

SEVEN-YEAR (2007–2013) RETENTION STUDY ON STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THEMATIC AND NONTHEMATIC FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE SEMINAR COURSES

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For more than 30 years, John Gardner has elevated the discussion about the importance of student success in the first-year of college, with a heightened emphasis on first-year seminar courses and their value. Many colleges and universities offer some version of a first-year experience seminar, which is true for the Midwestern MAC School discussed in this research study. The purpose of this seven-year retention study was: to assess the impact first-year seminar had on retention rates for students enrolled in thematic and non-thematic sections; to assess student leader post-perceptions about the course; and to examine the extent to which first-year students' perceptions changed over a seven-year period. Overall, findings are positive and encouraging based on analysis of the data. Specifically, findings illustrate that the first-year seminar course has positively impacted student retention for both groups of students in the study, but more significantly for students enrolled in the thematic sections of the course. Additionally, the researcher's findings also indicated that student leaders have positive post-perceptions about the course, and lastly, the First-Year Initiative survey findings show that over a seven-year period, students' perceptions about the course have improved.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, much emphasis has been placed on first-year seminars; according to the 2009 National Survey on First Year Experience (FYE) Seminar, 87% of American colleges and universities offer some form of FYE. Interestingly, the first freshman seminar was offered in 1882 at Lee College in Kentucky; the first for-credit seminar became part of Reed College's curriculum in 1911; and in 1972, in response to student riots against the Vietnam War and other issues, University 101 was introduced at the University of South Carolina. John Gardner is widely recognized for "initiating the reform movement in 1982, bringing attention to improving the freshman year (Policy Center for the First Year). Marina and McGuire (2015) credit Gardner for coining the term First-Year-Experience. In 1986, Gardner established the National Resource Center, and in 1995 renamed the organization the National Resource Center for The First-Year-Experience and Students in Transition.

Since the 1970s, FYE has gained considerable steam, and, as noted above, most colleges and universities offer FYE as a course to help first-year students acclimate to the college experience. Although the course has evolved, the overall goals and objectives remain the same, which are to facilitate student engagement, facilitate persistence and retention, support students with issues related to transition and adjustment, and facilitate graduation—the ultimate achievement of student success (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Researchers have conducted countless studies assessing the effectiveness and impact of First-Year Experience Seminar courses on freshman retention rates; many of these studies suggest that students who complete FYE have higher persistence rates to the second year of college. In the article "Understanding How First-Year Seminars Affect Persistence," Porter and Swing (2006) cite a large body of research evidence that indicates seminar students experience higher rates of persistence from year 1 to year 2 and that all student groups (based on race, academic standing, gender, at-risk students, regularly admitted students, etc.) benefit from participation in seminar courses.

Even today, across the higher education landscape, college and university administrators remain engaged

in age-old conversations and discussions relevant to student retention and graduation. Questions include "how do we increase persistence/retention?"; "how do we engage students and foster student success for all students?"; and the overarching question "how do we increase graduation rates?"

This article was initially submitted as a capstone project to fulfill the requirements of the Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program. The capstone study was designed to examine year 1 to year 2 persistence/retention rates for first-year students enrolled in the FYE 2100 Seminar at a midwestern Mid-America Conference (MAC) university over a seven-year period from 2007 to 2013. Primarily, this capstone project was specifically intended to:

- Assess whether there are differences in retention between students who take an FYE Seminar and those who did not.
- Determine if students enrolled in themed (academic college) sections have higher retention rates.
- Provide evidence that within a seven-year period, students' perceptions about their FYE 2100 experience improved based on comparative data from the First-Year Initiative survey.
- Obtain feedback and input about the FYE Seminar experience from students who enrolled in the course and/or participated as student leaders (cofacilitators).
- Use the findings to examine the overall impact of WMU's FYE 2100 Seminar on student retention and perceptions.

First-Year Experience Seminar at Western Michigan University

In 2005, this MAC school began offering the FYE Seminar as a pilot program; the first cohort consisted of 425 students (25 sections), and by fall 2016 there were more than 1,500 students (more than 70 sections) enrolled in the FYE Seminar. From 2006 to 2013; several different types of seminars were created—academic college (Colleges of Aviation, Business, Health and Human Services, and Education) based; program based

Figure 1. FYE Seminar Enrollment in Themed and Nonthemed Sections

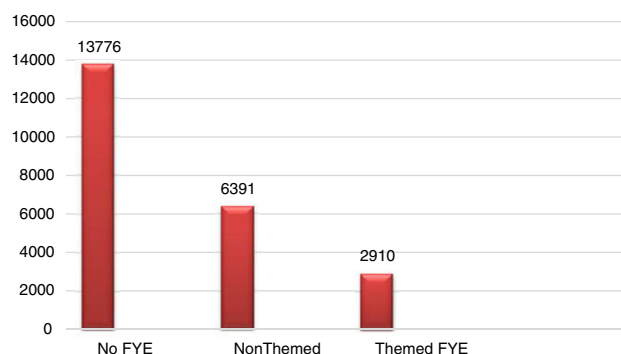


Table 1. Seven Year Student Enrollment in FYE

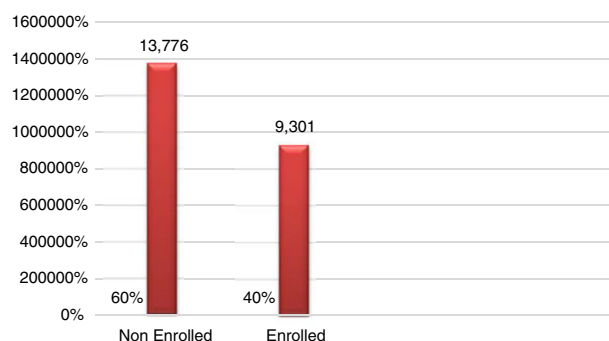
2007–2008	2008–2009	2009–2010	2010–2011	2011–2012	2012–2013
1,008	1,216	1,021	1,341	1,489	1,312

(Seita Scholars, Campus Migrant Assistance, Alpha program, etc.); theme based (Leadership and Camping); and academic seminars or classic sections (traditionally based) as termed at the school in this study. At the inception of FYE, students in college-, theme-, and program-based sections primarily self-selected into the course. However, in 2006 students identified as University Curriculum (undecided) were required to take the course. Figure 1 illustrates the number of FYE students enrolled in themed and nonthemed sections, as well as students never enrolled in a seminar course between 2007 and 2013.

Table 1 shows the growth of the FYE Seminar over a seven-year period.

In part, the FYE 2100 Seminar was established with a strong focus on retention, but also as a way to assist students in their transition into the university and to strengthen the relationships between first-year students and members of the faculty. During the first two years, only faculty were contracted to teach; however, this policy was relaxed, and in 2008 both faculty and staff (FYE faculty facilitators) were invited to teach. The MAC school's seminar is a two-credit grade-bearing elective course taught over sixteen weeks. In addition, the program hires student leaders to cofacilitate with faculty facilitators who are identified as the primary lead for the course.

Figure 2. Student Enrollment in FYE Seminar 2100



Data and Methodology

The Institutional Research Office provided retention data for a seven-year period (2007–2013) for the population of first-year students entering the MAC University each fall semester from 2007 to 2013. The total sample size for this study includes 23,077 first-year students, of which 9,301 were enrolled in FYE Seminar, and the remainder (13,776) were not enrolled. See Figure 2.

Along with assessing persistence and retention, GPA data was also analyzed as one of the variables considered when assessing the differences between the participants of the study. Additionally, data from the First-Year Initiative (FYI) survey was analyzed and included in the overall reporting for this study. At the conclusion of each fall semester, student cofacilitators have responsibility for administering the FYI survey via paper-and-pencil administration. This survey allows the FYE staff to assess student perceptions about the effectiveness of the course and the extent to which course outcomes are achieved.

Finally, the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) participant conducted a face-to-face focus group with former students (those who have completed FYE 2100) to gather more qualitative data about student experiences as related to participation in the course. These findings will also be included in this article.

Results and Findings

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

Data analysis was conducted with assistance from a member of the MAC school's FYE Faculty Task Force (Zondag, 2015) to assess:

- Whether there was a difference in retention between students who did or did not participate/enroll in FYE 2100.
- Whether there was a difference in retention rates for students enrolled in academic college-based sections of FYE and those enrolled in classic sections (traditional academic seminars) or students who never enrolled in FYE.
- Whether there was a difference in retention rates for undecided students who did or did not enroll in FYE 2100.
- Whether there was a difference in second-year grade point averages (GPAs) for students who did or did not participate/enroll in FYE 2100.
- Whether there was a difference in GPAs for undecided students who did or did not enroll in FYE 2100.

Difference in Retention for Students Who Did or Did Not Participate/Enroll in FYE 2100

Because of the nature of this study, categorical data were used for analysis, and as a result, chi-square tests were used to test whether the variables in the study were independent of each other. Additionally, “Chi-Square analysis [is viewed as] versatile and statistically objective” and appropriate for analyzing the data for this retention study (Paret, 2017).

In analyzing the data, using simple random sampling and categorical variables, results from chi-square (χ^2) test ($1, N = 23,077$) = 0.49, $p = .49$, indicate that there is no significant difference at the .05 level in the retention rate for students who took the FYE 2100 course and those who did not (see Figure 3).

Retention Rates

Further analysis of the data (see Figure 4) indicate that students who were enrolled in academic college-based sections of the FYE course had significantly higher second-year persistence and retention rates in comparison to those students enrolled in other FYE Seminars or students who never enrolled in a first-year seminar course. Chi-square analysis ($2, N = 23,077$) = 19.79, $p < .0001$, indicates that a dependent relationship exists between the variables and is significant at the .05 level.

Figure 3. Difference in Retention for students who did or did not participate/enroll in FYE 2100

		Return 2yr		
		Count	N	Y
		Total %		
		Col %		
		Row %		
		Cell Chi^2		
Attend FYE	N	3522	10254	13776
		15.26	44.43	59.70
		59.31	59.83	
		25.57	74.43	
		0.1458	0.0505	
Y		2416	6885	9301
		10.47	29.83	40.30
		40.69	40.17	
		25.98	74.02	
		0.2160	0.0748	
		5938	17139	23077
		25.73	74.27	

Figure 4. Retention Rates for students in themed and non-themed sections of FYE 2100

		Return 2yr		
		Count	N	Y
		Total %		
		Col %		
		Row %		
Themed FYE	N	1746	4645	6391
		7.57	20.13	27.69
		29.40	27.10	
		27.32	72.68	
NO FYE		3522	10254	13776
		15.26	44.43	59.70
		59.31	59.83	
		25.57	74.43	
Y		670	2240	2910
		2.90	9.71	12.61
		11.28	13.07	
		23.02	76.98	
		5938	17139	23077
		25.73	74.27	

Retention for Students in UNIV Curriculum (Undecided)

Table 2 shows that retention rates were significantly higher for University Curriculum (undecided) students enrolled in FYE in comparison to University Curriculum students who were not. However, the conclusion is that students who take the FYE 2100 for undecided students have a significantly higher retention rate, $\chi^2(1, N = 4,378) = 6.62, p = .010$, at the .05 level (see Figure 5).

Table 2. Summary of Chi Square Results for Retention

	Students Enrolled in FYE	Student Not Enrolled in FYE	P Value
Retention	59.7% (N = 13,776)	40.3% (N = 9,391)	0.59
Retention	Enrolled in academic college-based sections	Enrolled in classic (traditional seminar) sections	Never enrolled
	76.98% (N = 2,910)	72.6% (N = 6,391)	74.43% (N = 13,776)
Retention	Enrolled in University Curriculum	University Curriculum not enrolled in FYE	
	38.28% (N = 3,865)	11.73 (N = 513)	.010

Figure 5. Retention for Students in UNIV Curriculum (Undecided)

		Return 2yr		
Attend FYE		N	Y	
	Count			
N	Total %	188	325	513
	Col %	4.29	7.42	11.72
	Row %	13.55	10.87	
		36.65	63.35	
Y	Total %	1199	2666	3865
	Col %	27.39	60.90	88.28
	Row %	86.45	89.13	
		31.02	68.98	
		1387	2991	4378
		31.68	68.32	

Second-Year GPA Attending FYE Y/N and High School GPA Attending FYE Y/N

In conducting the study, the second-year college GPA and high school GPA were factored into the analysis for both groups of students, those enrolled in FYE

and those who were not. In Figure 6 we find that the second-year (college) GPA was slightly higher for students not taking FYE. We can also see that those students with higher high school GPAs were students who typically did not take an FYE course.

Second-Year GPA Themed and Nonthemed

When looking at the data for students who were enrolled in the academic college sections, the findings suggest that there was a slightly significantly higher GPA for this sample of the population, which is illustrated in Figure 7.

GPA for UNIV Curriculum (Undecided) Students

Finally, this study was designed to assess the difference in GPA for both groups of undecided students (those enrolled and those not enrolled). Findings in Figure 8 show that GPA for University Curriculum students who were enrolled in FYE 2100 was slightly higher, yet not statistically significant, at the .05 level of significance.

Figure 6. Second Year GPA Attending FYE Y/N and High School GPA Attending FYE Y/N

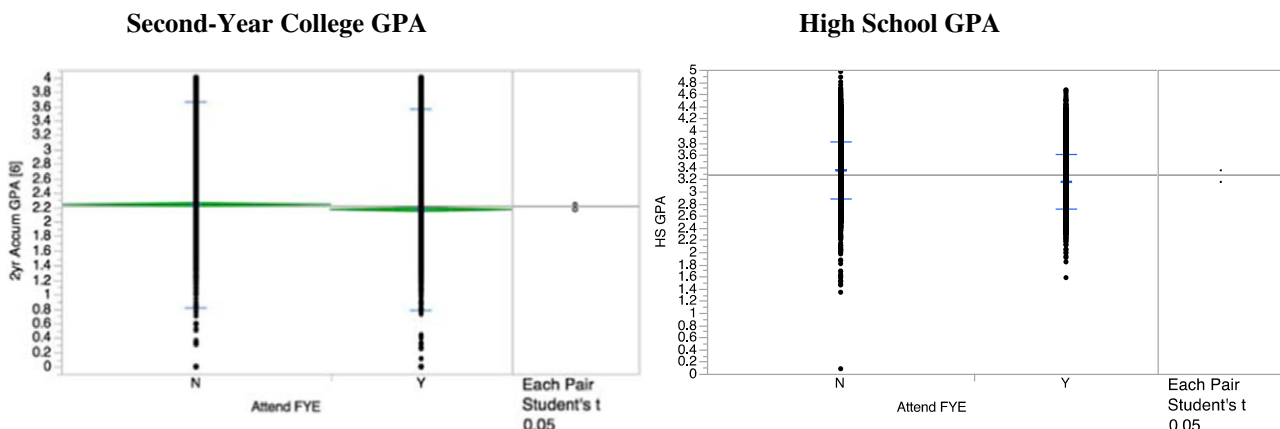


Figure 7. Second-Year GPA for Themed and Nonthemed

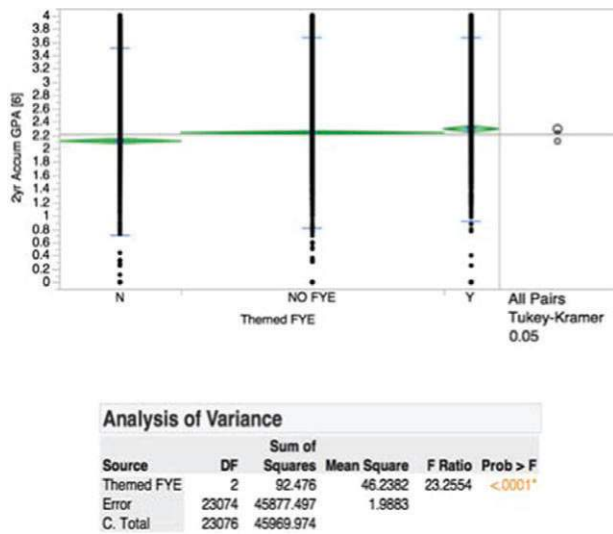
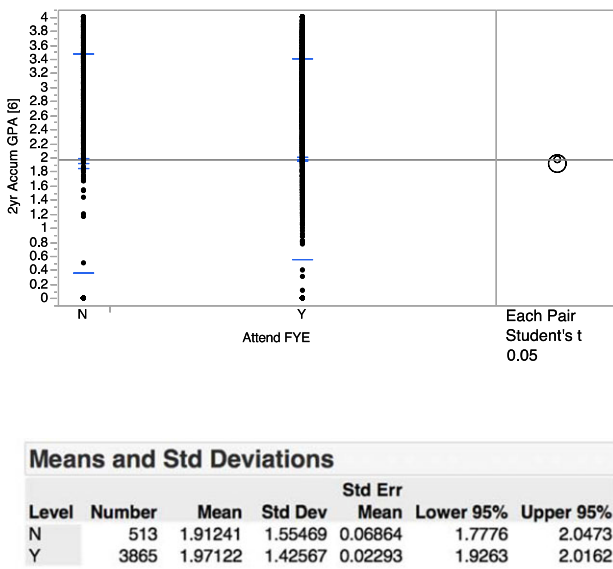


Figure 8. GPA for UNIV Curriculum (Undecided) Students



Overall, this study's findings reinforce or at a minimum suggest that most first-year students enrolled in an FYE course persisted at a higher rate. Specifically, students enrolled in college-based seminars had the highest retention rates in comparison to their FYE counterparts enrolled in more program-specific or non-program-specific sections of the Seminar.

FIRST-YEAR INITIATIVE SURVEY

Since fall 2007, the Skyfactor (formally Educational Benchmarking Initiative, Inc.) First-Year Initiative (FYI) survey was administered to assess a wide variety of student outcomes/factors. Specifically, this survey has enabled the FYE staff to determine students' overall perceptions about their FYE 2100 experience and, most importantly, the extent to which course outcomes have been achieved based on those perceptions. Additionally, the FYI survey makes it possible to identify and compare the MAC school FYE 2100 course to that of six peer institutions, and as such make changes that will improve the existing course. Using a 7-point (1 = lowest rating and 7 = highest) Likert scale, students were able to express their thoughts and help offer feedback to strengthen the course.

Figures 9 and 10 illustrate FYI results from 2007 to 2013. In 2011, the university administered a different survey—the Instructor Course Evaluation System (ICES)—but returned to using the FYI survey in 2012 because it was more comprehensive in examining the extent to which the course outcomes were accomplished.

Analysis of the FYI evaluation findings suggests that over a six-year period, students' perceptions about the course in general improved.

ANECDOTAL STUDENT AND STUDENT LEADER FEEDBACK ABOUT FYE 2100

In an effort to further obtain students' thoughts about FYE, student leaders who were former students enrolled in an FYE seminar were asked to participate in a focus group. The focus group was convened on two separate days in November 2015 to accommodate the nearly 55 student leaders who participated. Students were asked to respond to 10 questions. The responses were compiled and analyzed for common themes. Four major themes emerged: (a) relationships, (b) resources, (c) skills, and (d) transition. The findings are reported below around each theme.

- **Relationships:** Students were asked to describe ways in which the FYE 2100 class benefitted them in the semesters post-FYE. Many students indicated that the course afforded them the opportunity to

Figure 9. First-Year Initiative Survey Results From 2007 to 2013

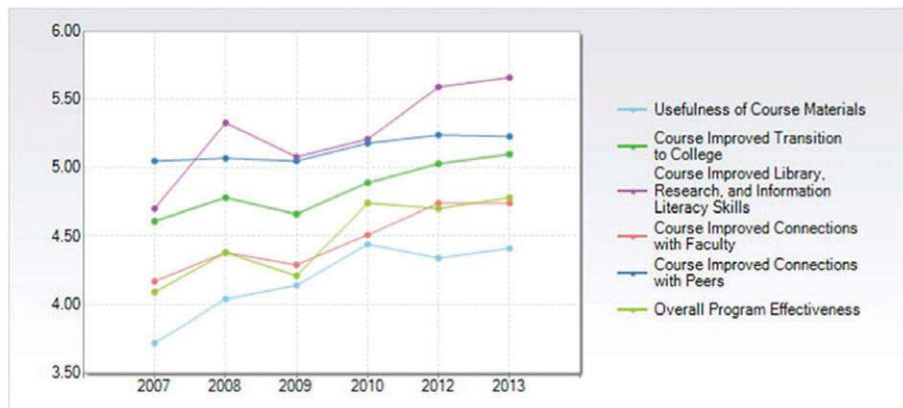
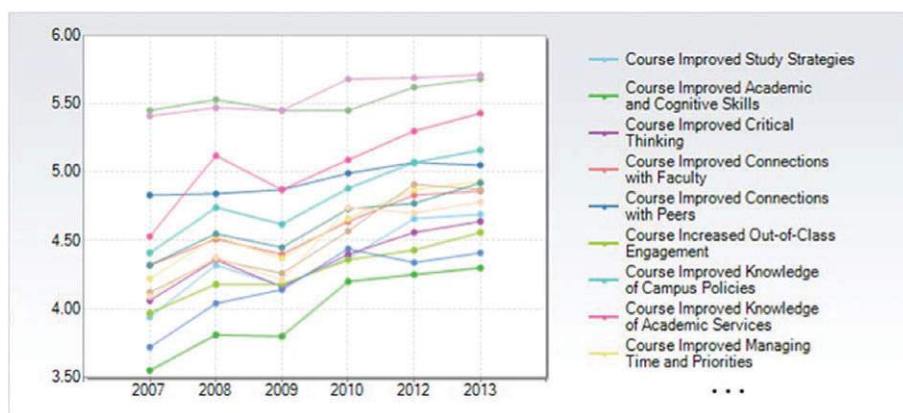


Figure 10. First-Year Initiative Survey Results From 2007 to 2013



build relationships with professors, advisors, and peers. Specifically, some leaders stated:

- It [FYE] gave me a foundation with good friends; it also gave me a great relationship with my academic advisor, allowed me to make new friends, make a connection with a great faculty member right from the start, and provided me with the encouragement and support in my first semester.
- FYE “provided connections to faculty that helped me develop, learn, and have challenged me. My current major academic advisor was my FYS teacher and having her in that role in my career has allowed me to grow a long-standing relationship to where I better trust her to have my back.”
- **Resources:** Some shared that the course gave them the tools and abilities to utilize what the MAC

school had to offer (i.e., online/offline library, job opportunities, and financial aid); another stated that they understand the library better, and it set them up with resources and support during their matriculation at the university: “I made connections that led me to a successful internship opportunity. Resources discussed in FYE, I have consistently used to be successful.”

- **Skills:** Some leaders believe they benefitted from being taught study habits, time management, and how to prioritize when there are competing variables, and how to schedule courses, get to know professors and classmates, as well as seize every opportunity. Some commented that they benefitted because the course highlighted the importance of writing, and as a result one student stated, “I had a better understanding of how to write a college-level paper, communicate with professors, and [became]

more knowledgeable about some specific campus resources.”

- **Transition:** Specifically, former students shared that the class assisted and supported their transition as first-year students. “FYE 2100 helped me in many ways. At first, I was nervous about coming into college due to the program that I was admitted into”; “I was part of a conditional admit program, and it was a second chance for me. It helped me transition from high school to college”; “taking FYE made me feel like a valued member of the [MAC school] community.”

Leaders were also asked to share their insights about what they perceived as the strengths and weaknesses of the course.

- **Weaknesses:** Some student leaders believed there was redundancy in some of the information presented; for some, the class was not challenging enough, particularly for engineering students; sometimes there was too much work—it felt like more of a workload than other courses. Other students disliked the University Wide Common Read selected and felt that students who start or enroll in spring semester should be considered, as they are disadvantaged because the course is not available during spring sessions, and that there needs to be more clear information and goals.
- **Strengths:** Some student leaders believed FYE promoted/encouraged student involvement and engagement; opportunities to learn about the many resources available on campus; that a safe space was provided for first-year students to learn; that it provided an opportunity to get acclimated and welcomed to the University and all it had to offer; they made connections with staff, faculty, and fellow students. Respect. Informative. Mentor. As a result of being enrolled in an FYE course, leaders believed the relationships were respectful between them and their FYE facilitators; the course was helpful and informative; and that the course provided a mentor (the FYE facilitator) who facilitated their transition into the university. Networking opportunities were facilitated: “solid network of students and friends to discuss all things “[MAC school]” with the feel of homeroom

classroom.” They received assistance with homework, class assignments, research papers, time management, and learning how to prioritize utilizing planners.

Student leaders were also asked to use one word to describe FYE 2100, and this is what they said: “development; **resourceful**; lackluster if [students] not invested; adventure (watching students go through their transition); diverse communication; life skills; diversity; **inside hookup**; identity (leadership section); **unconventional-student centered**; setting the foundation; first-year success; optimistic “Malone;” **community safe space**; family Trio FESP [MAC school] family; engaging; first set of friends; beneficial; information; informative; interesting; installs **confidence**; support; fresh start; **transitioning tools**; fun; welcoming; leader; and **how to be a student with school spirit and pride**.

Findings from the face-to-face focus groups revealed that most student leaders (who were former FYE 2100 students) believe FYE 2100 was beneficial and the course supported their transition and adjustment.

Discussion/Recommendations

This study was designed to look at the retention rates for students enrolled in thematic and nonthematic sections of the First-Year Experience course. What we know from findings is that FYE is making a difference, students are being retained, and those students in the theme (academic college-based) sections experience significantly higher retention rates; students who are undecided have higher retention rates than their counterparts not in FYE.

Many students enrolled in nonthemed sections are students who are undecided or may have higher academic need. Many of these students (not all) enter the university as conditional admits with either lower GPAs or lower test scores, so it might stand to reason that their persistence to the second year may not be as significant as their counterparts if we consider high school GPAs as well as other variables as predictors for persistence to year 2.

Additionally, the study highlighted that there is no difference between students who take FYE and those who do not, there is the opportunity to further study

the two populations and try to discern why there are no differences. More research is needed to ask more in-depth questions, with the goal of learning more about the characteristics of students, their needs, and how to design an FYE that facilitates persistence at higher rates for all students.

Overall, the findings are positive and encouraging, and based on this evidence, the SEM participant chose to think about FYE 2100 from a value-added perspective and what that potentially means for students and the MAC University. Barefoot and Koch (2015) state six reasons why FYS is linked with retention—"FYS:

1. Provides missing information that many students (if not most) need
2. Provides an immediate support group
3. Enables close interactions with faculty
4. Can focus on general or specific skill development
5. Can ensure students are exposed to opportunities for involvement
6. Can assure that students use helping services"

Researchers such as Gardner, Barefoot, Tinto, Kuh, Terenzini, Pascarella, and many others have extensively researched and written about the importance of providing students with a solid foundation during the first year—a foundation that supports transition and adjustment, designed toward overall student success. As a result of the numerous studies and positive outcomes associated with the FYE Seminar, it has been deemed a High-Impact Practice (HIP) because "it has been widely tested. The weight of evidence suggests that first-year seminars have provided positive benefits to all kinds of students, and that such seminars are a good all-purpose intervention to increase persistence from first to second year" (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006, p. 2).

The data is in: FYE 2100 showed positive gains over the seven-year period for which the data was compiled and analyzed. As stated throughout this article, FYE 2100 students were often retained at higher rates than their counterparts who did not take the Seminar. Unquestionably, significant amounts of time have been invested in the course since first being offered, yet more has to be done to strengthen student outcomes and

ultimately retention rates. Therefore, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Create a stronger campus culture that holistically embraces FYE 2100 in ways that encourage enrollment in FYE 2100 for the majority of, if not all, students, and not only those who are regarded as high risk or underprepared.
2. Participate in the Foundations of Excellence self-study, which would allow the university to fully examine the first year across the entire campus, and based on findings, begin to craft an intentional more purposeful experience that is understood and valued by faculty, staff and students.

First-Year Experience was introduced to the campus in 2005, and since that time more than 10,000 students have completed the course. Although we have successful quantitative and qualitative outcome measures, the course needs to be continuously revised to meet the need of first-year students. Along with modifying the course to meet the changing needs, we need to ask what students need, how to best deliver what is needed, and how it can be delivered over the course of a semester. Therefore, this SEM participant hopes the findings presented in this capstone are the springboard for creating an exemplary FYE 2100 Seminar experience that not only supports academic and social transition, but also results in persistence from the first year to second year and eventually graduation.

OBSTACLES, ADVANTAGES, OR STUDY EXCEPTIONS

In conducting this Retention Study, the SEM participant did not encounter any obstacles or exceptions that needed to be made for purposes of the study. However, there were several advantages of the study, including the following.

- Although the FYE personnel had anecdotal information (since the inception of the program) that indicated success of the MAC school's FYE 2100 Seminar, a formal comprehensive assessment had not been conducted, therefore making it challenging to promote the continuation or the need to grow the program. The most significant advantage is that this data was shared with the provost and his leadership team, and it allowed FYE personnel to

highlight the value and importance of the course based on retention.

- Another advantage is that having completed the Retention Study, the FYE staff were positioned to utilize this data (incorporate into a self-assessment) as part of the University's overall Learner Support Review Program, which helped to strengthen our program assessment in preparation for program review.
- Working with the MAC school's Institutional Research office was an advantage. They provided data files.
- This study allowed the SEM participant to triangulate institutional research, survey, and focus group data to complete a comprehensive review of the FYE 2100 Seminar.
- Findings from the study served as a strong validation for the FYE 2100 staff; it helped reinforce the value of their work and increase enthusiasm and a willingness to modify the existing Seminar based on results from the study to further support student success.

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