

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF A FIRST-YEAR
EXPERIENCE COURSE AND THEIR TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY: A
QUALITATIVE STUDY

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By
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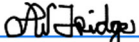

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This dissertation follows the format and style of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Seventh Edition*, except where superseded by directions from the Director of the Doctor of Education in Executive Educational Leadership Program at Houston Christian University.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my children, Ebubechukwu, Uchechukwu, and Amarachukwu, as they cultivate a growth mindset and pursue lifelong learning.

ABSTRACT

Oguchi, Joy Chinwenwa. *Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of a First-Year Experience Course and Their Transition to University: A Qualitative Study*. Doctor of Education (Executive Educational Leadership), January, 2024, Houston Christian University, Houston, Texas.

Students' experiences transitioning from high school to university during their first year are fundamental to their integration and academic progress in higher education; it can determine their success, including completing their degree. This study examined university students' perceptions regarding their experience in a first-year experience (FYE) course to gain an insight into how FYE courses impact first year students' transition to higher education. Three research questions guided this study. First, how do university students who participated in an FYE course perceive their experience in the course? Secondly, how do university students who participated in an FYE course believe it impacted their transition and integration into university? Finally, which component(s) of the FYE course do university students believe had the highest impact on transition and integration? Schlossberg's transition theory provided a theoretical framework that informed the structure for the study.

This study was conducted as a phenomenological qualitative study of nine second-year university students who took a first-year experience course in their first year at the university. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and data were collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were coded and analyzed to reveal themes and sub-themes and six main themes were revealed, including social connections and friendships, sense of belonging, transition to university, mixed emotions/positive feelings, course components, and peer mentoring and instructor support. The findings revealed that first-year experience courses play a crucial role in

first-year students' transition to university, in fostering a welcoming experience, connections and a sense of belonging, understanding the dynamics of higher education and university expectations, and navigating university resources and policies. In addition, the findings also revealed that components of the course, such as peer mentoring, structured study approaches, and engaging activities, benefit first-year students' transition experiences.

Keywords: higher education, transition to university, transition to college, social integration, first-year experience, first-year seminar, first-year experience course, peer mentoring.

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May his soul continue to rest in peace.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The experiences of college students during their first year are fundamental to their foundation and academic progress in higher education; it can determine their success, including completing their degree. In the first year of higher education, students can learn new insights and experiences that can help them develop a new understanding of who they are, their university environment, and how they fit into it. However, some students experience many challenges, such as alienation from family and friends, struggle to fit in, and financial struggles (Kerkvliet & Nowell, 2005).

First-year students often need guidance to navigate university education (Schackmuth, 2012). According to Schackmuth (2012), the first year of college experience can be stressful for students enrolling for the first time. Many students need more academic and social skills to succeed in college (Bailey, 2009). Hence, colleges and universities must provide relevant services and instruction to facilitate and enhance successful transition and integration in the first year. They must establish and offer programs and courses to help students adapt effectively, efficiently navigate, manage their university experience, and complete a degree (Bers & Younger, 2014).

Consequently, many higher education institutions have sought solutions to mitigate the transitional challenges that students face in their first year in college. One of the solutions adopted by many institutions is providing First-Year Experience (FYE) programs and courses to help students integrate effectively and successfully into college and to boost their success in university.

However, it is crucial to understand how undergraduate students have experienced the first-year experience (FYE) course and how they perceive it impacted their transition

and integration into college. Hence, this qualitative research study aims to understand college students' perceptions of the first-year experience (FYE) course and the components they find most beneficial to their transition and integration.

Statement of the Problem

A 12-month dropout rate of about 25% has been reported among first-time first-year bachelor's degree-seeking students (Bryant, 2022; Hanson, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). According to Bailey (2009), there is a shortfall in many first-year students' abilities to apply the necessary academic skills required to succeed in college. It is also well documented that many students transitioning from high school to college are underprepared for college educationally, mentally, emotionally, financially, and otherwise (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Baiocco et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2013; Lease, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Radford et al., 2010). By *underprepared*, Garvey (2011) refers to the differences between students' ability levels and experience and those needed to excel in higher education. In general, students who graduate from high school are often expected to resume college ready for the rigor of college and be able to seamlessly and immediately transition through unprecedented administrative and academic responsibilities. There is the notion that college readiness is characterized by the highest test scores, most resourced high schools and communities, or well-connected parents who are college graduates. Deploying institutional resources towards recruiting and retaining mostly students who fit this college-ready profile limits the opportunity for every student to succeed in higher education (McNair et al., 2022). On the other hand, McNair et al. (2022), suggested that colleges are often not student-ready either.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of first-year university students who participated in a first-year experience (FYE) course. More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how these first-year students (a) perceive their experience in the course, (b) believe it impacted their transition and integration into university, and (c) which component(s) of the course students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration into university.

The first year of university education is critical for students as they adapt academically and socially to the higher education environment (Baik et al., 2019; Merhi et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993). However, students often lack the social and academic skills needed to be successful or achieve degree completion (Tinto, 1993). Higher education administrators recognize the need to ensure the successful transition of first-year students and continue to develop and offer a variety of programs to them (Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Young & Hopp, 2014). Over time, these FYE programs and courses/seminars have undergraduate students. As the diversity of undergraduate students increase, it is not only necessary for higher education administrators to provide programs for first-year students, but it is also imperative to investigate how students who participate in the first-year experience programs have experienced them (Wilkin, 2014).

In addition, previous studies (e.g., Demirian, 2010; Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Pittendrigh et al., 2016) involving first-year experience courses have focused on the variables of Grade Point Averages (GPAs) and retention. Also, they have primarily utilized quantitative research designs. Limited Studies have

utilized qualitative methods to obtain a thorough understanding of the perceived experiences of students enrolled in first-year experience courses. Therefore, this qualitative study will provide an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and potentially contribute valuable insight into the lived experiences of college students regarding their transition and integration into university because of participating in a first-year experience course. It will thereby contribute to research on students' perceptions regarding what can influence the effective transition, integration, and academic progress of undergraduate students. This is vital, given the need for faculty and administrators to be student-focused when developing and reviewing courses and programs to better cater to student needs to ensure their success and achievement of the institution's goals. According to McNair et al. (2022), while it is essential for students to be prepared for college, as much as possible, colleges must also be student-ready to foster the possibility of student success.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study.

- RQ 1: How do university students who participated in an FYE course perceive their experience in the course?
- RQ 2: How do university students who participated in an FYE course believe it impacted their transition and integration into university?
- RQ 3: Which component(s) of the FYE course do university students believe had the highest impact on transition and integration?

Definitions of Terms

College and University: used interchangeably for **institutions of higher education**; educational institutions that offer post-secondary education.

First-Year Experience Program (FYE): Initiative or program that combines the exploration of co-curricular, academic and career opportunities to help students navigate the transition from high school to higher education (Koch & Gardner, 2014).

First-Year Experience Course or First-Year Seminar (FYS): An introductory course offered in higher education institutions to assist first-time-in-college students in developing requisite skills for success in college and being connected to resources and opportunities on campus for successful transition and integration.

Mentoring: A process whereby a person (mentor) shares knowledge and experience with another person (mentee) while encouraging and supporting them to manage their learning.

Peer Mentoring: A relationship between two people in a comparable situation whereby the person who has lived through the situation and acquired more experience (peer mentor) supports the other (mentee) by sharing their experience and knowledge and providing direction.

Transition: is any event or non-event that results in altered relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg et al., 1995). It is a process of change or moving from one stage or position to another that occurs over a period.

Integration: The action or process of successfully joining or mixing with a different group of people (Cambridge Dictionary).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is considered one of the essential parts of a research process (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It describes the theoretical foundation on which a study is based. For any research study, the theoretical framework forms the basis from which knowledge is constructed and serves as the basis for the reason behind the study, its purpose, problem statement, significance, and research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In addition, the theoretical framework, as the lens through which a study can be conducted, offers an anchor or a foundation for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). With first-year students' challenges as they transition from high school to higher education, "institutions must be prepared for their students, be rooted deeply in the transformative power of higher education and the commitment to students' success and capacity to thrive in twenty-first-century life and work" (McNair et al., 2022, p. 5). Institutions must implement programs that effectively ensure a successful transition and foster integration into their new university or college community and a sense of belonging. This study, which aimed to understand college students' experiences in a first-year experience course and their advising has been identified to be emerging as an FYE high impact practice, regarded as Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory.

Transition Theory Base

Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory is the framework for this study and the lens through which the study was conducted. The theory emerged following Schlossberg's realization of the need for a structure that would help understand and facilitate the transition of adults and point them to the resources they needed to get through the usual

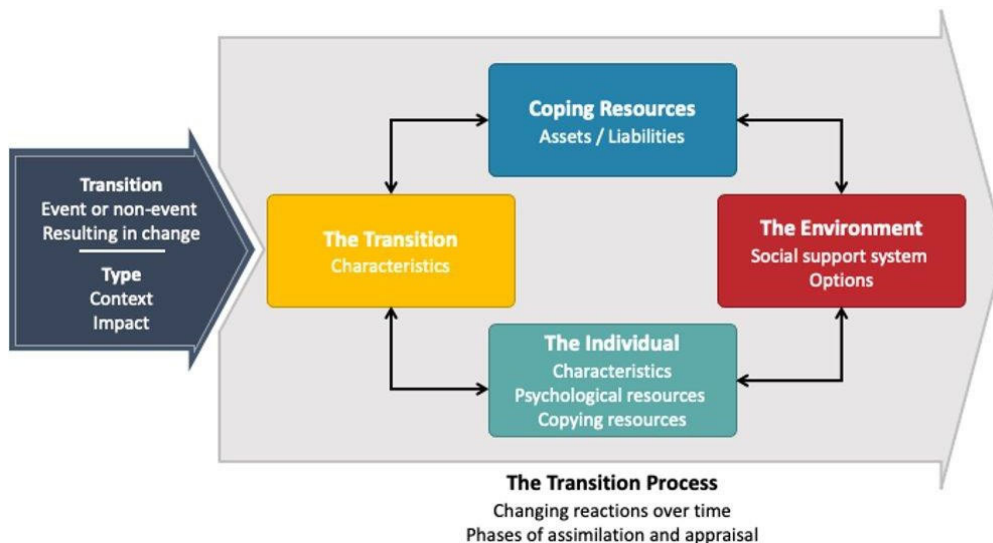
and unusual process of living (Evans et al., 2009). It was, therefore, developed to facilitate a unified understanding of the continual transitional processes people undergo as human life lays open to changes that individuals must adapt to (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg anchored the theory on three philosophical beliefs: (a) transition is a human experience; it is an unpredictable and inevitable process whereby adults (e.g., university students) go through life irrespective of the outcome; (b) transition occurs at every stage of human development in sequential order, but the experience does not necessarily converge to a single reality; and (c) change requires new networks of relationships and self-perceptions (Gosai et al., 2023). Even though Schlossberg's transition theory related initially to adults in transition, it was identified as relevant and

Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined transition as any event or non-event that results in altered relationships, roles, routines, and assumptions. They asserted that transitions offer growth and development opportunities, but one cannot assume a positive outcome for all individuals going through a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg et al., 1995). However, according to Schlossberg et al. (1995), a transition's type, context, and impact must be considered in understanding the meaning an individual makes of a transition.

Figure 1*Schlossberg Transition Theory - SketchBubble***SCHLOSSBERG TRANSITION THEORY**

The Individual in Transition (Schlossberg, 1984)



Note: Schlossberg et al. (1995)

Types

Schlossberg described three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Anticipated transitions are expected; for example, students in high school expect to graduate and go to college if they choose. Whereas unanticipated transitions happen unexpectedly; for example, losing a job may be a unanticipated event. On the other hand, non-event transitions are transitions anticipated or expected to occur but never occurred; for example, a person can anticipate having a child but may never have

one (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Of these three types of transitions, high school graduates transitioning from high school to higher education experience anticipated transitions.

This type of transition is encircled by significant life events that involve changing roles as individuals progress through life (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Examples of these life events include completing high school, going to college, getting married, becoming a parent, moving to a new city, or even retiring. However, even though high school graduates who apply to colleges anticipate the transition, researchers suggested that they are often underprepared for college educationally, mentally, emotionally, financially, and otherwise (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Baiocco et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2013; Lease, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Radford et al., 2010). In addition, they must adjust to their new social environment with its unique challenges.

Context

As previously mentioned, Schlossberg et al. (1995) asserted that understanding the context of a transition is vital. Context is the relationship an individual has to the transition, including the setting of the transition. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), both the person undergoing a transition and the setting of the transition can impact the outcome of a transition, positively or negatively. Additionally, Schlossberg et al. (1995) asserted that the setting of a transitional event can determine the aspect of a person's life that a transition will impact. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) also noted that when high school graduates transition to higher education, they move from an educational system with a strict structure to an independent higher education setting.

Impact

The impact of a transition describes how a transition affects the individual's daily life. The more impact the transition has on an individual, the more time and resources are required to fully understand the transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Furthermore, Schlossberg's transition theory highlighted four main factors that form the core elements that can impact students' transition: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (the four S's). These factors determine how an individual manages transitional changes, and Goodman et al. (2006) further pointed out that the effectiveness of an individual to successfully cope with transition depends on the resources available to them in the areas of the four S's.

Situation

According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), individuals' situations vary based on the cause of the transition (trigger), control, timing, and duration of the transition, the new role the individual is taking on, previous experiences the individual had with a similar transition, the individual's assessment of the transition as a positive experience or a negative one, and other stressors. Each transition is unique; therefore, an individual's perception of it and its impact will determine how to handle it (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). If an individual has a positive perception of the transition, they may be better prepared to manage it than someone with a negative perception (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Self

Self describes personal and demographic characteristics (age, gender, culture, and socioeconomic status) and psychological resources (personal values, worldview, spirituality, development, and resiliency). These factors directly impact how individuals

view their lives, the contexts by which they frame their lives, the directions they take in life, and available resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Troiano et al. (2010) suggested that individuals in transition, such as first-year students, may need help managing the transition to higher education effectively because of self-factors.

Support

Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified support as a vital resource for dealing with transition and stress. Evans et al. (2009) found that the level of support an individual has during a transition process also affects his or her ability to manage the transition. This support could be from family, friends, and institutions or communities the individual is a part of, and support could be through aid, resources, affirmation, and feedback. High school graduates transitioning to higher education need the support of their universities to manage their transition. In addition, they will benefit from connecting with other students who have gone through a similar experience (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Schlossberg et al. (1995) highlighted that support enables the individual to deal with emotional challenges, access psychological resources and adjust to transitional changes. Therefore, to aid first-year students in successful transition to higher education, faculty, administration, student services staff, and other professionals who work with the student population must identify and understand their unique challenges and include relevant resources in student programming to support students and enhance successful transition (Kosine, 2006).

Strategies

Strategies refer to an individual's coping responses during a transition. They could be in the form of responses that aid in managing stress, controlling the meaning of the

problem, and modifying the situation (Evans et al., 2009). In addition, flexibility and multiple strategies can help individuals cope effectively (Goodman et al., 2006). Students come from many different situations, and they need support from several different people, places, and things to effectively transition, integrate, and progress in their university education, including faculty, administration, peers, and programs offered by the institution. However, when students are unaware of the resources available on campus, they cannot access them even though they are available.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are factors that are not under the researcher's control that could impact the interpretation of the findings or generalize the result (Lunenborg & Irby, 2008). As with any study, the researcher has identified the following potential limitations to the applicability and purpose of the study:

1. First-year experience programs vary from one institution to another, and the study will be conducted at one institution and may not be generalized to broader populations.
2. Given that the research sought to measure perceptions, participants' responses to focus group and interview prompts depended on their individual interpretation of the questions.
3. Participants were from different course sections. Even though the course contents were supposed to be the same, instructors had varied teaching styles and class conditions that could have impacted students' experiences with the course.

Delimitations

Studies, especially in social and behavioral sciences, typically involve multiple variables that could be influenced by physical and social conditions, including location, environment, or population (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). As a result, researchers often set self-imposed boundaries to guide the scope and achieve the purpose of the study (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The study's purpose, the questions the researcher sought to answer, and the desire to understand students' perceptions regarding the TYE course influenced the researcher's delimitations for this study.

The delimitations of this research study were that participants must:

- be at least 18 years old,
- be enrolled in a four-year university in Texas,
- have enrolled in an FYE course in their first semester at the university;
and
- after taking the FYE course, they continued their degree at the same university without a break.

Assumptions

Certain propositions, postulates, or premises are acceptable as operational for the research in any study. These are called assumptions. These assumptions include the data's nature, analysis, and interpretation (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). For this study, the assumptions include that:

1. The data that was collected measured the perceptions of college students regarding the FYE course.

2. Participants in the study understood the focus group discussion prompts and interview questions and responded appropriately.
3. The interpretation of data accurately reflects the perceptions of the respondents.

Organization of Study

The researcher has presented this study in five chapters. Chapter I gives a general overview of the study, which includes the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose and significance of the study, the definition of terms, the theoretical framework, research questions, limitations, delimitation, and the assumptions of the study.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature on the first-year experience course, which includes the history and the evolution of the FYE course, the role of the FYE course, the types of FYE courses, the components of the FYE Course, transition and integration, and peer mentoring. Chapter III describes the methodology used for this research study, including the selection of participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter IV presents the study's findings, including the data analysis for the research questions. Finally, chapter V summarizes the entire study, discussing the study's findings, implications for theory and practice, recommendations for further research, and conclusions.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter presents the rationale for conducting the study on college students' perceptions of a first-year experience course and its impact on transition and integration into the higher education environment. Researchers have investigated first-year experience courses for several decades, and most of the studies have been conducted within the context of attrition and academic achievement characterized by Grade Point Averages (GPAs) (Das et al., 2021; Demirian, 2010; Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2015; Pernzadian & Credé, 2016; Pittendrigh et al., 2016). With the assumption that the university environment is a unique culture where first-year students must adapt as a foundation they can build on for academic success, this study sought to build upon an existing body of research through the lens of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory framework to understand college students' experiences. In addition, the study sought to identify the benefits first-year students derived from a first-year experience course and the components of the course they find most impactful to their transition, integration, and success during their first year in university. To fully understand and develop the study, it was imperative to review the relevant literature as a basis from which the context emerged and was presented.

This literature review was organized into four sections. Section One reviewed the literature related to higher education in the United States, including the characteristics of undergraduate students in America, with relevant data. Section Two synthesized the literature on transition and integration, including transition challenges, remediation, academic and emotional needs of students. Section Three reviewed the literature on first-

year experience of university students and the first-year experience courses to explore what previous research has found, including its historical context and evolution through several decades, goals, types, content and component, and challenges of implementing an FYE course. It also reviewed the first-year experience course as a high impact practice. Finally, Section Four reviewed the literature on peer mentoring in the higher education context, including its benefit to peer mentors and selection process. These four sections of the literature review provided a full description of the essential elements feeding into the first-year experience course as it related to the transition and integration and, consequently, the success of first-year students. This review reduced the literature to its basic conceptual and methodological approaches to allow the reader to gain knowledge of the study's theoretical framework.

Higher Education in the United States

The character of higher education in the United States was based on the ideals that characterize America's public life (Eckel & King, 2004). Limited government and freedom of expression, capitalism and equal opportunity, and social mobility are examples of the ideals that provided inclusive access to postsecondary education. Furthermore, such ideals were recognized as necessary elements of America as a land of opportunity. It shifted higher education away from an opportunity only for the elite that excluded individuals based on gender, religion, race/ethnicity, and social class (Eckel & King, 2004). Hence, during the 20th century, American higher education became the primary access to the middle class, including women and minorities into mainstream higher education. Today, higher education has become remarkably diverse and complex (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Hanson, 2022).

Higher education in the United States is structured in various forms and shapes such as public and private, large and small, religiously affiliated and secular, urban, suburban, and rural. Additionally, higher education has four types of degree-granting institutions such as public two-year institutions also known as community colleges, public four-year universities and colleges, private, not-for-profit institutions, and for-profit institutions (Eckel & King, 2004). Higher education presently provides diversity and vast opportunities to every student who aspires to gain postsecondary education, is qualified, and can find a college or university that best fits them. Eckel and King (2004) analyzed higher education institutions in America as follows.

Public two-year colleges or community colleges are higher education institutions that provide tertiary education and continuing education to supplement traditional four-year institutions. In addition, many public two-year colleges also offer remedial education, workforce, or technical degrees and certificates, GED-General Educational Development tests, and a limited number of four-year degrees. Furthermore, community colleges award associate degrees in the workforce or vocational fields and offer core courses that can be transferred to four-year institutions. Public four-year universities and colleges include regional universities focusing on undergraduate teaching and graduate preparation in professional fields as well as research universities offering undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. Private, not-for-profit institutions include various kinds of higher education institutions such as research universities, four-year liberal arts undergraduate teaching universities, some two-year institutions, faith-based institutions, women's colleges, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and

other specialized single field institutions such as fine arts or nursing. For-profit institutions offer vocational programs and award certificates rather than degrees.

Characteristics of American Undergraduate Students

The characteristics of undergraduate students in the United States (e.g., age, gender, and race/ethnicity) varied among institutions; public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit, and between two- and four-year institutions, by ethnicity and by age. Data from Hanson (2022), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022), and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center (2022) showed that approximately 15.9 million undergraduate students attended a higher education institution in the United States in 2020. Among these undergraduate students, 69% (approximately 10.9 million) attended four-year institutions, and 31% (4.9 million) attended two-year institutions. Furthermore, 73% (8 million) of those who attended four-year institutions were full-time students, while 27% (2.9 million) were part-time students. Whereas, at two-year institutions, it was the opposite because 37% (1.8 million students) attended full-time while the majority 63% (3.1 million students) attended college part-time. In addition, among the 95% of undergraduate students who enrolled in a postsecondary degree-granting institution in 2020, 48% were enrolled in public four-year universities, 30% in public two-year colleges, and 17% in private nonprofit four-year institutions. However, data from NCES (2022) showed that the public four-year institutions had the most enrollment representation of racial/ethnic composition within the undergraduate population: 54% White, 21% Hispanic, 11% Black, 8% Asian, 5% were at least of two races, 1% American Indian/Alaska Natives, and 1% Pacific Islanders. Comparatively, there was a higher percentage of White (62%) and a less percentage of Hispanic students

(14%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (less than 1%) enrolled in private nonprofit four-year institutions.

In addition, the population of undergraduate students enrolled in a degree-granting institution varied by age. As of fall 2019, 90% of full-time undergraduate students at public four-year institutions were under the age of 25, compared to private nonprofit institutions where it was 86% and in two-year institutions where it was 80% (NCES, 2022). In addition, *Chronicles of Higher Education Almanac* (2007) reported that more than 55% of undergraduate students were women, 45% were students of color, and 40% were aged 24 or older. This unprecedented diversity required the centering of human connection. However, doing so attracted additional, often invisible, challenges (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

McNair et al. (2022) asserted that given the changing face of higher education in America, it is imperative for colleges and universities to embrace new models of delivering education and student support services that can accommodate current college students. To serve the diverse student population, colleges and universities need to first have an accurate understanding of the 21st-century college students' profile to be ready for their students. According to McNair et al. (2022), being student-ready involves how higher education institutions define student success, their relationship with students, and their actions. It is also about the strategies they implement and how they implement them. Being student-ready requires a systematic, intentional, holistic, and transformative system that facilitates student learning and ensures students have what they needed to succeed. McNair and colleagues further emphasized that being a student-ready college has to do with how colleges and universities develop a culture throughout the campus that ensures

students' engagement with the broader community for their success. Hence, the conversation was reframed around student success from being dependent on student deficit and pre-college characteristics to one of student assets and institutional leadership, opportunity, and accountability. This definition of student success, therefore, sees beyond the traditional predictors of completion and focuses on student learning, development, and growth that meet students where they are and addresses their needs throughout their higher education journey (McNair et al., 2022)

Transition and Integration

Successful transition into higher education has been identified as beneficial in promoting persistence in university students and was considered crucial for their success (Coertjens et al., 2017; Tett et al., 2017). First-year university students transitioning from high school to higher education must adjust to their new university environment and integrate the events and activities that come with the change into their lives as undergraduates. The integration or adjustment of first-year students to college is defined as the ability to successfully adjust to the diverse challenges new students encounter in college (Credé & Niehorster, 2011).

In a study that investigated the factors that most commonly affected the adaptation of first-year students to the university environment, Sevinç and Gizir (2014) found that first-year students who struggled with adjusting often used avoidance strategies to deal with challenges in the transition process. The Schlossberg transition theory identified adopting effective strategies as one of the ways individuals coped with transitions (Goodman et al., 2006). However, avoidance as a coping strategy could be detrimental. Consequently, many first-year students did not overcome the challenges of

this transition phase, which influenced their success during the first year and beyond. As much as higher education's importance continued to be profound, graduation rates and student success remained below average (McNair et al., 2022). Current statistics showed that first-time undergraduate first-year students had a 12-month dropout rate of about 24%, and among first-time first-year bachelor's degree-seeking students, about 25% eventually dropped out (Hanson, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Many factors influenced these outcomes, including financial, mental, psychological, and emotional concerns. Schelbe et al. (2019) and Van Der Meer et al. (2017) pointed to several reasons students may not have earned degrees, including (a) the difficulty they faced during transition as they tried to adjust to their new social environments, responsibilities, and roles they assumed as college students, (b) challenges of identity as they explored who they were outside the context of home, (c) lack of academic rigor and financial responsibilities.

Additionally, Vlasova (2022) asserted that 28% of undergraduate students who failed to complete college did so because of the failure to meet set academic requirements, and 13% did not continue because they did not fit into the social life in college. In other words, they did not feel integrated nor have a sense of belonging. These students experienced a flawed transition process and did not adjust or integrate into university life, which made it difficult for them to thrive. Felten and Lambert (2020) also identified that what students need and want is a sense of belonging: finding their place and identifying their people. The transition theory suggested that support was a vital resource for dealing with transition and it created a sense of belonging. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), support enables an individual to deal with emotional

challenges, access psychological resources, and adjust to transitional changes. Respondek et al. (2017) and Apriceno et al. (2020) also concluded that as students navigate transition challenges with appropriate support, they learn to function as self-directed learners, became confident learners, move away from their idea of academic control, and learn how to regulate their emotions regarding academics. The researchers further asserted that students' sense of belonging and connectedness in college directly connects to essential outcomes, such as academic achievement, well-being, motivation, and retention. Felten and Lambert (2020) described belonging as "a basic human need that takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, such as when joining a new community, and for certain populations, particularly those marginalized" (p. 19).

Furthermore, Strayhorn (2018) found that there is a direct relationship between students' sense of belonging and the feeling that they are cared about, respected and their contributions are relevant in the community. When students experience a sense of belonging, feel integrated into their institution, and succeed academically, they are more likely to persist and continue in the institution (Apriceno et al., 2020; Respondek et al., 2017). Al-Sheeb et al. (2018) investigated how the academic and social characteristics of higher institution environment affect the holistic satisfaction of first-year undergraduate students and found that sense of belonging is among the best determinants of first-year students' level of satisfaction.

Without question, the first year in higher education is a critical year for students' future success, academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Baik et al., 2019; Merhi et al., 2018). While the transition from high school to university can be an exciting experience, it can also be incredibly stressful for many young adults who are leaving

home for the first time, moving away from family and friends to an unfamiliar environment, often with an increasingly demanding academic, social and other kinds of pressure (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Hence, McNair et al. (2022) suggested that college educators must have the ability to listen deeply, be empathetic towards students, and to respond accordingly. Furthermore, McNair and colleagues also emphasized that a caring educator is one of the essential elements of an institution that is student-ready, asserting that within the educator's personal sphere of influence on college campuses, their actions must demonstrate empathy and compassion for students they encounter in their classrooms, advise, or students accessing academic support (McNair et al., 2022). The Schlossberg transition theory suggested that even though transitions offer growth and development opportunities, one cannot assume a positive outcome for all individuals going through a transition.

Moreover, first-year students need to adjust to the new academic conditions and the many changes they encounter during their first year in college such as organizing their learning, managing schedules, building new social networks and friendships, and adjusting to the rigor of higher education (De Clercq et al., 2016). This need for adjustment in the first year, therefore, implies that the first year lays the foundation for subsequent social adaptation and academic success as students are in a continuous state of growth and change (Astin, 1993). During the first year, students develop the attitudes and disciplines that can shape their entire college experience and future success and develop perceptions about themselves as college students (Lerdpornkulrat et al., 2016; Soytürk & Öztürk, 2019).

In their research on students' transitions into higher education, Timmis et al. (2022) highlighted the need for targeted support, especially during the first week on campus, to facilitate the successful transition of first-year undergraduate students. Many colleges and universities offer this kind of support through new student orientation programs in the first week of students' enrollment and arrival at college. The specifics of each orientation program vary across institutions. However, the activities usually focus on academically and socially preparing students (Brooman & Darwent, 2013) to enable them to integrate quickly and effectively (Coertjens et al., 2017). Even though Cabrera et al. (2013) considered these new student orientation programs valuable to first-year students' transition into higher education, Pennington et al. (2017) suggested that transition happens over time and should be viewed as a continuous part of the learning experience. This view was consistent with Schlossberg's transition theory, which suggests that transitions are a process that offer growth and development opportunities, even though one may assume a positive outcome for all individuals in a transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Hence, being a student is not by default (especially in higher education). Instead, Timmis et al. (2022) described it as what one becomes through a complex learning process that entails navigating continuous context-specific social situations throughout a student's first year in university. It required learning about the new environment, practices, and culture (Gregersen et al., 2021), including the myriad of personal, social, academic, and institutional challenges first-year students must cope with to thrive and perform well at university (Credé & Niehorster, 2011). This further aligns with Schlossberg's transition theory, which asserts that a transition's type, context, and impact must be considered in understanding the meaning and

individual makes of a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In addition, the theory suggests that transition was an unpredictable and inevitable human experience and process that occurs at every stage of human development and requires new networks of relationships and self-perceptions (Gosai et al., 2023).

As earlier established, the process of transition can be stressful for students, especially those enrolling in college for the first time. Hence, first-year experience programs were developed to help young adults transition from high school to college. Nester (2016) conducted a qualitative study that investigated how first-year students enrolled in a first-year experience course at a community college in the Southeast United States experienced the course. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interview and concept maps. The result revealed that building the foundation of successful transition and integration into the new college environment requires an extended support system, an enabling environment, and participation in fun activities on campus. This is consistent with Schlossberg's transition theory, which identifies support as a vital resource for dealing with transition and stress (Schlossberg et al., 1995)

Transition Challenges of First-Year Students

Researchers such as Gosai et al. (2023) and Briggs et al. (2012) have described transition challenges as a blend of psychological, academic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors that impact the ability of a student to adjust successfully during their first year in college or university. Given the relevance of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory, to understanding transition challenges, it is essential to review three philosophical beliefs that form the basis of the theory:

1. Schlossberg viewed transition as a human experience: an unforeseeable and unavoidable process that required adults (including college students) to go through life no matter the outcome.
2. This experience does not necessarily come together as one reality even though transition takes place at every stage of human development.
3. Change required self-perception and new networks of relationships (Gosai et al., 2023).

Drawing from Schlossberg's theory, Gale and Parker (2012) interpreted the concept of transition as the capacity to navigate change based on institutions' capacity to provide the resources and support needed to manage change. They identified three perspectives for understanding the concept of transition: (a) transition as induction, (b) transition as development, and (c) transition as becoming. The concept of *transition as induction* supposed that students follow a typical learning track that involves engaging in pre-college preparatory classes and orientation programs to achieve their goals and objectives. *Transition as development*, however, involves an internal learning process that leads to academic achievements like mastering basic skills. Finally, as an approach that allowed students to achieve, grow, and become who they want to be, *transition as becoming* assumes a standard viewpoint that embeds students' expectations and perceptions in the institution's transition process (Briggs et al., 2012). In their review of the literature, Nelavai and Ramesh (2020) identified challenges that many first-year students face, such as "socializing issues, avoiding various distractions, adapting to the new environment, independency, cognitive challenges, understanding teaching

methodologies, coping with study materials, studying new subjects and remembering high school knowledge” (p. 824).

First-year experience courses positively impact the transition from high school to college (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015; Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Likewise, mentoring programs positively impact students' academic performance, reduce dropout rates, and foster greater social integration (Leidenfrost et al., 2011). In studies regarding first-year undergraduate students and first-year experience courses, researchers have investigated the factors that influence college students' academic achievement based on grades (e.g., Das et al., 2021; Demirian, 2010; Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2015; Permezadian & Credé, 2016; Pittendrigh et al., 2016). However, proponents of first-year experience programs have argued that when assessing a first-year experience program designed to foster transition and integration, researchers should also assess the ability of participants to apply and retain the information they have learned (Al-Sheeb et al., 2018; Skipper, 2017). In other words, it was essential to examine other course outcomes, including their academic progress and social integration (Al-Sheeb et al., 2018; Skipper, 2017).

Remediation Needs of First-Year Students

Many first-year students who enter a university or college for the first time need to prepare for the academic rigor of college-level coursework. They need to gain the basic academic skills or the ability to apply the necessary academic skills required to succeed in college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Hughes et al., 2013). Therefore, there is a need to fill learning gaps from high school by providing remediation in the fundamental subject areas that students are deficient in to improve their chance of success in college-level courses. However, it was imperative first to

understand students' entry characteristics and developmental experiences to develop programs and be better prepared to facilitate students' development and growth in universities and colleges.

Hence, Martinez (2010) suggested that with challenges beyond the individual's range of skills, a small amount of support could help the learner succeed in completing the chosen tasks. In addition, Awang et al. (2014) asserted that students support each one another in diverse ways, thereby viewing their peers as reliable, accessible, and helpful informers. They proposed that positive relationships among students are valued as useful support networks for social and academic support, and resource discovery and sharing. This thought aligned with Schlossberg's transition theory, which anchored on the idea that support enables the individual to deal with emotional challenges, access psychological resources and adjust to transitional changes (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Consequently, in response to the growing need to prepare students to succeed in their first year, many universities have developed remedial programs and initiatives to facilitate the transition to college and ensure students' academic success. Institutions facilitate such remediation through developmental courses, which do not give college credit, but are designed to help students gain proficiency in basic subjects.

Therefore, according to Ganga et al. (2018), remediation exists to help students who are considered deficient in the basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics required to tackle college-level courses develop the skills. Programs that offer these basic skills are considered essential to help students thrive in their undergraduate level courses. Such programs are developmental, preparatory (Hu & Liu, 2017), or compensatory (Denzin, 1972). Overall, Tinto (1975, 2012) asserted that the first year of

college establishes the foundation for student success and retention, and students can build upon it only if they can adapt to higher education expectations.

Academic and Emotional Needs of First-Year Students

As previously established, in addition to academic unpreparedness, first-year college students encounter tempestuous emotional changes that are directly tied into the stress they experience because of transitioning into college life (Wyatt et al., 2017); they must create a new social circle while learning to manage their new academic responsibilities. These can create anxiety and other mental health issues as the students' stress levels increase, negatively affecting their academic performance (Wyatt et al., 2017). Brandy et al. (2015) identified anxiety and depression as common mental health issues college students face, as they are often overwhelmed and experience loneliness. Ibrahim et al. (2013) asserted that the rate at which college students experience depression is higher than the general population. Hence, first-year college students have a higher risk of depression as they face the emotional transition to university life because it impacts their emotional state, as new social networks, academic stress, and living arrangements equally do (Brandy et al., 2015). Furthermore, along with the pressure associated with being a university student, anxiety disorders can negatively impact students' academic achievements, especially those who also work while enrolled in a university or college (Mounsey et al., 2013).

Diverse factors can cause a downswing in the mental health of first-year students. These factors can include unsatisfactory academic performance, not feeling like they belong, and failure to acclimatize to the university environment. In their study of first-year students' academic performance and mental health, Wyatt et al. (2017) found that,

even though in comparison to upper class students, first-year students experienced minimal impact of mental health issues, they still must address stress and anxiety to prevent potential mental health issues.

Consequently, as part of the first-year experience programs, institutions offer the first-year experience courses, interchangeably referred to as first-year seminars (FYS) or student success seminars. The course is designed to help first-year college students develop the required skills inside and outside the classroom to successfully integrate into college, navigate college, and complete college-level coursework (Bailey, 2009). As a part of the overall first-year experience, first-year experience courses aimed to help students develop vital connections, integrate into academic life, develop helpful academic skills, access, and utilize resources and services (Young, 2020). In addition, it aimed to orientate first-year students to their new environments (Van Der Meer et al., 2017). Hence, first-year experience programs have also been found to have positive effect on the academic performance of students (Pickenpaugh et al., 2021; Young, 2020). It then becomes crucial to understand how university students have experienced this course and how they perceive it impacted their transition and integration into university to enhance their academic progress.

First Year Experience

The First-Year Experience (FYE) program or Freshman-Year Experience program is a program at many universities and colleges designed to help first-year, first-time-in-college students navigate the transition from high school to higher education to foster the participation of first-year students in activities outside the classroom. Such programs were intended to foster persistence and typically involve academic and social

orientation to the institutions (Van Der Meer et al., 2017). FYE programs include new student orientation, welcome week activities, academic advising, learning communities, first-year experience courses or seminars, and residence education initiatives supporting college integration (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Côté and Allahar (2007) identified that among these first-year experience programs, first-year experience courses or first-year seminars have historically been the most widely utilized in higher education institutions. Furthermore, data shows that 73% to 90% of higher institutions in the United States offer FYE courses, and up to 90% of students enroll in a first-year experience course (Young & Hopp, 2014). Felten and Lambert (2022) also found that in nearly all the institutions they surveyed, "Careful attention is paid to the first-year experience because research so clearly demonstrates how students start matters" (p. 85).

First-Year Experience Courses

First-Year Experience (FYE) courses have been called many different titles in different institutions, including First-Year Seminar (FYS), and have had different learning outcomes. It was designed for first-year undergraduate students in colleges and universities to support their academic performance, social development, persistence, and degree completion (What Works Clearinghouse [WWC], 2016). In addition, FYE courses also aimed to increase students' connection to their institutions and sense of campus community with the chance to interact with faculty and peers (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992). Some FYE courses are simply orientation courses that introduce students to their college and help them meet individuals from numerous departments on the campus. Some are brief courses that integrate study skills and other factors that have been proven to help students succeed. In addition, some institutions have implemented year-long first-year

experiences, putting students in learning communities and focusing on related topics throughout their first year.

Although content and focus differ across colleges and universities, most first-year experience courses are primarily designed to connect students to campus resources, time management, study skills, career planning, cultural diversity, and student development opportunities (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992; WWC, 2016). However, Upcraft and Gardner (1990) suggested that the goals of first-year experience programs should be to help students "fulfill their educational and personal goals" (p. 2), through:

- a. developing academic and intellectual competence,
- b. establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships,
- c. developing identity,
- d. deciding on a career and lifestyle,
- e. maintaining personal health and wellness, and
- f. developing an integrated philosophy of life.

Most first-year experience courses focused on connecting the students to the college, their instructors, and their classmates. Braxton (2000) explained, "Academic integration reflects a student's experience with the academic systems and academic communities of a college or university" (p. 571). Therefore, to help with the integration process, FYE classes were typically small groups to encourage interactions between students and the instructor and among the students. In addition, this small group structure encouraged "social and cultural activities" (Gordon, 1990, p. 194).

Historical Context of the First-Year Experience Course

First Year Experience (FYE) courses or First Year Seminars (FYS) have existed for over 100 years and have continued to evolve; they have been shaped and influenced by educational, economic, and political trends (Koch & Gardner, 2014). So, as the world changed, the education system evolved, and so did first-year experience courses (Tobolowsky, 2008). The initial first-year experience course started at Lee College in Kentucky in 1882 (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992), although Boston College has been credited with being the first to offer an extended orientation seminar in 1888 to guide first-year students in their transition to college life, targeting their academic success (Gahagan, 2002). According to Mamrick (2005), the *In Loco Parentis* era in the early 20th century informed institutions assuming the responsibility to guide students' social adjustment and individual success in higher education.

Initially, the course's general goal was to provide holistic support to each student and guide them through their college experience (Mamrick, 2005). However, given the new sense of institutional duty, higher education institutions redefined the overall goals and mission of the first-year experience course. The 2012-2013 National Survey on First-Year Seminars report highlighted that the first-year experience course existed to achieve three primary objectives: (a) to help students develop a connection with the institutions, (b) to introduce students to university resources and services, and (c) to help students improve their academic skills (Young & Hopp, 2014). However, by the 1920s, over half of the first-year experience courses had deviated from the traditional curriculum style of how to be practical students to a curriculum focused on adjustment. By 1930, as first-year

experience courses grew, over one-third of all colleges and universities had incorporated a first-year experience course into their academic program (Gordon, 1990).

Nevertheless, by the late 1930s, things began to take a downturn because faculty got frustrated as the course design began to lose its focus, resulting in the course's decline in popularity. This trend continued until the 1960s, when undergraduate students had to depend on each other for support in their transition to college life (Gordon, 1990). Soon, during the 1970s, a new and diverse population of students began to enroll in higher education institutions, and colleges and universities experienced increased enrollment. They realized the need to revive the first-year experience course and re-introduce it into higher education culture. However, college and university campuses experienced increased social and political unrest (Hunter et al., 2015; Watts, 1999), which led to a growing division between undergraduate students and university administrations. For example, the Kent State University shootings on May 4, 1970, further aggravated the situation and triggered a nationwide student strike, forcing colleges and universities across the United States to close (Watts, 1999).

At the University of South Carolina (USC), students protested peacefully against the invasion of Cambodia (Gardner, 2006). However, the involvement of the National Guard by the Governor of South Carolina resulted in students being tear-gassed, which led to a riot where students raided the administration building and barricaded the university president, Thomas F. Jones, in his office for 24 hours (Gardner, 2006, 2015; Hunter et al., 2015). This riot led President Jones to form a committee tasked with designing a program that would teach students to love their university and help them to develop personal relationships with the institution to foster unity on the campus of USC (Schroeder, 2003;

Watts, 1999). The committee designed a course called University 101, structured as an extended orientation course for new students. In addition, President Jones believed that a more humane and holistic education would be achieved in the university if students met with faculty in small groups to discuss topics of common interest (Gardner, 2006).

Fundamentally, the introduction of the University 101 course was an effort to redesign the first-year experience course, to inculcate the love of the university in the students, and, consequently, prevent riots. Hence, In the early 1980s, there was a resurgence of the first-year experience course, which had at the time become a movement (Barefoot, 2000). John Gardner was appointed the first director of the first-year experience course, University 101, at the University of South Carolina. For over 30 years, he led the program, during which time they established foundational philosophies that led to a grassroots movement in the 1980s and caused the first-year experience course to play a prominent role once again in higher education in the United States. This new outlook led to a resurgence of the first-year experience course that has become a movement (Barefoot, 2000) and one many colleges and universities have modeled after (Upcraft & Gardner, 1990).

Current Context of the First-Year Experience Course

First-year experience courses have continued to grow in popularity for the past 30 years while also evolving to meet the needs of undergraduate students (Koch & Gardner, 2014). For the past three decades, higher education institutions have offered courses to students enrolling in college for the first time to assist them with integrating into the college environment and facilitating student success (Tinto, 2012). Gordon (1990) suggested two kinds of first-year experience courses: orientation courses, and first-year

seminars. Some universities and colleges combine multiple contents into one course. However, the orientation courses focus on student development and build in contents such as time management and study skills and learning how the college functions (Duggan & Williams, 2011). Most first-year experience courses were, however, semester-long programs that provided a comprehensive and extended orientation for incoming first-year students, which typically included connecting these first-year students with activities and resources on campus that could aid their transition to their new university environment. These classes were usually smaller than most other undergraduate courses (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

Furthermore, in 1990, Upcraft and Gardner published *The Freshman Year Experience: Helping Students Survive and Succeed in College*. This publication highlighted the importance of supporting students during their critical first year of college in response to a Carnegie report titled *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, which recommended that institutions of higher education incorporated retention strategies for first-year students, including solid orientation programs, better academic advising and counseling, increased interaction between faculty and students, and an orientation course that would count for college credit (Boyer, 1987). This recommendation led many institutions and researchers to critically review the first-year experience courses that had already been implemented in some institutions. Consequently, by the early 1990s, first-year experience courses were offered in 80% of four-year institutions and 62% of community colleges (Gardner & Schroeder, 2003). These institutions relied on best-practices to determine their content. However, Barefoot (2000) provided the following list of objectives prevalent in most first-year experience courses:

- a. To increase student-to-student interaction
- b. To increase faculty-to-student interaction, mainly out of the classroom
- c. To increase student involvement and participation in campus activities
- d. To link the curriculum and co-curriculum
- e. To increase academic expectations and levels of academic engagement
- f. To assist students with insufficient academic preparation for college. (p. 14)

The Role of the First-Year Experience Course

First-year experience courses can play a significant role in helping first-year students succeed in college. First, the courses create an opportunity for first-year college students to integrate academically and socially into the college environment, and they affect persistence and retention and promote student success (Coats, 2005; Noble et al., 2007). Jaffee (2007) suggested that several factors positively impact a student's success in the first year and beyond. Students perform better academically when making meaningful academic connections across their courses. Second, positive interactions with peers regarding course content and subject matter enhance student success. Third, students learn better when engaging in the courses with hands-on activities and problem-solving. Fourth, students who develop academic relationships with faculty are more likely to succeed (Jaffee, 2007; Snijders, et al., 2022).

First Year-Experience programs offer academic and social support (Gore & Metz, 2017), correlating with Tinto's (1993) argument that students are more likely to persist and succeed when they "find themselves in settings that are committed to their success and provide needed academic and social support" (p. 4). They can improve students' success by successfully integrating them into the college community (Tinto, 1987). In

addition, first-year experience courses have a positive impact on grade point averages (GPAs) (Jamelske, 2009), retention rates (Friedman & Marsh, 2009; Jamelske, 2009; Miller et al., 2007), graduation rates (Lang, 2007; Noble et al., 2007), and satisfaction with college life (Hendel, 2006–2007; Strayhorn, 2009).

Furthermore, Padgett and Keup (2011) have identified two broad objectives of the course, irrespective of its format: (a) to help students develop academic skill sets and (b) to help students create connections to their colleges or universities. Also, the course has been found to help with the transition to college and foster student success (Anderson et al., 2006). Similarly, Carter et al. (2010) and Cuseo et al. (2008) highlighted additional benefits of first-year experience courses as critical thinking and social skills development, spiritual and moral development, improved self-knowledge, self-beliefs, personal habits, and the recognition of world issues and respect for other cultures. Upcraft et al. (2005) identified other goals of the first-year experience course such as preparing students for the demands of specific academic disciplines and aiding in student retention by helping them make a successful transition into college.

Overall, the National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programming (NRCFYEST, 2013) has identified the top three objectives of first-year experience courses in North American colleges and universities as (a) helping students develop a connection with the institution, (b) connecting students to campus resources and services, and (c) developing academic skills. Likewise, commonly used textbooks for first-year experience courses, like *Keys to Success* (Carter et al., 2010) and *Thriving in College and Beyond* (Cuseo et al., 2008), suggest similar objectives.

Challenges of Implementing an Effective First-Year Experience Course

First-year experience courses have gained popularity because of the belief that providing underprepared undergraduate students with academic and life skills can boost student engagement, resulting in student success and better retention, and has become progressively prevalent in institutions of higher education in North America (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015). In their article on the problem of first-year seminars, Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns argued that even though there are good intentions behind first-year experience courses, many of such courses, on the contrary, sustain the disengagement they are intended to alleviate because they rely on a narrow view of education. They further affirmed that while first-year experience courses were a much-needed intervention, with the likelihood that some of the course structures were both rigorous and successful in their aims, there was the concern that those focused mainly on captivating students through entertainment or training in skills and strategies conceived to achieve high grades and find employment as effortlessly as possible, take a chance with sustaining the same disengagement they sought to diminish.

However, this did not imply that students should not learn the basic skills for achieving high grades. But, regarding education as just a commodity to be sold instead of as a challenge that can be surmounted further strengthened the idea that projected education as only a barrier to economic prosperity (Burston, 2007). It is, however, quite uncertain that a view such as this could encourage learning. Ideally, programs that foster engagement would consider fundamental questions that address education as both a means and an end, like questions about what it means to be educated or how education relates to the good life. However, advocates of the first-year experience course often

ignored or underrepresented such relevant questions and focused on the inferred vision of higher education, driven by economic gains, which influenced present-day educational discourse (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015).

Commonalities of the First-Year Experience Course

There is no universal model of approach for first-year experience courses (Gianoutsos, 2015); institutions of higher education design their first-year experience courses or seminars to incorporate each institution's mission, to meet the unique needs of their first-year students' population. When higher education faculty design academic programs and courses, they set educational goals for students that begin with learning outcomes at both the program and course levels. To meet such learning outcomes in the 21st century university and college classroom, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2015) suggested that courses should include active learning and a variety of meaningful assessment tools and methods, which they described as high-impact practices. Given the varied nature of the course, Gianoutsos (2015) further suggested that it was vital to recognize the commonalities across colleges and universities.

Types of First-Year Experience Courses

As previously established, the diversity of students in higher education has continued to increase. De Bard (2004) identified today's college students as the most diverse student population in the history of American higher education as the age of students who enroll in higher education now spans beyond the traditional ages of 18 to 22, with 55% of university students today being at least 22 years old. In addition, there has also been more ethnic diversity among today's college student population. So, the needs of first-year college students have continued to evolve and expand as student

diversity grows, but "the structure of the first-year seminar is flexible enough to meet the growing needs of the changing student demographic" (Gahagan, 2002, p. 6). Although there are claims that most colleges have one program for all traditional first-year students and do not consider the life experiences of the adult students and their individual needs for the course, survey findings reflected the diversity of course and curriculum types in addressing adaptability (Gahagan, 2002).

In fact, Barefoot and Fidler (1992) conducted a survey and identified five distinct types of first-year experience courses offered in colleges and universities, including (a) prolonged or extended orientation seminars, (b) academic seminars with similar content, (c) academic seminars with varied content, (d) pre-professional seminars, and (e) basic study skills seminars (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992; Griffin & Romm, 2008).

Extended Orientation Seminar

Barefoot and Fidler (1992) referred to this type of first-year experience course as a New Student Orientation (NSO) or Performance Student Course (PSC), which is presented as a seminar with different titles. It is sometimes called a first-year orientation, college survival, college transition, or student success course. This type of first-year experience course aims to equip students with the knowledge and tools they need to be effective and successful in their first year of higher education and throughout their academic life. Faculty, staff, or administration typically teach the course; sometimes, a combination of faculty and staff or an upper-class student can co-teach the course. The course content typically includes time management, research abilities, academic and career planning, learning strategies, tools available on- and off-campus for students, and an introduction to student development issues (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992; Keup &

Petschauer, 2011). Additionally, Hunter and Linder (2005) asserted that this extended orientation type first-year experience course is the oldest, most common, and most regular of all types offered in higher education institutions across the United States. Keup and Petschauer (2011) claimed that these "extended orientation courses have recorded positive results" for a more considerable number of evaluation tasks than other forms of the course and has resulted in increased persistence to the second year and enhanced student interactions (p. 8).

Academic Seminars with Similar Content Across Sections

This type of first-year experience course takes an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented approach and often includes academic skills components like critical thinking and expository writing. It could be implemented as a part of the general education requirement or focus on a specific academic theme or discipline and the complexities of a specific discipline and industry (Lamb et al., 1997). This type of first-year experience course typically has two different formats: those with identical content in all parts and those with additional content (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). Academic seminars with similar content across sections have been identified as the second most popular type of course, with the overarching aim of bridging a divide and encouraging the development of academic skills (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). A college or university offering this form of first-year experience course may benefit from the participation of several departments providing a full range of experience for the student.

Academic Seminars with Varied Content

These are like first-year experience courses with similar content across sections, except that specific topics vary from section to section. Even so, both types of courses

have the same goals (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). For example, in a survey of institutions offering first-year seminars in the United States, findings reveal that they both intensely focus on critical thought and writing in the discipline areas (Tobolowsky, 2008)

Pre-Professional or Discipline-Linked Seminars

These are designed to prepare students for the demands of their major or discipline and profession. The pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars introduce students to the various aspects of a specific discipline as the students explore their interests (Tobolowsky, 2008). This first-year experience course is typically taught within specific disciplines such as business, engineering, health sciences, or education. It plays off the faculty skills and interests (Keup & Petschauer, 2011) to help facilitate students' transition to college and explore the career path, emphasizing critical thinking, career exploration, and educational preparation (Keup & Petschauer, 2011).

Basic Study Skills Seminars

This type of first-year experience course is typically designed for academically underprepared students. Therefore, it has some elements of the other first-year experience courses, focusing on basic academic skills such as grammar, note-taking, and reading texts. However, in contrast to the other types of first-year experience courses previously mentioned, basic study skill seminars aim to prepare students academically and connect them with the resources available on campus (Keup & Petschauer, 2011).

Hybrid Model Seminars

The hybrid models of the first-year experience course are the latest addition to the original five types. It integrates components of two or more types listed above to best meet the students' needs and the program's goals, and many institutions have adopted this

model. Even though of the five types of first-year experience courses listed above, the Extended Orientation Seminar is the most common and historically prevalent first-year seminar (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992; Hunter & Linder, 2005; Keup & Petschauer, 2011). Moreover, Gianoutsos (2015) highlighted this hybrid model as the most significant type of the course, suggesting that coordinators of the course diversify and not be confined to implementing only one of the original types of first-year experience course models. However, it is vital to note that every first-year program is unique, irrespective of the typology and commonalities between them. Therefore, they should reflect the diversity of each institution and student population while ensuring that the model, type, and characteristics of its first-year experience course continue to evolve to meet the needs of the evolving student populations and other institutional changes.

Approaches to Designing a First-Year Experience Course Offering

In addition to the types of first-year experience courses described above, the course offering approach can either be centralized or decentralized. A centralized first-year experience describes a situation where the institution implements one overarching first-year experience course program that serves the entire first-year student population (Gianoutsos, 2015), typically operated from specific divisions of the institution - often within the Division of Academic Affairs or the Division of Student Affairs and may be designated to a specific program such as the Academic Success Center, Department of English, or Office of Student Life. This approach is often adopted to ensure quality control of the curriculum and offer students and instructors a shared experience. However, Gianoutsos (2015) has also identified the primary challenge with this model, which is its inability to meet the diverse needs of students representing different majors

and subpopulations (e.g., first-generation students, undeclared students, honors students, and commuter students). In contrast, some first-year program coordinators have argued that grouping students into various sections may reduce their exposure to a higher level of diversity.

Decentralized first-year experience programs, on the other hand, incorporate different academic colleges or on-campus operating programs independently, although there may be some standard campus-wide commonalities (Gianoutsos, 2015). They are designed to represent and serve a specific first-year student subpopulation and grouped by majors. Gianoutsos also suggested that decentralized programs could make quality curriculum and delivery of instruction challenging and make institution-wide assessment measures or goals more challenging, given the variance from section to section.

However, when creating first-year experience courses, the focus should be on creating a program that supports and advances the institution's mission, vision, goals, and expectations (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Keup & Petschauer, 2011). Within these components, the most important objective should be to address the specific needs of the institution's first-year students by considering their characteristics. This student-centered approach is unique to first-year experience courses, given that they are not restricted by traditional guidelines or have limitations in traditional academic courses. Instead, first-year experience courses have more flexibility to adapt to changing dynamics of the students, their needs, and how they learn (Cuseo, 2007). Therefore, first-year experience course contents are designed to focus on the learner rather than some external knowledge that stems from the research interest of scholars in the discipline (Cuseo, 2007). This is

why it is imperative to understand how students perceive their lived experiences with the course to help inform the development of the course to meet students' needs.

Consequently, the first critical step to developing a first-year experience course is identifying and understanding the characteristics of the students in the institution and their needs (Gianoutsos, 2015). Understanding students' needs involves an in-depth analysis of demographic data of the institution such as race or ethnicity, age, gender, first generation position. It also involves understanding the academic preparation the students had, retention rates, use of campus resources, withdrawal rates, trends in changing majors, and students who did not declare a major in their first year (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). This thought aligned with Schlossberg's transition theory, suggesting that understanding the context of a transition was vital. Both the person undergoing a transition and the setting of the transition can impact the outcome of a transition, positively or negatively; and the setting of a transitional event can determine the aspect of a person's life that a transition will impact (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Widespread practices in designing a FYE course involved developing a list of topics to be included in the course with a lesson plan outline (Gianoutsos, 2015). Fink (2013) suggested that even though this process may be structured and practical, its focus is typically on "organization and delivery of information, usually through many lectures, and pays little to no attention to the quality and quantity of student learning" (p. 68). In addition, this design process tends to limit learning to just understanding and remembering topics, practically promoting the learning of foundational knowledge (Fink, 2010, 2013). Instead, Fink suggested that students should be exposed to more impactful learning experiences that are beyond foundational knowledge but also focus on

application to help students connect knowledge to real life, human side, to help them understand how people affect society, to help them engage in inquiry, and to help them learn how to engage in learning. Finally, learning outcomes should be realizable and measurable (Fink, 2013).

Engaging First-Year Experience Course Instructors

There are varied models and ways to engage first-year experience course instructors, and the courses can only be as strong as the instructors who teach them (Gianoutsos, 2015). Across higher education institutions in the United States, first-year experience courses are taught by diverse individuals within the institutions, such as academic advisors, administrators, student, personnel staff, other professional staff, professors of all ranks (but less of higher ranks), including adjunct professors (Gordon, 1990). Nevertheless, according to the National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programming (2000), faculty are the most common instructors of first-year experience courses. However, Hunter and Linder (2005) have found that nearly all institutions utilize multiple types of instructors to facilitate the first-year experience courses. In addition, the National Survey of First-Year Experience Programming (2000) revealed that about one-third of institutions surveyed used teaching teams to facilitate their first-year experience courses.

Given the importance of the course to integrating first-year students and the influence of the instructor or facilitator, the processes of recruiting and training first-year experience instructors are critical. However, Gianoutsos (2015) concluded that this process can be particularly challenging, especially when the institution cannot provide considerable extrinsic rewards for teaching first-year experience courses. This leads to

high turnover trends among first-year experience course instructors, especially as the terms of engagement of instructors and commitments are usually semester-by-semester without any long-term contract. However, a few institutions engage first-year experience course instructors on full time. Furthermore, Hunter and Linder (2005) asserted that even though recruiting quality instructors for the first-year experience courses can be challenging, there are always more candidates seeking to teach the course, which corroborates the need for a comprehensive selection process and an in-depth training program for the selected instructors.

Typical Components of an FYE Course

The content of FYE courses is designed to help individual students gain academic skills that will help them become effective students. Therefore, the curriculum typically includes modules that cover strategies and techniques that help students develop skills for notetaking, managing time, reading, writing, studying, managing money, research, communicating effectively, making decisions, and thinking critically (Chambers et al., 2013; Clark & Cundiff, 2011). In addition, the curriculum includes components that help students understand faculty expectations (Jamelske, 2009). This rich content is designed to help students develop the skills and ability to self-manage and develop their academic and social skills. Kelley (2017) also found that students believed that the components of the FYS course have helped them develop confidence and increase their motivation. Although there are variations in first-year experience course offerings across institutions, varying from general, theme-based, discipline-focused, to whether they grant credit or not, nevertheless, more commonalities exist between them. Some universities and colleges design their first-year experience courses as an extension of the initial student

orientation program. In contrast, others focus on basic academic skills or specific disciplines. Irrespective of the design, first-year experience courses are intended to provide an opportunity for greater experiential educational activities, student-to-student interactions, and student-faculty interactions involving problem-based and collaborative learning (Cuseo, 2015; Everette, 2015).

FYE Course as a High-Impact Educational Practice (HIEP)

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (Kuh, 2008) has identified the first-year experience course or seminars as a high-impact practice (HIP), widely implemented across public and private institutions across the United States to improve student engagement, retention, completion, and overall success, particularly among first-generation and underrepresented students. Kuh (2008) defined high-impact educational practices as academic and extracurricular programs or structures based on quality practices and pedagogies that foster 21st-century learning outcomes. These teaching and learning practices have been extensively tested and proven beneficial for increasing college students' engagement and retention rate.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities has further identified some educational practices they consider HIPs. They are first-year seminars and experience courses, courses that are writing-intensive, everyday cognitive experiences, learning communities, collaborative projects, service learning, global learning, capstone projects, reflective e-portfolios, internships, and research. Kuh (2008) suggested that colleges and universities should provide the opportunity for their students to engage in at least two activities considered to have a high impact during their undergraduate journey. Students should participate in at least one such program in their first year and at least one

more later concerning the major. However, McNair et al. (2022) discovered that simply implementing high impact practices (HIPs) without examining students' needs, faculty and staff development, and institutional capacity often led to a complicated curriculum design with a variety of HIPs but having little or no integration and effectiveness.

First-year experience courses or seminars are an obvious choice of HIP targeting first-year students across institutions. Generally, programs (like the first-year experience programs or courses) intended to increase persistence and support the academic progress of college students typically involve academic and social orientation to the institution (Van Der Meer et al., 2017), supporting students' integration into academic life, helping them develop useful connections within the school community, and accessing vital services and resources. These programs contribute to improving student outcomes thereby benefiting them (Young, 2020). According to McNair and Albertine (2012), the highest-quality first-year experience program emphasized critical inquiry, collaborative learning, information literacy, and other intellectual skills and practical proficiencies. Therefore, high-impact educational practices like the first year-experience courses must (a) be carefully designed to support the developmental and educational needs of students and deliver the learning outcome, and (b) include mentoring, professional development, reward structures, inter-disciplinary partnerships, and learning opportunities in and out of the classroom to foster innovation (McNair & Albertine, 2012). Consequently, it becomes essential for colleges and universities to understand how they can incorporate HIPs into teaching and learning within and outside the classroom to facilitate higher levels of student engagement and success.

Academic Advising as an Emerging HIP

Within the first-year experience course, academic advising has been identified to be emerging as an FYE high impact practice, regarded as one of the essential components of both the first and second year of college (Young, 2019; Young et al., 2015). Keup and Young (2021) identified academic advising as critical to students (especially in the first year of college) who are learning to navigate through the curriculum, explore and select majors, identify career pathways, and steward personal resources. Findings from student surveys, including the National Survey of Student Engagement administrations, the National Survey on The First-Year Experience of 2017 and the National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives (NSSYI) of 2019, administered by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, all reflected advising as a promising practice and an emerging HIP, along with other studies by the Advising Success Network (ASN) and the National Resource Center (Keup & Young, 2021).

The aforementioned data sources revealed that 80% of institutions of higher learning identified academic advising as an intentional component of their first-year experience (FYE), which makes it the most prominent FYE approach (Young, 2019). Furthermore, 58% of institutions surveyed on second-year programming affirm academic advising as a targeted and intentional approach to supporting students in their second year - sophomores (Young, 2019). Furthermore, Keup and Young (2021) found that most institutions required nearly, if not all their students to engage in academic advising during the first and second year of college. Over 60% of first-year students were required to engage with their advisors at least twice during their first year and 66% of second-year students met with their advisors regularly (Young, 2019; Young et al., 2015). Along with

the required expectation for student involvement, academic advising requires time and effort but allows for frequent feedback.

Peer Mentoring

Another high-impact practice that has been identified within the first-year experience course is *peer support* (Permzadian & Crede, 2016), also referred to as *peer mentoring* (Holt & Fifer, 2016). Felten and Lambert (2020) highlighted how human connections facilitate student success in higher education institutions, asserting that relationships between peers, student-faculty, and student-staff are the foundation on which learning, belonging, and achieving in college are based. They emphasized that the interactions of students with fellow students, faculty, and staff have a positive impact on the depth of student learning and a wide range of other outcomes like retention, graduation rates, identity development, critical thinking, leadership abilities, and communication skills (Felton & Lambert, 2020).

According to Schneider (2010), 30% of first-year college students drop out at the end of the first year, and 60% earn a university degree after six years. Some of the reasons identified that may prevent first-year students from progressing in their degree include difficulty in transitioning and adjusting to new social environments, responsibilities and roles, academic reasons like lack of rigor, financial reasons, and confusion of identities outside the context of home (Grabsch et al., 2021). Institutions, therefore, are implementing strategies to mitigate these barriers (Schneider, 2010; Van Der Meer et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2019). For example, Keup (2016) identified peer mentoring or peer leadership to meet many criteria for being considered a high-impact practice.

Consequently, one of the interventions colleges and universities have adopted to mitigate the challenges of first-time students in college is through peer-mentoring programs (Holt & Fifer, 2016). Positive peer interactions positively relate to cognition, racial identity, learning, self-concept, intellectual/academic, well-being, moral development, autonomy, retention, graduation, and expected career accomplishments (Mayhew et al., 2016). In higher education settings, a peer-mentorship program is an intervention strategy that matches a student (mentee) with another student (mentor) who is considered more experienced (Terrion & Leonard, 2007) to provide practical guidance and social support to the mentee (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Nora & Crisp, 2007). In addition, these mentorship programs establish relationships between returning and first-year students where peers can act as informal advisors and links to the larger community in college (Graham et al., 2022), making it an impactful intervention that facilitates college transition and academic success to produce natural, personal, and enduring relationships. According to DeMarinis et al. (2017), these relationships can positively impact students' knowledge and feelings about the community. In addition, it also allows peer mentors to serve as role models to their mentees and share their college experience to teach from their past and current experiences (Jacobi, 1991). In mentoring relationships, mentors and mentees are expected to interact continuously (Roszkowski & Badmus, 2014). Specifically, academic achievement (measured by grades) improves when mentors and mentees connect at least once monthly (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003).

Beltman and Schaeben (2012) defined a *peer mentor* as a person who supports, guides and offers practical advice to another person (mentee), typically close in age, and shares common characteristics or experiences. However, Felten and Lambert (2020)

concluded that more is needed than to pair a student with a single mentor charged with meeting all their needs. Instead, institutions should focus on creating a "relationship-rich environment" that allows students to interact with several members of the college community, including peers, faculty, and staff. Such education is "rooted in relentless welcome, inspired learning, web of relationships, and meaningful question" (Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 40). Furthermore, Humberd and Rouse (2016) found that student peer mentoring programs enhance the success of undergraduate students by providing peer-to-peer support that encourages campus connectedness and engagement, academic excellence, and the personal growth and development of participating students. In addition, these mentorship relationships can positively impact student knowledge, support, and feelings of connectedness (DeMarinis et al., 2017; Felten & Lambert, 2020). However, even though individual relationships like peer-mentoring relationships can be educationally impactful, Felten and Lambert (2020) found that a network of overlapping relationships stands a better chance of meeting the evolving needs of college students.

Peer-mentoring programs aim to foster higher academic achievement and social integration (Leidenfrost et al., 2011). Peer mentors build trust, demonstrate empathy, provide guidance and support, and advocate for their mentees (Pascarelli, 1998). Consequently, first-year students model their behavior after upper-class students who are more experienced. As part of a first-year experience course or program, this positions peer mentors to assist first-year students by helping them feel connected and integrated into their new campus community and providing emotional support. According to Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition theory, support is a vital resource for dealing with transition and stress, and support could be from their peers, the institution, their family

members or even the community. The level of support an individual has during a transition process affects his or her ability to manage the transition (Evans et al., 2009). Sanchez et al. (2006) and Ward et al. (2010) also asserted that peer-mentored students exhibit positive attitudes toward academic, social, and career goal attainment, and peer-mentoring programs in universities have recorded significant success in fostering social integration and students' satisfaction with the university (Sanchez et al., 2006). In addition, mentees feel satisfied with their mentors and the whole mentoring experience, such as academic and social support, advice, and help in handling stressful situations (Hughes & Fahy, 2009; Salinitri, 2005).

Recent studies have corroborated that peer-mentoring programs can help students feel more connected and integrated with a stronger sense of belonging in their campus community, increasing retention, persistence, and student success (Strayhorn, 2018; Yomtov et al., 2017). Additionally, Yomtov et al. (2015) investigated if peer mentoring can improve first-year students' first-year experiences and found that peer mentoring helped first-year students feel more integrated and supported in the university, significantly reinforcing their persistence toward graduating. Other studies that have compared college students who participated in peer mentoring programs and those who did not participate in a peer mentoring program found that those who participated in a mentoring program and had peer mentors had significantly better grades (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003), experienced less failure and had better retention (Goff, 2011; Hu & Ma, 2010; Ward et al., 2010). Schelbe et al. (2019) asserted that students who succeed academically and experience a sense of belonging, essential to increased resilience and student success (Tsang, 2020), and integrate into the school community are more likely to

remain at the institution (Schelbe et al., 2019). In addition, according to (Schmidt & Faber, 2016), peer mentoring has also been shown to provide mentees with personal guidance, professional development, enhanced academic performance, and career choice development leading to higher student academic gains (DeMarinis et al., 2017). Peer mentoring also has a positive impact on reducing test anxiety, thereby contributing to academic success (Smith et al., 2021).

Students derive emotional gains from a peer mentoring program. Researchers have investigated the emotional benefits of peer mentoring and found that mentees reported feeling less isolated and had an increased sense of belonging in the campus community (Beltman et al., 2019; Bonin, 2016; Collier, 2017; Cornelius et al., 2016; DeMarinis et al., 2017; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Graham & McClain, 2019; Tout et al., 2014; Yomtov et al., 2017). According to Yomtov et al. (2015), it was significantly more likely for a student who is mentored to identify someone he or she can rely on for emotional support than non-mentored students. Furthermore, some of the social benefits of peer mentoring to the mentee include mentors helping their mentees make essential connections and alleviating feelings of loneliness (Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Moschetti et al., 2018). In fact, by incorporating peer mentoring into first-year experience programming, first-year students (mentees) learn essential life skills, including interpersonal, critical thinking, study, and problem-solving skills, and increase their confidence and capability as higher education learners (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Therefore, peer mentoring provides enhanced psychosocial, cognitive, and career development (Humberd & Rouse, 2016).

Even though several of the studies mentioned above focused on peer mentoring programs for women students, students of color, and first-generation students, "even traditionally successful students appreciate the assistance and availability of peer mentors in their classroom" (Bonin, 2016, p. 6). It is important, however, to be mindful that mentoring relationships are also susceptible to challenges capable of undermining their effectiveness and efficiency. Nakanjako et al. (2011) highlighted several of such challenges, including scanty knowledge of the mentoring process, limited availability of mentors, excessive duties for both mentors and mentees to perform in the process, like meeting regularly.

Benefits of Peer Mentoring to Mentors

It is evident that peer mentoring has been researched, and its benefits to mentees are well documented (Beltman et al., 2019; Bonin, 2016; Collier, 2017; Cornelius et al., 2016; DeMarinis et al., 2017; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Graham & McClain, 2019; Strayhorn, 2018; Tout et al., 2014; Yomtov et al., 2015; Yomtov et al., 2017). When higher education institutions implement peer mentoring programs, it often focuses more on mentees, assuming they benefit most from the mentoring experience. However, mentoring is equally beneficial to the mentor as much as it is to the mentee. According to Snowden and Hardy (2013), mentors and mentees enjoy the benefit of increased grades and experience better engagement with the campus community. Considering that peer mentoring is a relationship between two people, Dixon et al. (2023) suggested that mentors can also benefit from mentoring, even though there is limited research on such benefits. Existing research highlighted that peer mentors gained personal satisfaction and leadership skills from mentoring (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). They also

developed communication and interpersonal skills, gained self-awareness of their strengths, and networking opportunities (Schmit & Faber, 2016). Furthermore, by mentoring, peer mentors improve their psychosocial skills, such as compassion, empathy, confidence, and engage in decision-making and reflective thinking (Koutsoukos & Sipitanou, 2020). By serving in this leadership role, peer mentors hone their skills and engage in career development (Booth et al., 2016), including leadership and interpersonal skills.

Additionally, Shook and Keup (2012) found that peer mentors experienced improvements in their leadership skills and ability to manage time. The mentors have a stronger connection to the school and are explicit about their future careers. The researchers also found peer mentors to be a valuable resource among the students, acting as advocates, sharing knowledge, and disseminating information among students (Shook & Keup, 2012).

Selection of Mentors

According to Holt and Fifer (2016), the program selection process is fundamental to high-quality mentoring, including the mentors' training and supervision. With the intensity of such training programs, it is safe to suppose that the professional and learning skills that peer mentors develop can be transferred to their future careers (Dixon et al., 2023). For quality mentorship, the training of mentors should focus on improving the self-efficacy of mentors (Holt & Fifer, 2016). Invariably, enhancing leadership skills contributes to their self-efficacy, satisfaction, and prospect of future participation as mentors (Haqquee et al., 2020). Therefore, Graham et al. (2022) and Zevallos and Washburn (2014) suggested that when training peer mentors, the content must include

expectations of their behavior, role, goals, and a skills development component to improve mentor self-efficacy. Furthermore, they identified skills such as listening and effective communication as fundamental skills that must be developed (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014), suggesting that training should be ongoing (Taylor et al., 2013; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014).

Summary

In summary, given the extensive research and the review of the literature on first-year experience courses, it is safe to conclude that irrespective of the variation in the details and specifications, there is general consistency between institutions regarding the assumptions, means, and goals of first-year experience courses. Consequently, a compelling argument can be made for advancing these student support programs in higher education. When institutions implement the FYE courses correctly, the students' assimilation into college life is often smooth and enjoyable. Students experience a sense of belonging, which can improve their success. More so, first-year experience courses provide students with ample resources and services to access and utilize throughout their time as undergraduates. Therefore, this supposes that all students can succeed, are capable of high academic progress and achievement, and can develop vocational competency through learning and applying skills to develop self-discipline, self-management, self-regulation, and satisfaction with their college experience.

Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns (2015) asserted that even though institutions evaluate and define the success of these endeavors in terms of retention, for students, success involves achieving progress by obtaining good grades in as stress-free and enjoyable manner as possible to complete their degrees efficiently and achieve satisfying and well-

paying employment. Overall, all first-year experience courses should aim to support first-year students in adjusting to their unfamiliar environment. Student-ready institutions are intentional about supporting student success. Hence, prioritizing the desire to better serve the students. This is a value proposition that calls for “deep commitment, truth-telling, a clear process, and high levels of engagement and accountability” (McNair et al., 2022).

Based on the literature, the extant research on first-year experience courses has used quantitative designs to measure the effectiveness of first-year experience courses and seminars using retention and Grade Point Average (GPA) as the dependent variables. However, it will be helpful to investigate first-year experience programs using qualitative designs to gain a thorough understanding of students’ experiences. Therefore, this research will utilize quantitative methods to better understand students’ experiences.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used to test the research questions. Research methodology is the techniques and procedures of using systematic inquiry to acquire knowledge (Fulford & Hodgson, 2016). The methodology for this study was organized systematically under various sections describing the study's design, how participants were sampled and selected, and how data was collected, managed, and analyzed. In addition, the study's setting was described along with the researcher's role during the study and how the data's reliability and validity were tested. Finally, how data from the research were stored, and the ethical considerations for the study were also established.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of first-year university students who participated in a first-year experience (FYE) course. More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how these first-year students (a) perceive their experience in the course, (b) believe it impacted their transition and integration into university, and (c) which component(s) of the course students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration into university.

The following research questions guided the study:

- RQ 1: How do university students who participated in an FYE course perceive their experience? in the course?
- RQ 2: How do university students who participated in an FYE course believe it impacted their transition and integration into university?

RQ 3: Which component(s) of the FYE course do university students believe had the highest impact on transition and integration?

Overview of Design

This research design describes the entire study plan for this research. It explains the study's type, method, and implementation strategy as it relates to its research questions (Vogt et al., 2012). It is the overarching strategy that guides research and gives a scientific understanding of the methods that were best applicable for investigating a phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2017). This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative approach. According to Hammarberg et al. (2016), qualitative design methods are utilized when answering questions about experiences, perceptions, and meanings, usually from participants' points of view. The phenomenological approach focuses on understanding the individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon or its essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, this approach helped to gain deep understanding of the perceived experiences of students who took an FYE course regarding their experience. Also, rather than fitting data into perceived thought, this approach allowed for a free flow and development of the research. Creswell and Poth (2018) described phenomenology as a suitable method within the qualitative design for understanding participants' shared meaning of their lived experiences of a phenomenon. Hence, the phenomenological qualitative research approach was suitable for this study for an extensive analysis of the experiences of first-year students in the FYE course and its impact on transition and integration and to answer the research questions.

Role of Researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher plays a significant role in the research process and must be careful to disclose potential biases that may come up during the study. The researcher's role in this research study was to conduct the study. It included designing the study, collecting, and analyzing data to reveal common themes, and amplifying participant voices. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research. As the investigator in this research, the researcher connected with the participants by building rapport, respecting them, and assuring them that their perceptions and experiences would count. The researcher was ethical and professional and strove to demonstrate an unprejudiced attitude about participants' answers, passing no judgment on participants' responses to the research questions. This disposition helped the researcher to gain participants' trust (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the study's purpose, interview process, and role of the participants were reviewed with participants before the interviews, and an opportunity to address any questions or concerns participants may have was given. This helped to further build trust.

Background of Researcher

The researcher was the administrator and head of pastoral care (assistant principal, pastoral) for four years at a secondary school in Nigeria. In that position, she led the counseling department and supervised form tutors while overseeing the school's daily administration and serving on the senior leadership team (SLT). Being in this position allowed the researcher to understand adolescent students' unique needs better; they longed for belonging. Part of the role of the counseling department was to ensure a smooth transition of new students to the school to help students develop a sense of

belonging and adjust quickly to their new school. When this happened, students thrived. The researcher later became an independent college counselor, and for seven years, supported high school juniors and seniors of various backgrounds through the college application process.

As the researcher worked with clients/students, it became evident that aspiring college first-year students had mixed emotions regarding their transition to college. Many of the students reported the fear that they may feel lost in college and not adjust to the demand of higher education. This led the researcher to devise ways to help facilitate a soft landing in college, as a part of the services offered. Some students expressed needing clarification with the language or terms used in college (e.g., course credit, prerequisite, corequisite, degree planning). This led to including optional complimentary seminars to the offerings.

Five seminar topics were offered: Tips on Managing Time in College, Building Effective Study Skills for Success in College, Setting SMART Goals, Introduction to College Vocabularies, and Understanding ME. As part of the understanding ME module, students were offered an opportunity to take the Career Direct career guidance assessment to learn four essential components relating to career selection: personality, interests, skills, and values. This helped the undecided students begin thinking about career options in line with the four factors mentioned above. These optional complementary seminars were conducted via Zoom, and students could attend any or all the sessions during the summer before resuming in college. Many of the students who participated in these seminars reported that it was helpful, and some of the topics were reinforced in their FYE classes.

The researcher's first involvement with the FYE course was in becoming an academic advisor at a community college. As part of the course's component, the researcher provided academic advising and facilitated degree planning for first-year students enrolled in the FYE course. This involvement in supporting first-year college students enrolled in this course and seeing the challenges they face during their transition to community college sparked the researcher's interest in researching how students experience an FYE course and the components they find most beneficial to their transition.

Setting and Context

This research study was conducted at a four-year liberal arts Christian university in southeast Texas, offering baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral level degrees. For the semester and academic year covered by this study (fall 2022), the undergraduate enrollment at the university was 2,823, which included 732 (28.2%) new first-year students. Demographically, 1,778 (63%) of the undergraduate students were female, and 2,187 (77.5%) were from ethnic or racial minority groups. The institution has a particular focus on its students' first year on campus and has, therefore, designed a first-year experience program to help students connect with the university, integrate into campus, and begin to see their university as home. The institution's development of the first-year experience program stemmed from research, the university's experience, and the understanding that the key to students' success is the foundations built during the first year. The first-year experience program at this institution is composed of several different yet complementary elements, including new student orientation, welcome week activities, student success, and success coaching, extra-curricular programs (clubs, organizations,

and Greek life), campus living and learning, freshman council and first-year seminar (FYS).

As a key component of the first-year experience program, the institution offers a first-year experience course known as the First-Year Seminar (FYS 1300), which is a required general education course for all first time-in-college students enrolled at the university. The seminar was implemented in recognition that the foundation built during the first year is critical to students' success. FYS 1300 is a credit hour course intended to arm first-year students with what the university refers to as tools for personal and academic survival, designed to enhance students' university experience. The FYS's purpose is to support new students in exploring how to make their education meaningful and relevant. It also aims to help students become aware of the various learning opportunities available to them at the university by directing them to the academic, cultural, social, recreational, and spiritual resources and opportunities available to them within the university and teaching the new student how to effectively utilize and take part in these as a new member of the university community.

Ultimately, the course is designed to support the transition of first year-in-college students, arming them with the tools and resources available to them as university students. (See Appendix E for course syllabus.)

The FYS at this university is structured around eight intertwined elements of personal wellbeing and stewardship: spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, social, vocational, financial, and environmental. In line with the university's mission, the eight dimensions are derived from the concept of human existence as beings created by God to glorify and enjoy Him forever. Even though the FYS is a first year first-semester course,

students begin to engage with the course before the semester starts and before they arrive on campus. During the summer preceding the first semester, the university grants incoming students access to Blackboard (the university's online course management system). The early Blackboard access enables incoming first year students to explore the eight wellness dimensions, allowing them to connect with faculty, other students, and university staff before they even arrive on campus. As an incentive to motivate the students, those who complete all the assigned tasks associated with each wellness area earn a badge and can win a parking spot on campus for the fall semester.

An integral and fundamental part of FYS at this university is peer mentoring. It was incorporated into the FYS to assist first-year students with problem solving and integrating into campus life. Peer mentors are upper-class students (sophomores-seniors) who assist instructors in FYS classes during the fall semester and continue their one-on-one mentoring role in the spring semester, serving as role models, campus resource experts, and trusted points of contact for students enrolled in FYS 1300. In addition, peer mentors at this university collaborate with the instructors to assist first-year students with solving problems and getting involved on campus.

Sampling and Participant Selection

Sample selection is vital in any research to gain relevant information about the population earmarked for the study (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Trochim (2006) described a *population sample* as a wide selection of objects or individuals that is a central focus of a scientific inquiry and having similar interests or characteristics relevant to the study. There are two broad classifications of sampling methods: probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Denscombe, 2014). Probability sampling refers to a technique

based on random selection, which allows subjects in the population equal chances of being selected. On the contrary, non-probability sampling uses a non-random approach based on set selection criteria (Denscombe, 2014). This study utilized purposive sampling to select the institution and participants for the study. Purposive sampling is a non-random selection method contingent on the researcher's knowledge and experience of the sample group (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Purposive sampling is relevant when sampling a specialized or specific group of individuals based on clear criteria (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Qualitative researchers commonly use the purposive sampling technique to identify and select cases rich in information to effectively use limited resources in research (Patton, 2002). It involves identifying and selecting persons or groups of persons who have experienced or know about a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). The availability and willingness of participants are significant factors in research. Hence the consideration of purposive sampling for this study.

To conduct this study, the researcher purposively selected a university that offers FYE courses to its students. Next, permission and approval were sought from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to access participants and access the necessary data relevant to the purposes defined for the study. This study's sample consisted of second year (sophomore) students enrolled in a four-year Christian university in southeast Texas who took FYS 1300 in their first year at the university.

To recruit participants, at the beginning of fall 2023 semester, after receiving IRB approval to conduct the research, the researcher contacted a faculty member at the university who acted as the gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is a member of the institution serving as an intermediary between the researcher or data collector and the potential

respondents. They control the access to data and contact with respondents (Keesling, 2008). The gatekeeper assisted in identifying the sample based on the set criteria for sampling and helped to recruit participants through class announcements. A web link (Google form) was created by the researcher, containing a Research Participation Survey (See Appendix A), Consent to Participate form (Appendix B), and demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). The link to the Google form was included in class email announcements so that those who chose to participate in the study could fill out the form indicating their willingness and availability to participate in the study.

The consent form contained detailed information about the study and the protocol for the study. The study's purpose was disclosed in the consent form, which included a statement emphasizing that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw their participation at any point during the process. Signing the consent form electronically by printing their full names confirmed participants' consent to participate in the study. Six students responded by completing the Google form and signing the consent form. The researcher then followed up with sending a sign-up schedule created on Sign-Up Genius for the consented participants to schedule the focus group/interview sessions. However, none of the six students who had consented to participating in the study responded. After waiting for fourteen days, the researcher tried to recruit participants by visiting the student's center and purposively identifying second-year students. After explaining in detail, the study's purpose, participants' role and the researcher's role, emphasizing that participation in the research was voluntary and participants could withdraw their participation at any point during the process without any explanation, nine second-year students volunteered to participate in the research by

signing the consent form. The consent form included a statement emphasizing that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw their participation at any point during the process. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for this study because selection of participants was based on the researcher's knowledge and experience of the sample group.

Characteristics of the Participants and Context

The participants selected for this study were students in their second year (sophomores) during fall 2023, who participated in a first-year experience course in their first year in university. Most studies on FYE courses often drew samples from students currently enrolled in the course. However, by the time this study commenced (beginning of fall 2023), first-year students had barely settled into the semester, let alone gained any reasonable experience in the course. Tett et al. (2017) explained that transition is not a one-time event but a process that spans the entire first year for college students. Hence, selecting participants who had completed their first year and were in the first semester of their second year was appropriate for this study to gain an extensive understanding of students' experiences in the course throughout their first year.

The following are the selection criteria used for this study:

1. Participants were 18 years or older.
2. Participants were in their second year at the selected university.
3. Participants had participated in an FYS during the fall of 2022 (i.e., their first semester in college).
4. Participants had taken the course in the same institution (not transfer).

Instrumentation

Instrumentation is the means and tools researchers use to collect data to measure relevant factors or variables. It includes data selection, instrument design, construction, assessment, and the circumstances under which they administer the instruments (Hsu & Sandford, 2010). The instrumentation for this study is described in the following section.

Validity and Reliability

An instrument's validity explains how much it measured what it was designed to measure (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). In qualitative research, validity can be considered rigor (Golafshani, 2003) or trustworthiness (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Hence, the rigor or trustworthiness of a study describes the level of confidence in the data, methods utilized to support the study's quality, and the interpretation of the results (Polit & Beck, 2013). Furthermore, Morse et al. (2002) pointed out that research would be worthless without rigor. A research study's trustworthiness forms the central feature of validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, the validity and reliability of a research study determine its trustworthiness.

Ensuring the rigor or trustworthiness of a research study is the researcher's responsibility (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, research principles must be adhered to and implemented throughout the study, especially as it pertains to accessing and assessing information, describing participants' roles in the study, managing the researcher's bias, and communicating trustworthy findings. However, realizing trustworthy qualitative research results involves more than just satisfying the methodical process. Therefore, to establish trustworthiness in this study, credibility, transferability, and dependability were used as guidelines (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Credibility

Qualitative research can be considered credible when the context is adequately described in the presentation of the result and is identifiable by people who share the same experience (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Therefore, credibility is the criterion used to evaluate the internal validity or the value of qualitative research. Hayashi et al. (2019) proposed triangulation to establish credibility in qualitative research. *Triangulation* is a qualitative approach that involves the validation of various information gathered from participants through various data sources. It is the interrelationship between the data collected from multiple sources to increase the understanding of the study, thereby enhancing the reliability of the results (Hayashi et al., 2019). According to Fusch and Ness (2015), "Triangulation is how one explores various levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon. It is one method by which the validity of the study results is ensured" (p. 1411).

In this study, the researcher utilized triangulation to enhance its trustworthiness and collected data using two sources: two focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews. The data was analyzed and categorized into units of meaning to validate the themes manifested, thereby validating the trustworthiness of the research. Throughout the process, there was active observation by the researcher and engaging in multiple layers of coding of the information to ensure that participants' voices were accurately represented. Triangulation and persistent observation enabled the researcher to establish the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability involves laying out clear information regarding the research to enable readers to determine the applicability of the results to diverse groups of people and environments. A deep and precise description of the research process and the participants allows the reader to evaluate the transferability of the findings to their setting or context (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Therefore, the onus is on the researcher to present clear descriptions and information regarding participants, processes, and other forms of data that will enable others to determine the transferability of the results to their contexts.

This research study enhances transferability by utilizing purposeful sampling and clearly describing participants' experiences and processes (Patton, 2014). Hence, the researcher used qualitative research methods such as recorded interviews and focus groups as well as transcribing the recordings verbatim. Furthermore, using purposive sampling allowed the researcher to utilize students who have experienced the phenomenon and can speak to their experiences in a first-year experience course.

Dependability

Dependability describes the reliability of the study's results over time, including its findings, interpretation, and recommendations in a way that data obtained from the study supports the findings, interpretation, and recommendations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability means that if the research study is performed multiple times, it will maintain consistency and produce the same results. For this study, the researcher generated an audit trail to help review the choice of methods utilized in the study. Denscombe (2014) described an audit trail as keeping careful documentation of each element in case of an audit. It involves keeping interview notes, field observation notes,

journals, records, drafts of interpretation, and calendars (Carlson, 2010). In addition, keeping an audit trail includes thoroughly evaluating the research process to substantiate or corroborate the data, allowing the researcher to validate the research decisions by showing data collection, recording, and analysis (Bowen, 2009). For this study, the researcher created an audit trail by preserving the:

- a. Recordings of the focus group discussions and individual interviews
- b. Transcripts of the focus group discussions and individual interviews
- c. Observation notes
- d. Documentation of data collected and the analysis.

Researcher Bias

Researchers often bring their experiences, prejudices, personal philosophies, and ideas into the study. The researcher needs to minimize bias, even more so, to identify and lay out potential bias sources for better examination of the research findings and conclusions (Smith & Noble, 2014). As an academic advisor involved in first year advising and supporting assigned cohorts of a first-year experience course is an obvious source of bias that can potentially impact my objectivity in interpreting the result of the study. However, I adopted the method of bracketing to ensure an objective engagement in this research. Bracketing is setting aside one's prior assumptions and beliefs to avoid misrepresenting participants' perceptions, experiences, and intended meaning (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, I laid aside my perceptions of students' experiences in the FYS course and personal beliefs.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are necessary for any research study, more so when the research involves people. It is, therefore, critical to avoid any possibility that the research would harm people. This is inevitable if the researcher fails to adhere to research ethics and guidelines (Bell, 2014). Researchers require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before conducting any investigation, confirming the importance of research ethics (Denscombe, 2014). Aligning with Denscombe's (2014) proposition, I first sought the approval of HCU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before commencing on this study. This ensured that the proposed research aligns with institutional policies, protects research participants, and complies with ethical standards. Some ethical issues that could have potentially arisen in this research study are confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, involuntary participation, and power (Bell, 2014; Creswell, 2009). These were proactively mitigated through the following:

Confidentiality

First, I sought the participants' consent before recording the interviews and focus group discussion (Denscombe, 2014) using the voice memos app on my iPhone. Secondly, I ensured that notes containing data related to this research are stored securely. Thirdly, I downloaded the recording from my phone onto a laptop to encrypt it so only the researcher can access it. Fourthly, I immediately deleted the recording from my phone (Denscombe, 2014) and stored notes containing data in a secure location. Finally, after this research study, I securely stored all data following HCU's data storage 3-2-1 rule described above (Houston Christian University, n.d.).

Anonymity

The researcher must protect the research participants' identity (Denscombe, 2007). Therefore, personal identifiers such as names were not requested on the questionnaire or during the interviews and focus group discussions, to protect the identity of participants during the research process and when reporting findings. Participants were identified by pseudonyms, such as Participant One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight and Nine in analyzing the data.

Informed Consent

Before embarking on any research, participants must provide written consent (Creswell & Poth, 2018) Also, participants must be aware that they can withdraw from participating in the research at any time without explanation (Denscombe, 2014). Therefore, before commencing this research study, the researcher provided a consent form (Appendix B) containing detailed information about the research, including the expectations of the participants and the researcher. The consent form also contained a statement letting participants know upfront that their participation was strictly voluntary. It also included information about the confidentiality of all collected data and signing the form confirmed Participants' consent.

Data Collection

The aim of qualitative research is to thoroughly understand the perceptions of purposively selected participants (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). This research study was conducted using qualitative methods. Deep and robust descriptions of a phenomenon or phenomena are usually gathered through inductive, qualitative methods, which include interviews, written statements, focus group discussions, and participant observation

(Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Hence, data was collected for this study using two sources: focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The data was gathered in two phases.

Phase 1: Focus Group

The first stage of the data collection was two focus group sessions involving all nine participants randomly split into two groups of four and five participants, respectively. The focus group discussions allowed for open-ended discussions among participants, guided by the researcher (See Appendix D). This data collection method was appropriate to better understand participants' responses parallel to other group members' experiences. The focus group discussions lasted 48 minutes and 55 minutes respectively and were recorded using the voice memo app on the researcher's iPhone.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are used to understand individuals' behaviors (Blandford, 2013). It combines structured and unstructured questions, allowing the researcher to use inquiry and on-the-spot follow-up questions to explore, reinforce understanding and shed light on questions (Wilson, 2013). They are used mainly to explore complex issues (Denscombe, 2014). Following each focus group session, participants were asked to volunteer for one-on-one semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 20 minutes. One participant volunteered from the first group and two more participants volunteered from the second group. (See interview protocol in Appendix E). Semi-structured interviews allow participants or interviewees to reconstruct the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014; Vagle, 2018). It also allows them to describe the phenomenon the way they have lived it rather than through memory description, which does not explain all the sensory experiences they had with the phenomenon (Seidman,

2013). The interviews were also recorded on the voice memos app on the researcher's iPhone. The recorded focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were transcribed word for word. Table 1 provides a view of who the participants were.

Table 1

Research Participant Information

| Participant | Gender | Ethnicity | Living Condition | First-Generation/ Multi-Generation | Domestic/ International |
|--------------------|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| One | Female | Black/African American | On-Campus | Multi-Generation | International |
| Two | Male | Black/African American | Commuter | First Generation | Domestic |
| Three | Female | Hispanic or Latino | On-Campus | Multi-Generation | Domestic |
| Four | Female | Hispanic or Latino | Commuter | First-Generation | Domestic |
| Five | Male | Black/African American | On-Campus | First-Generation | Domestic |
| Six | Male | White, Non-Hispanic | On-Campus | Multi-Generation | Domestic |
| Seven | Male | Asian American | Commuter | First Generation | Domestic |
| Eight | Male | Biracial | Commuter | Multi-Generation | Domestic |
| Nine | Female | White, Non-Hispanic | On-Campus | Multi-Generation | International |
| | | | | | |

Data Management/Storage

In qualitative research studies, researchers accumulate extensive amounts of data and need to determine the data management methods to employ to ensure the privacy and safety of data. Lin (2009) suggested imminently transferring data into an assessable form

to mitigate deterioration or data loss. For this research, the data are stored on the researcher's password-protected personal computer, a password-protected USB drive in a locked document cabinet, and with the Center for Research and Doctoral Studies (CRDS). This aligns with the 3-2-1 rule of keeping three copies of the data on two types of storage media and one copy stored offsite. Furthermore, all resources, and data that were generated from the institution where this research was conducted, or its employees, such as the FYS 1300 course syllabus remains owned by the institution.

Data Analysis

This phenomenological qualitative study used descriptive qualitative data analysis techniques to analyze the data collected from the interviews and focus group discussions. Phenomenology examines how people relate to their environment meaningfully, described as intentional relation by Vagle (2018). According to Giorgi (2012), the analysis of data must include a step-by-step process that ensures a rigorous analysis and form the core description of the phenomenon's structure as experienced. This study's data analysis was a step-by-step process that included the following:

Data Preparation and Organization

All focus group and interview responses were transcribed into a Word document and printed out for easy use by the researcher, and the demographic information collected for the data analysis was collated.

Data Review and Exploration

The researcher listened to the recordings and read the entire transcripts of the focus group discussions and interviews several times to gain a thorough and holistic

understanding of participants experiences, while keeping note of thoughts, emerging questions.

Creating Initial Codes

Initial codes were generated using manual techniques and resources to connect with the data, such as highlighters and sticky notes.

Themes Identification

The generated codes were further reviewed, revised, and combined into themes by identifying and grouping recurring opinions, themes, beliefs, and languages, and transforming meaning components into the third person.

Presentation of Themes

The findings presented in Chapter IV answer the research questions by utilizing two sources of data collection, including focus group discussions and interview responses, which allowed for triangulation. Data triangulation is when data from multiple sources is used in a study. It allows findings to be corroborated while allowing more factual data to compensate for weaker ones in any of the sources, and to enhance the validity and reliability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Summary

In this chapter, the detailed approach adopted for this study and the reasoning behind choosing the research design, including essential details of the research questions that were explored, sampling and participant selection process and criteria, and how data was collected, analyzed, and stored have been provided. Also, the researcher's role was established as the investigator while acknowledging personal bias. Furthermore, the

reliability and validity of the instruments used in this research study were discussed.

Finally, the result of the study is presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of first-year university students who participated in a first-year experience (FYE) course. More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how these first-year students (a) perceive their experience in the course, (b) believe it impacted their transition and integration into university, and (c) which component(s) of the course students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration into university. This chapter consists of the data analysis findings from two focus groups and three individual semi-structured interviews of nine second-year students (sophomores) who participated in a First-Year Seminar (FYS) in their first year at the university. The participants shared their experiences in the class. They provided salient insights into their transition experience because of participation in the FYS at a four-year liberal arts Christian university in southeast Texas. Using qualitative data analysis, the researcher inquired to thoroughly understand and accurately interpret the participants' lived experiences in the FYS related to their transition, to accurately report the findings. First, the chapter gives an overview of the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from which themes emerged. Participants' exact quotes were also used to emphasize their experience and to corroborate the themes identified in the analysis. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do university students who participated in an FYE course perceive their experience?
2. How do university students who participated in an FYE course believe it impacted their transition and integration into university?

3. Which component(s) of the FYE course do university students believe had the highest impact on transition and integration?

Data analysis started with the transcriptions of the recorded focus group discussions and interview responses. The transcription was done in two steps to ensure the accuracy of the information:

1. The Trint transcribing software was used to transcribe the audio recordings into texts before exporting the transcription to a Word document.
2. The transcripts were edited by listening to each recording while reading along the transcripts and correcting mis-transcriptions to ensure a verbatim transcription. To begin the coding, the researcher listened to the recordings and read all the transcripts several times to thoroughly understand the participants' experiences.
3. The open coding method was utilized, along with the manual technique, to create the first set of coding, using assorted colors of highlighters to mark consequential statements to point out commonalities, meanings, and connections.

Initially, 135 meanings were identified and categorized. Furthermore, the focused coding technique was utilized to identify and combine patterns. A second level of focused coding was used to group the categories further to reflect participants' voices regarding their experiences better.

The following six themes and subthemes emerged.

- Social Connections and Friendships
 - Support
- Sense of Belonging
- Transition to University

- Navigating resources, policies, and activities
- Study Tools and Techniques
- Adjustment – Emotional, Mental and Spiritual
- Mixed Emotions/Positive Feelings
- Course Components
- Peer Mentoring and Instructor Support

Theme 1: Social Connections and Friendships

The data analysis revealed that forming social connections and building lasting friendships were essential to most of the study's participants, who expressed how much they valued the friendships they formed in and through their FYS class. The Social Connection and Friendships theme is defined in this analysis as building relationships and establishing lasting friendships with other students. Most students who participated in this study were primarily on-campus students who left their friends and family to come to the university – an unfamiliar environment for the first time, in most cases without knowing anybody. Participant One revealed:

The first people I met were from my FYS class. They were my first friends in college, which definitely helped me build connections on the first day to build connections and helped me feel like I belong here because they were in the same major as me.

Participant Two also said, "I got to meet people that were in my same major, so that helped me make new friends. I met some really good people I am still friends with today." Most participants expressed that the connections they made in their first few days in the university and the community they built with other students in their FYS class

helped make their transition to university smooth and enjoyable. Participant Eight further expressed, "I kind of just had my friends, and it taught me how to branch out and ask classmates for help."

Another benefit that participants highlighted was the lasting friendships they made in the class. Students expressed how the friendships they developed in the FYS class have lasted beyond their first year. Participant Nine said, "Yeah, actually, I met my friend "XYZ" in this class, and we're still friends to this day, and we joined different organizations together." Participant Three also reported, "I met, I have like a lot of connections with people in that class. Some have transferred, but I'm still like in touch with them." According to the participants, building lasting friendships and social networks benefit first-year students by providing the much-needed support to thrive in the new educational setting.

Within these friendships, most participants reported that they developed a network of support invaluable for their adjustment as they navigated the expectations and adapted to the rigor of higher education in their first year. For example, Participant Eight said:

My peers, they helped with being there for me. Like when I would get a little homesick or like even struggling with a class, they were like, "oh, ok this is what you need to do and how to manage everything." They were just more of like emotional support.

Participants described it as mutual support. Participant One said, "If I needed help on anything, I could go to somebody, and they would definitely help me out and I could help them out at the same time."

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging was highly emphasized by all participants in the focus group discussions and individual interviews as a significant benefit derived from participating in the FYS. Participants described how the FYS class felt like a community where everyone was cared about and valued. Participant Three put it this way: "For me, it just showed me how you would fit in with certain types of groups and in your other classes, and also helped me fit in with the group of freshmen." Participant Two corroborated it thus, "I knew I wasn't alone. I knew we were all going through the same thing and might as well go through it together." Also, Participant One expressed:

Whenever I was struggling with something, I knew that I wasn't alone and I knew that someone had to be feeling the same way that I was feeling, and they were also just as nervous for anything as I was, and I knew I wasn't alone.

In addition, in describing how the FYS impacted their sense of belonging and connection to the university community, Participant Four reported:

I had a sense of belonging just because they grouped us, at least in my semester, they grouped us according to your major. So, I was grouped with like-minded people who had similar goals to mine. So that helped me to open up more about something that I was actually interested in.

Most participants talked about the mutual support they gained from their peers, and Participant One buttressed it by saying, "I could go to someone, and they would definitely help me out, and I could help them out at the same time." In addition, the participants reported that the FYS course allowed them to connect with other students through various activities that helped extend their connections beyond the FYS

classroom, enabling them to enjoy activities outside the classroom and establish bonds supporting their adjustment to the university.

Theme 3: Transition to University

The theme of Transition encompassed various sub-themes and elements that supported participants' adaptation to the university environment and practices that foster a successful university experience, including navigating university resources, policies, and activities; study tools and techniques; and self-awareness and adjustment.

Navigating University Resources, Policies, and Activities

Regarding navigating university resources, policies, and activities, the participants described how the FYS course guided them in understanding university policies, accessing resources, and effectively utilizing them. Utilizing the tutoring center, learning notetaking, study tools, and techniques were opportunities that the participants found beneficial. The participants valued the information shared and activities they did in the class that helped them learn and connect with what was going on around campus. Participant Six reported that the course was beneficial because "for certain assignments, we would have to locate certain things around the website, and it would show us where our resources are located and how to access them." Participant One also reported, "I definitely utilized the tutoring center a lot because there were so many classes I needed help in, and I didn't know that there was a tutoring center until my FYS professor told us about it." Participant Three corroborated that they learned to utilize the spaces in the library because of the information they got from the FYS class.

The participants also recalled learning about various clubs and activities in the FYS class and how that helped them to make connections outside the classroom. During the individual interview, Participant Seven recalled:

I got to know more about the campus, like the clubs, the different kinds of clubs there were, and to have more friends like friends in Young Life. Like I joined Young Life, and I got to meet more people, and I'm more open and social with everybody.

Participant One also corroborated that by saying, "It helped me a lot to get to know more about the university and like the dos and don'ts of like what to do for my major." The participants said that the information and knowledge they gained in FYS equally helped them in their other classes and provided guidance. As Participant Six put it, "We had that guidance to help us through learning where our resources are and how to access them and make the most out of them." According to Participant Nine, "We at least had the guidance to help us through learning where our resources are and how to access them and make the most out of them."

Study Tools and Techniques

The participants recalled learning specific tools that helped them build a foundation for their academics. For example, Participant Four said:

One of the main things that I remember talking about in class was Bloom's taxonomy and how to study more effectively because before college, you can get by without really studying too much; but once you get to college, its different.

Participant Two stated, "They did teach me like a lot of study tools, how to take notes, study for like thirty minutes intervals, and other helpful little tips that I didn't know

before coming into college." Participant Nine added that, [the professor] "She kind of like gave us like step-by-step how to create like a study guide."

Emotional, Mental and Spiritual Adjustment

Most participants reported having derived emotional and mental adjustment from participating in FYS. Being a first-year student can create anxiety and can be stressful; hence, the students valued having a course that helped them alleviate their anxiety and the stress of acclimatizing to their new environment. The participants revealed that the seminar acted as a supportive environment, reducing anxiety, and providing comfort during the transition to university life. Participants appreciated the approachable atmosphere where they could discuss emotional well-being and receive guidance.

Participant Six recalled:

I remember starting college. I was extremely anxious and worried because they try to prepare you for college in high school, but it's the opposite because college is an experience that you have to learn and grow on your own. But FYS helped me ease into it in my freshman year.

As Participant Four put it:

Most people are too quiet to themselves and can't express themselves, and it creates like a barrier. But for me, FYS helped me emotionally and mentally and it allowed me to open up more than I ever would on my own and I feel like it benefited me emotionally and mentally in my life.

Participant Seven also recalled, "When I would get a little homesick or like even struggling with class, they were just like emotional support." Some of the students also

talked about how the class encouraged their spiritual lives by encouraging the class to attend "Ignite" and "Convocation." Participant Five puts it this way:

They made sure we go to ignite and convocation, and you know, it's a good way of like trying to get students to like be closer to God and to grow their spiritual life, and I feel like that is the biggest thing that would help students go through their college life.

Participant Six also said:

It helped with like connection to God. It wasn't forced upon us, but it did help give us the push to where, you know, to get out of that comfort zone and just be able to give ourselves to God and just worship Him.

In addition, some of the participants also revealed how the FYS course helped them develop self-awareness. Participant Five stated, "It taught me to understand myself and how to branch out and ask other classmates for help," and Participant Eight added, "It helped me to know more about myself as well, to help succeed and thrive to do better, do more and explore more and just how to be more independent with my life." In describing how the transition from high school to university would have been different without the FYS, the participants reported that making connections would have been difficult without the FYS course. Participant Nine reported:

I feel like without FYS, I would be kept to myself and like suffering in silence. I don't think I would do anything outside of maybe emailing a teacher. I don't think I would have ever talked to a peer that I didn't know and be like, hey, do you mind helping me figure out what this is? I believe FYS helped in breaking that

barrier for me, I don't think I would have ever branched out and spoken to people and like be ok with letting people know that I'm struggling.

Participant Eight said, "It would be a little bit of a challenge, just not being able to be more open because I was really shy back then."

Theme 4: Mixed Emotions/Positive Feelings

Despite the initial mix of emotions ranging from excitement to nervousness, anxiety, and fear as they anticipated their first day of class, the participants expressed positive feelings in the FYS class, describing it as informational and valuable. According to the participants, the FYS provided experiences that enhanced their first year of university experience, as it helped them feel a sense of confidence, independence, comfortability, growth, and success; and they felt a sense of belonging in their class and university. Participants described how these feelings led to their active participation in the class and other classes and the ability to seek help when needed, describing it as a fun class. Participant Seven reported having a fun experience in the FYS class: "Honestly, it was fun. I had a lot of fun my first year in college." Participant Four also reported, "There was also a fun aspect of the class. It wasn't just lectures, and I believe that was something that helped freshmen feel at ease and comfortable." Other participants also described the FYS as a class where they could ease off stress. Participant Five described it as relaxing and less stressful: "When you come into FYS, it is more like a relaxed environment, and you could like to get some stress off your shoulders." In describing the feeling of confidence that most of the participants alluded to having experienced, Participant Eight recalled, "I think I wouldn't have been as confident in going into classes and studying for my classes if I hadn't had the FYS." Most of the participants also reported feeling

confident to ask for help. For example, Participant Nine said, "When I felt more confident being in classes, I feel like that's when I knew I was beginning to feel successful and all, just because, like, I could sit there and even if I didn't understand something, I still had the confidence to learn."

Theme 5: Course Component

The Course Component theme reflects the course elements the students found beneficial, including the class structure, textbook, class activities and assignments, group projects, and class discussions. However, peer mentoring was highlighted by every Participant in the Focus group discussion and the semi-structured interviews as the most beneficial component of the FYS course. Given its frequency in the data coding, peer mentoring emerged as a separate theme and is discussed in the next section. Overall, Participants described the seminar as well-structured to meet the transitional needs of students. Participant Six recalled during the focus group discussion, "It helped me with structure, timing, and keeping me on task. I would drift off sometimes but having the FYS like, we would like track our progress and that would help bring me back on track." Participant Four also recalled, "It was the first class I had to take in college. So, it allowed me to see how college was going to work and how college classroom would be structured." Most participants found the textbook for the class helpful, expressing that the topics were relevant to becoming a successful college student. According to Participant Four, "The book was basically the one that guided the structure of the class, and I believe there were essential things in the book that helped us."

When describing the benefits they derived from class activities, several participants disclosed that many of the assignments in the class required them to

participate in class activities, and the experiences they described revealed the value they derived from the activities and materials they learned in the class. Participant Five recalled how one assignment was a semester-long activity called "web of connections," where they were required to have a minimum of eight valuable contacts throughout the campus that they could easily approach for various issues, like financial aid, issues with roommates, academic support, student services, and so on. According to Participant Five:

We had like certain assignment, and they put us in groups and so we get to meet people and network and at the same time, we get knowledge from each other and different sources. Like, if people like found out something that other people probably didn't know, they would share the information; and I think that helped me a lot.

Participant One reported:

I feel like I was really close with my FYS class because we had the same, like similar experience of going to college for the first time and just really navigating our majors and just like learning from our peer mentors and our professor.

Theme 6: Peer Mentoring and Instructor Support

Peer mentoring was highlighted as a crucial aspect that guided students through the challenges of the first year and is one of the most recurring themes. Every Participant in the focus groups and individual interviews had a lot to say about the value they derived from the peer mentoring component of the FYS. The participants considered it the most beneficial component of the FYS course. They described how their pair mentors were the first friends they made in college and the support they got from these mentors, who were upper-class students. Moreover, in the words of Participant Five, "I learned a lot from my

peer mentor because she has gone through where I am now and is always sharing her experience with me." Many students reported becoming friends with their peer mentors, who they described as supportive and helpful in clarifying expectations. Participant One further reported:

I like became really close friends with my peer mentor because she was a year older, and she knew like what we were going through, and I can still like go to her to this day, even though I'm a sophomore because she is experienced with like everything I am going through now.

Participant Three affirmed it by saying, "I still see my peer mentor around campus. I speak to her, and we like, you know, best buds."

As regards instructor support, in addition to peer mentoring, many participants described their instructors' roles as vitally beneficial to their transition to university. According to the participants, instructors provided guidance, academic advice, and a teacher's perspective, while peers offered emotional support, guidance, and practical advice from a student's perspective, encouraging engagement and interactions. During the semi-structured interview, Participant Seven described how the FYS professor made everybody feel welcome, and Participant Six testified:

My professor who I had, she always checked on our well-being. Every day at the beginning of class, she asked how we were doing, whether thumbs-up, thumbs-middle, or thumbs-down, especially coming back from the weekend when she would ask how our weekend was, and people would be honest. And then for the people that said they didn't have the best weekend or an ok, again, after class one-on-one, she would talk and ask why?

A support system, including instructors, peers, and a sense of community helped the participants feel supported and successful in their transition to university. Most participants emphasized connecting with peer mentors and instructors to contribute to a positive transition experience.

Summary

Nine first-year university students took part in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews regarding their experiences in the first-year seminar course and transition to university. Qualitative research methods were used to conduct the study and analyze the data. Six main themes were identified from the analysis of the data collected: Social Connections and Friendships, Sense of Belonging, Transition to University, Positive Feelings, Course Component, and Peer Mentoring. Other sub-themes also emerged from the six themes to describe the students' lived experiences in-depth.

The focus groups and semi-structured interviews emphasized the positive impact of the first-year seminar on their transition to university. The FYS played a crucial role in helping students understand university dynamics, connect with peers, and navigate university resources and policies. Furthermore, the sense of belonging and emotional well-being fostered through this seminar significantly contributed to students' successful transition and integration into the university community. Participants also highlighted specific components within the seminar that they found particularly beneficial, including structured study approaches, engaging classroom activities, and peer mentoring. Overall, the first-year seminar provided valuable support, guidance, and a sense of community during students' first year in university.

In the next and concluding Chapter, a discussion of the findings of this research study, implications, and recommendations for further research are presented.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students will continue to enroll in universities and colleges, irrespective of their preparedness from high school. While the need to prepare students to be college-ready is frequently discussed, higher education institutions are now shifting the conversation to universities and colleges being student-ready (McNair et al., 2022). Educators must recognize that students often need to learn what they need or possess the necessary skills to transition smoothly and build a foundation to succeed in college. One of the ways many colleges and universities prepare students for the demands of higher education is through the first-year experience courses. In the present study, the lived experiences of students who took a first-year seminar course (FYS) during their first year in university were examined to understand the meaning they make of their experiences.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of first-year university students who participated in a first-year experience (FYE) course. More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how these first-year students (a) perceive their experience in the course, (b) believe it impacted their transition and integration into university, and (c) which component(s) of the course students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration into university. The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. How do university students who participated in an FYE course perceive their experience in the course?

2. How do university students who participated in an FYE course believe it impacted their transition and integration into university?
3. Which component(s) of the FYE course do university students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration?

The study was conducted at a four-year liberal arts Christian university in southeast Texas, offering baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral-level degrees. A purposive sampling method was used to select the institution and participants for the study, and the participants were nine second-year students (sophomores) who took the First Year Seminar (FYS 1300) in their first year at the university. Data was collected using qualitative methods through two focus groups and semi-structured interviews and was analyzed through a step-by-step process that ensures a rigorous analysis forming the core description of participants' experiences. The recorded focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim. I listened to the recording and read the transcript several times to gain a thorough and holistic understanding of participants' experiences while noting my thoughts and emerging questions. I generated initial codes using assorted colors of highlighters to mark similar contexts and meanings. Then I combined the codes into themes by identifying and grouping recurring opinions, themes, beliefs, and languages. I presented the findings of the data analysis in the preceding chapter. This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the existing literature and the theoretical framework for this study, including its implications and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings

Six themes were identified from the analysis of data: (a) Social Connections and Friendships, (b) Sense of Belonging, (c) Transition to University, (d) Mixed Emotions/Positive Feelings, (e) Content, and (f) Peer Mentoring/Instructor Support.

Social Connections and Friendships

One of the themes that emerged from the data analysis was the ease with which participants created social connections and developed lasting friendships, first within the FYS class. Support also emerged as a sub-theme. In the present study, establishing social connections and developing friendships in the FYS class was valued by first-year students as they otherwise may not have been able to make the necessary connections during their transition. Based on participants' responses, it is evident that the experience of creating lasting friendships with their peers was significant for students. In creating these friendships, participants expressed that they created a support network. Support was a vital resource for the students in dealing with transition. According to participants, gaining the support of peers enabled them to deal with emotional challenges, access psychological resources, and adjust to transitional changes. This aligns with existing literature as the participants regarded their peers as individuals they could depend on for assistance. Martinez (2010) suggested that with challenges beyond the individual's range of skills, even a little support can help the learner succeed in completing tasks, affirming that positive relationships among students are regarded as valuable support networks for social and academic support and resource discovery and sharing.

Also, in their research on students' transition into higher education, Timmis et al. (2022) found that first-year students needed targeted support for successful transition,

especially during the initial weeks on campus. Furthermore, Awang et al. (2014) found that students supported each other in diverse ways, thereby viewing themselves as reliable informers who are easily accessible and helpful. The present study's findings also align with Schlossberg's transition theory, which anchors on the idea that support enables the individual to deal with emotional challenges, access psychological resources, and adjust to transitional changes (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Schlossberg's theory is anchored on three philosophical beliefs:

1. Transition is a human experience; it is an unpredictable and inevitable process whereby adults (e.g., university students) go through life irrespective of the outcome.
2. Transition occurs at every stage of human development, in sequential order but the experience does not necessarily converge to a single reality.
3. Change requires new networks of relationships and self-perceptions (Gosai et al., 2023).

It presupposes that making social connections, establishing relationships, and lasting friendships are essential for students to successfully transition and be integrated into their new environment. Furthermore, creating social connections and developing friendships helped students to feel valued and accepted in the classroom and the broader university community. Even though some participants expressed the tendency to be shy and keep to themselves, by being a part of an FYS class, they learned to be more open and comfortable connecting with classmates and developing friendships. The participants perceived that the FYS was beneficial in helping them form initial friendships,

connecting them with like-minded individuals. These social connections helped them develop a sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging was an important theme that emerged from the present study. It describes the need to belong, which is a human emotional need for affiliation with and acceptance by group members. This study's participants' sense of belonging hinged on gaining their peers' attention, acceptance, and support. The participants expressed that grouping students into FYS sections based on academic majors or other common interests, like grouping athletes, allowed for a sense of belonging and facilitated networking. This theme can be regarded as the anchor that holds together the other themes because for the participants, it was crucial for them to feel like a part of their new environment and feel comfortable in it. Developing a sense of belonging was paramount for this study's participants during their first year in university; they had just moved away from their families and friends to an unfamiliar environment. They needed to fit in, feel accepted, and feel like they belonged. It was important for the students to know that other first-year students were going through the same things they were going through. These findings align with existing literature. Strayhorn (2018) suggested that a sense of belonging resulted from students feeling valued and respected by others, connected to their environment, and having social support. In their research, Felten and Lambert (2020) identified that students needed and wanted to have a sense of belonging, finding their place and identifying their people. Vlasova (2022) corroborated this by finding that 13% of undergraduate students dropped out of college after the first year because they did not fit into the social life in college. In other words, they do not feel integrated nor have a

sense of belonging. In addition, Schelbe et al. (2019) found that a sense of belonging was essential to student success and increased resilience, asserting that students who experienced a sense of belonging succeeded academically.

Furthermore, Strayhorn (2018) found a direct relationship between students' sense of belonging and the feeling that they were cared about and respected and that their contributions were relevant to the community. Al-Sheeb et al. (2018) investigated how the academic and social characteristics of the higher education institution environment affected the holistic satisfaction of first-year undergraduate students. The findings also suggested that a sense of belonging was among the best determinants of first-year students' level of satisfaction. These all align with the findings of the present study.

Transition to University

Transition was another important theme that emerged from analyzing the data collected from participants in this study. One of the essential purposes of first-year experience courses is to support first-year students' transition to higher education and integration into their new university environment, and to help them find and utilize the university's offerings and resources for their social and academic growth. Most of the participants in the present study found the FYS course beneficial to their transition and integration into the university. The FYS course helped students connect with their peers, especially as members of each class section shared certain commonalities, thereby alleviating the challenges of being new and friendless. In addition, the FYS course helped first-year students understand college classroom dynamics, academic expectations, and study techniques and to adjust to university life. The participants also derived emotional well-being and established support systems within their cohorts. All these benefits

derived from participating in the seminar gave the students a glimpse into the expectations of higher education and fostered a successful transition to university. For this study's participants, the transition from high school to university was less stressful and more accessible than most of them had expected coming into university, with the support system that the FYS courses provided.

These findings are consistent with existing literature. Briggs et al. (2012) and Gosai et al. (2023) described transition challenges as a blend of psychological, academic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors that impact the ability of a student to adjust successfully during their first year in college or university. Nester (2016) conducted a qualitative study on an FYS. The result revealed that building the foundation of successful transition and integration into the new college environment required an extended support system, an enabling environment, and participation in fun activities on campus. This result aligns with the findings of the present research as participants alluded to enjoying the same benefits through their participation in the FYS course.

Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns (2015) and Leary and DeRosier (2012) also suggested that first-year experience courses positively impact the transition from high school to higher education. The current study's findings affirm that the first year of higher education establishes the foundation for student success and retention, and students can build upon it only if they can adapt to higher education expectations (Tinto, 1975, 2012). In addition, the first year of university education is critical for students as they adapt academically and socially to the higher education environment, and students needed to build the social and academic skills they need to persist and be successful (Baik et al., 2019; Merhi et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993). This is corroborated by Erdpornkulrat et al. (2016)

and Soytürk and TepeköylüÖztürk (2019) who found that during the first year, students develop the attitudes and disciplines that can shape their entire college experience and future success and develop perceptions about themselves as college students.

Mixed Emotions/Positive Feelings

Attending college for the first time can generate mixed emotions as students transition from high school to higher education. In the present study, students had a mix of feelings and emotions that graduated from excitement to anxiety, confusion, and then to confidence. This study's participants described their initial feelings as a wave of emotions that started with the initial excitement of going to college and gradually developed into nervousness and anxiety as the first day of class approached. They wondered how they would cope with their classes, their study routine, how their classmates would act towards them, and if they would like their professors. All these thoughts and feelings created stress and anxiety for the students as they thought about how to navigate higher education and their unfamiliar environment. This was consistent with the findings of Schackmuth (2012) that the first year of college experience can be stressful for students enrolling for the first time. It is also established in the literature that while the transition from high school to university can be an exciting experience, it can also be incredibly stressful for many young adults who are leaving home for the first time, moving away from family and friends to an unfamiliar environment (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Wyatt et al. (2017) asserted that, in addition to academic unpreparedness, first-year college students encounter tempestuous emotional changes that directly tie into the stress they experience because of transitioning into college life,

creating anxiety and other mental health issues as the students' stress levels increase and negatively affect their academic performance.

In the present research, these initial feelings of anxiety and stress were alleviated in the FYS class and translated into positive emotions and feelings of confidence, independence, comfortability, growth, and success as they developed a sense of belonging in their class and university. According to the participants, these positive feelings enhanced their ability to develop strategies and the will to cope with challenges, engage in active participation, and develop the ability to seek help when needed. In addition, the participants felt welcomed by the instructor and their peers, making them feel like they belonged. These kinds of feelings expressed by the students described an atmosphere where students were comfortable, knowing they would not be judged. When the students develop confidence in their ability to cope with challenges and succeed, they feel comfortable trying new things with optimism. Based on the current study's results, the FYS course created an experience that allowed students to develop the right attitudes and the relevant skills needed to be successful in university.

Existing literature supports this finding. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) and Schlossberg et al. (1995) concluded that transitions offer growth and development opportunities, even though one cannot assume a positive outcome for all individuals going through a transition. Schlossberg's transition theory revealed that transition is unique to individuals, so an individual's perception of it and its impact will determine how they handle the transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). If an individual has a positive perception of the transition, they may be better prepared to manage it than someone with a negative perception (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Apriceno et al. (2020) and

Respondek et al. (2017) also found that as students navigate transition challenges with appropriate support, they learn to function as self-directed learners, become confident learners, move away from their idea of academic control, and learn how to regulate their emotions regarding academics.

Course Components

Course Components also emerged as a theme from the present study's data analysis. Universities and colleges can determine the components or content of their first-year experience courses, and there is a wide range of contents. In the present study, the characteristics of this theme are the course structure, the textbook, class activities and assignments, collaborative projects, and class presentations. This theme reflects the participants' enjoyment of the various activities. This study's participants reported that they valued discovering campus resources, having the opportunity to learn about the many resources on campus early on, and developing useful skills beneficial to their adjustment to and success in university. The students also indicated that the FYS course was well structured to meet their transition needs. The various components of the course enhanced students' experiences. They believed that the choice of the course's textbook was an intentional effort by the university to expose students to resources beneficial to their transition and integration into the university community and that the textbook guided the class structure.

The participants found the class activities enjoyable and engaging, and they provided an opportunity for interaction with other students, enabling them to learn from each other and support one another. They also indicated that the assignments and projects helped them to gain academic and presentation skills, be informed about the resources

and opportunities available on campus, keep up to date with campus activities and events, and make necessary connections to other parts of the university, which helped them integrate into the life of the university. In addition, first year students learned various techniques and strategies that helped them develop the academic skills needed to succeed in the university, such as managing their time, effective notetaking, and study skills. Previous research aligns with this finding.

Congruent with the present study, Schlossberg's (1985) transition theory emerged following Schlossberg's realization of the need for a structure that would help understand and facilitate the transition of adults and point them to the resources they needed to get through the usual and unusual processes of living (Evans et al., 2009). Also, Chambers et al. (2013) and Clark and Cundiff (2011) found that most share of the FYS curriculum typically includes modules that cover strategies and techniques that help them develop skills for notetaking, managing time, reading, writing, studying, managing money, research, communicating effectively, making decisions, and thinking critically. In their research, Kelley (2017) found that students believed that the components of the FYS course helped in increasing their confidence and motivation, as they perceived it to be beneficial in providing helpful resources and building the necessary skills to be successful in university.

Peer Mentoring and Instructor Support

In the present study, peer mentoring was the most valued aspect of the FYS course for the participants. This peer mentoring strategy matched a first-year student with an upper-class student, considered more experienced, to provide practical guidance and social support. It was a strategy that helped students establish relationships where fellow

students could be informal advisors and links to the university community at large. In the present study, participants had positive interactions with their peer mentors. They reported that their peer mentors were the first friends they made in the first week of school. Because the peer mentors were upper-class students, first-year students valued and leveraged their experiences to navigate university life and expectations, and they were supportive and helpful in clarifying expectations. The participants developed a level of trust in their peer mentors and their ability to help them navigate the university. The students believed that their mentors understood what they were going through because they were once in their shoes, and that made them comfortable with their mentors and created a bond between them that resulted in lasting friendships beyond the first year and produced natural, personal, and enduring relationships.

In addition, participants reported that FYS instructors were supportive of them. They received academic advice from instructors, which they found beneficial to their academic success. Also, they found the synergy between the instructors and the peer mentors significant to the class structure. Instructors provided guidance, academic advice, and a teacher's perspective. At the same time, peers offered support, guidance, and practical advice from a student's perspective, fostering interpersonal engagements and problem-solving. In addition, the participants perceived their mentors as role models. These findings are congruent with existing literature. Schmidt and Faber (2016) found that by incorporating peer mentoring into first-year experience programming, first-year students (mentees) learned better study skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, increasing their confidence and capability as higher education learners. In the quasi-experimental research conducted by Al-Sheeb et al. (2018), findings

revealed that students who participated in an FYS course interacted better with fellow students and seminar instructors. Humberd and Rouse (2016) also identified enhanced psychosocial, cognitive, and career development due to the peer mentoring relationship. In addition to the support first-year students gain from their peers and instructors, Milsom and Hartley (2005) asserted that students can benefit immensely from connecting with other students who have gone through a similar experience.

Implications of Study for Higher Education Institutions

In the current study, participants provided robust information regarding their lived experiences in a first year experience (FYE) course concerning their transition to university. Understanding these experiences is vital for understanding how to better assist first-year students in their transition to higher education. To be ready for students that are admitted into institutions of higher education and provide an education to them, university administrators must expand their knowledge to understand the challenges that first-year students face in their transition process and to know the resources and programs that are most beneficial for the students in transition. In this study, participants reported valuing peer mentoring, the FYS course activities, and the impact they had on their transition and integration. They also reported finding the course beneficial for building lasting friendships that were educationally and socially beneficial and mutually supportive as well as learning about and utilizing campus resources, integrating into the university community, developing a sense of belonging, and acquiring the skills necessary to succeed in university.

Generally, students reported having a positive experience in the FYS course, and they found the skills and values learned in the course beneficial in the FYS class, their

other classes, and even outside the classroom. Hence, university administrators should focus on the high-impact practices of the first-year experience courses, including information literacy, critical inquiry, collaborative learning, and other skills that help students develop practical and intellectual competencies. Consequently, this study may inform and assist higher education institutions in adjusting the first-year experience course curriculum to provide opportunities that allow students to enhance their experiences both inside and outside the classroom to foster a smooth transition and integration into higher education settings and students' overall success.

Recommendations for Future Research

Consistent with all research studies, this study provides a specific narrow focus. Even though it contributes to the scholarship on FYE and transition, countless questions still exist that need to be answered. At the university where samples were obtained for this study, all first-time college students are required to take an FYS course in their first year. Even though each participant's experience was unique, they all had a positive experience and found the seminar beneficial to their transition to university. However, in some universities, first-year experience courses are offered as optional courses, making students' transition experiences even more diverse. Future research is recommended to explore a qualitative comparative study at a university where first-year experience courses are not mandatory for first-year students to understand the transition experiences of students who participated in a first-year experience course compared to those who did not participate in the course. A study like this might further help gain insight into other factors and programs that can foster first-year students' successful transition to higher education.

Furthermore, academic advising has been identified in existing literature as an emerging first-year experience high-impact practice (HIP) because it helps students create a degree plan in their first year, which sets students on track to accomplish their academic goals (Keup & Young, 2021; Young, 2019; Young et al., 2015). However, in the present research, there was an insignificant mention of academic advising. Further recommendations for future research can involve a qualitative study exploring students' perceptions of the impact of academic advising on their transition during their first year in college or a university. Finally, participants in the present research valued peer mentorship as the most beneficial aspect of the FYS course. It would be interesting to investigate the peer mentors' perspectives of their experiences in supporting first-year students in the course and the benefit they derive from assisting the instructors and mentoring first-year students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of first-year university students who participated in a first-year experience (FYE) course. More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how these first-year students (a) perceive their experience in the course, (b) believe it impacted their transition and integration into university, and (c) which component(s) of the course students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration into university. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do university students who participated in an FYE course perceive their experience in the course?

2. How do university students who participated in an FYE course believe it impacted their transition and integration into university?
3. Which component(s) of the FYE course do university students believe had the highest impact on their transition and integration?

The research questions were clearly answered by the findings. From the current study's findings and consistent with existing literature and the theoretical framework, first-year experience courses play a crucial role in helping students transition successfully, creating an opportunity to make various connections, understand the dynamics of higher education, understand university expectations, and navigate resources and policies. Furthermore, first-year experience courses foster a sense of belonging and emotional well-being, significantly contributing to the successful integration of first-year students into the university community. Components of the course, such as peer mentoring, structured study approaches, and engaging activities, benefit first-year students' transition experiences. Overall, the first-year experience courses can provide valuable support, guidance, and a sense of community during a student's initial year in university. Although each student is unique in their first-year experience and transition, FYE courses can play a crucial role in aiding academic adjustment, creating a supportive community, and fostering relationships. In addition, instructors and peers provide guidance leading to a successful transition.

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APPENDIX A:**Research Participation Survey**

Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of a First-Year Experience Course with Peer Mentoring and its Impact on Transition and Integration into Higher Education Environment.

1. Would you like to participate in the study?

Yes. No

2. What is your email address?

3. Comments and/or Questions:

APPENDIX B:

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

College Students' Perceptions of a First-Year Experience Course with Peer Mentoring and its Impact on Transition and Integration into a Higher Education Environment.

Principal Investigator: Joy Oguchi

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be part of a research study. This information presented in this consent form will help you choose whether or not to participate in the study. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

Why is this study being done?

The present study is designed to understand university students' perceptions regarding their experience in a first-year experience course with peer mentoring to gain an insight into how university students who participated in an FYE course; (a) perceive their experience in the course, (b) believe it impacted their transition and integration into university, and (c) which component(s) of the course students believe has the highest impact on their transition and integration into university

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire and participate in a focus group discussion session that will last approximately 30 minutes. You may also be selected for an interview that will last approximately 15 minutes. You will be assigned randomly to one of two study groups so you will have an equal chance of being in a group. After the focus group session, one volunteer from each group will participate in the interviews. Audio recording will be required for the focus group and interview sessions. If you do not want to be recorded, you should not be in this study.

How long will I be in this study and how many people will be in the study?

Participation in this study will last approximately 45 minutes. About eight participants will take part in this research study.

What are the risks of taking part in this research study?

We do not believe there are any risks from participating in this research.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because this research can potentially improve the FYS.

How Will You Protect my Information?

A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality.

We will keep the records of this study confidential by storing one set of the data in the cloud on the researcher's google drive. A second set will be stored on an external hard drive, passworded and secured in a document cabinet at the researcher's home where only the researcher can access it. A third copy will be stored with the Center for Research and Doctoral Studies (CRDS). We will make every effort to keep your records confidential. However, there are times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of your records.

The following people or groups may review your study records for purposes such as quality control or safety:

1. Representatives of Houston Christian University and the HCU Institutional Review Board
2. Federal and state agencies that oversee or review research (such as the HHS Office of Human Research Protection or the Food and Drug Administration)

The results of this study may also be used for teaching, publications, or presentations at professional meetings. If your individual results are discussed, your identity will be protected by using a code number or pseudonym rather than your name or other identifying information.

Will I be compensated for being part of the study?

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. You cannot withdraw information collected prior to your withdrawal.

If you are a Houston Christian University student or faculty/staff member, you may choose not to be in the study or to stop being in the study before it is over at any time. This will not affect your grades or job status at Houston Christian University. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research study.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact: Joy Oguchi (email: oguchijoy@hbu.edu Phone: 713 597 1035) or Dr. Kristie Cerling (Email: kcerling@hbu.edu Phone: 281 649 3322)

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Houston Christian University Institutional Review Board

Email: irb@hbu.edu

Signature

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy along with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Subject

Date

APPENDIX C:**Demographic Data Questionnaire**

1. **Age:** 18 – 25 25 – 30 Above 30

2. **Gender:** Female Male

3. **Ethnicity:**
 African American Asian American Hispanic or Latino
Biracial
 Native American or Pacific Islander White, Non-Hispanic
Other

4. **Student Status:** (Tick all that apply)
 First Generation (you are first person in your family to attend college)
 International Student

5. **Academic Load:**
How many credit hours did you take during the first semester of your first year?
 Less than 12 credit hours 12 credit hours More than 12 credit
How many credit hours are you taking this semester?
 Less than 12 credit hours 12 credit hours More than 12 credit

6. **What was your living arrangement during your first year?**
 On Campus Off Campus (commuter)

7. **Did you participate in at least one club, organization, or Greek life during your first year?** Yes. No

8. Are you currently participating in at least one club, organization, or Greek life?

Yes No

APPENDIX D:**Focus Group Discussion Prompts**

1. Did participating in the FYS help you overcome any obstacles or challenges during your transition to university? If yes, please explain.
2. How did participating in the FYS help you navigate the university's policies, resources, and services?
3. How did the FYS impact your sense of belonging and connection to the university community?
4. How did the FYS support your emotional and social well-being?
5. What were the other components of the FYS?
6. Which other components of the FYS did you find most beneficial to your transition and integration into university?

APPENDIX E:**Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe your transition to university during your first year?
2. How did participating in the FYS help you understand and adjust to academic expectations of the university?
3. What would you consider the most significant benefits of participating in the FYS?
4. What role did your FYS instructor and peers play in your transition and integration?
5. How did participating in the FYS help you feel supported and successful in your transition to university?
6. How do you perceive your transition experience would have been different without the FYS?

APPENDIX F:**FYS 1300 COURSE SYLLABUS**

Fall 2023

Office of the Provost

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The ultimate purpose of college is student learning. The purpose of the first-year seminar is to help the new student begin exploring how to make his or her education, both in and out of the classroom, relevant and meaningful. Emphasis is on assisting the student in becoming aware of the spectrum of learning opportunities at this university, directing the student to the academic, social, cultural, recreational, and spiritual resources and opportunities available to them within the university, and teaching the new student how to effectively utilize and take part in these as a new member of the university community.

Prerequisite(s): None

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Name: Dr. First-Name Last-Name

E-mail: name@xyz.edu (*best way to reach me*)

Office Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX

Office Location: XXXX

Office Hours: Email to set up an in person or virtual appointment; Appointments must be requested at least 24 hours in advance

Day(s) and Time Course Meets: MWF 11:00–11:50 am

Day and Time of Final Exam: Thursday, 12/14 10:15 – 12:15 pm

PEER MENTOR INFORMATION

Name: First-Name Last-Name

E-mail: name1@xyz.edu

Cell Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX

LEARNING RESOURCES

Teach Yourself How to Learn: Strategies You Can Use to Ace Any Course, McGuire, ISBN 9781620367568

XYZ Student Handbook, <https://xyz.edu/student-life/student-services-resources-handbook/>

Unless otherwise noted, all course material such as the syllabus, PowerPoints, assignment links, etc. are available in Blackboard. Course announcements will be sent via Blackboard.

COURSE OUTCOMES

The objective of the Freshman Year Seminar is to introduce students to holistic wellness through spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, social, financial, occupational, and environmental connections, opportunities, and learning. Importance is placed on teaching first-year students how to effectively utilize these skills and resources as a new member of the university community.

1. Students will explore growth mindset theory by implementing selected metacognitive strategies, behaviors, and habits in first-semester classes in order to positively influence future implementation of the same in their chosen course of study.
2. Students will be introduced to how the Gospel of Jesus Christ shapes their lifelong formation.
3. Students will develop financial literacy knowledge and decision-making skills to help make informed financial decisions through problem solving, critical thinking, and an understanding of key financial facts and concepts.
4. Students will understand their authentic social self, develop social skills, and engage in social opportunities.
5. Students will engage in physical activities and be exposed to principles of healthy living.
1. Students will be able to discover their strengths and develop disciplines and tools to promote resiliency.
2. As good stewards, students will participate in activities that respect and improve their environment.
3. Students will explore their personal strengths and evaluate how they connect to their academic, personal, and professional goals.

RELATION TO DEPARTMENTAL GOALS AND PURPOSES

The Freshman Year Seminar Committee has designed this course to:

- Prepare students for academic success and degree completion
- Help students develop resiliency in all facets of life
- Provide opportunities for students to discover their personal strengths, potential, and calling

- Assist the cultivation of meaningful personal relationships with students, faculty, staff, and God

RELATION TO COLLEGE GOALS AND PURPOSES

The ultimate purpose of college is student learning. The objective of the Freshman Year Seminar is to help students begin to explore how to make education, both in and out of the classroom, relevant and meaningful.

RELATION TO THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

- The mission of XYZ University is to provide a learning experience that instills in students a passion for academic, spiritual, and professional excellence as a result of our central confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”
- Pursuant to our University mission, all XYZ courses are taught in accordance with the Preamble to the By-laws the University’s Foundational Documents (“The Ten Pillars: A Christian University and Its Worldview”).
 - Provide a supportive atmosphere for students from all backgrounds that foster intellectual and social interaction in the teaching–learning process.
 - Encourage academic excellence, and promote the development of critical and creative thinking, responsibility, and continuing interest in learning.

TOPICAL OUTLINE

FYS 1300 Fall 2023 MWF 11:00 – 11:50 am ROOM

Dr. First Name Last Name name@xyz.edu Office Hours: Email to set up an appointment (≥ 24 hours advanced notice required)

| Week | MONDAY | WEDNESDAY | FRIDAY | Assignments (Sun) | University Notes |
|------------------|--|------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| 1 | 8/28 Course Introduction College Etiquette | 8/30 Dunham Theater Convocation | 9/1 Get to Know Campus How to Husky | 9/3 Read Ch 1 & 2 *Quiz 1 | 9/1: Last day to add for fall |
| Dimension | <i>Social, Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Social, Intellectual</i> | | |
| 2 | 9/4 <i>Labor Day Holiday</i> | 9/6 Dunham Theater Convocation | 9/8 Ch 1 & 2: College Expectations | 9/10 *Safe Colleges Read Ch 3 *Quiz 2 | 9/4: Labor Day Holiday 9/1: 90% Refund for Fall drop deadline |
| Dimension | <i>n/a</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Social, Intellectual</i> | <i>Social</i> | |

| | | | | | |
|------------------|--|---|--|--|--|
| 3 | 9/11 Ch 3: Metacogniti on Visit from the Tutoring Center (1 st Sections) | 9/13 Dunham Theater Convocation | 9/15 New Experiences Academic Story Visit from the Tutoring Center (2 nd Sections) | 9/17 *Academic Story Read Ch 4 (Study Cycle) *Quiz 3 | 9/11: 75% Refund for Fall drop deadline 9/13: Census date/Drop w/o a “W” deadline 9/13: 50% Refund for Fall drop deadline |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Environment al, Intellectual</i> | <i>Intellectual</i> | |
| 4 | 9/18 Ch 4: Study Cycle & Retrieval Practice | 9/20 Dunham Theater Convocation | 9/22 Plant Your Roots Web of Connection s | 9/24 Read Ch 4 (Bloom’s) *Quiz 4 | |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Social, Vocational</i> | | |
| 5 | 9/25 Ch 4: Bloom’s | 9/27 Dunham Theater Convocation | 9/29 McNair Hall Advising Season Kickoff | 10/1 *Advising Reflection | |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Intellectual</i> | |
| 6 | 10/2 Spirituality in College Ignite Introduction | 10/4 Dunham Theater Convocation | 10/6 3 Circles Video Testimonies | 10/8 *Ignite Reflection Read Ch 5 *Quiz 5 | 10/3 – 10/5: Ignite Convocation |
| Dimension | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | |
| 7 | 10/9 Ch 5: Metacogniti on | 10/11 Dunham Theater Convocation | 10/13 Husky Stadium Field Day | 10/15 *Field Day Reflection Read Ch 7 & 8 *Quiz 6 | |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Physical</i> | <i>Physical</i> | |
| 8 | 10/16 | 10/18 Dunham Theater | 10/20 <i>Fall Break Holiday</i> | 10/22 *3 Emotionall | 10/20: Fall Break |

| | | | | | |
|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Ch 7 & 8: Stress & Anxiety Mental Health | Convocation | | y Healthy Choices | |
| Dimension | <i>Physical, Emotional</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>n/a</i> | <i>Emotional</i> | |
| 9 | 10/23 Learning Plan and Reflection | 10/25 Dunham Theater Convocation | 10/27 Holcombe Mall & Brown Quad Homecoming Carnival & Lunch | 10/29 *Budget *Carnival Reflection | |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Social</i> | <i>Financial, Social</i> | |
| 10 | 10/30 Resume Building Financial Budget | 11/1 Dunham Theater Convocation | 11/3 McNair Hall Part-Time Job Fair | 11/5 *Resume *Part-Time Job Fair Reflection Read Ch 6 *Quiz 7 | 11/3: Drop with a “W” deadline |
| Dimension | <i>Vocational, Financial</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Vocational</i> | <i>Vocational</i> | |
| 11 | 11/6 Ch 6: Growth Mindset Growth Mindset Project Introduction | 11/8 Dunham Theater Convocation | 11/10 Presentation Example Growth Mindset Project Work Day | 11/12 n/a | 11/8 to 11/10: 10:00 pm-6:00 pm: Pre-Priority Registration for Jan 2022 Fastterm/Spri ng 2022/May 2022 Fastterm (Athletes, Honors, Veterans, TRiO) |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual, Social</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Intellectual, Social</i> | <i>n/a</i> | |
| 12 | 11/13 Growth Mindset | 11/15 Dunham Theater Convocation | 11/17 Community service | 11/19 n/a | 11/12-11/15: 10:00 pm: Priority Registration |

| | | | | | |
|------------------|---|--|---|---|---|
| | Project Work Day | | Introduce Husky Storehouse Service Project | | begins for January 2022 Fastterm/Spring 2022/May 2022 Fastterm based on completed hours |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual, Social</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Environmental</i> | <i>n/a</i> | |
| 13 | 11/20 Friendsgiving | 11/22 Dunham Theater Convocation | 11/24 <i>Thanksgiving Holiday</i> | 11/26 *Growth Mindset PowerPoint | 11/22: 1:00 pm – 11/24: Thanksgiving Break |
| Dimension | <i>Social</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>n/a</i> | <i>n/a</i> | |
| 14 | 11/27 Growth Mindset Presentations | 11/29 Dunham Theater Convocation | 12/1 Growth Mindset Presentations | 12/3 <i>n/a</i> | |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual, Vocational</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Intellectual, Vocational</i> | <i>n/a</i> | |
| 15 | 12/4 End of Semester To-Do List Final Exam Schedule | 12/6 Dunham Theater Convocation | 12/8 Christmas Celebration Collect Husky Storehouse boxes | 12/10 *EOS To-Do List *Service Project Reflection | 12/8: Last Class Day |
| Dimension | <i>Intellectual</i> | <i>Spiritual</i> | <i>Social</i> | <i>Intellectual Environmental</i> | |
| Finals | | Thursday, 12/14 10:15–12:15 pm Final Exam | | | 12/12–12/15: Final Exams |
| Dimension | | <i>Intellectual</i> | | | |

*Assignment is due online by 11:59 pm

Whole Husky Icons indicate Badges earned from the corresponding assessment(s)

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

The course is worth 1000 points.

| Assignment | Learning Objective | Total Points | Due Date | Details |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Attendance and Participation | 1-8 | 129 | n/a | 3 points per 43 days |
| Quizzes | 1-8 | 70 | Various | 10 points per 7 quizzes |
| Safe Colleges | 7 | 50 | 9/10 | |
| Academic Story | 1 | 50 | 9/17 | |
| Advising Reflection | 4, 6, 8 | 50 | 10/1 | |
| Ignite Reflection | 2 | 50 | 10/8 | |
| Field Day Reflection | 4, 5 | 50 | 10/15 | |
| Three Emotionally Healthy Choices | 6 | 50 | 10/22 | |
| Budget Activity | 3 | 50 | 10/29 | |
| Carnival Reflection | 4 | 50 | 10/29 | |
| Resume | 8 | 50 | 11/5 | |
| Part-Time Job Fair Reflection | 4, 6, 8 | 50 | 11/5 | |
| Growth Mindset Presentation | 1 | 100 | 11/26 (PowerPoint) 11/27, 12/1 (In class) | Includes PowerPoint Submission |
| End of Semester To-Do List | 1, 6 | 50 | 12/10 | |
| Service Project Reflection | 2, 4, 7 | 50 | 12/10 | |
| Final Exam | 1-8 | 101 | 12/14 | Multiple choice & Essay portions |
| Total | | 1000 | | |

The grading and point scale is as follows:

A = 895–1000; B = 795–894; C = 695–794; D = 595–649; F = below 595

CREDIT HOUR DEFINITION

The University definition of a credit hour is found at xyz.edu/CreditHours

TEACHING STRATEGIES

The goal of the Freshman Year Seminar is to create a holistic learning experience for first-year students. Various teaching strategies will be implemented in this course. Primarily, students will learn via discussion, collaborative learning, presentations, and writing assignments. Material will also be disseminated through online assignments and videos. Students will be introduced to and encouraged to implement metacognitive learning strategies and a growth mindset, as set in the university's Mission: Metacognition QEP, to aid their academic success.

ATTENDANCE, ABSENCE, AND TARDY POLICIES

Regular attendance in class is important for student success, and it is university policy that students must attend class. The University attendance and absence policy is located in the catalog at xyz.edu/AttendancePolicies

There are 43 days of instruction. Per the university policy, missing 11 or more class periods will result in failing the course regardless of your grade in the course. Attendance is taken at the beginning of class via an online activity. Unexcused absences will result in no credit for attendance that day. Arriving late to class after the online activity has closed will result in half credit for attendance that day, no exceptions.

ACTION REQUIRED BY STUDENT TO DROP A CLASS

The University procedure for dropping a class is located in the catalog at xyz.edu/Drop.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

XYZ University complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding students with disabilities. The University policy concerning academic accommodations is located in the catalog at xyz.edu/AcademicAccommodations.

FAMILY EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS AND PRIVACY ACT (FERPA)

XYZ University complies with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), as stated in the catalog at xyz.edu/FERPA.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY

XYZ students are expected to follow the University academic integrity policy found in the catalog at xyz.edu/AcademicIntegrity.

ACADEMIC GRIEVANCE POLICY AND PROCESS

XYZ students have a right to academic grievance as defined in the policy and process located in the catalog at xyz.edu/AcademicGrievance.

PLAGIARISM SOFTWARE

The University utilizes Turnitin and iThenticate to help students and instructors detect inadequate citation or plagiarism in written assignments. These platforms promote a greater awareness of academic integrity and are a tool to help support students as they grow in producing original academic writing and research.

Turnitin is integrated within Blackboard, and writing assignments for this course will be submitted through the Turnitin Feedback Studio with Originality. When students click on an assignment that utilizes this tool, they will be directed to the Turnitin platform. Assignments must be submitted through Turnitin, accessed through the Blackboard course, before the date and time the assignment is due and will not be graded without meeting this requirement.

Certain assignments in some courses will also utilize iThenticate, a resource designed to assess the originality and integrity of multi-draft writing assignments, such as theses and dissertations. For those designated assignments, students accessing iThenticate will be directed to a separate site to submit their work for review. With iThenticate, students will be able to check their work up to five (5) times prior to final submission for assessment.

In accordance with FERPA and to best protect your privacy, personally identifying information beyond your name (e.g., Social Security number, ID Number, email address) should not be uploaded with the text of your assignments. Additional information about the privacy and security of Turnitin can be found at https://help.turnitin.com/Privacy_and_Security/Privacy_and_Security.htm.

User guides for Turnitin are available in the Blackboard ATOR. If you have further questions or encounter problems with Turnitin or iThenticate, please contact the Help Desk during normal operating hours for personalized support or submit a Help Desk ticket and a member of the Academic Technology team will provide support.

CHILDREN IN CLASSROOMS

In almost all instances, children are not allowed in the classroom nor are they allowed to be on campus unattended. Class sessions are for enrolled students only unless other arrangements are approved by the instructor in advance. For safety reasons, children are prohibited from all laboratories.

CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS

The classroom environment is to be conducive to learning and is under the authority of the instructor. In order to assure that all students have the opportunity to gain from the time spent in class, students are expected to demonstrate civil behavior in the classroom and show appropriate respect for the instructor and other students. Inappropriate behavior toward the instructor, in or out of the classroom, may result in a directive to the offending student to leave the classroom or the course entirely.

Classroom behaviors that disturb the teaching-learning experiences include the following behaviors: activated cellular phone or other device, demands for special treatment, frequent episodes of leaving and then returning to the class, excessive tardiness, leaving class early, making offensive remarks or disrespectful comments or gestures to the instructor or other students, missing deadlines, prolonged chattering, sleeping, arriving late to class, dominating discussions, shuffling backpacks or notebooks, disruption of group work, and overt inattentiveness. It is at the discretion of the instructor as to whether laptops will be allowed for use in the classroom.

PATHFINDER

To ensure your success, XYZ has implemented Pathfinder, a program that gives students and instructors the resources they need to track student progress. Your professor may use this platform to encourage your progress or express a concern. If a concern is raised, you should meet with your professor and/or advisor to discuss strategies for successful completion of this course and follow their recommendations.

EMAIL POLICY

All University and class email communication will be sent to your XYZ email account. You are responsible for checking this frequently. If you choose, you may reroute your XYZ email to another email address. Your emails should be in a professional format with correct spelling, capitalization, and grammar.

INCOMPLETE COURSE REQUEST

Only the dean of the college or school may grant incompletes and only to students who have a major documented emergency in the last few days of a semester. Students with excessive absences, which will result in failing the course, will not be allowed to take the final exam nor be eligible to receive an incomplete.

ACADEMIC CALENDAR

Academic Calendar

LATE WORK & TEST POLICY

Late work will be penalized. You should not miss any exams. If you are sick, you need to notify the professor in advance. The professor reserves the right to administer a different exam, deduct points for taking the exam late, and/or schedule the makeup for a later date. Missing an exam without giving prior notice will result in a zero for that test, with no makeup.

When noted, assignments may be accepted up to 7 days late with a maximum of 50% of the possible points.

STUDENT PERCEPTION OF INSTRUCTION

Students are encouraged to complete faculty appraisal forms as regularly administered by the University.