

# Demonstrating the Impact of First-Year Seminars on Student Outcomes

2012 ASHE Conference

Las Vegas, NV

**Jennifer Keup**

([keupj@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:keupj@mailbox.sc.edu))



# Background

“The freshman seminar is a course intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students by introducing them:

- to a variety of specific topics, which vary by seminar type [*6 types*],
- to essential skills for college success, and
- to selected processes, the most common of which is the creation of a peer support group.”

*(Barefoot, 1992)*

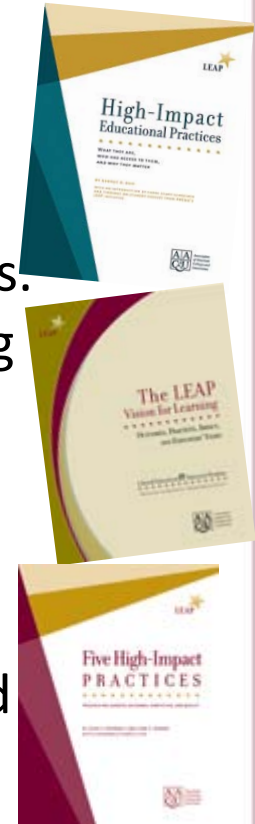
# Background

- Evidence of FYS can be found as early as 1880s but experienced a “renaissance” in 1970s
- National data indicate pervasive use (*Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012; Padgett & Keup, 2011*)
  - 96% of institutions offer a FYS
  - Half offer a FYS to 90% of more first-year students
  - Growing use among 2-year colleges
- Evolution in type, structural characteristics, & content

# FYS as High-Impact Practice

## First-Year Seminars and Experiences

“Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members’ own research.”



# Previous Research: Findings

- Positive impact on retention to second year, persistence to graduate, and academic performance
- Positive effect on behavioral outcomes
  - Involvement in campus activities
  - Interaction with faculty and peers
  - Student engagement
- FYS faculty development also linked to improved teaching performance

# Previous Research Findings

- Positive impact on persistence into the second year, persisted

**“FYS participation has statistically significant and substantial, positive effects on a student’s successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college”**  
(Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 403)

- Positive impact on academic performance while in college
  - Interaction
  - Student effort
- FYS faculty development linked to improved teaching performance

# Previous Research: Limitations

- Reliance upon single-institution studies
- Inability to capture the wide range of seminar characteristics
  - Seminar type
  - Seminar structure
  - Students served
  - Instructional features



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER  
FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

# Research Questions

- Which characteristics of first-year seminars (i.e., structural elements, institutional characteristics, course objectives, and seminar content) have an impact on students' first-year grades?
- Which characteristics of first-year seminars (i.e., structural elements, institutional characteristics, course objectives, and seminar content) have an impact on students' persistence to the second year?



# Method

- Data source
  - Institutional respondents to the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (n = 890)
  - Respondents to a Spencer Foundation funded follow-up survey to collect outcomes data (n = 185)
- Sample representativeness
  - Not nationally representative
  - Representative of institutions that offer first-year seminars

# Method

- Dependent variables
  - Average cumulative first-year GPA for FYS
  - Average sophomore return rate for FYS students
- Independent variables
  - Institutional and seminar controls
  - Structural characteristics of FYS
  - Instructional characteristics of FYS
  - Course objectives
  - Course content

# Method

- Descriptive statistics
- A series of OLS regression analyses
  - Five regression analyses for each of the two outcomes
    - Each included institution controls and one of the other blocks of independent variables
  - Final models (one for each outcome) included all of the variables that proved to be significant in previous regression analyses

# Results: Separate Models

	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
<b>Content</b>		
College policies and procedures	-.208*	
Health and wellness	.201*	
Critical thinking		.199*
<b>Instructional Characteristics</b>		
Seminar instructor: Adjunct faculty	-.315***	
Seminar includes online components	-.207*	

\*\*\*p<.001; \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05

	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
<b>Objectives</b>		
Improve sophomore return rates	-.272***	
Develop writing skills		.246*
Self-exploration/personal development		.180*
<b>Structural Characteristics</b>		
Primary FYS type: Academic Variable Content	.387*	.192*
Primary FYS type: Basic Study Skills	-.355*	-.260**
FYS class size	-.253***	
Credits seminar carries	.343***	
Percent of students taking a first-year seminar		.191*
Administrative unit for FYS: Student Affairs	.238**	
Seminar has been assessed	-.221*	

\*\*\*p<.001; \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05

# Results: Combined Model



**NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER**

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

	Beta for GPA	Beta for Persist
<b>Structural Characteristics</b>		
Primary FYS type: Academic Variable Content	.388***	
Primary FYS type: Basic Study Skills	-.381***	-.294***
Percent of students taking a first-year seminar		.256**
<b>Instructional Characteristics</b>		
Seminar instructor: Adjunct faculty	-.331***	
Seminar includes online components	-.195*	
<b>Course Objectives</b>		
Develop writing skills		.267**
Personal development/exploration		.202*
Improve sophomore return rates	-.187*	
<b>Course Content</b>		
College policies and procedures	-.255**	
Health and wellness	.248**	
Critical thinking		.231*

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

$p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

[www.sc.edu/fye](http://www.sc.edu/fye)

# Discussion & Implications

- Seminar characteristics do matter to outcomes
  - Greater impact and wider range of effect on GPA than persistence
  - Little overlap in characteristics that predict outcomes
- Effect of FYS structural characteristics on outcome is mediated by other characteristics
- Characteristics that are aligned with core academic activities of the institution have a greater affect on outcomes



# Discussion & Implications

- Bring attention to the need to include FYS characteristics in the study of this intervention
- Findings can help inform the development and refinement of FYS, especially in resource-sensitive times
  - Provide empirical evidence for FYS decisions
- Institutional data as the nexus between student analyses and policy

# Future Research

- Look at a wider range of outcomes
- Examine high-impact practices associated with FYS
- Methodologically expand to include decision-tree analysis



**NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER**

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE\* AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

[www.sc.edu/fye](http://www.sc.edu/fye)

# 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars

- Administration: Oct. 30 – Dec. 18, 2010
- Invitation sent to 3,225 institutions in 3 waves:
  - Chief Academic Officer
  - Chief Executive Officer
  - Chief Student Affairs Officer
- Incentive program
- 1,028 usable responses
  - 32% response rate
  - 890 with FYS



# 2010 Follow-Up Survey

- Funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation
- Primary purpose was to gather information on student outcomes
  - Students in FYS in 2009-2010 academic year
  - General population of first-year students
- Survey sent to 890 respondents with FYS from the 2009 survey
- Incentive program
- 185 usable responses