

A Multi-Campus Study of the Perceived Effect of First-Year Seminars on the Experience of Students in Their First Semester of College

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Introduction to Study

Type of Study

Qualitative study that incorporated elements of narrative inquiry and analysis

Purpose

To determine how participating in a first-year seminar impacts students during the first semester of college

Significance

Scope of study



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Research Questions

1. What are students' perceptions of the impact, if any, of first-year seminars on their ideas and actions concerning the college experience while they are taking the course?
2. What aspects of the first-year seminar have most influenced student perceptions?
3. To what extent do these perceptions of impact vary based on the background characteristics of the students and type of section taken?



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Study Design/Methodology

Site #1: USC Columbia (U101)

- 3-credit hour course
- Affinity, major, and general sections
- Required of some majors/groups

Site #2: Clemson University (CU 101)

- 2-credit hour course
- Affinity, major, and general sections
- Required of some majors/groups

Site #3: USC Aiken (AFYS 101)

- 1-credit hour course
- Affinity, major, and general sections
- Not required of any major/group



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Study Design/Methodology

Sample Selection

- Major specific sections (Business and Nursing)
- Affinity/special population sections
- General sections

A total of 271 students were contacted, via email, and invited to participate in the study and 58 students responded.

Data Collection

One-on-one interviews were conducted with 18 students (13 women and 5 men) who were all enrolled in a first-year seminar at one of the selected sites.



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Data Analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed and then analyzed inductively to allow the emergence of themes.

A coding system was then created, and the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was used to code data based on recurring ideas, perceptions, or experiences. These themes were revised throughout the process.

Data from the syllabi of the chosen seminar sections were also gathered and then analyzed to compare stated goals and purposes of courses with those of participants.



Findings

1. **Perceptions regarding outcomes of first-year seminar participation**
 - a. Academic reassurance
 - Increased academic success/grades
 - Eased concern about grades/grading
 - b. **Connection to instructor or peers**
 - Likely to contact professor even after class ends
 - Met new people
 - c. Learning skills
 - Helped learn to manage time
 - Provided study strategies
 - d. Major
 - Helped chose major
 - Realized career options



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Findings

Connection to instructor or peers

“She’s done a wonderful job connecting with us. She made it a point to memorize all of our names. She knew my name before I knew hers, which is really kind of rare. I don’t even think any of my other teachers know me at all; my name or nothing. I’d go talk to her about any of my problems. I think she would definitely be able to help me out; like if I had to drop a class or maybe if I was in a spot academically, losing a scholarship. I would definitely go to her first.” (Bradley)

“I didn’t feel as stressed out after I started this class. We talked about everything.” (Amanda)

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Findings

2. Aspects of first-year seminars perceived as most useful

a. In-class interactions

- Discussions
- Activities

b. Instructor characteristics, behaviors, pedagogy

- Friendly
- Helpful
- Concerned
- Approachable

c. Course content

- Learning skills
- Time management



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Findings

In-class interactions

“She’s really open to us. Like if something applies to us, we can tell our story. Then, she always has feedback on everything. Since she’s been a nurse for so long, she has a lot of stories and things that make what you’re learning very applicable.” (Chantel)

“It’s a completely open environment for you to express yourself openly without being judged. We might not all be best friends, but we all get along and we all know a bit about each other.” (Anna)

Findings

3. **Individual perceptions about purpose of first-year seminar**
 - a. **To ease transition to college life**
 - College strategies
 - Differences between high school and college
 - b. **To communicate academic expectations**
 - Classes and workload
 - College-level writing
 - c. **To increase familiarity with institution and customs**
 - History and traditions of school
 - Campus resources
 - d. **To fulfill major, general education, or scholarship requirement**
 - Assignments are busy work
 - Repeated information learned in high school

Findings

To ease transition to college life

“It helps you make the transition between high school and college; it helps you understand what you’re going to be experiencing...experiencing either in the next year, or in the next four years or more of your life. And just to welcome you home because this is your home now.”

(Nia)

“This class provides you with strategies for college because it’s so much different from high school. It also gives you a chance to become acquainted with USC Aiken.” (Travis)

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Findings

Document Analysis (Course syllabi)

- 1. Comparison of all three seminars**
Course purpose, goals, and assignments similar
- 2. Comparison of “like” sections**
General sections were similar, but major-specific sections revealed differences
- 3. Comparison of sections within each seminar**
Consistency among sections within each of the three seminars, possibly due to common course content



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Discussion

1. Perceptions of purpose

- “To Ease Transition to College Life” and “To Increase Familiarity with Institution and Custom” emerged most frequently.
- First-generation students in the study were more likely to have perceptions that related to either the eased transition theme or the “To Communicate Academic Expectations” theme.
- Difference between the perceptions of the students who were enrolled in the seminar because they were required to take it compared to those who were taking the course voluntarily.

Discussion

2. Aspects of course with greatest impact

- All participants perceived in-class interactions to have the greatest impact compared to other aspects of the first-year seminar.
- Narratives and document analysis suggest content in seminars in the study was largely taught using activities or active learning strategies.
- Most participants had difficulty recalling specific class activities and discussions.
- Some considered assignments to be pointless or just busy work (significance of course content vs. process).

Discussion

3. Perceived impact of course on students

- Majority of participants indicated the first-year seminar had facilitated a connection to their instructor or peers.
- Some said participating in the seminar increased their academic confidence or success either because it was an “easy” course, or it provided them with skills they could apply in other classes (First Generation).
- Learning skill information was often described as “common sense” or repetitive of information that was learned in middle or high school.



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Limitations/Future Research

1. Timing of data collection

- Differences between 3-credit hour, 2-credit hour, and 3-credit hour classes

2. Type of seminar sections and institution type/environment

- First-year seminar in context of larger range of first-year programs
- Role of environment and perceptions of course impact

3. Background characteristics of participants

- Seminar type and impact on different student groups (Weismann and Magill, 2008)

