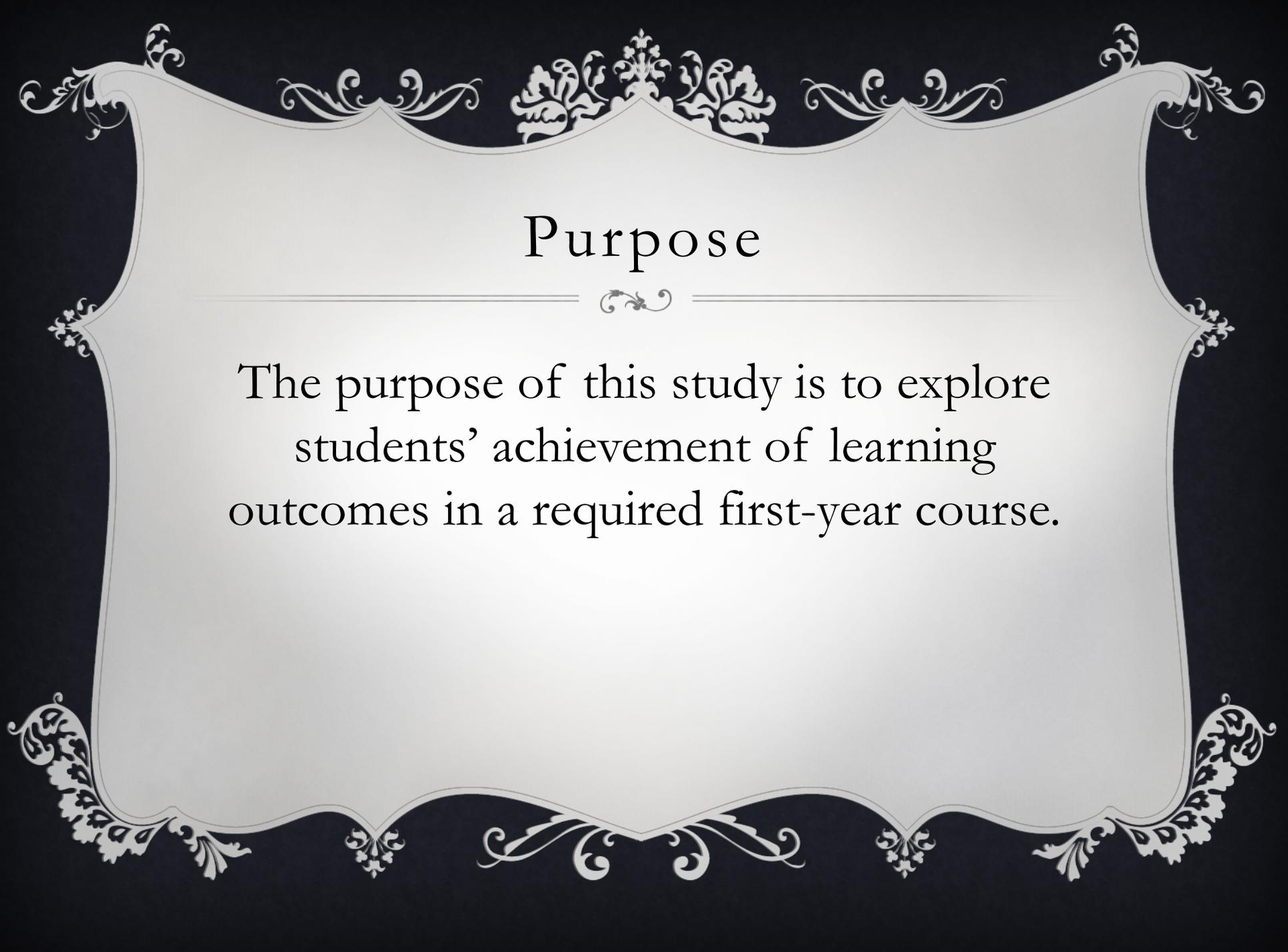


Six-Word Memoirs: A Content
Analysis of First-Year Course
Learning Outcomes

Lisa Rubin, Ph.D.

Kansas State University



Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore students' achievement of learning outcomes in a required first-year course.



Background

- ❖ First-year courses are being implemented at institutions around the U.S.
- ❖ Colleges & universities are assessing learning outcomes to achieve institutional goals and maintain **accreditation**: “the primary means of quality assessment and assurance used by higher education in the United States” (Beno, 2004).

Background

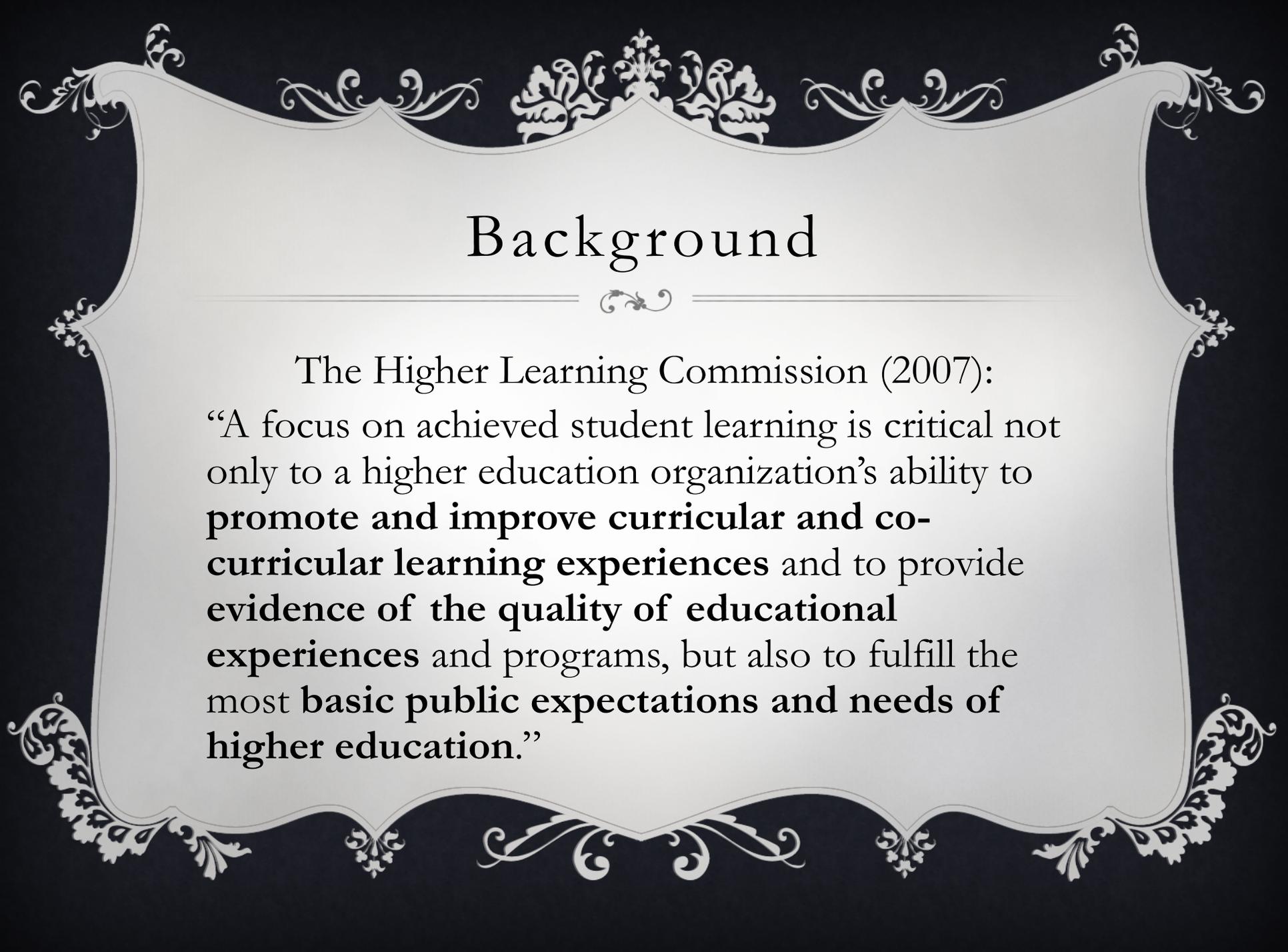
❖ **Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)** “are defined in terms of the particular level of knowledge, skills and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences” (Ewell, 2001).

- **Knowledge:** content in an academic discipline
- **Skill:** doing something
- **Affective outcome:** change in belief or value development
- **Ability:** Integration of these that require multiple elements of learning

❖ SLOs are a “principal gauge” of effectiveness (Ewell, 2001)

Background

- ❖ Accreditation bodies have brought student learning outcomes into accreditation standards in the assessment of teaching and learning.
- ❖ Institutional learning outcomes are often tied to the general education curriculum (Hyers & Joslin, 1998; Keup & Barefoot, 2005).
- ❖ First-year experience (FYE) courses are often required as part of general education, and are increasingly common for student adjustment to higher education and improved learning (Friedman & Marsh, 2009).



Background

The Higher Learning Commission (2007):
“A focus on achieved student learning is critical not only to a higher education organization’s ability to **promote and improve curricular and co-curricular learning experiences** and to provide **evidence of the quality of educational experiences** and programs, but also to fulfill the most **basic public expectations and needs of higher education.**”

Review of the Literature

❖ Participation in FYE course benefits:

- Meaningful connection with faculty
- Comfort in class discussions
- Positive academic and social experiences in college
- Integration into campus community and campus life (Keup & Barefoot, 2005)

❖ Students in learning communities do not meet course learning outcomes at a higher rate than those in independent FYE seminars, but course connections to activities should be *intentional* so students make a “connection between what they are doing and what they are learning” (Smith, Goldfine, & Windham, 2009).

- Place learning outcomes on syllabus
- Connect each assignment to SLOs
- Discuss relevant SLOs to each classroom topic (Beno, 2004; Smith et al., 2009).

Review of the Literature

- ❖ Students are responsible for their own learning (Pintrich, 2008; Walker, 2008)
 - The student voice is vital in the development and assessment of SLOs.

- ❖ 2006 National Survey of First-Year Seminars
 - Only 60.2% of institutions conducted formal assessment of FYE courses since 2003
 - External instruments, national surveys, course evaluations, focus groups, interviews, institutional data (Griffin & Tobolowsky, 2008)

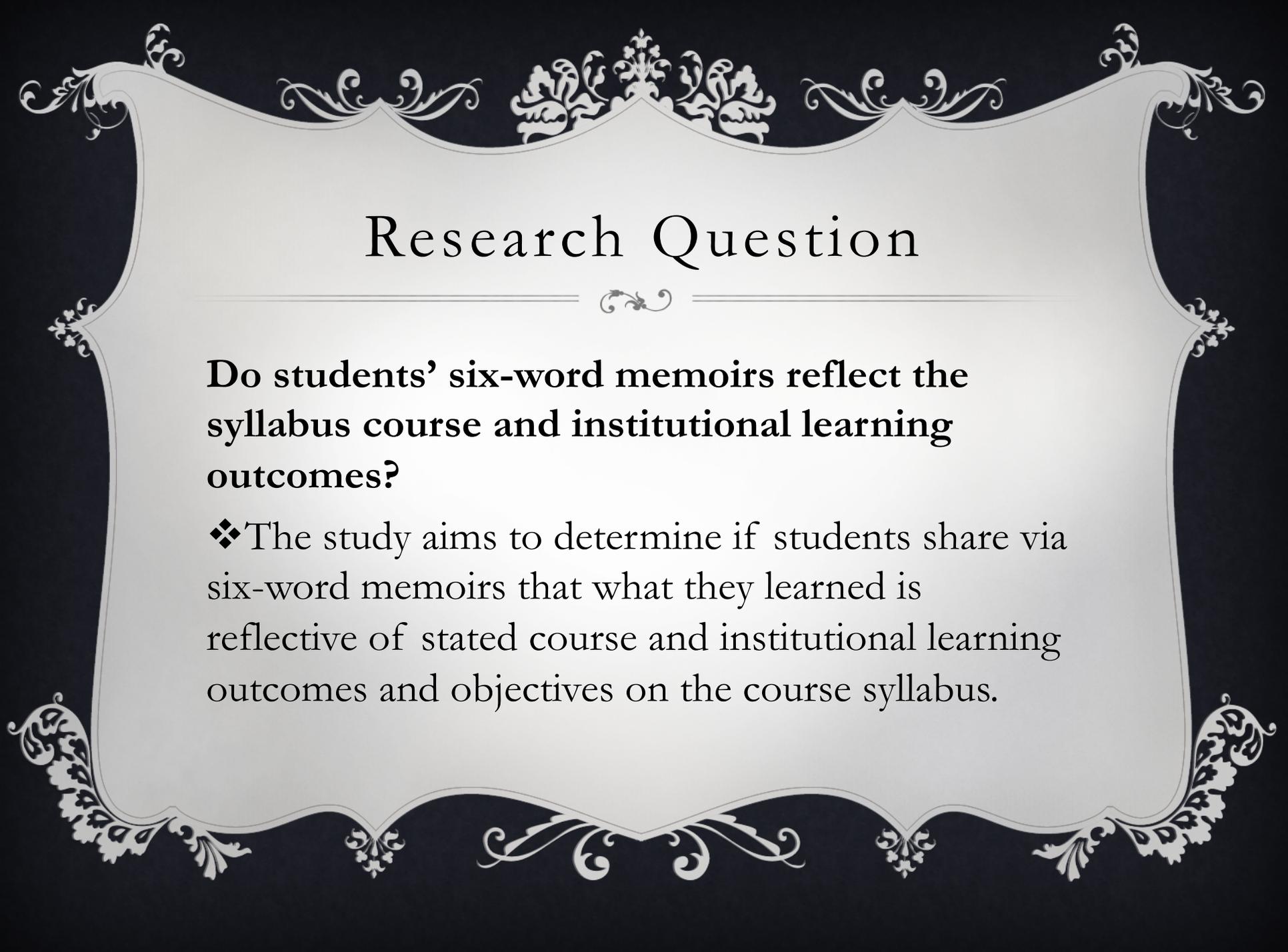
Review of the Literature

- ❖ Six fundamental questions institutions should ask about student learning:
 1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?
 2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?
 3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?
 4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning and for assessment of student learning?
 5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?
 6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what students are learning—and how well?

(The Higher Learning Commission, 2007)

Theoretical Framework

- ❖ Situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
 - FYE seminar is an interactive environment
 - Through participation, students and instructor create a community learning environment
 - Learners participate in community and master **knowledge and skills**, a social process
 - A way of understanding learning
 - Seminar environment is an example of a context for learning experiences
 - Teaching vs. learning curriculum: teacher making meaning vs. learners' perspectives influencing classroom learning in community: Learners "have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints" (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
 - "Exemplars" are situated opportunities/goals = SLOs



Research Question

Do students' six-word memoirs reflect the syllabus course and institutional learning outcomes?

❖ The study aims to determine if students share via six-word memoirs that what they learned is reflective of stated course and institutional learning outcomes and objectives on the course syllabus.

Method

- ❖ Participants: students enrolled in FYE course at a small baccalaureate institution in the southwestern United States
 - Approximately 30 students in each section
 - Data collected from 9 sections of the course from 2011-2013
 - 551 data points collected
- ❖ First day of course: syllabus review with course and institutional learning outcomes, which were tied to specific assignments or quizzes
- ❖ Hybrid course: online component linked SLOs to specific assignments

Method

❖ Course Learning Outcomes:

- Identify learning styles and how to use them to be successful in different types of college course settings
- Develop study and time management skills
- Understand how to manage personal finances
- Develop a matriculation plan for your college career
- Create and update a professional resume and cover letter, and know how to use these documents in the job search process
- Develop and articulate educational and career goals
- Develop the skills to network, search for jobs, and interview
- Learn the value of diversity in the campus community and workplace

Method

❖ Institutional Learning Outcomes:

- Develop communication abilities
- Develop critical thinking abilities
- Develop effective citizenship

❖ Each objective had specific skills and knowledge expected, **course** learning outcomes associated with it, and specific assignments and exams related to it.

Method

- ❖ Instructor collected voluntary submissions of six-word memoirs about what students learned in the course on the last night of the FYE course.
- ❖ Six-word memoirs were developed by *SMITH Magazine*
- ❖ Previously were employed in assessing students' learning of library knowledge in a library skills course (Miller, 2011)

For sale:
baby shoes, never
worn.

- Ernest Hemingway



Method

- ❖ Content analysis was utilized to explore content of six-word memoirs without referring back to SLOs to avoid influence
- ❖ NVivo software
- ❖ Emergent coding used to create codes (nodes) based on the data rather than the SLOs, “a priori” coding (Stemler, 2001)
- ❖ Substantive coding – open coding analyzing data directly (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007)
- ❖ Nine nodes (“containers” for NVivo coding to reference data in a category) were created from 627 words, phrases, or entire six-word memoirs (Bazeley & Richards, 2000)
- ❖ Word frequency conducted to see if patterns of words emerged: most common word stems were “learning,” “class,” “resume,” and “interview.”

Method

- ❖ The nine emerging nodes with corresponding data include:
 - Campus resources (27)
 - Career documents (55)
 - Financial aid/money management (30)
 - Learn from each other (14)
 - Perception of course or instructor (124)
 - Prepare for future (89)
 - Self-discovery (112)
 - Skills (139)
 - Success (33)



RESULTS



Campus Resources

“Found useful library resources and help.”

“Guest speakers are really informative tools.”

“Utilize academic advisors to graduate quickly.”



Career Documents

“Learned to write my resume properly.”

“Thank you letter goes long way.”

“My resume sucked until this course.”

“Cover letters can set you apart.”



Financial Aid / Money Management

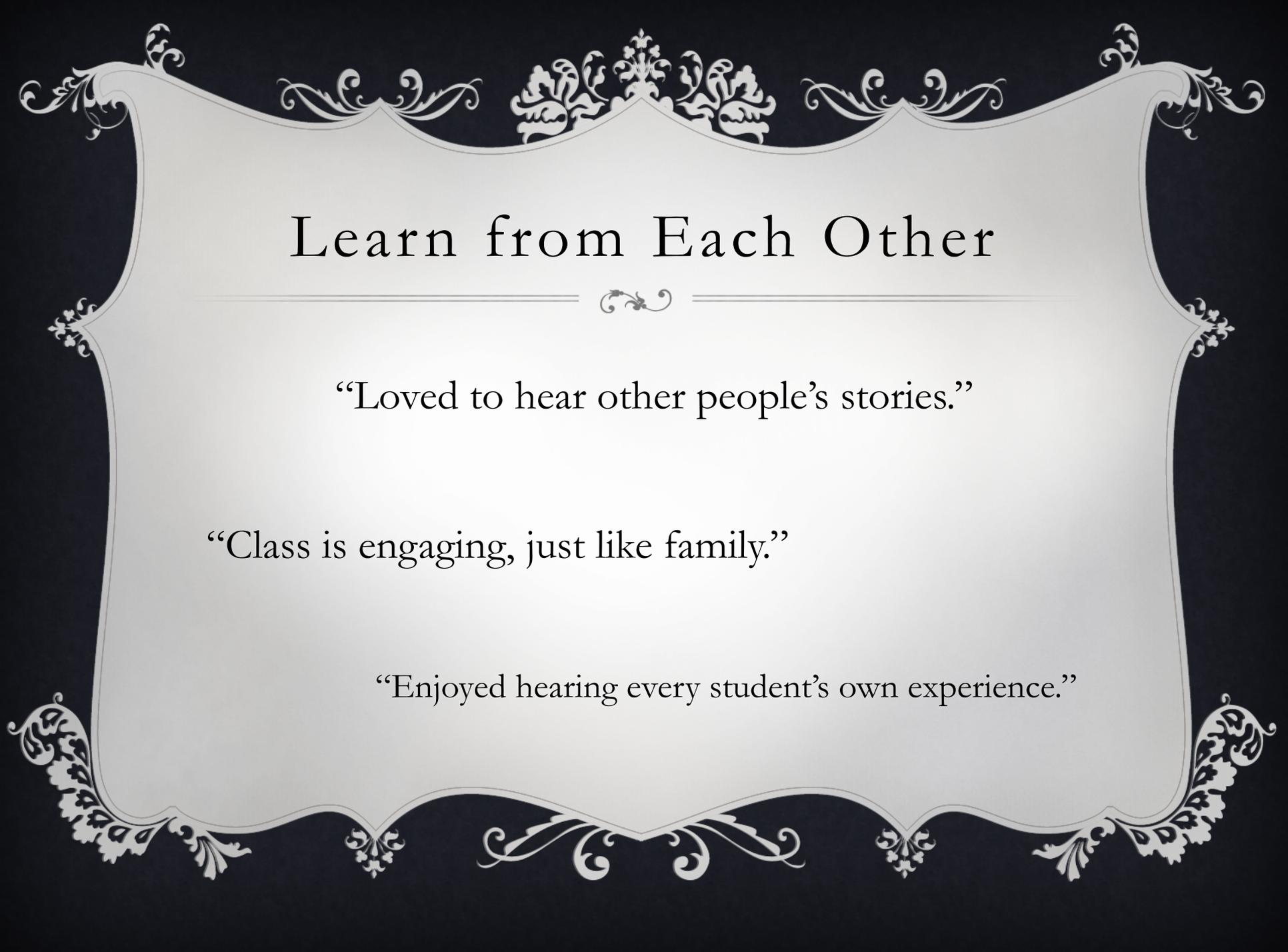
“Never own too many credit cards.”

“Teaches how to save money now.”

“Learning about school debt is eye-opening!”

“Learned how to manage money functionally.”

“Taught me how to budget finances.”

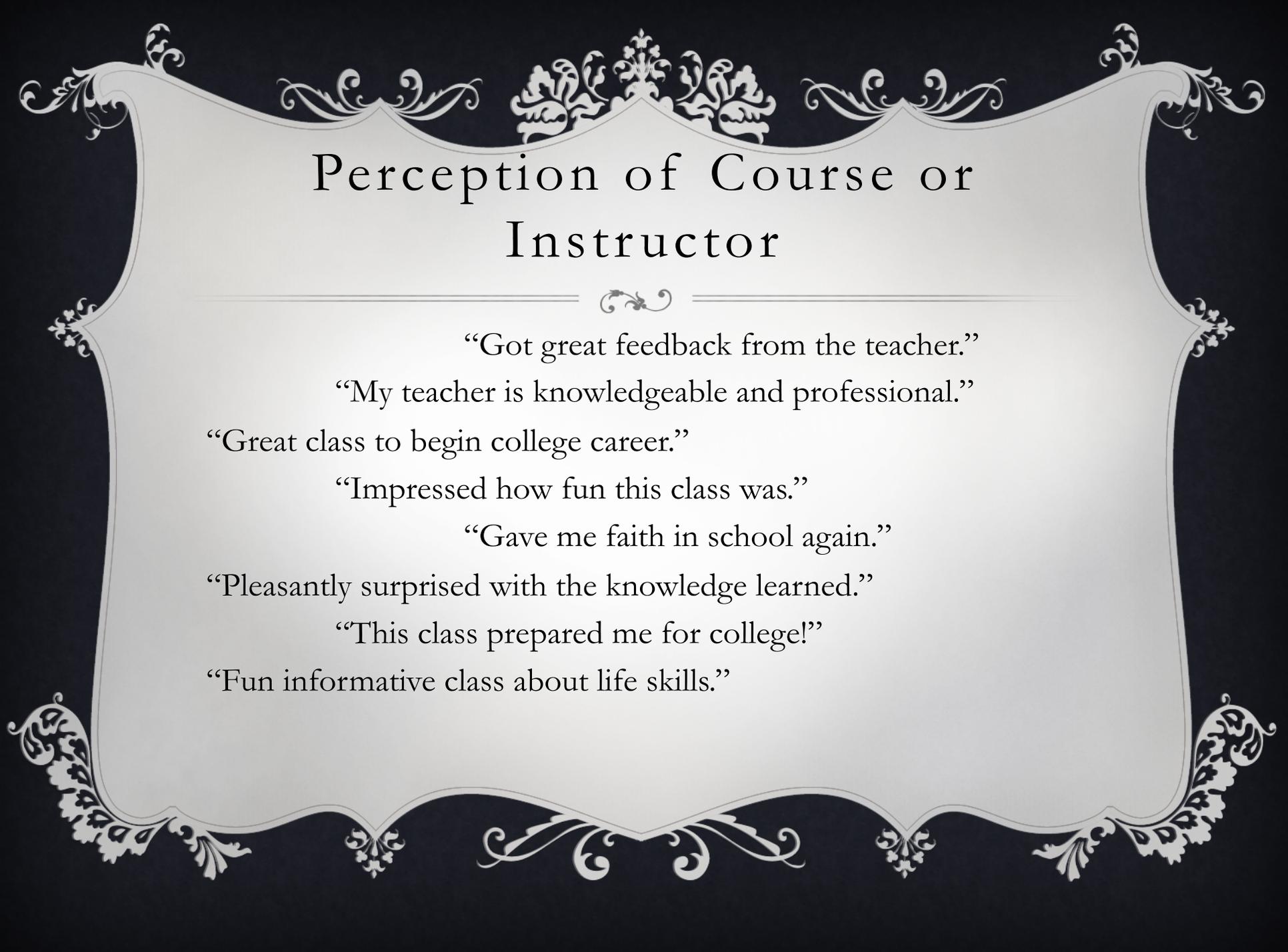


Learn from Each Other

“Loved to hear other people’s stories.”

“Class is engaging, just like family.”

“Enjoyed hearing every student’s own experience.”



Perception of Course or Instructor

“Got great feedback from the teacher.”

“My teacher is knowledgeable and professional.”

“Great class to begin college career.”

“Impressed how fun this class was.”

“Gave me faith in school again.”

“Pleasantly surprised with the knowledge learned.”

“This class prepared me for college!”

“Fun informative class about life skills.”



Prepare for Future

“Matriculation project was a look forward.”

“Made me eager to career search.”

“Goals are very important in life.”

“Learned the classes left to graduate.”

“This class gave me more ambition.”

“My future is more clear today.”

“My unknown journey has a direction.”



Self-Discovery

“Identified my top values and priorities.”

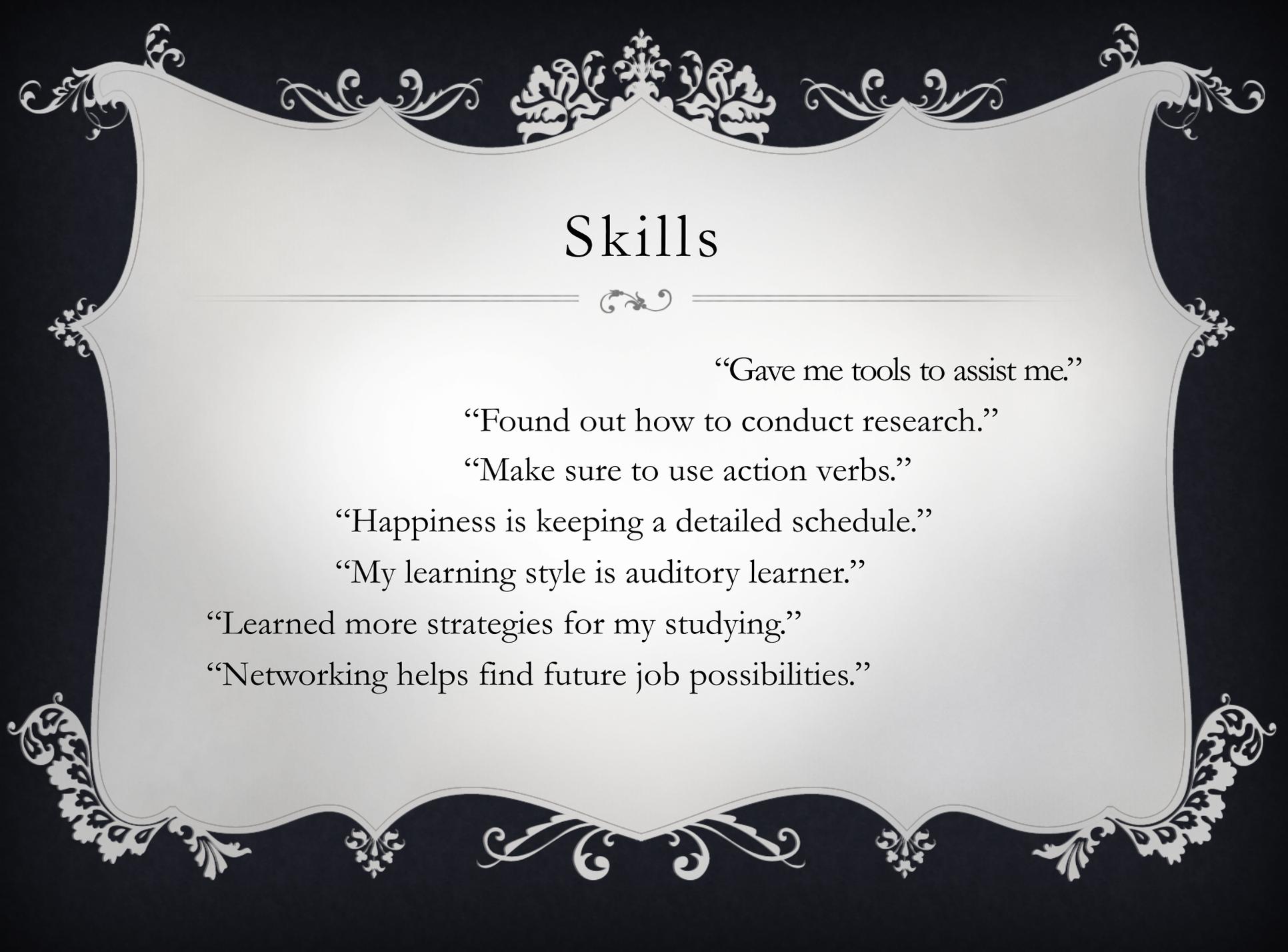
“Take credit for your great work.”

“Felt more confidence with each assignment.”

“Life needs balance for full potential.”

“I was a very quiet student.”

“Have never valued education so much.”



Skills

“Gave me tools to assist me.”

“Found out how to conduct research.”

“Make sure to use action verbs.”

“Happiness is keeping a detailed schedule.”

“My learning style is auditory learner.”

“Learned more strategies for my studying.”

“Networking helps find future job possibilities.”



Success

“Education is the foundation of success.”

“My success is measured by me.”

“Finally feel on track, let’s roll!”

“College success = living the good life.”

Discussion

- ❖ Seminar environment: engaging class, participation from all students, high interaction and discussion
- ❖ “Learn from each other” node encompasses situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation
- ❖ Students in First-Year Experience classroom were influenced by classmates and what they shared
- ❖ In “perception of course or instructor” node, students learned course structure and instructor’s influence, part of situated learning

Discussion

❖ Skills node encompassed many of the skills-related syllabus learning outcomes: learning styles, time management, study techniques, and career skills like job searching and interviewing:

- “I learned about time management here.”
- “I learned interview do’s and don’ts.”

❖ The institutional learning outcomes of develop communication abilities and critical thinking abilities also fall under the skills node:

- “Communication is the key to success.”
- “This class helped me with shyness.”
- “This class made me think more!”

Discussion

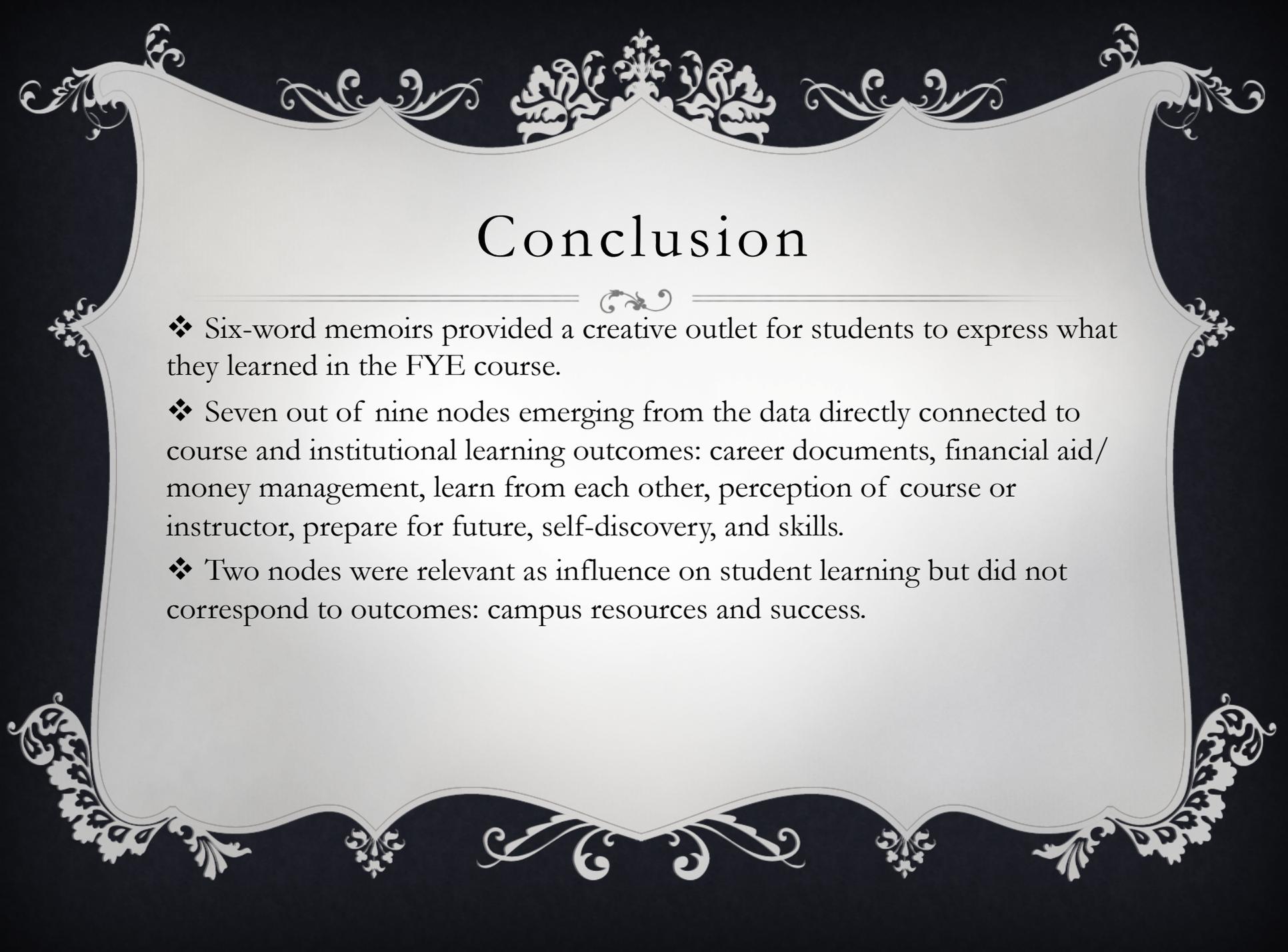
- ❖ Campus resources enable students to develop the skills with appropriate tools and assistance, but node does not directly tie to specific outcomes.
- ❖ Once students become aware of resources and people on campus that impact other learning outcomes, then they may achieve progress towards graduation (prepare for future node, develop a matriculation plan learning outcome).
- ❖ Financial aid/money management node submissions directly related to manage personal finances learning outcome.
- ❖ Career documents submissions directly related to the course learning outcome to create a professional resume and cover letter and learn how to use the documents in the job search process.

Discussion

- ❖ The prepare for future node relates directly to the development of a matriculation plan.
- ❖ The learning outcome of developing career and educational goals is related to both preparing for the future and self-discovery.
- ❖ Many students in first-year seminars are discovering not only their educational and career direction, but often, also their **identity**.
- ❖ Self-discovery and identity:
 - “Learned that my knowledge has value.”
 - “I got to know myself better.”
 - “I feel I finally found myself.”
- ❖ Self-discovery submissions also connect to institutional learning outcome of develop effective citizenship.

Discussion

- ❖ No six-word memoirs or nodes directly addressed the diversity learning outcome.
- ❖ The success node does not connect to any course or institutional learning outcomes; it is more about students' feelings at the course conclusion.
- ❖ Students listening to each other's experiences and interpretations of course content experienced legitimate peripheral participation. The social environment of the seminar and connection to learners is reflected here:
 - “Loved to hear other peoples’ stories.”

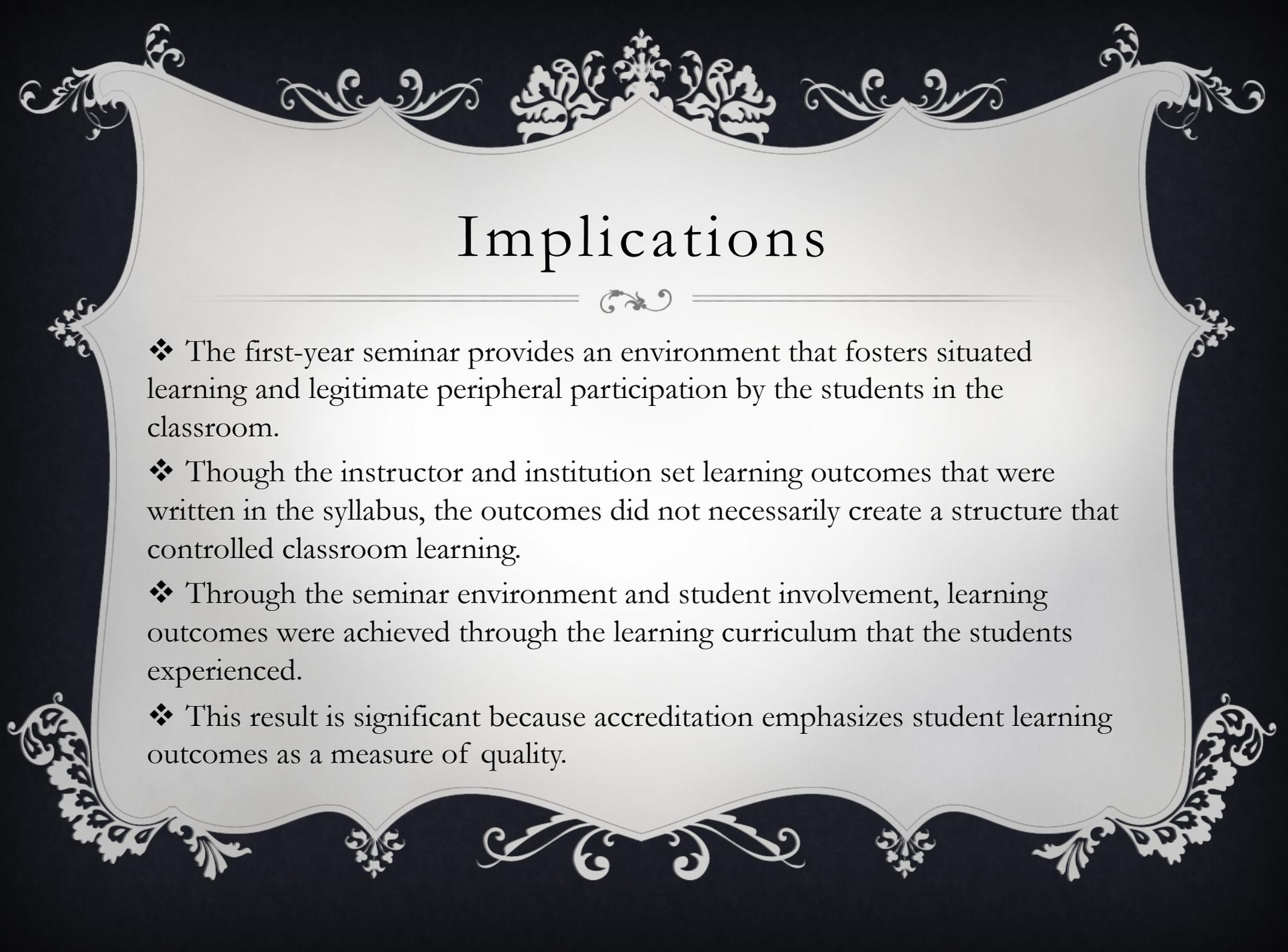


Conclusion

- ❖ Six-word memoirs provided a creative outlet for students to express what they learned in the FYE course.
- ❖ Seven out of nine nodes emerging from the data directly connected to course and institutional learning outcomes: career documents, financial aid/money management, learn from each other, perception of course or instructor, prepare for future, self-discovery, and skills.
- ❖ Two nodes were relevant as influence on student learning but did not correspond to outcomes: campus resources and success.

Conclusion

- ❖ **There is a significant connection between the student learning outcomes on the syllabus and what students learned in the classroom!**
- ❖ A learning curriculum is developed through the learners' experiences in the situated learning opportunities in the classroom environment, whereas a teaching curriculum is heavily influenced by structure and the instructor (Lave & Wenger, 1991) – in this class experience, students engaged in legitimate peripheral participation.



Implications

- ❖ The first-year seminar provides an environment that fosters situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation by the students in the classroom.
- ❖ Though the instructor and institution set learning outcomes that were written in the syllabus, the outcomes did not necessarily create a structure that controlled classroom learning.
- ❖ Through the seminar environment and student involvement, learning outcomes were achieved through the learning curriculum that the students experienced.
- ❖ This result is significant because accreditation emphasizes student learning outcomes as a measure of quality.

Implications

- ❖ The first-year seminar serves a specific purpose in a general education curriculum; its classroom environment should engage students through discussion and learning from each other.
- ❖ The instructor becomes a facilitator that allows students to learn from each other or challenge each other to participate more in classroom activities.
- ❖ There are many ways to assess student learning; six-word memoirs were just a new way.
- ❖ Learning outcomes should be carefully designed for purposes of accreditation and standards of teaching and learning.
- ❖ Once learning outcomes are established, assessing student learning can be explored both through emergent and a priori means, or via quantitative measures, which are ideas for future research.

Implications

- ❖ Six-word memoirs: a new way to evaluate instructors?
- ❖ Intersection of exploring educational quality (via accreditation), assessing student learning (outcomes), and the importance of the first-year seminar.
- ❖ In this particular course, students' learning closely aligned with learning outcomes and the essence of the first-year seminar.

“Wish this class were a pocketbook.”

Questions? Discussion!

Lisa Rubin, Ph.D.
Kansas State University
rubin@ksu.edu

