RESEARCH BRIEFS

Community College Students Deriving Value from a First–Year Seminar Curriculum

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Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how community college students derive value from a first-year seminar curriculum. In short, students valued the time this course allowed for them to reflect on their life experiences and their goals as well as build relationships. Students recorded instances of perceived personal growth and skill application through writing and photography during their time in a first-year seminar course of which I was the instructor. Reviewing and coding over 175 individual assignments and nine interview transcriptions resulted in the following four overarching themes: (a) personal growth; (b) skill improvement; (c) relationship building; and (d) self-expression. Implications were identified by stakeholders between students, faculty, and administrators.

Background

Many different higher educational institutions may enroll students with diverse backgrounds, but this is especially prominent at community colleges. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2020), 29% of U.S. community college students identify as first-generation, nine percent as non-U.S. citizens, and eight percent as students who have previously earned a bachelor's degree. Additionally, 37% percent of community college students are ages 22-39, and nine percent are over age 40. These statistics underscore that community colleges serve a variety of learners with varied life experiences and educational goals.

An important component of meeting community college students' needs and supporting their success is first-year programming, as such activities are designed to equip students with both social and academic skills for college (Hatch, 2016, 2017). As Tinto (2012) stated, "the more academically and socially engaged [students are] with academic staff, and peers, especially in classroom activities, the more likely they are to succeed in the classroom" (p. 5). In particular,

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instructors who love what they are doing and constantly seek to partner with students in their learning through engagement within the classroom find receptive audiences (Nash, 2018). Faculty and staff can also play an important role in a student's sense of belonging, which research has identified, along with high levels of self-efficacy and motivation, as having the greatest impact on students' retention to their second year (Han et al., 2017).

Within first-year programming efforts, first-year seminars with an emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, and collaborative learning are considered a high-impact practice (HIP), or a teaching and learning practice that has been widely tested and shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds (AAC&U, 2018). HIPs have been found to have a significant and positive impact on a students' sense of belonging in their first year, which is related to students' transition to the new environment (Ribera et al., 2017). Additionally, participating in HIPs, like a first-year seminar and attending student orientation, are ways that students can develop ownership within an institution, referred to by Tinto (1993) as institutional commitment. Within community colleges, first-year seminars can be particularly impactful HIPs in order to meet the variety of students' academic and life goals. For example, some students may enroll in a class at their college to determine their path or enrich their knowledge for personal reasons, while others may seek to transfer to a four-year institution, earn an associate degree, credential, or certification.

First-year seminars are important initiatives in providing students space to identify academic goals and to build a sense of belonging both within the classroom and to the institution itself. (Han et al., 2017; Merriam et al., 2007). As such, it is important for community college educators to include activities for self-reflection so that students can identify what they find valuable in terms of their goals and the transferable skills needed to reach these goals. To facilitate success, first-year seminars must be deliberately developed to be adaptable for students of all ages, educational backgrounds, and life experiences. For instance, Permzadian and Crede (2015) found first-year seminars increase retention and improve student performance if they include coping skills, stress management, and ways to increase motivation along with reviewing academic skills. Additionally, building transferable skills that can be used across all life roles, including academic, career, and personal, increases the value of first-year seminars, because this not only compliments what students are learning in their major-specific courses but also provides students skills to use outside of the classroom. Self-reflective opportunities are valuable for a variety of community college students, regardless of their academic and vocational goals and their personal backgrounds. Such application of resources to students' curricular and cocurricular activities can aid students with meaning making. For example, introducing institutional career coaching services in connection to a career project incorporates interdependence and goals setting while fostering engagement with a campus resource.

To further explore meaning making within community college first-year seminars, I sought to answer the following research question: How do community college students derive value from a first-year seminar curriculum?

Study Design and Method

This case study is bounded by student enrollment in a first-year seminar at a public community college in the Midwest. The sample included 16 students: six who were enrolled in a first-year seminar in summer 2020 and 10 enrolled in a seminar offered in fall 2020. The course was one-credit hour, eight-weeks in length, and a requirement for students seeking to earn an associate degree. The sections in this study were virtually delivered because of COVID-19. Students had the opportunity to self-select into the study. Six out of 16 students enrolled in the course in the summer participated, and, of these, four completed every assignment in the course. Ten out of 21 students enrolled in the fall course participated, and, of these, eight completed every assignment. In total, 16 students participated in the study. Six students in the summer signed consent for me to include their coursework as part of my study. Of these, three also participated in interviews. Ten students in the fall gave consent for me to include their coursework as a part of my study, and six of these students also participated in an interview.

I first disseminated a pre- and post-course self-inventory, in which students self-scored how true, on a scale of 0-10, statements were regarding personal responsibility, self-motivation, self-management, interdependence, self-awareness, lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, and self-belief (Downing, 2017). I reviewed the results to determine differences between student perceptions at the beginning and at the end of the course. The first-year seminar curriculum was designed with the following four steps: reflect, visualize, write, and plan. Based on these steps, students completed projects that incorporated self-reflection towards personal growth, including those that focused on attitudes and ambitions, behaviors, careers and cultures, and development and discovery. As part of the course, students completed discussion boards weekly, which counted toward participation points. All assignments graded and feedback provided prior to final grade meetings and potential participant interviews.

In addition to the pre- and post-course surveys, I drew upon interviews and an analysis of students' course assignments. Students participated in one 45-minute semi-structured interview, in which they responded to questions that asked about their perceptions of their personal growth, application of transferable skills, and the curriculum and their reactions to any self-inventory score changes (based on pre- and post-course survey results) and the use of self-reflection and visual mediums if included in their work.

Table 1
Summary of Participant Attributes and Participation in Summer 2020

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnic Origin	Sex	Area of Study	Participated in Interview	Allowed for Use of Course Assignments for Study
Clay			Male	Geology		X
Grace	52	White, American	Female	Business Administration	X	X
Holly		Not available	Female	Culinary Arts		X
Mason	23	Vietnamese	Male	Business Administration	X	X
Nicki	29	Black, Nigerian	Female	Nursing	X	X
Penny		Not available	Female	General Studies		X

Table 2
Summary of Participant Attributes and Participation in Fall 2020

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnic Origin	Sex	Area of Study	Participated in Interview	Allowed for Use of Course Assignments for Study
Alex	27	Asian, Chin	Male	Accounting	X	X
Blythe	50	White	Female	Paralegal Studies	X	X
Darryl		Not available	Male	Entrepreneurship		X
Ellis	20	Not available	Male	Business Administration		X
Flora		Not available	Female	Sustainable Architecture		X
Irene		Not available	Female	Archeology or Paleontology		X
Jackie	32	White, Caucasian	Female	Culinary Arts	X	X
Kim	34	African American	Female	Mortuary Science	X	X
Lynn	19	White, Caucasian	Female	Elementary Education	X	X
Opal	48	White, Lebanese	Female	Accounting	X	X

Findings

The data analysis revealed the following four overarching themes: (a) personal growth; (b) skill improvement; (c) relationship building; and (d) self-expression.

Personal Growth

Overall, students viewed the first-year seminar as an opportunity for reflective self-growth. Being required to slow down and look at oneself is often welcomed but especially so in the year of 2020 when what may have been considered normal obstacles were exacerbated by local, national, and global events. Students found value in this community and relationships built within the course which was especially important in the virtual environment.

Personal growth included self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and Creator mindset, or the acceptance of responsibility and power of choice (as described in the On Course textbook used in the class). Emotional intelligence was the most discussed topic among students, and it was also the only area that 12 of the 14 participants increased their post-test score. Specifically, of the 112 self-inventory post-test scores (8 criteria multiplied by 14 students), 75 scores increased, 11 remained the same, and 26 scores decreased from the self-inventory pre-test score. This indicated that 90% of the students' scores increased or stayed the same from the pre- to post-test.

According to self-inventory post-tests, students saw the most growth in their emotional intelligence scores compared to any of the other seven topics. In her assignments, one participant, Holly, recognized emotional intelligence impacted her work, as it was the ability to be self-aware, understand emotions, and manage them based on the situation. From the text, she understood that this allowed her to empathize accurately with others and manage relationships with harmony. One of her favorite phrases she shared was, "Control what you can control." She added, "While I may not be able to control everything that is happening around me or to me, I can control my reaction to all those things." Holly showed self-awareness and acceptance of responsibility, which also connected to the Creator mindset.

Figure 1: Breakdown of Four Major Themes and the Subcategories and Subcodes Within
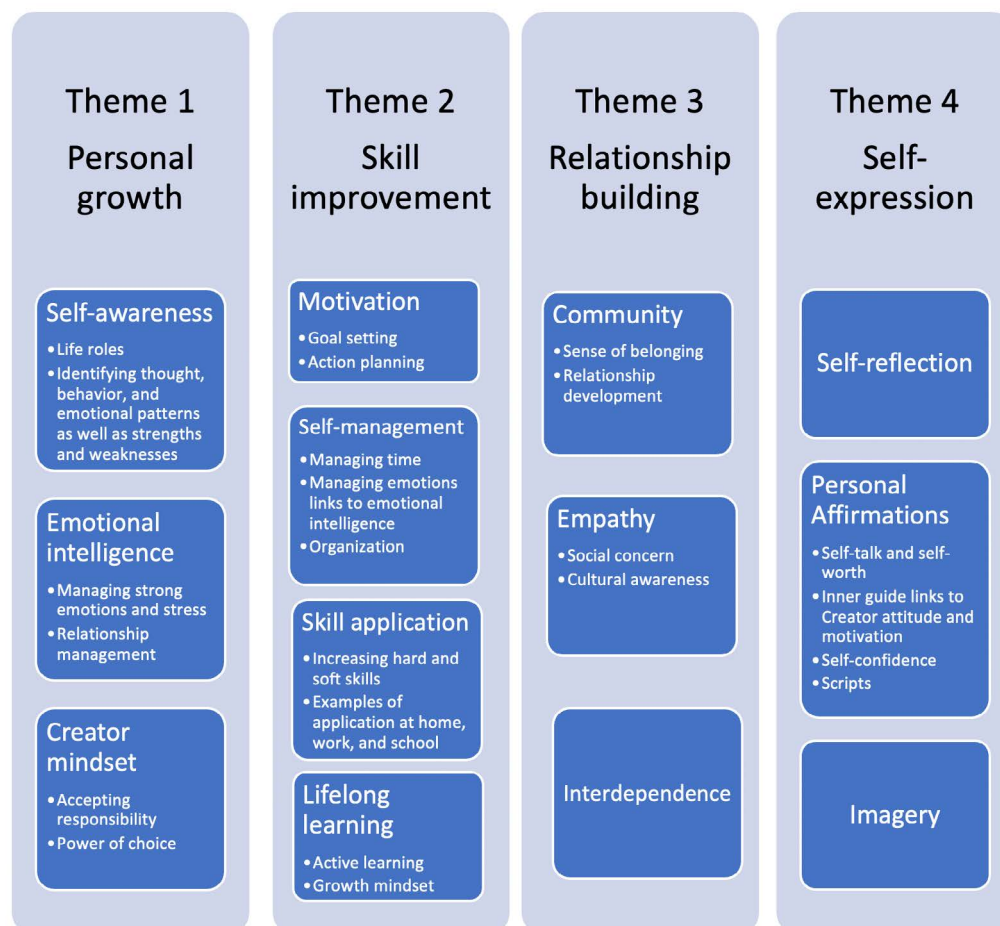
Figure 2: Comparison of Self–Inventory Pre– and Post–Test Scores

Pseudonym	Pre-Personal responsibility	Post-Personal responsibility	Pre-Self-motivation	Post-Self-motivation	Pre-Self-management	Post-Self-management	Pre-Interdependence	Post-Interdependence	Pre-Self-awareness	Post-Self awareness	Pre-Lifelong learning	Post-Lifelong learning	Pre-Emotional intelligence	Post-Emotional intelligence	Pre-Believing in myself	Post-Believing in myself
Summer																
Clay	66	66	56	56	38	41	44	38	71	65	65	63	65	65	72	67
Grace	58	74	64	76	44	72	37	64	48	66	53	76	57	74	59	67
Holly	64	57	54	55	60	46	24	51	45	56	55	61	41	50	54	53
Mason	71	71	80	73	76	73	58	68	78	56	78	59	57	73	70	76
Nicki	58	60	60	61	55	47	30	42	48	43	47	50	37	51	45	65
Penny	38		57		39		48		37		29		36		50	
Fall																
Alex	60	64	69	75	55	63	58	58	59	59	56	67	53	66	53	60
Blythe	68	76	68	80	61	71	57	74	67	69	57	75	59	72	61	77
Darryl	75	68	59	56	60	53	52	47	44	57	42	35	50	52	65	70
Ellis	74	77	72	71	65	70	37	45	69	70	60	62	57	64	66	69
Flora	48		49		26		39		33		45		26		10	
Irene	73	77	74	80	58	72	58	73	64	80	77	80	62	74	73	78
Jackie	62	71	74	63	80	73	52	63	67	61	57	57	59	65	64	51
Kim	80	81	70	80	71	75	68	65	74	74	76	79	78	78	79	76
Lynn	55	50	56	56	38	39	47	49	35	41	41	43	20	31	34	37
Opal	68	70	65	73	64	69	43	62	58	67	45	55	63	67	51	64

Note. The color-coded scores that increased between the self-inventory pre- and post-test are highlighted in green. Scores that decreased are highlighted in red. Scores that remained the exact same are highlighted in blue. There was one student in each of the summer and fall sections that did not complete the self-inventory post-test therefore there are no highlighted scores in the rows of Penny and Flora.

Skill Improvement

Through skill improvement, students demonstrated motivation, self-management, application of skills, and lifelong learning. Holly encapsulated these concepts, as she shared that her role as mother has proven to be the most challenging and most rewarding. Being near the end of her degree program, her goal was simply to finish. She wanted to:

Finish something I started twenty years ago, to be an example to myself that it is important and I should finish, and be an example to my daughter that it's never too late to take charge of your life…This has been a very unique year, and a lot of self-reflection helped motivate me to take charge and finish my last remaining class for my degree. Not to better my career or pursue my life dreams. Right now, it is simply for me.

Holly expressed that when things were overwhelming, small obtainable goals could be celebrated as they were achieved, which made it easier to stay motivated. Her academic goal of "finally officially obtain[ing]" her degree required her to manage herself and her priorities in order to graduate. While she felt she had benefited in her career and from her previous schooling, she wanted to complete her degree as an example to her teenage daughter. Holly shared words of wisdom to her classmates and how she found the class applicable having already had a successful career. She taught and practiced many of the first-year course concepts at work, but she had "never really thought to apply to personal life and/or personal learning."

Relationship Building

Relationship building included community, empathy, and interdependence. Employing interdependence was the area with the second-most growth for students in their self-inventory post-test, with 10 of the 14 participants increasing their score. Perhaps the best description of building community and its impact was shared by Kim:

I must say attending school virtually seemed a bit challenging at first. But the further along I have gotten into the semester I noticed that it's a little easier compared to being on campus. Even though it is virtually, it feels good to be a part of this "new" community. It feels good because I am collectively a part of a group that wants to succeed in these trying times.

I asked Kim if I could share her sentiment, and, after she agreed, I put it on the Zoom white board in a following class. I asked the class to think about these statements and to write down their reactions. I then sent them into breakout rooms to expand and share with each other. Kim emailed me later to say how much the activity meant to her.

Self-Expression

Finally, self-expression included subcategories of self-reflection, positive affirmations, and imagery. Reflective writing was new for Kim. She learned a lot, as it was something she had not done much of in the past. In her interview, she shared:

> But having the self-reflection really just helped me to open up really see myself for who I am, what I want and just gave me that encouragement and motivation to, you know, keep going, despite things that are going on in my life and in the world. It really gave me a chance to just know myself better and realize what I was capable of, so it was a powerful thing I would say.

Another participant, Lynn, liked the opportunity to dig deep into her mind and learn about herself. In her interview she shared, "I've never really had like a really high self-esteem, but this class really pushes you to find those things that you like about yourself and the things that you don't like and how to fix it." In her self-inventory post-test reflection, Lynn wrote that the most important discoveries she had achieved in this 8-week course was understanding herself better: "I know more of what I want to do and how I can achieve it. This course has thought me to think more positively and have a Creator mindset." Overall, the student experience in the course resulted in its intended purpose with 90% of the students' scores increasing or staying the same from the pre- to post-test.

Conclusions

Holistic in design, this case study contained numerical, visual, and reflective perceptions in writing as well as interviews to gain an understanding of how community college students derive value from a first-year seminar curriculum. The participants were able to see that skills were indeed transferable within their academic, career, and personal roles. The following are implications for action:

- **Identify Opportunities for Students to Make Meaning of the Material.** Opportunities for students to reflect are important. As findings from this study revealed, participants viewed the first-year seminar as a chance for self-growth. Being required to slow down and look at themselves in all the chaos life brings is often welcomed, but especially in the year 2020. Creating and implementing activities that promote self-reflection and meaning making are also important in promoting student engagement (Kuh et al., 2015-b). Such opportu-nities may increase students' openness to dive deep and engage with course content and their peers while increasing their time and effort toward their learning

- **Maintain Faculty Commitment to Students' Learning.** Actions that institutions take are important, including faculty use of "principles of good practice to arrange curriculum" (Kuh et al., 2015-b, p. 9). Faculty are key personnel in supporting student success, as they have influence on curriculum, relationships with students, and the classroom environment. As teaching and in-struction modalities continue to evolve, intentionally developing first-year seminars with students' needs and goals in mind will be critical to fostering student's sense of belonging. This will require institutions to se-lect engaging, approachable faculty who are famil-iar with content and are able to engage meaningfully within face to face, online, virtual, and hybrid modal-ities. The first-year seminar is a course generally with-out any pre-requisites; as such, faculty will need to be mindful of equity-related issues, including technology used for class activities, while simultaneously finding innovative approaches to promote discussion and con-nection.

- **Give Faculty a Voice.** Requests for faculty to create or innovate first-year seminars are frequent at many institutions. Faculty may find scholarship of teaching and learning to be a useful resource and approach to such calls and for formalizing reflections, observa-tions, and sharing of data related to student learning (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Research and re-flection encourage "those at the center of the teach-ing-learning process [i.e., faculty]" to "shape priorities and engage in the work in meaningful ways if they are to find the results illuminating and useful" (Kuh, et al., 2015-a, p. 12).

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