other students, especially those who have had similar experiences. Student teaching assistants might provide more insight and support, not found with other faculty and would be less intimidating. Astin (1993) described peer groups as the most influential on growth and development in the first year. Including a peer mentor program as a part of a larger first-year experience program would be beneficial.

Students would benefit more from being able to form cohorts with students who are enrolled in the same program and will have similar experiences. This would also allow students to establish relationships with faculty who will be directly involved with them as they persist to graduation. This process should also help keep the balance between student involvement and academic performance. Having the first-year seminar as a requirement in the first year should remain the policy. Because there are multiple types, institutions should offer various forms to address the different levels of preparedness or unpreparedness of incoming first-year students. This would also consider the various characteristics of incoming first-year students.

Some higher education institutions do not mandate student to enroll in the first-year seminar. Considering that the literature from previous studies support positive outcomes related to participating in the course, institutions not mandating the course should consider doing so (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, it should continue being required for credit and students should be required to complete the course during the first semester, especially since the first few weeks of

the first year of college are considered to be the most critical to adjusting (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The smaller class sizes should remain. The small class sizes are important for encouraging engagement with classmates and with the instructor. Students will be allowed to make connections as they get actively involved in class and establish healthy relationships. The first-year seminar should serve as a means for students to start leaving their comfort zones and developing a sense of belonging as they adjust to their new life and responsibilities.

Beyond informing students about campus activities and organizations, the first-year seminar itself can be used as more of an anchor for student involvement. Some consideration should be given to making it an anchor for first-year programs developed to create learning communities beyond the semester the seminar is taken to continue motivating students to persist. A more involved first-year program is another avenue to create a cohort for students to depend on. Students would have a network system of support through institutional resources and supportive relationships beyond the first-year seminar. A full first-year program could also serve to provide avenues for students to establish connections to the institution and further increase academic and social integration. Any programs developed should be intentional. Meaning they should be planned and implemented with the desired goals and outcomes in mind.

It is important to continue assessing the impact of the first-year seminar. This is necessary because higher education institutions are under constant pressure to improve retention and degree completion (Renn & Reason, 2013) especially because the largest

departure of students happens during the first year (Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the related literature, participant responses, and limitations of the current study, the following is a list of recommendations for future research.

- One recommendation for future research is to conduct similar studies. This study has limitations in the small sample of participants and being limited to one college.
- Further studies should include a larger number of participants and be conducted at multiple institutions.
- This study focused on traditional aged students. Future research should address adult and transfer students.
- Comparisons across campuses should explore the different student perceptions and seminar types to see how students' expressions are similar or different.
- Studies should be conducted at small and larger colleges, universities, research schools, two-year colleges, HBCUs, and any type of higher education institution offering the first-year seminar.
- Comparisons of faculty/staff versus students' beliefs would be a beneficial study as well. Another study to conduct would a comparison between first-year students required to take the seminar and those who were not required to take the seminar.
- Additionally, a qualitative study focused on students who took the seminar versus students who did not to assess the similarities and differences.

- Future studies could focus on how students feel about their level of preparedness moving from high school to college. Results from these studies might enable higher education institutions to better address these concerns using the first-year seminar as an intervention strategy.
- Studies might also explore students' expectations of taking the first-year seminar and the realities of their experiences. These studies should target the multiple forms of the first-year seminar to determine how each is promoting student retention and persistence.
- Another topic of interest to explore would be students who failed the course and where they ended up.
- Expanding further, researchers could focus on the different characteristics of students such as their backgrounds, socioeconomic status, gender, race, level of preparation, at-risk, and other attributes and how they might have an impact on their views. These studies would gain the most valuable insight by using students who are close to graduation. They would generate useful contributions to the current literature, showing multiple narratives and contribute to how the first-year seminar could further be improved to increase retention and persistence. These studies could be a combination of focus group interviews and follow up individual interviews.
- Lastly, longitudinal qualitative studies would be beneficial as well. Using purposely sampled first-year students required to take the seminar could yield valuable results. Students would be observed beginning in their first year and

throughout their enrollment through a combination of focus groups and interviews.

- Conduct studies with the purpose of taking into account the views of students and using the descriptions of their experiences to help guide development and implementation of first-year seminars and other first-year programs.

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Appendix A

Email Invitation to Participants

Dear Students,

My name is Zeketra Grandy. I am a doctoral student at the University of Georgia in the Workforce Education Program. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study I am conducting titled: College Success: A Qualitative Examination of Students' Beliefs About the Role the First-Year Seminar Played in their Retention and Success as they Persist Toward Graduation. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of students who have taken the first-year seminar, remained enrolled, and are persisting to graduation.

This study involves using qualitative interviews as a way to capture the complexity and a deeper understanding of how students experienced the first-year seminar from their point of view. While, your participation is greatly appreciated, it is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. Participants will receive a \$10 Visa gift card for their participation.

If you would like to participate in the study, please read the attached informed consent letter for more details regarding the study and your participation. Please reply to this email to let me know you are willing to participate and tell me which form of communication is best for you. I will follow up to schedule an interview date and time and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Zeketra Grandy, M.S., M.Ed., Doctoral Student University of Georgia

Appendix B: Consent Document

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CONSENT FORM

COLLEGE SUCCESS: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR PLAYED IN THEIR RETENTION AND SUCCESS AS THEY PERSIST TOWARD GRADUATION

Researcher's Statement

You are being asked to take part in a research study conducted by Zeketra Grandy, a graduate student at the University of Georgia in the Workforce Education program under the supervision of Dr. Elaine Adams. You are being invited to participate because you are a graduating senior who has taken the first-year seminar and remained enrolled continuously to this point. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to participate in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and ask questions. Should you decide to participate, you will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the role of the first-year seminar through the description of graduating seniors, who have taken the course, remained enrolled since their first semester, and are persisting to graduation. Your participation in this study is important to providing insight into continued efforts in research on of retaining students to graduation and increasing knowledge about the importance of the first-year seminar.

Voluntary Participation and Time Commitment

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline participation or withdraw your consent at any time for any reason with no consequences. If you decide to withdraw consent at any time, please know that any information already provided will be treated with the same confidentiality described above. The interviews should require no more than 45-60 minutes of your time. There may be follow-up if necessary, after completion of interview transcripts.

Risks of Participation

There is a minor risk to maintaining confidentiality of the information shared during the interview. Precautions will be taken during the data collection and storage process to

prevent any confidentiality breaches. Participants will be identified by initials only during the interviews, transcription process, and labeling. The write up the research may identify race and gender. Participants will never be identified by name.

Benefits and Compensation

An incentive for participating will be offered in the form of a \$10 Visa gift card. Students who participate in the interviews will each receive a \$10 Visa gift card for full completion of the interview process without withdrawal from the study. These cards will be distributed once the interview is complete. Participants who withdraw from the study early will be rewarded based on the following prorations: \$1 cash for 10 minutes, \$3 cash for 15 minutes, and \$5 cash for 30 minutes. For your participation, you will be entered into a drawing for a \$15 Visa gift card. You do not have to be in the study to enter the drawing. Send an email to zmg67399@uga.edu to enter the drawing if you do not want to be in the study.

While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, your participation will help to make a significant contribution to knowledge regarding the role of the first-year seminar on retaining students to graduation. Additionally, this study will add to current qualitative studies and literature and potentially inform future research. Your decision to take part or not to take part in the research will not affect your grades or class standing.

Privacy/Confidentiality

All information obtained during this research project will be treated confidentially. Transcriptions and recordings will be labelled using only your initials to keep your identity confidential. For me to perform analysis of interview data, audio recordings are necessary. I will be the only person with access to these audio recordings. These audio recordings (and/or transcriptions of these recordings) may be used in the future to present findings at research conferences, for publication, and/or in teaching settings. Because of this, all material from your interview will be retained, however, I will take care not to include details that may identify you as a participant. All recordings and transcripts will be saved on a flash drive. The flash drive will be locked away in my home office. Any physical copies of the transcripts will be destroyed by shredding once data analysis is complete. My major advisor, Dr. Elaine Adams may have access to the data upon request.

If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

Requests for Further Information

For more information regarding this research study, please contact Zeketra Grandy at zmg67399@uga.edu or at (706)355-5006.

Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

I have read (or had read to me) and understand the contents of the consent form. I have been encouraged to ask questions and received satisfactory answers to my questions. I give consent to have my interview audio recorded. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. I agree to participate in this research study by providing my signature. I have or acknowledge that I will receive a signed copy of this form.

Name of Researcher_____ Signature_____

Date

Name of Participant_____ Signature_____

Date

Appendix C

Interview Protocol Outline

Introduction: Hello, (student name). It is nice to meet you, I am Zeketra Grandy. I am the researcher and I will be conducting the study today. Let's have a seat. Before we get started, I want to remind you that the interview today will be recorded. Is this still okay with you? You can end the interview at any time.

Consent to record the interview is obtained

Place recorder, which was tested prior to arrival of the participant, in an area where we can both be heard clearly. Turn on recorder and begin.

First, the purpose and the process were explained.

The consent form was reviewed in detail before giving the participant a chance to ask questions.

Each participant was asked to sign the consent form. Once the forms were signed, the interview began.

Interview questions developed beforehand were used to guide the interview.

Questions 1-3 of the interview guide answered research question 2.

Questions 4-8 of the interview guide answered research question 3.

Question 9-14 of the interview guide answered research question 4.

Research question 1 was answered through a culmination of the descriptions given through participants' answers to question 1-14 of the interview guide.

Question 15 allowed for a way to give participants a chance to include anything they may have left out when answering the interview questions and to bring the interview to a close.

Closing: Thank you, (student name), for interviewing with me today. Your contribution is important and without you this study would not be possible. To show my appreciation I would like to present you with this visa gift card. I am grateful for your willingness to participant. Thank you for your time

Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your precollege experience. (Your time in high school)
2. How well do you think you were prepared for the transition from high school to college? (Grades, school activities)
3. Tell me about your first year of college? (Finances, making friends, differing academic expectations)
4. What type of student support services were available to you and how did you utilize these services? (Social organizations, counseling, disability services)
5. What type of academic support services were available to you and how did you utilize these services? (tutoring, study groups, mentoring)
6. What type of relationships did you build with faculty and staff during your first year? (comfortable seeking assistance, speaking up in class, engaging outside of class)
7. What type of connections did you make with other students during your first year? (connect outside of class, lasting friendships)
8. Did you participate in the first-year seminar in your first semester? If after the first semester, why?
9. Did the first-year seminar help you adjust to the expectations of college life both socially and academically? How?
10. In what ways did it help you set and commit to goals?
11. What did the first-year seminar offer in addressing the learning needs of first-year students?

12. In what ways did it encourage you to remain enrolled past the first year? Did it influence your persistence to graduation?
13. Is there anything you learned from the first-year seminar that you continue to apply?
14. What are your thoughts on how the first-year seminar might be improved?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding your experiences with the first-year seminar?

Appendix E

IRB Approval Letter



Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
<http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/>

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

January 13, 2020

Dear Joyce Adams:

On 1/13/2020, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Version VERSION00000268 - COLLEGE SUCCESS: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR PLAYED IN THEIR RETENTION AND SUCCESS AS THEY PERSIST TOWARD GRADUATION
Investigator:	Joyce Adams
Co-Investigator:	Zeketra Grandy
IRB ID:	VERSION00000268
Review Category:	Exempt 2ii

Modifications: add Piedmont College as external site, update study submission form.
Modifications approved.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy

(<https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRBExempt-Review.pdf>). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the “Add Public Comment” activity.

A progress report will be requested prior to 10/9/2024. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Jennifer Freeman, IRB Analyst Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia