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## Implementation of a First-Year Seminar: Retention and Student Views of Advising and Engagement at a Small Midwestern University

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IMPLEMENTATION OF A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR: RETENTION AND STUDENT  
VIEWS OF ADVISING AND ENGAGEMENT AT  
A SMALL MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

December

2011

This dissertation submitted by Kristi Bitz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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Dean of the Graduate School

12-13-11

Date

## PERMISSION

Title            Implementation of a First-Year Seminar: Retention and Student Views of  
                  Advising and Engagement at a Small Midwestern University

Department    Teaching and Learning

Degree         Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions of a first-year seminar course as well as academic advising and other student engagement activities before and after the implementation of a first-year seminar course at a small Midwestern university. Retention rates prior to and after the implementation of the first-year seminar course were considered and comparisons of retention rates for students who completed the first-year seminar with students who did not complete the course were analyzed.

Research questions included:

1. What were student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course?
2. Was there a difference in advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students after the implementation of the first-year seminar course?
3. Did overall retention rates rise after implementation of the first-year seminar course?
4. Was there a difference in rates of retention for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course compared to those not enrolled?

Existing data was utilized and included National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results from freshmen during spring 2007 and spring 2009. Enrollment and retention data of freshmen, provided by the university under study, from 1993 through 2010 were reported. First-year seminar course evaluation information from fall 2008 and fall 2009 was analyzed.

Student retention increased after the first year of implementation of the first-year seminar course and fell after the second year of implementation. Student perceptions of advising were more favorable after the majority of the university incoming freshmen students participated in the first-year seminar course, which was taught by the student's academic advisor. A goal of the course was to increase student engagement, and NSSE results showed significant increases in engagement in service learning, advisor quality ratings, and perceptions that the university emphasized helping students cope with non-academic responsibilities. Overall perceptions of the course itself were favorable and were analyzed using two semesters of course evaluation data.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of college student retention is not new to higher education. Tinto (1993) wrote that between the first (1987) and second (1993) edition of his book titled, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, “The growing acceptance of the importance of student retention has been reflected in an explosion of research and policy reports seeking to better understand and address the forces that shape student retention in higher education” (p. ix). In spite of decades of research and program implementation aimed at keeping students in college, retention still remains at levels that are not optimal.

According to ACT (2009), national retention rates were 67.6% for students from their freshman to sophomore year at public bachelor degree granting institutions. “By the 1980s, programs designed to not just recruit students but to keep them through graduation had become common at colleges and universities throughout the United States” (Reyes, 1997, p. 36). Not only is it good for students to earn a higher education degree from the standpoint of employability and personal fulfillment, universities benefit fiscally when students remain at their college. Barefoot (2000) indicated that factors ranging from institutional survival to doing what is right for students have been the impetus for improving the first year of college. Unfortunately, students who drop out of college usually do so by the end of their first year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). A study of the literature on college student retention revealed two key components of student

persistence from freshman to sophomore year including solid academic advising and first-year experience programs.

### Academic Advising

Although the venue which offers academic advising services, such as faculty advisors or professional advising centers, varies among institutions of higher learning, providing students with someone on campus who can provide guidance and answer questions has been common to advising programs. Academic advisors help students clarify goals and values, understand the nature and purpose of higher education, provide information related to the specific institution of higher education, and help students with educational planning and monitoring (Crockett, 1978). Crockett (1978) emphasized the tradition of academic advising in higher education. He stated that since the beginning of colleges and universities, "students and faculty have interacted so that students could realize the educational benefits available to them" (p. 29). He reported a renewed interest in academic advising due in part to the recognition that academic advising is not a minor support service but an integral part of higher education. Crockett further stated that "a renewal of attention to academic advising was related to interest in student retention and that student retention increases are a by-product of academic advising" (p. 29).

Advising services were offered to students long before the service itself became a topic of research. Migden (1989) stated, "... institutions of higher education are becoming more aware of advising's role in the educational process as they confront such issues as student retention and students' personal growth and development" (p. 63). He further asserted, "The time may be right for academic advising to emerge as one of the vital ingredients in the total educational process" (p. 63).

Lau (2003) indicated that freshmen need more guidance and support and, therefore, academic advising is more important to them than to upper level students. Habley (1981) concluded, "The delivery of quality advising services can make a major contribution to the creation of a staying environment" (p. 49). An in-depth study of published literature on student persistence was conducted by ACT in 2004. Their analysis revealed academic self-confidence and motivation to be important contributors to college persistence. Academic counseling and advising were advocated as a way to strengthen academic self-confidence and motivation.

Academic advising alone will not likely produce the desired increases in student retention for freshman to sophomore year desired by many institutions of higher learning. First-year experience programs provide another way to deliver student support and produce increases in student persistence. Providing incoming students with ways to become familiar with campus services and expectations, connect with other incoming students, and enhance student success skills are often at the cornerstone of first-year seminar programs.

### First-Year Seminar

Freshman seminars, often referred to as first-year seminars, can take a variety of forms from theme-based courses to courses that provide an extended orientation to campus and enhance student success skills. They may last throughout the student's entire first year at college, the whole first semester, or for shortened amounts of time which conclude prior to the end of the first semester. They are offered for credit or no credit, and some carry letter grades while others are considered pass or fail courses. The courses, offered in a variety of formats, have been one vehicle utilized by colleges to



assist in increasing student retention. Davig and Spain (2004) indicated, “Freshman orientation classes appear to be one component of strong retention programs. The classes provide a unique opportunity for a student to interact with a professor and aid the student’s assimilation into college life” (p. 318).

Results from a First-Year Initiative (FYI) 2001 pilot study, developed by the Policy Center on the First Year of College and Educational Benchmarking, Inc., were reviewed by Swing (2002). The study revealed four types of first-year seminars: college transition themed, special academic themed (e.g., leadership), discipline based themed, and remedial/study skills themed. College transition themed courses accounted for 73% of the types of courses identified and included courses that covered topics related to “orientation to college, life transition, and academic skills” (Swing, 2002, p. 1). Student evaluations of effectiveness of the college transition themed courses revealed that among ten learning outcomes examined by FYI, this type of first-year seminar yielded the highest ratings. Learning outcomes included items such as improving out-of-class engagement, knowledge of academic services, improved study strategies, and connections with peers and faculty.

Not only do first-year seminar programs help students build relationships and acclimate them to campus, these programs have also contributed to increases in student retention. Review of several longitudinal studies point to an increased retention rate for students who participate in first-year seminar types of courses. Boudreau and Kromey (1994) completed a longitudinal study of retention and academic performance with students at the University of South Florida. Their study controlled for student differences by matching each freshman orientation course participant with a nonparticipant based on

several pre-enrollment characteristics such as race, sex, high school grade-point average, admission test scores and status, and major. "Findings show that course participants performed better than nonparticipants on measures of retention and academic performance . . ." (p. 444). Schnell (2003) also completed a longitudinal study of college graduation rates and found students who completed a first-year seminar graduated at a higher rate than matched group students who did not complete such a course. Data revealed by another longitudinal study comparing first-year seminar participation and retention was conducted by Williford, Chapman, and Kahrig (2001). They studied the Ohio University's freshman "University Experience" course. Ten years of data revealed that in most years, participants' year-end grade point averages, retention rates, and graduation rates were higher than those who did not participate in the course. Fidler and Hunter (1989) studied the University of South Carolina's first-year seminar course and retention rates of participants. Data collected regarding retention at the University of South Carolina revealed that students taking its University 101 freshman seminar achieved higher retention rates for 14 consecutive years. Ten of those years found significant differences in freshmen to sophomore year retention between participants and nonparticipants.

#### Combining Academic Advising with First-Year Seminar

While individually the importance of academic advising and first-year experience programs and their correlation with retention of students at colleges and universities is well documented, the possible synergistic effect of combining academic advising and first-year programs is not directly addressed in the literature. ACT (2004) has recommended an integrative approach to policy and program design and implementation

that addresses academic and non-academic factors related to college student retention (p. 20). They further indicated this integration may occur in first-year programs and academic advising. Nutt (2003) contended that retention efforts need to “recognize the value of academic advising to the success of students and the necessity that advising become a central part of a collaborative campus-wide focus on the success of our students” (p. 2). Crockett (1978) asserted that “dynamic advising programs are characterized by frequent high-quality contacts between adviser and advisee” (p.33). He stated that these interactions can take place in a small group format. By partnering a first-year seminar course with advisor contact, frequent interactions between advisor and advisee seem to be a natural by-product.

Several authors (ACT, 2004; Crockett, 1978; Nutt, 2003) supported collaboration and integration of programs and services for incoming and existing students at colleges and universities. Results of direct studies demonstrating how integrating first-year experience with academic advising may affect the outcome of student persistence were not available at the time of the writing of this paper.

#### Nature of the Problem

After several years of lower than expected retention rates for college freshman at one particular Midwestern university, resources were channeled toward methods of increasing student persistence. Historically learning centers, freshman-year programs, honors programs, career centers, and social and professional organizations, were some services offered to increase student success and persistence (Lau, 2003). In addition to the previously mentioned programs and services, a 2009 report issued by Noel-Levitz indicated, “students rated academic advising as one of their most important needs” (p.1).

At 4-year public institutions, which is the type of university studied in this paper, students rated academic advising higher than instructional effectiveness, safety and security, and eight other aspects of their educational experience.

Consideration of the literature and characteristics of the university lead to the implementation of a first-year seminar course taught by the student's academic advisor. After discussing various configurations for seminar groups, such as grouping based on student athletic status, at-risk status, or by intended college major, it was decided to place students in specific seminar groups based on majors that were indicated on their application. A faculty or staff advisor who was willing to teach the seminar, with preferred expertise in that particular major, would act as the instructor for the course and advisor for the students enrolled in that section of the course. The course was not set forth as an institutional requirement, although students were strongly encouraged to enroll.

Because there is a plethora of evidence that indicates students themselves, society, and our institutions of higher learning all benefit from an educated population, the undertaking of increasing retention at one particular Midwestern university was given priority. Literature regarding student persistence revealed first-year experience courses and academic advising to be key factors in student retention and were put forth as potential strategies for increasing retention at this particular university.

#### Research Questions

The research questions used in this study were as follows:

1. What were student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course?

2. Was there a difference in advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students after the implementation of the first-year seminar course?
3. Did overall retention rates rise after implementation of the first-year seminar course?
4. Was there a difference in rates of retention for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course compared to those not enrolled?

#### Purpose of the Study

Retention rates at a small Midwestern university were not at a level that compared favorably with other BA/BS granting public institutions nationally. For example, national retention rates (ACT, 2009) for institutions of this type from 1983 to 2009 ranged from a low of 66.4% to a high of 70%. For this particular institution, available data revealed retention rates as low as 51% and as high as 67% during the years 1993 through 2010. The university under study received a Title III strengthening institutions grant which included the implementation of a first-year experience program for incoming freshmen, in hopes of boosting retention rates. Since research has not only supported first-year seminars for improving retention, but also academic advising, it was decided to blend these activities. The model for delivering the first-year seminar included utilizing the freshman students' advisor as their instructor for the course. The course was implemented at the start of the fall 2008 semester.

The participants in the study included freshman enrolled at the university that was studied from fall 1993 through fall 2010. Some data focused on students who completed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) during spring 2007 and spring 2009, pre and post implementation of the first-year seminar. Retention data from fall 1993

through fall 2010 was considered. Qualitative data collected through student surveys of course participants during fall 2008 and fall 2009 was reported. An odds ratio analysis comparing retention of 2008 and 2009 course participants and non-participants was completed. An advising satisfaction survey was designed and piloted (Bitz, 2010) with fall 2009 first-year seminar course participants. The survey was evaluated using factor analysis, revised, and published and is discussed in Chapter V.

### Significance of the Study

The findings from this study impacted, for this particular university, whether institutional financial support for the first-year seminar program continued once grant funding ended. The findings also impacted the institution's consideration of making the first-year seminar course mandatory for all incoming freshmen students.

On a larger scale, the findings of this study added to the literature base regarding the effectiveness of first-year seminar courses where the model of advisor as the seminar instructor is utilized. Because findings suggested that students' perceptions of academic advising became more favorable and students who participated in the first-year seminar course persisted at greater rates than those who did not enroll in the course, this study provided additional support for the importance of academic advising and the first-year seminar. This study also contributed to the limited literature base that supports the benefit of the combination of these services.

### Delimitations of the Study

Analysis of engagement for purposes of this study was limited to course outcomes for the first-year seminar at the university under study. These engagement outcomes included an evaluation of: participation in service learning, quality of academic advising,

institutional assistance with coping with non-academic responsibilities, and career planning discussions with a faculty member or advisor. Additional delimitations in this study include the fact that this small Midwestern university's success with this program, or lack thereof, may not generalize to other universities. The study was not designed following an experimental model; therefore, causation cannot be determined. Other factors may have acted as confounding variables in this study, and it may be true that the program itself was not the cause for changes in reports of engagement or retention rates of freshman students.

### Organization of the Study

In the first chapter, this study was introduced and background was provided to lay the foundation for the purpose of the study. The nature of the problem was established as well as the purpose and significance of the study. The research questions clarified the direction of the study. The delimitations cautioned the readers with regard to generalizability of findings and potential confounding variables. The second chapter provides a literature review of benefits of student persistence and information regarding national retention rates. This chapter also summarizes the history of university academic advising, models of academic advising, and how the advisor/advisee relationship correlates with undergraduate student retention. The concept and history of first-year experience is discussed in Chapter II as well as models for delivery of first-year seminars. Chapter II concludes with literature findings regarding the integration of first-year seminar with academic advising. In Chapter III, the participant population, the instruments and methods used to collect data, and information regarding how the data was analyzed is discussed. Chapter IV presents an analysis of the data that was collected

and Chapter V provides a summary, discussion of findings, and recommendations for further study.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to compare data on student retention and student perceptions of engagement before and after the implementation of a first-year seminar course at a small Midwestern university. The study focused on incoming first-year, full-time freshmen.

Provided in this chapter is a history of academic advising and first-year experience in the United States. Models for providing advising and delivery of first-year seminars are also discussed in addition to how these two activities relate. A justification for the importance of first-year experience and academic advising in higher education, along with current and historical rates of student persistence are reported.

#### Benefits of Student Persistence

Retention of undergraduate students in higher education has been a focus area of research and publication over the past four decades (Tinto, 2006). However, Noel (1976) contended there were 50 years of mostly unproductive research on student retention. Both of these authors, prominent in the field of student attrition, agreed that when the study of student departure initiated, a student's departure from a college or university was considered a function of the student's failings. The view of students who did not persist was that they were less motivated or less able than those who did persist (Noel, 1976; Tinto, 2006). The 1970s brought a shift from "blaming the student" to evaluating the

characteristics of the institution. The sentiment shifted to one in which both the student and institution of higher learning shared a role in student persistence.

As the shift from “blaming the student” to consideration of the role of the institutions of higher education in student persistence became more salient, the impact of an educated population and the importance of student retention for the viability of our colleges and universities became more prominent. Not only is it important for society in keeping a competitive edge with other nations that colleges and universities produce well-educated individuals, but colleges and surrounding communities benefit financially from students who are retained at their institutions. In fact, it is more costly to recruit new students than to retain the students already enrolled in the university (Braunstein, Lesser, & Pescatrice, 2006).

Research supports that student tuition and fees contribute to the financial revenue of the university (Nabila, 2008; Porter & Swing, 2006). A student who is not retained no longer pays tuition and fees. Additionally, it is assumed that many students will purchase books through the university bookstore and patronize local businesses, which may benefit the university and the community where the university is located. Certain states tie state funding to retention, which many universities rely on for their sustainability. Measures of retention and/or persistence to graduation are asked for by some state accountability reports (Porter & Swing, 2006; Tinto, 2006). If colleges and universities are not retaining their students, they may face fiscal consequences. Many grants, which aid some colleges and universities with personnel and programming, consider retention rates and goals. If universities cannot prove program effectiveness that considers student retention, funding may be jeopardized or not appropriated.

Not only do society, colleges and universities, and their surrounding communities benefit from student persistence, but from a private business sector standpoint, retention in higher education is a profitable business for companies who develop measures for predicting retention of particular students. Companies offer consulting services for assisting institutions in their study of student retention and program implementation that focuses on raising student retention rates.

Thus far, the discussion of student retention has focused primarily on the benefits for the university itself and society when a student completes a college education; however, this is only part of the student retention picture. The student who either does not finish college or transfers to another institution, risks losing time and money by taking extra coursework for credits that either may not transfer or transfer in a way that would not help fulfill his or her general education or major requirements. Moreover, students who do not persist in college typically do not earn as much during their lifetime and “tend to develop lower self esteem” (Braunstein et al., 2006).

After realizing the benefits of student retention for the individual, the higher educational system and society, the discussion needs to shift to answer the question, “What can be done to increase student persistence?” Several factors have been shown to contribute to college student retention, but academic advising and first-year experience programs have been supported in the literature as being of utmost importance. Academic advising can help students connect with a concerned and knowledgeable faculty or staff member. The advisor/advisee relationship can provide guidance and support. First-year experience programs can help acclimate the student to campus, help the student identify valuable resources, and teach student success skills. This literature review focuses first

on student retention in general, then on academic advising and first-year experience programs as they relate to student retention.

### Undergraduate Student Retention

A report issued by ACT (2009) indicated that first- to second-year retention rates for college students fell between 53.7% and 80.6%, depending upon the institution type (private or public and highest degree offered). Students who drop out typically leave by the completion of the first year of college (Noel et al., 1985). In fact, several authors in the area of student retention have agreed that the first 6 weeks of college is the most critical time for the student with regard to making the decision of whether to stay or leave (Noel, 1976). According to the 2009 ACT report, the lowest freshman to sophomore retention rate was found within 2-year public schools (53.7%) and the highest was found at PhD granting private colleges (80.6%). In 2009, nationally, the mean overall retention rate was 65.9%. For BA/BS public universities, the retention rate for the freshman to sophomore year was 67.6%. From 1983 to 2009, retention rates nationally hit a low of 65.7% in 2008 and a high of 68.7% in 2007. From 1983 to 2009, the lowest recorded retention rate was 51.3% in 2004 for 2-year public institutions; and the highest recorded was in 1985 at PhD granting private colleges, with an average national retention rate of 85%. According to the 2009 data 2-year public and private schools nationally faced the lowest retention rates and PhD granting institutions, both public and private, boasted the highest rate of student persistence. In both public and private education, student retention rates increased as the level of the degree that the institution offers increased.

In order to address student persistence, the factors that interfere with student retention must be considered. A variety of personal and institutional factors contribute to

student persistence. Universities may have little to no control regarding the experiences incoming freshmen bring to the university. Prior academic preparation, personal experiences, family background and support that each student brings to college cannot be controlled by the university, but the manner in which the institution supports the students once they arrive and the services offered to the students, are well within the control of the university. The willingness of the student to access services is to some extent beyond the control of the university, yet the university can do some things to help students understand their own needs and feel more comfortable and willing to access the services they may need. The university can certainly shape what is offered to and requested of students, once they arrive. By doing so, the university can do much to create an environment that is welcoming and helpful and addresses the student's academic, social, and psychological needs.

Once students arrive on campus, they may find the college experience is not what they had anticipated. This dissonance between anticipation and actuality, if not resolved, can lead to lack of persistence. Additional factors that may contribute to student attrition include dissatisfaction with their professors or courses, feeling overwhelmed or unable to manage coursework or time, failing to find a mentor, or not finding a good social fit between students and their peers (Lau, 2003). The topic of student retention, after a student arrives on campus, proliferates the literature. Tinto (1993) offered a theory of student departure that included not only the role of the classroom experience and the college community, but also the underlying commitment of the student. He reported an "unexplored link between student learning experiences and student leaving" (p. 69).

Tinto emphasized the importance of a student's transition into college and integration into the college both from an academic and social integration standpoint.

In attempts to address the student retention picture, an abundance of literature designed to explore issues focusing specifically on advising, first-year experience, and retention have been published. "Student retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education" (Tinto, 2006, p. 1). The National Academic Advising Association and the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition are two entities that have supported the importance of advising and first-year experience with regard to student persistence. "The National Conference on Academic Advising was first held in 1977, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) was chartered in 1979 and the NACADA Journal: *The Journal of the National Academic Advising Association* followed in 1981" (Tuttle, 2000, p. 15). The National Academic Advising Association's Fall 2009 Journal issue highlighted the history of academic advising in the United States. In an article by Cook (2009), some noteworthy events in the history of academic advising that were delineated include: the 1986 publication of standards by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) for student services programs, establishment of the NACADA website in 1995, and the 1999 debut of *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, which is an on-line publication. By 2008, membership in NACADA had grown to over 10,000 members from all 50 states, Puerto Rico, Canada, and several other countries (NACADA, 2010).

A National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was established, which supports the publication of the *Journal of the First-*

*Year Experience and Students in Transition*. This journal was first published in 1989 (P. Burton, personal communication, July 27, 2010), although the first conference was held in 1982 with 175 educators present and was titled "A National Conference on The Freshman Seminar/Freshman Orientation Course Concept" (Gardner, 1986, p. 262). In 1983, the conference was renamed and the University of South Carolina's First National Conference on the Freshman Year Experience was held. In 1985, 700 participants attended from the United States, Canada, Scotland, England, and Northern Ireland (Gardner, 1986).

The specific factors of academic advising and first-year experience are so salient that organizations, conferences, and journals emerged to specifically address academic advising and first-year experience. Additionally, student retention as a whole has been the focus of the *Journal of College Student Retention*, which includes articles that address research on academic advising and first-year experience among other factors in student persistence, and was first published in 1999 (Seidman, n.d.). Information retrieved from the journal's web site indicated:

Current U.S. retention figures have not improved over time, even with large amounts of money expended by colleges and universities on programs and services to retain students. In spite of these programs and services, retention figures have not improved. In fact, only about 66% of high school graduates attend college and about 50% of those who attend college earn a bachelor degree. Put in real numbers, about 2,800,000 students will graduate from high school this year, 1,850,000 will attend college and only 925,000 of these students will earn a bachelor degree. Colleges are looking for ways to keep the students that they recruit. (¶ 9)

As a focus of much research, conferences, and other literature, student retention has claimed its niche in the field of student development. To not recognize its importance would be to overlook students who are not able to fulfill the goal they sought

when leaving high school. In order to address this need, consideration of the factors that contribute to student retention that are within the control of the higher education institution must be made.

The 2004 report published by ACT titled “What Works in Student Retention” indicated that the top three campus practices that had the greatest impact on student retention for all surveyed colleges included first-year programs. The first-year programs include freshman seminars, academic advising, and learning support (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). This was also the case when looking specifically at 4-year public institutions. The ACT report contains data requested from all 2,995 accredited, degree-granting 2-year and 4-year public and private colleges. Of those 2,995 institutions, 1,061 supplied data that was compiled and reported as indicated previously. This was ACT’s third national survey of this type.

In 2009, ACT embarked on a data-gathering quest similar to the one they published in 2004. This data was published in 2010 (Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, & Burkum). The data for this ACT study was reported in a slightly different manner. When college administrators identified the top three campus practices that impacted retention, all respondents identified at least one of the following: freshman seminar/university 101 for credit, tutoring programs, advising interventions with selected student populations, mandated course placement testing programs, or comprehensive learning assistance center/lab. For 4-year public universities, the top five highly rated practices for student retention included: advising interventions with selected student populations, tutoring, programs for honors students, mathematics center/lab, and freshman seminar/university 101 (credit).



Retention is important for students, colleges and universities, and society, and our United States retention rates are not at an acceptable level. We have been able to identify literature that specifically supports academic advising and first-year programs for entering freshman as a way to retain and support students. It is now the intent to focus specifically on those two aspects of the student retention picture.

## Academic Advising

### *The History of Academic Advising*

The historical foundations of academic advising have been divided into three eras (Kuhn, 2008). Frost (2000) described that from 1636, when Harvard was founded, through approximately 1870, advising was an undefined activity. During this time, advisors did not hold a separate role and students did not have elective course choices.

The second advising era was explained by Frost (2000) as a defined, but unexamined activity. This period began around 1870 and continued through about 1970. During this time, students began to have elective choices, but there was concern regarding preservation of the classical curriculum. Advisors were incorporated to help mediate this concern. Advising during this period focused on assisting students with registration, which primarily involved selection of appropriate courses. After 1970, academic advising as a field of research began.

### *Models of Academic Advising*

According to Frost (2000), academic advising became a defined and examined activity from the 1970s to the present. Several key individuals began the scholarship of research in academic advising. Crookston (1972) and O'Banion, Fordyce, and Goodwin (1972) published articles which "established student development as the theory base of

academic advising” (cited in Cook, 2009, p. 22). During the 1970s, two types of advising were described in the literature: developmental advising and prescriptive advising (Crookston, 1972). These two types of advising were still utilized and written about in 2011, with varying opinions regarding the role of an academic advisor in higher education.

Based on a student’s past history, he or she may appreciate or expect prescriptive advising (Pardee, 1994). Crookston (1972) compared prescriptive advising between an advisor and advisee as that of a patient and medical doctor relationship. The relationship is based on authority. The doctor prescribes and the patient complies. The advisor teaches and the student learns. This form of advising is very direct and the advisor may be perceived as an expert and competent, which may be comforting for some students. This may bode well for some faculty and “makes for a tidy relationship with the student in which the adviser may remain relatively uninvolved, if not aloof” (Crookston, 1972, p. 13).

Advisors who use a developmental approach to advising, advocated by Grites and Gordon (2000), provide assistance to students. This type of assistance entails course selection and helping students formulate and realize career and life goals. This approach concerns itself with the student as a whole person. Rather than telling the student what to do and acting as an expert, as is often the case with prescriptive advising, the advisor guides the student in making decisions. Developmental advising, as its name implies, is intended to help the student grow over time and become more and more developed and self-sufficient. The advising then becomes a shared responsibility of the student and the advisor. As collaboration takes place, the advisor becomes a resource and can help direct

the student to places where his or her needs can be addressed and questions can be answered (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). The student's educational, career, and personal goals are the focus in a developmental advisor/advisee relationship (Winston, Ender, & Miller, 1982). According to Heisserer and Parette (2002), "Helping students to feel valued requires a developmental approach in which the advisor expresses interest in the student, and uses effective communication, questioning, and referral techniques" (p. 75). Each student brings different experiences and views to his or her higher education institution and these differences are recognized by advisors who subscribe to a developmental model of academic advising. "Developmental advising focuses on student potentiality and student values, and how these values and potential relate to their academic goals" (Sullivan-Vance, 2008, p. 15).

Habley (1981) emphasized the critical and direct relationship between advising and retention by introducing the advisement-retention model. His model stipulates that advising must be student-centered and developmental. Habley (1981) emphasized, "Academic advising, properly delivered, can be the most utilized one-to-one service provided on any college campus" (p. 50). He indicated that retention efforts will be minimized if student development is not a priority in the academic advising system.

While prescriptive and developmental are among the styles of advising, Habley (1983) wrote about the institutional structure of advising. He described the following seven models for delivery of advising services: faculty only, supplementary, split, dual, total intake, satellite, and self-contained. The faculty only model, as its name implies, involves academic advising delivered to students by a faculty member assigned to them. The supplementary model builds upon the faculty only model in that, in addition to a

faculty member being assigned to students, an advising office is available for students for general academic information and resource and referral information. In a split model, certain groups of students (e.g., underprepared, undecided) are assigned to an advising office while other students are assigned to faculty advisors or an academic unit. With a dual model of academic advising, students are assigned to two advisors. One advisor assists the student with general educational requirement information and a faculty member provides advising information within the student's major courses. The total intake model assigns all students during a certain period of time, or until certain requirements are met, to an advising unit. After the time period has lapsed or the course or credit requirements are met, the student transfers to a professional or faculty advisor in a specific academic area. A satellite model allows each academic college or division to develop its own method of advising deliverance. Finally, the self-contained model delivers advising to students from enrollment to departure via staff members located in a centralized unit (Habley, 1983).

The literature and implementation of specific models for delivering academic advising services further supports its importance in the field. There has not been agreement regarding which model serves students better. Student characteristics, expectations, and university structure are all factors that are considered when academic advising models are implemented in higher education.

#### *The Advisor/Advisee Relationship and Retention*

In part, because research has found academic advising correlated with undergraduate retention (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Noel, 1976; Tinto, 1987), the advisor/advisee relationship and the process of providing advising to students has been

written about extensively. "Given the changes in the characteristics of their student bodies, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender, many institutions have begun to reexamine their retention strategies. This reexamination often has focused on the role of the academic advisor . . ." (Coll, 2008, p. 391).

Noel- Levitz (1995-2009) annually publishes results from surveys issued to students on campuses across the United States. Of those measured by the survey, an examination of 4-year public university data from 1995 through 2009, indicated throughout this entire span, student satisfaction inventory results revealed academic advising and instructional effectiveness as the most valued campus activities. These two items consistently rated higher than items such as campus safety and security, registration effectiveness, campus climate, campus life, service excellence, campus support services, and recruitment and financial aid. Only in 2005 did one other item rank as high as academic advising and instructional effectiveness in terms of mean importance, and that item was concern for the individual. From 1995 through 2009, instructional effectiveness and academic advising have tied, or at times one has ranked slightly higher than the other, in terms of the importance students give to these items. Overall, academic advising seems to matter either as much, or at times slightly more, than the quality of the instruction students receive at their chosen institution of higher learning.

Hunter and White (2004) purported, "Academic advising, well developed and appropriately accessed, is perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult who can help them shape such an experience" (p. 21). Light (2001) spent 10 years studying Harvard University seniors and concluded that, "Good advising may be the single most

underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (p. 81). Some colleges and universities have responded to the growing recognized importance and demand for advising by employing professional advisors, whose main role on campus is to provide academic advising services to students. Many universities house advising centers where students are able to drop in and meet with an advisor.

A 1996, a system-wide student satisfaction study of the 14 Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education institutions (Bailey, Bauman, & Lata, 1998) revealed four factors that were significantly different between persisters and nonpersisters. The four factors, in which satisfaction differed significantly between persisters and nonpersisters, included overall experience, campus community, faculty, and advising. This information was made available to the system institutions to help guide retention efforts. Advising can have an impact on at least two of these other three factors. A good experience with an academic advisor can affect a student’s overall experience as well as his or her experience with faculty. If a student’s advisor is a faculty member and that student sees his or her advisor as representative of faculty in general, a good experience with that faculty advisor would seem to lend itself to an overall favorable impression of faculty. An advisor, whether a faculty member or not, can assist a student with issues that may arise with faculty and help build bridges of assistance and understanding between the faculty member and the student.

When a university encourages a strong focus on advising services delivered to college students, college professors who find themselves in the role of advisor may struggle with how advising fits into their schema of a college professor. Academic advising, as a form or component of teaching (where there are learning outcomes and in

some cases even an advising syllabus), can help blend these two expectations (teaching and advising) that are often given to faculty in university settings. In 1972, Crookston indicated that the variety of functions and roles an advisor holds lends itself to, not only advising, but teaching as well. Crookston stated, "Advising is viewed as a teaching function based on a negotiated agreement between the student and the teacher in which varying degrees of learning by both parties to the transaction are the product" (p. 17). About 35 years later, Hurt (2007) wrote, "In every way that matters, advising is a form of teaching" (p. 36). Appleby (2001) contended, "The knowledge, skills, and characteristics displayed by effective teachers are essentially the same as those exhibited by effective advisers" (p. 4). According to Pizzolato (2008), using an advising as teaching model can help students see themselves as people who can construct their own knowledge without having to have knowledge fed to them by someone else. In addition, students learn that there are often many ways to view a given situation. Obtaining the skills of knowledge construction and being able to see multiple views can help students realize options for their own future. Noel (1976) reviewed one university's retention committee efforts and noted that, "academic advising may be the most important kind of teaching done by the faculty" (p. 33). When academic advisors have a good skill set for the activity of academic advising and realize the importance of that relationship in terms of student retention and student growth and development, that relationship can be critical.

ACT (2004) reviewed 400 research studies on postsecondary retention. Of these studies, 109 met their criteria for inclusion in their larger analysis. Their criteria included studies that "examined the relationship between non-academic factors and postsecondary retention, focused on full-time students enrolled in 4-year United States postsecondary

institutions, and used standardized measures and reported all of the pertinent study information” (p. 5). The result of their analysis indicated, “College retention and performance are also influenced by non-academic factors, such as academic self-confidence, achievement motivation, institutional commitment, and social support” (p. 13). Cited as factors in building academic self-confidence and motivation are academic counseling and advising.

Having taken an extensive look at the importance of academic advising with regard to student persistence as well as student growth and development, one must also consider another factor supported by literature in the student retention puzzle: first-year experience.

#### First-Year Experience

Included in the argument for the importance of academic advising in student retention demonstrated through research by ACT (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Habley et. al. 2010), first-year programs were also mentioned by university respondents as a key factor in student retention efforts. In 1986, Gardner declared, “A movement is taking place in American higher education to change the way colleges and universities treat, welcome, assimilate, support, and most importantly, inform their freshman students in this new dawning age of information” (p. 261). The movement Gardner was referring to was the freshman-year experience. The regular college curriculum may not provide the kind of introduction to the university that some students need (Gordon & Grites, 1984). Some may assume that traditional-aged freshman college students transform from a child living in their parents’ home to a self sufficient adult upon entering college, but that is not always the case. Students may need guidance and direction, not only with finding their



way around campus, but also with life management types of skills. “Early and intrusive support for students is one institutional characteristic known to enhance retention; the freshman orientation seminar can provide this early and intrusive support” (Cuseo, 1991, p. 1). Freshman seminars are often structured to help guide entering freshman with regard to navigating the college campus and further developing their skills to live independently and responsibly. In order to be integrated into the campus culture, students need to know what opportunities and assistance are available, and freshman seminars can assist students with these needs. If students’ departure can be caused in part from a lack of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993), a course that assists students in those areas may increase the likelihood that the student will persist.

#### *History of First-Year Experience*

Activities attempting to help acclimate students to the university are not a new phenomenon. In 1888, New England’s Boston University introduced a “freshman seminar” concept to help its incoming students develop college survival skills. Iowa State followed in 1900. In 1911, Reed College was the first college to offer credit for such a course (Gardner, 1986). Although the concept of a class to facilitate the incoming student’s adjustment to college dates back over 100 years, the actual study of this effect on student satisfaction and retention dates back just several decades. At the time the first volume of *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) was published, there were few research projects to review (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). The second volume (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) contained a synthesis of many research studies that had been conducted on the first-year seminars. “They found substantial evidence indicating that first-year programs increase persistence from the first to second year of

college” (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006, p. 26). Gaff (1997), in an article written about the need for reform in higher education, discussed five examples where “effectiveness and efficiency intersect” (p. 17). Freshman year program was listed first, as one of five examples.

The University 101 freshman orientation seminar at the University of South Carolina was developed in 1972 and has been a voluntary, three-credit, pass/fail course.

The course

was founded in reaction to the large student riots which racked that institution in 1970 and was an effort to try to change student attitudes toward the University in terms of those attitudes becoming more positive and less hostile. It was also an effort to have in place by the early 1980s a significant retention vehicle. (Gardner, 1986, p. 269)

#### *Research on First-Year Experience*

A 16-year analysis of the retention rates of freshmen to their sophomore year of participants versus nonparticipants in University 101 was studied by Fidler (1991). During the study, participation in the course ranged from one third to one half of the university’s incoming freshman class. Because the course was voluntary, the author attempted to control for a variety of variables in his analysis, including race, sex, course load, academic ability, and motivation to stay in college. He found that during 11 of the 16 years studied, retention of participants was significantly higher than nonparticipants. For the other five years, participants returned for their sophomore year at a higher rate than nonparticipants, but not at a rate that was statistically significant. “Participants, regardless of race or sex, were better retained than nonparticipants. In addition, participants had lower academic ability, higher course loads, and no differences in motivation” (p. 7). This would refute arguments that participants in the freshman

seminar were retained at higher rates because they selected the course due to higher motivation to complete a college degree or better grades in the first place. Graduation rates for University 101 participants versus nonparticipants were also studied (Shanley & Witten, 1990). The authors of this study looked at 2,776 students who were enrolled during the 1979 fall semester. Twenty-eight percent were seminar participants and 72% were not. Shanley and Witten found that after seven years, the University 101 participants' graduation rate was 56%, while the graduation rate for nonparticipants was 51%.

In a matched comparison group study, Schnell and Doetkott (2003) found significantly ( $p < .001$ ) greater retention for participants in their institution's first-year seminar course over four cohort years of study. In their study, "each of the 927 seminar participants was matched with a nonparticipant on the basis of pre-enrollment characteristics including American College Testing (ACT) composite scores, high school rank, size of high school graduating class, and classification on academic major" (p. 384).

Not all studies have revealed higher retention rates for students enrolled in freshman seminar courses. In 1998, Hendel (2001) studied 1,733 freshman students at a Research I, urban, public university to determine whether there were differences in student satisfaction between students who enrolled in the university's first-year experience course versus those who did not enroll. Using a logistic regression model, seminar participation was one variable in the prediction of retention. "Results of t-tests between the two groups of students indicated statistically significant differences at  $p < .05$  for 15 of the 92 items on the Student Experiences Survey" (p. 6). For all but one item, the first-year seminar participants demonstrated the more positive responses. Most of the

significant differences that were found focused on academic advising evaluation. In Hendel's study, retention from first year to second year was not affected by seminar participation. His results did indicate greater satisfaction of seminar participants with some aspects of university life, but did not show an effect on retention.

Gardner (1936) indicated that freshman-year experience programs "represent a deliberately designed attempt to provide a rite of passage in which students are supported, welcomed, celebrated, and ultimately (hopefully), assimilated" (p. 266). These programs provide an opportunity for the university to sell itself again to the student and help build a foundation for the student, upon which the next several years can be built. Freshman-year experience programs are intended to recognize that students are different in a variety of ways, yet their needs also overlap upon coming to college. The first-year seminar, although often sharing a common goal of acclimating a student to college and building relationships, can take a variety of forms.

#### *First-Year Seminar Models*

First-year seminars take a variety of forms. A summary of the *2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars* (Tobolowsky, 2008) found most higher education institution respondents (968 of the 2,646 surveys that were mailed out were returned for a 36.6% response rate), offered a first-year seminar (84.8%). Seminars were mandatory in some institutions (46%) and voluntary in others. They were offered for credit toward graduation (92.2%), or no credit. If credit was offered, a range of 1-credit (42.5%) to 4-credit seminars were typically offered at various institutions across the United States. Three credit courses were the most frequently offered (32.7%), next to the 1-credit

variety. Some courses were letter graded (82%) and some issued pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory types of grading.

The content of first-year seminars vary from theme based courses to those that focus predominately on student success types of skills and an extended orientation (57.9%), although the trend since 1988 is that of more academic seminars (Tobolowsky, 2008). The student success types of courses focus on academic skills development topics such as time management, study skills, note taking, critical thinking, and career planning. The instructor for the course may be a student affairs professional or faculty member who may also act as the student's academic advisor (31.9%). At 90% of the responding institutions, faculty teach the first-year seminar and 72% reported that student affairs or other campus professionals also teach the course. In many cases, there are multiple seminar sections offered with a blend of these employees, faculty and student affairs professionals, teaching the seminars. Seminar classes tend to be small, with 85% of respondents indicating enrollment of 10 to 25 students.

Swing (2002) summarized five types of first-year seminars. He considered in his essay the work of Betsy Barefoot and the 2001 First-Year Initiative (FYI) pilot study, which was a grant-funded initiative (Porter & Swing, 2006). The five types of first-year seminars Swing discussed, and the percentages of colleges reporting such types, were College Transition themed (73%), Special Academic themed (14%), Discipline-Based themed (8%), Remedial/Study Skills themed (0%), and Mixed (5%). College transition themed courses orient students to the campus and college and provide information and discussion on the transition and adjustment issues related to this change in students' lives. Special academic themed courses, rather than focusing on college transition issues, focus

on a special theme of study. Discipline-based themed courses serve as an introduction to an area of study or department. Remedial/study skills themed courses, as their name implies, focus on basic study skills. Five percent of the 62 campuses in the 2001 pilot study were coded as mixed because less than 80% of the sections were of the same type.

Of the 10 learning outcomes measured by the FYI 2001 pilot study reviewed by Swing (2002), college transition themed courses were rated the highest overall on learning outcomes by students. The learning outcomes were measured by the percentage of students who indicated a “highly effective” rating. The learning outcomes included: improved knowledge of campus policies/procedures, improved academic/cognitive skills, improved critical thinking skills, improved connections with faculty, improved knowledge of wellness issues, improved connections with peers/others, improved knowledge of academic services, improved managing of time/priorities, improved out-of-class engagement, and improved study strategies. Given the nature of the college transition themed courses and the type of learning outcomes studied, the findings of the study may not be surprising.

First-year experience courses often include components that attempt to help integrate the student into the university. Astin (1984) presented a theory of student development based on student involvement. He defined student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Astin’s theory promotes the value of the work that the student does in and out of class, rather than focusing on the work of the educator. By focusing on the time and energy students put into learning, Astin’s theory of student involvement began to form. His theory was derived from previous research on college dropout by Astin

(1975), which led him to conclude that factors related to student persistence in college implied involvement in college. Conversely, he found that factors contributing to college dropout suggested a lack of involvement in college. In his 1975 work, he also found that college “fit” was important. When students can identify with the college, it is a good “fit.” When there is a good “fit”, involvement comes easier and persistence is more likely.

Astin (1984) utilized the term “involvement” rather than “motivation”. It may be easier to provide opportunities to “involve” students rather than figuring out ways to “motivate” them. The term engagement, as measured by a variety of instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), has been used synonymously with the term involvement. Engagement has been shown to matter, especially during the first year (Tinto, 2001; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Many first-year experience courses attempt to involve students through various assignments in and out of class. Oftentimes, courses have event attendance and/or service learning components which encourage the students to get involved in the larger university community.

Cuseo (1991) emphasized a supportive conclusion regarding the value of the first-year seminar:

Arguably, there may be more empirical research supporting the value of the freshman orientation seminar than for any other single course offered in higher education, simply because traditional courses have never had to document their value empirically; the mere force of tradition and departmental territoriality assure their perpetual place in the college curriculum. (p. 3)

Although the research on first-year seminars does not in its entirety support a positive effect on student retention, there is evidence that it does support persistence. Additional benefits to student development cannot be overlooked.

## Partnering Academic Advising with the First-Year Seminar through the Advisor as Instructor Model

Factors affecting freshman student retention, such as academic advising and first-year experience programs have been studied extensively, but research that involves the blending of advising with first-year experience is scarce. Although considered a best practice (R. Robbins, personal communication July 22, 2010), minimal research exists to support or refute a model for delivering advising services through first-year experience course instruction, where the course instructor also serves as the student's advisor. Cuseo (1991) stated, "An even more intrusive approach to ensure regular contact between students and their academic advisor is to have the course instructor's advisees enroll in his/her section" (p. 8). It is known, through the data reported in the summary of the 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars (Tobolowsky, 2008), that 31.9 % of first-year seminars are taught by a student's academic advisor. Beyond that, comparisons between seminar formats regarding the advisor as the instructor for the course versus a nonadvisor as the course instructor appear to be nonexistent.

It seems logical that advisor/advisee contact can be increased when a student's advisor is also his or her seminar instructor. A typical 1-credit seminar would meet once a week over the course of a semester. Once-a-week contact between an advisor and advisee would not be typical, but it becomes a reality when advisor contact is partnered with a weekly scheduled course experience. Many excellent academic advisors may not be afforded the opportunity to be of much service to an advisee simply because of the limited amount of contact the advisor may have with his or her advisee. When a course that meets each week is taught by the student's advisor, that student should have multiple interactions with his or her advisor over the course of a semester. The



transition/orientation type of seminar, in which the advisor serves as the seminar instructor, affords the advisor the opportunity to provide large group advising covering topics such as career planning, campus resources, campus and community involvement, and college student success skills.

Research supports freshman-year courses and advising as important components for increasing student retention, which was originally the primary goal for the implementation of a first-year seminar course at the university that was studied. The University under study received a 5-year Title III grant in 2007 for strengthening the institution. A portion of the grant included the development and delivery of a first-year experience course. Interested parties spent approximately four months discussing how the seminar should be delivered and the content to include. Once a delivery and content plan was solidified, it was presented to a group of student tutors for input. The student response was positive and indicated that the format and content were congruent with what the student tutors believed such a course should include.

Although research supporting utilizing the academic advisor as the first-year seminar instructor does not exist, it was the model chosen by the institution under study. Those who provided input into the format for the first-year seminar for this campus, which included administrators, faculty, coaches, and housing authorities, believed this format would streamline the advising process. After reviewing literature regarding the importance of academic advising and first-year seminars with regard to freshman student retention, it was decided to blend academic advising with first-year seminar by designating student academic advisors as instructors for the first-year seminar course. A synergistic effect was anticipated.

The importance of first-year seminars and academic advising has been studied for many years and has been proven to be an integral piece of the student retention puzzle. First-year seminars have often been utilized to help students acclimate to their chosen university and to understand not only the expectations of college students, but also opportunities available to assist incoming students. Academic advisors, although they come from different backgrounds and might see their roles a bit differently, can offer support and guidance to students as they navigate their way through the university.

A program designed to blend academic advising with a first-year seminar course at a small Midwestern university is the focus of this paper. The seminar course was implemented during fall 2008. National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) data for freshmen pre and post implementation of the course was considered, as well as retention rates pre and post program implementation. Course evaluation data was considered, as well, to gain insight into the views the students had after taking the course and what they felt it offered to their university experience.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether student retention rates changed after the implementation of a first-year seminar course at a small Midwestern university. Students' views of engagement before and after the implementation of the course were also compared. The course was implemented as part of a Title III strengthening institutions grant, which aimed at increasing student retention rates. This chapter describes the procedures and methodology used in this study. Participant characteristics, data collection, and instruments that were utilized are also discussed.

#### Design

Existing data was utilized for this study. The institution that was studied did not have an Institutional Review Board. A letter granting this researcher permission to utilize the data was received from the Vice President for Student Affairs and Institutional Research at the university under study. This project was reviewed and approved by the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

This study utilized data that had been collected by the university with regard to freshmen to sophomore retention of students. Comparisons were made between retention rates of students who enrolled in a first-year seminar class and those who did not enroll. Student views of academic advising and engagement data, collected from participating freshmen by the university through the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) before and after the course implementation, were compared. The NSSE collects

information related to student reports of their participation in university programs and activities (The Trustees of Indiana State University, 2001). Selected NSSE responses which align with the university's first-year seminar course outcomes were compared between the 2007 and 2009 student responses (pre and post course implementation). Additionally, student perception data was collected through course evaluations.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What were student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course?
2. Was there a difference in advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students after the implementation of the first-year seminar course?
3. Did overall retention rates rise after implementation of the first-year seminar course?
4. Was there a difference in rates of retention for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course compared to those not enrolled?

### Sample

The participants in this study included college freshmen enrolled at a small Midwestern university. Full-time freshmen enrollment at this university, between the years of 1998 and 2009, ranged from a high of 166 students (in 2004) to a low of 89 students (in 2007). Included in the qualitative commentary were all freshmen who were enrolled in the first-year seminar course during fall 2008 and fall 2009, and who completed the end of course evaluations. Demographic information that was available for the fall 2008 and 2009 cohort indicated that, of the 2008 incoming full-time freshmen, 36% were athletes. Residency and race information was not available for this group. For the 2009-2010 cohort, more demographic information was available. Of these freshmen

students, 55% came into the university as student athletes. Half of the students were residents of the state where the university is located and 13% were from one particular neighboring state. Twenty-five percent of the students were minority, including black (12%), Hispanic (10%), American Indian (3%), and Asian (< 1%).

### Instruments

Student engagement data was analyzed by using National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results from 2007 and 2009. The NSSE is a student survey instrument that was piloted in 1999, with a national full scale administration following in 2000. Each year, information is collected from hundreds of 4-year colleges and universities regarding how students spend their time in and out of the classroom and student behaviors that are associated with college success (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2011). For purposes of this study, four NSSE questions were analyzed (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007 & 2009). These included:

1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course: very often, often, sometimes, never.
2. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor: very often, often, sometimes, never.
3. To what extent does your institution emphasize helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.): very much, quite a bit, some, very little.

4. Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution: excellent, good, fair, poor.

In addition to the NSSE, another instrument used in this study for data collection was a course evaluation instrument. This instrument was developed by this researcher in collaboration with first-year seminar course instructors and an outside Title III grant evaluator.

### Data Collection

This study was an analysis of preexisting data collected through the institution and this researcher. Access to NSSE and retention data was granted to this researcher by the Vice President of Student Affairs and Institutional Research at the university that was studied. Course evaluations were collected by the researcher and summary data was compiled. These can be found in Appendices A, B, C, and D. Students were assured that seminar instructors would not have access to students' course evaluations until final grades had been issued. Individual students were not identified by name in any of the data.

### Data Analysis

To answer the first research question which addressed student perceptions of the first-year seminar course, course evaluations were collected from two semesters (fall 2008 and fall 2009). The first-year seminar course was not mandatory during the years of this study; nonetheless, incoming first-time, full-time freshmen accounted for a high percentage of the students enrolled. Of the 90 incoming full-time freshmen in 2008, 69 completed the first-year seminar course (77%); of the 147 full-time freshmen in 2009, 123 completed the course (84%). The fall 2008 course evaluation data included 58 of the

69 students enrolled in the first-year seminar course at the conclusion of the semester (a response rate of 84%); the fall 2009 data included responses from 92 of the 125 students who were enrolled in the course at the time the evaluations were distributed (a response rate of 74%). Two of the students who enrolled in the first-year seminar course during fall 2009 were not first-year, full-time freshmen but requested to take the course. It is possible that their responses were part of the course evaluations for that year. Otherwise, data represents responses from only first-year, full-time freshmen. When calculating freshmen retention rates, those two students were not included but the 123 first-time, full-time freshmen in the course were considered in analysis. Course evaluation data were reported using percentages when answers called for closed ended responses, such as yes or no. Individual, unidentified student feedback was reported when course evaluation questions requested that students provided an open-ended response.

Research Question 2 explored differences in student perceptions of advising and engagement before and after the seminar implementation and was addressed through analysis of NSSE data. Students who completed the NSSE were enrolled freshmen in either the spring of 2007, prior to the first-year seminar course implementation or freshmen enrolled during the spring of 2009, after the first-year seminar course was implemented. The invitation to participate in the NSSE was sent to all freshmen and senior students every two years at this particular institution. Students received an email invitation from the survey administrator asking them to participate in the online survey and were assured that their participation was voluntary. For purposes of this study, only freshmen data that was collected were analyzed. During the fall of 2006, 136 new full-time freshmen were recorded as eligible for NSSE participation at the university under

study. During the spring of 2007, when the NSSE was administered to 2006-2007 freshmen, responses varied from a high of 79 respondents to a low of 75 respondents. It seemed that some students began the survey but dropped out partially through the administration or did not answer some questions. In the fall of 2008, 83 first-time, full-time freshmen were recorded as being eligible to complete the NSSE survey, which was administered to those students during spring 2009. A total of 44 freshmen completed portions of the survey during the spring of 2009; although a low of 40 student responses were recorded for some items. The students who completed the NSSE during spring 2009 were part of the first cohort that participated in the university's first-year seminar course, which began during fall 2008. The NSSE items that pertained to academic advising perceptions and first-year seminar course goals were analyzed using t-tests.

All first-time, full-time freshmen enrolled at the university beginning fall 1998 through fall 2009 were considered when discussing retention data. Fall-to-fall retention data were reported using percentages of returning freshmen for the two years of course implementation that were studied (2008 and 2009). A 10-year average freshmen student retention rate prior to course implementation was reported as well. This data was utilized to address research questions three and four which explored freshmen retention rates through the years prior and after the implementation of a first-year seminar course, as well as a retention comparison between students who did and did not enroll in the first-year seminar course.

An odds ratio analysis of fall 2008 and fall 2009 seminar participants and nonparticipants with regard to retention to fall 2009 and fall 2010, respectively, were utilized specifically to address Research Question 4. "An odds ratio is used to compare



odds for two groups, in the same way relative risk is used to compare risks” (Westergren, Karlsson, Andersson, Ohlsson, & Hallberg, 2001, p. 257). The odds ratio analysis compared the following: retention numbers of 2008 (to fall 2009) and 2009 (to fall 2010) entering first time, full-time freshman students who took the first-year seminar course and were retained to fall 2009 or fall 2010; those who took the course and were not retained to fall 2009 or fall 2010; those who did not take the course and were retained to fall 2009 or fall 2010; and those who did not take the course and were not retained to fall 2009 or fall 2010. Table 1 provides a summary of the student population that contributed to different sets of data and which research questions were addressed with that data.

Table 1. Student Groups that Contributed to Data Sets.

Type Of Data	Student Population	Number in Group	Research Question/s Addressed
National Survey of Students Engagement (NSSE) Responses	First-year full-time freshmen who began in either Fall 2006 or fall 2008. NSSE taken during the following spring for those groups	Spring 2007 (Fall 2006 cohort) N = 75-79  Spring 2009 (Fall 2008 cohort) N = 40-44	Was there a difference in advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students after the implementation of the first-year seminar course?
University Retention Data	Ten year average of first-year, full-time freshmen retained to the following year (prior to first-year seminar course implementation) and specific retention data for 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 (after first-year seminar course implementation)	Ten year average (1998-2007) N = 1390  Retention 2008 to 2009 N = 90 (all first-time, full-time freshmen) Retention 2009 to 2010 N = 147 (all first-time, full-time freshmen)	Did overall retention rates rise after implementation of the first-year seminar course?  Was there a difference in rates of retention for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course compared to those not enrolled?
Course Evaluation Responses	Student responses gathered from those enrolled in the first-year seminar course in 2008 and 2009	Fall 2008 N = 58 (84% response rate) Fall 2009 N = 92 (74% response rate)	What were student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course?

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to compare data on student retention and student perceptions of engagement before and after the implementation of a first-year seminar course at a small, Midwestern university. The study focused on incoming first-year, full-time freshmen. In this chapter, the results of the data analysis with regard to answering the research questions are described.

#### Research Question 1 Results

Research Question 1 explored student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course. Participants in the fall 2008 and fall 2009 first-year seminar courses completed course evaluations which were developed by the researcher in collaboration with other first-year seminar course instructors, an outside Title III grant evaluator, and a professor emeritus from a college in California who has extensive experience in first-year seminar delivery. The evaluation form from fall 2008 to 2009 changed slightly due to concerns of one potential question being misinterpreted by the students. The question involved asking students if the course had impacted their decision to remain at the university being studied. In 2008, the question asked students if the course impacted their decision to stay or leave (insert name of university). An affirmative response, for example, left questions regarding whether the course actually impacted the student's decision to stay, or to leave. Comments made by the students gave some indication that typically when the students indicated that yes, the course impacted their decision to stay

or leave, it meant that it impacted their decision to stay. Additionally, two questions were added to the 2009 course evaluation to glean student feedback regarding adding a peer mentor component to the course and to get an indication of what percentage of class meetings students had attended. Course evaluations for 2008 as well as compiled feedback from selected questions for 2008 and 2009, are found in Appendices A, B, C, and D respectively. The course evaluation itself and results were altered in cases where it was necessary to protect the identity of the university under study.

The fall 2008 course evaluation data includes 58 of the 69 students enrolled in the first-year seminar course at the conclusion of the semester (a response rate of 84%). The fall 2009 data includes responses from 92 of the 125 students who were enrolled in the course at the time the evaluations were distributed and submitted the course evaluations (a response rate of 74%). Fall 2008 results included responses from 33 females, 23 males, and 2 students who did not respond to the question regarding gender. Fall 2009 results included responses from 36 females, 50 males, and 6 students who did not respond to the question regarding gender. A variety of responses were given when asked about the most helpful aspects of the course. Included in the 2008 and 2009 responses were comments related to the service learning requirements of the class. Some classes embarked on service learning projects as a whole class and some required that the students participate in an individual service learning project. Projects were small in scale, typically with a 2-hour time commitment from the students.

Students indicate that educational planning and helping students with spring registration was a helpful aspect of the course. Each course devoted time to helping students understand graduation requirements of the university and how to plan schedules

in order to meet those requirements. Comments such as, “finding the right courses to enroll in” and “doing our 4-year plan” were indicative of the students’ appreciation for those activities.

The 2009 course evaluations revealed that 50 students stated that weekly contact with their advisor was one of the three most helpful aspects of the course. Similarly in 2008, comments such as “we got to have time with our advisor to ask questions or talk about things” and “direct contact each week with instructor” lend themselves to the conclusion that a benefit was realized by the students of having their advisor serve as the course instructor.

Students were asked if they thought the course should be a requirement for all incoming freshmen. In 2008, 66% of students indicated that they thought it should be a requirement. In 2009, 61% of students indicated that yes, they thought it should be a requirement of all incoming freshmen. Reasons such as, “because it helps new freshmen get used to college” and “I think it helped me by thinking a lot about my major and careers and what college classes to take” confirmed that the content of the class was helpful for some students. Students also emphasized that meeting with their advisor each week was a rationale for making the class required for incoming freshmen students. Students who felt the course should not be required reasoned that some of what was covered during the class was already known to them or should be known by students. One student indicated it should be a highly recommended class but not required, and another responded that learning from his or her own mistakes makes life fun.

The fall 2008 question regarding whether the course impacted their decision to remain at or leave the university under study yielded 33% of the students answering in

the affirmative. As mentioned previously, the wording of the question may have been confusing to students. Did an answer of “yes” mean the course impacted the decision to stay, or did it impact their decision to leave? Individual responses indicated that students did find the course helpful in their decision to remain at the university and included statements such as: “It made me realize that (insert university name) is not a bad school at all!” Even more affirming of the course’s impact on student retention was the following comment made by one student: “I was thinking about transferring but now I want to stay after seeing what classes I would start taking.”

In 2009, the course evaluation question regarding seminar impact on retention was reworded and first asked students if they planned to return to the university for the spring semester. If the student responded that yes, he or she did plan to return, the student was then asked to indicate if the course impacted his or her decision to remain at the university. Slightly more than 17% of students indicated that the course did impact their decision to remain at the university. Ways that the course impacted the students’ decision included the assistance with educational planning that they received, realizing that there were faculty who cared about them, and finding that the university was more than a small school but rather a place that was best for them.

The course evaluation offered space for students to make final comments. All final comments in the 2008 evaluation were positive responses regarding the benefit of the course or compliments to the instructor. Seven students offered additional comments in 2008 that were considered positive by this researcher. Two examples included, “Overall it was a very good class” and “This class helped, thank you!” The 2009 course evaluation results included 20 additional comments, two of which included: “I want to

thank my advisor for helping me understand the guidelines of college!” and “I found the class very helpful on how to survive not just in college but in life.” In 2009, not every student offered positive final comments. Two students mentioned that they felt the class was offered too early in the morning. Three students offered suggestions regarding improving the course such as less homework, making the lessons more defined, and shortening the length of the course. Two additional comments offered by students that were considered negative by this researcher included the following responses: “It was pretty boring. I[*sic*] felt like one giant long lecture on how to be a college student” and “The instructors were very good, but I just did not like the class.” One student mentioned that although he or she thought it was a good course, that student sometimes felt there were more important courses that needed his or her attention.

In general, course evaluation information affirmed that students appreciated having their advisor as the instructor for the class. The weekly contact provided by having an advisor as an instructor, in a course that targeted student success skills, was helpful for students. The fact that some students indicated that the course did impact their decision to remain at the university lends itself to the belief that the course is a retention tool for the university and impacts retention in a positive way. Some students felt the content was information they had already learned or should have learned in high school. Because of this, a deeper look at course evaluation data already collected and additional years of data collection could be utilized to consider if aspects of the course should be modified.

## Research Question 2 Results

Research Question 2 compared advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students before and after the implementation of the first-year seminar course. Freshmen reports of engagement and perceptions of advising were measured by the NSSE. At the university under study, freshmen and seniors were invited to participate in an online version of the NSSE every 2 years. Fall 2006 freshmen were a cohort that did not participate in the first-year seminar; however, they participated in the spring 2007 NSSE. During the fall of 2006, 100 first-time, full-time freshmen were recorded as eligible NSSE participants at the university under study. During the spring of 2007, when the NSSE was administered to 2006-2007 freshmen, responses varied from a high of 79 respondents to a low of 75 respondents. In the fall of 2008, 83 first-time, full-time freshmen were recorded as being eligible to complete the NSSE, which was administered to those students during spring 2009. A total of 44 freshmen completed portions of the 2009 survey, although a low of 40 student responses were recorded for some items. The students who completed the NSSE during spring 2009 were part of the first cohort that participated in the university's first-year seminar course, which began during fall 2008.

Selected NSSE responses, which aligned with first-year seminar course goals, were analyzed. T-tests were used to compare data between spring 2007 and spring 2009 freshmen respondents to assess significant differences in responses between the cohorts.

Because of the structure of the first-year seminar course (where the students' advisor served as the instructor for the course), it was prudent to consider NSSE items which questioned student advising perceptions. One NSSE item specifically addressed advising perceptions and read, "Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic



advising you have received at your institution?" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, 2009). Response options included: excellent = 4, good = 3, fair = 2, or poor = 1. Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicated that the students in 2009 who took the survey ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) reported significantly better quality in their academic advising than freshmen in 2007 ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .82$ ),  $t(115) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .05$ .

A component of the first-year experience course was participation in a service learning event. Some sections of the course required students to complete a service project with the whole class while other instructors asked students to complete a project on their own, typically two hours in length. A NSSE item that addressed this learning outcome asked the students how often they "participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, 2009). Response options included: very often = 4, often = 3, sometimes = 2, or never = 1. Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicated the freshmen in 2009 who took the survey ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) reported significantly higher occurrences of participation in a community-based project than the students in 2007 ( $M = 1.45$ ,  $SD = .66$ ),  $t(118) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .01$ . Because service learning was incorporated into each section of the first-year seminar, it is not surprising that students reported participation in community-based service significantly more often than the students in 2007.

Educational planning was another component of the first-year seminar course that was measured by the NSSE. The NSSE asked students for an indication of how often they had talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor (National Survey of

Student Engagement, 2007, 2009). Response options included: very often = 4, often = 3, sometimes = 2, or never = 1. Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicated no significant difference between groups at an alpha level of .05.

The first-year experience course attempted to help students with managing their time (life management) between the various responsibilities that may confront students not only academically, but also personally. Handling stress (health and wellness) related to the pressures of the college experience was also included in the course content. A NSSE item that addressed this topic was a question that asked students to what extent their institution emphasizes helping students cope with their non-academic responsibilities such as work and family (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, 2009). Response options included: very much = 4, quite a bit = 3, some = 2, or very little = 1. Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicated the freshmen in 2009 who took the survey ( $M = 2.51, SD = .85$ ) reported significantly higher rates of emphasis in helping students cope with their non-academic responsibilities than the students in 2007 ( $M = 2.15, SD = .80$ ),  $t(115) = 2.28, p = .05$ .

Not all of the items measured by the NSSE related to intended learning outcomes of the first-year seminar course; those that did were analyzed using t-tests to check for significant differences between groups. It was not possible to determine whether differences on NSSE responses related to academic advising, service learning engagement, and institutional emphasis on coping with non-academic responsibilities were a result of the first-year experience class or due to other factors. Students who took the first-year experience course did differ significantly in their responses to those NSSE items compared to students who did not have the opportunity to take the course.

### Research Question 3 Results

Research Question 3 considered retention rates after the implementation of the first-year seminar course. Freshmen to sophomore retention rates for ten years preceding the implementation of the first-year seminar (i.e., students who were first-time, full-time freshmen fall 1998 through fall 2007) ranged from a high of 60% in 2000, 2003, 2004, and 2007 to a low of 53% in 1998, 1999, and 2001. The fall to fall retention rate for first-time, full-time freshmen after the implementation of the first-year seminar (fall 2008) was 61%. This was the highest retention rate for freshmen for this university since 1993, when it reached an all-time high rate of 67%. Of those freshmen who began at the university during fall 2008, 77% of them completed the first-year seminar course.

The second cohort (fall 2009) of first-time, full-time freshmen to participate in the first-year seminar, yielded a 51% fall 2009 to fall 2010 retention rate, which was disappointingly low. During fall 2009, 84% of all first-time full-time freshmen completed the first-year seminar. The retention rate of 51% for the fall 2009 cohort was of major concern.

### Research Question 4 Results

Research Question 4 explored differences in rates of retention for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course compared to those not enrolled. To compare retention rates from fall to fall for students who took the first-year seminar course, versus those who did not take the course, an odds ratio analysis was conducted. "The odds ratio is an exact summary measure of the net multiplicative impact of the odds of an event for each unit increase in a given predictor . . ." (DeMaris, 1993, p. 1057). Although retention rates plummeted for the fall 2009 cohort of freshmen, the odds ratio analysis of retention

of first-year seminar participants versus nonparticipants yielded data that indicated the first-year seminar participants were being retained at a higher rate than those who did not participate. Students who took the first-year experience course during fall 2008 had a nearly four times greater likelihood of being retained to fall 2009 than those students who did not complete the course (see Figure 1). For the fall 2009 cohort, those students who completed the first-year seminar course were five times more likely to be retained to fall 2010 than students who did not complete the course (see Figure 2).

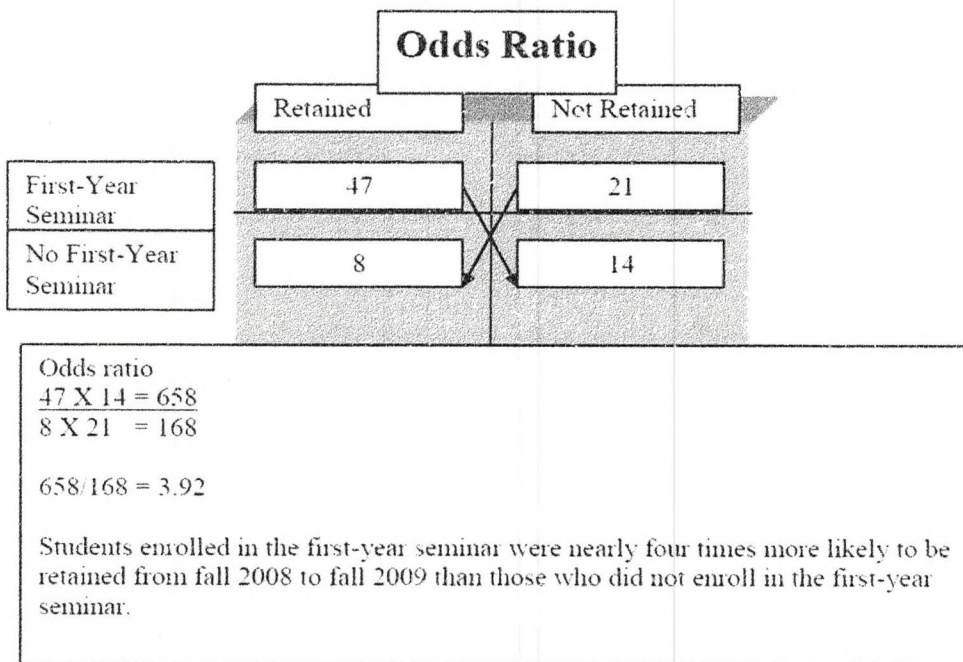


Figure 1. Odds Ratio Analysis of Fall 2008 First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen and Participation in the First-Year Seminar Course.

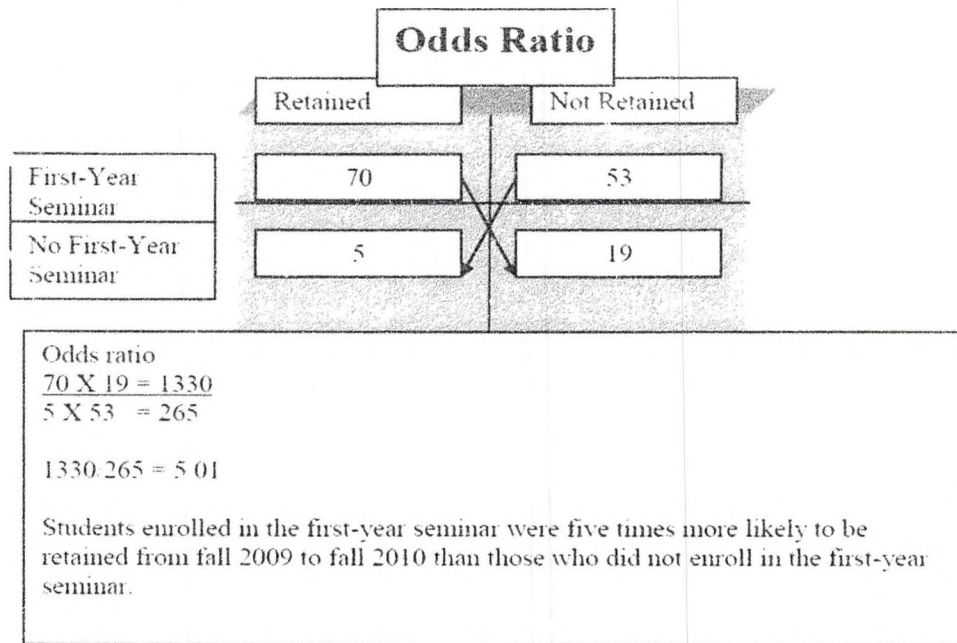


Figure 2. Odds Ratio Analysis of Fall 2009 First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen and Participation in the First-Year Seminar Course.

The odds ratio analysis conducted on data regarding retention of 2008 and 2009 freshmen students indicated that for both cohorts, students who completed the first-year seminar were nearly four to five times more likely to return to the university the following fall than those who did not complete the course. The data does not prove cause and effect, but a relationship did exist between fall seminar enrollment and retention to the following fall during both of the two years studied at this particular university.

Much of the data gathered and analyzed supported the first-year experience course as a vehicle to increase student retention and engagement at the university that was studied. Several NSSE item responses during the spring of 2009 indicated that students, many of whom were part of the initial first-year seminar, reported significantly higher engagement in 2009 than the 2007 students who had not been offered the course. The odds ratio analysis for both 2008 and 2009 freshmen indicated that students who

took the first-year experience course were more likely to return for a second year at the university under study. The course evaluation results provided a qualitative look at student comments about the course and their interpretation of its value and how it may have impacted their decision to remain at the university.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to look at retention rates, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results, and course evaluation data after the implementation of a first-year seminar course at one small Midwestern university where the first-year seminar was taught by the students' academic advisor. Most studies have found academic advising and first-year seminars individually to be of importance to students in terms of satisfaction with their university experience, as well as being related to increased student retention (Boudreau & Kromej, 1994; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Habley, 1981; Habley & McClaranahan, 2004; Noel, 1976; Schnell, 2003; Tinto, 1987). A review of literature found no studies that did more than recommend programs be tied together that provide support to incoming students (ACT, 2004; Crockett, 1978; Nutt, 2003; R. Robbins, personal communication July 22, 2010). The potentially synergistic effect of combining academic advising and first-year seminar is not well documented in the literature.

The belief of this researcher, who also served the university under study as their director of student retention, was that advisor/advisee relationships, if well developed, could offer the support that many incoming freshmen needed. By partnering advising with a course that met once each week, advisor/advisee contact could be more intensive and aid in increasing student retention.

This study evaluated a program in which the first-year experience course was taught by the student's academic advisor, with the intention of increasing advisor contact and accessibility for incoming freshmen students, providing support for incoming students, and raising retention rates at the higher education institution under study. The analysis of the first-year seminar course included consideration of course evaluations, NSSE data, and university retention rates before and after program implementation.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What were student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course?
2. Was there a difference in advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students after the implementation of the first-year seminar course?
3. Did overall retention rates rise after implementation of the first-year seminar course?
4. Was there a difference in rates of retention for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course compared to those not enrolled?

Existing data was utilized. First-year seminar course evaluation information from fall 2008 and fall 2009 was analyzed to address Research Question 1. Selected responses from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for freshmen at the university under study during spring 2007 and spring 2009 were used to compare differences between groups, and address Research Question 2. Enrollment and retention data of freshmen from the fall of their incoming year, to the following fall were provided by the university under study, from 1993 through 2010, and were reported to address Research Question 3. An odds ratio analysis of fall 2008 and fall 2009 seminar participants and



nonparticipants, with regard to retention to fall 2009 and fall 2010 respectively, were utilized to address Research Question 4.

## Discussion of Findings

### *Discussion of Research Question 1*

Research Question 1 explored student perceptions with regard to the first-year seminar course. Participants in the fall 2008 and fall 2009 first-year seminar course completed course evaluations. These evaluations were developed by this researcher, along with input from first-year seminar course instructors, and an outside Title III grant evaluator. Course evaluations for fall 2008 and fall 2009, as well as compiled feedback from selected questions for 2008 and 2009, are found in Appendices A, B, C, and D, respectively. The course evaluation itself and results were altered in cases where it was necessary to protect the identity of the university under study.

The fall 2008 course evaluation data included 58 of the 69 students enrolled in the first-year seminar course at the conclusion of the semester. Freshman fall enrollment that year for the university was 90 total incoming first-time, full-time freshmen. While not a mandatory course, 77% of the incoming freshmen during fall 2008 completed the course, and 84% of those enrolled at the time the course evaluations were distributed completed them. The fall 2009 course evaluation data included responses from 92 of the 125 students who were enrolled in the course at the time the evaluations were distributed. Fall 2009 total enrollment of first-time, full-time freshmen included 147 students. With 125 students completing the first-year seminar during fall 2009, 85% of incoming freshmen completed the course with 74% of the first-year seminar participants completing course evaluations.

Student responses from the course evaluations indicated that educational planning and helping students with spring registration were helpful aspects of the course. Each course devoted time to helping students understand graduation requirements of the university and how to plan schedules in order to meet those requirements. Comments regarding the most helpful aspects of the course included statements such as, "finding the right courses to enroll in" and "doing our 4-year plan" indicated the students' appreciation for those activities. As a course instructor, this researcher observed that once students formulated a plan of study in writing, many were able to envision their completion of a degree, which for most students was a main goal of attending college.

In 2008, comments such as "we got to have time with our advisor to ask questions or talk about things" and "direct contact each week with instructor" lent themselves to the conclusion that a benefit was realized by the students of having their advisor serve as the course instructor. The 2009 course evaluations revealed that 50 students stated that weekly contact with their advisor was one of the three most helpful aspects of the course. The 2008 and 2009 course evaluation responses emphasized an appreciation for accessible advisors that were a natural by-product of having the students' academic advisor serve as their course instructor. The model used by the university under study, where advising services were delivered at least in part through weekly contact with advisees in a seminar class, followed a developmental model of advising. In developmental advising, rather than the advisor serving as an expert who provides a prescribed course plan to the student, the advisor assists with goal setting and career planning and views the student as a whole person (Grites & Gordon, 2000). Throughout

the course, the advisor acted as an accessible resource to the students. This aligned with a developmental advising approach (Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Students were asked if they thought the course should be a requirement for all incoming freshmen. In 2008, 66% of students indicated that they thought it should be a requirement. In 2009, 61% of students indicated that yes, they thought it should be a requirement of all incoming freshmen. Reasons such as, “because it helps new freshmen get used to college” and “I think it helped me by thinking a lot about my major and careers and what college classes to take” confirm that the content of the class benefitted some students. Students also emphasized that meeting with their advisor each week was a rationale for making the class required for incoming freshmen students. Students who felt the course should not be required reasoned that some of what was covered during the class was already known to them or should be known by students. One student indicated it should be a highly recommended class but not required and another responded that learning from his or her own mistakes makes life fun. During the three years of employment at the university under study by this researcher, the general sense was that college students would rather have more choice and fewer “requirements” when it came to academics. When over 60% of students indicated that they felt this particular course should be a requirement for all students, this researcher was not only pleased, but also pleasantly surprised.

The fall 2008 course evaluation question that queried whether the course impacted the students’ decision to remain at or leave the university under study yielded 33% of the students answering in the affirmative. Individual responses indicated that students did find the course helpful in their decision to remain at the university and

included statements such as: “It made me realize that (insert university name) is not a bad school at all!” Even more affirming of the course’s impact on student retention was this comment made by one student: “I was thinking about transferring but now I want to stay after seeing what classes I would start taking.” These results supported Cuseo’s (1991) indication that, “Early and intrusive support for students is one institutional characteristic known to enhance retention; the freshman orientation seminar can provide this early and intrusive support” (p. 1).

In 2009, slightly more than 17% of students indicated that the course did impact their decision to remain at the university. Ways that the course impacted the students’ decision included the assistance with educational planning that they received, realizing that there are faculty who care about them, and finding that the university was more than a small school but rather a place that was best for them. There is no way of determining whether these students actually did remain at the university under study since identifying information was not tied to specific evaluations. We also cannot determine if these students who indicated the course influenced their decision to remain at the university would have stayed even if they had not taken the course. That being said, it seems safe to assume this course was a factor in student retention for at least a few students. Because the university under study was so small, one student who was retained would have yielded an approximate 1% increase in student retention.

The course evaluation offered space for students to make any final comments, which are found in Appendices C and D. In general, student comments were favorable. In 2008, all additional comments provided by students were favorable. In 2009, 12 of the 20 comments were counted as being positive by this researcher. Four students offered

comments that were interpreted by this researcher as a mix of compliments and suggestions for course improvement such as, “Good course but too long.” Four students offered comments that were interpreted as negative such as, “The class needs to have more defined lessons each week. I felt like when I came to class and just sat there and listened to the teacher ramble on.”

In general, course evaluation information affirmed that students appreciated having their advisor as the instructor for the class. The weekly contact provided by having an advisor as an instructor, in a course that targets student success skills, was helpful for students. The fact that several students indicated that the course did impact their decision to remain at the university lends itself to the belief that the course is a retention tool for the university and impacts retention in a positive way.

#### *Discussion of Research Question 2*

Research Question 2 compared advising perceptions and reported engagement of freshmen students before and after the implementation of the first-year seminar course. Freshmen reports of engagement and perceptions of advising were measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). At the university under study, freshmen and seniors were invited to participate in an online version of the NSSE every two years. Fall 2006 freshmen were a cohort that did not participate in the first-year seminar; however, they participated in the spring 2007 NSSE. During the fall of 2006, 136 first-time, full-time freshmen were recorded as eligible NSSE participants at the university under studied, which was administered to those students during spring 2007. In the fall of 2008, 83 first-time, full-time freshmen were recorded as being eligible to complete the NSSE, which was administered to those students during spring 2009. The

students who completed the NSSE during spring 2009 were part of the first cohort that participated in the university's first-year seminar course, which began during fall 2008. Selected NSSE responses were analyzed. T-tests were used to compare data between spring 2007 and spring 2009 freshmen respondents to assess significant differences in responses between the cohorts.

Because of the structure of the first-year seminar course (where the students' advisor served as the instructor for the course), it was prudent to consider NSSE items which questioned student advising perceptions. Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicated that the students in 2009 who took the survey ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) reported significantly better quality in their academic advising than freshmen in 2007 ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .82$ ),  $t(115) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .05$ . These results offered evidence that partnering advising with first-year seminar yields better advising. The instructors who taught the first-year seminar, for the most part, had taught at the university under study for years and had acted as academic advisors for incoming freshmen. A difference between the cohorts that were compared with the NSSE was that the 2006-2007 freshmen group most likely did not have contact with their advisor on a weekly basis and definitely did not have advisor contact through a course designed to offer large group advising and an orientation to campus and college life.

A component of the first-year experience course was participation in a service learning event. A NSSE item that addressed this learning outcome asked the students how often they "participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, 2009). Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicate the freshmen in 2009 who

took the survey ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) reported significantly higher occurrences of participation in a community-based project than the students in 2007 ( $M = 1.45$ ,  $SD = .66$ ),  $t(118) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .01$ . Because service learning was incorporated into each section of the first-year seminar, it is not surprising that students reported participation in community-based service significantly more often than the students in 2007.

Educational planning was another component of the first-year seminar course that was measured by the NSSE. The NSSE asked students for an indication of how often they had talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, 2009). Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicated no significant difference between groups at an alpha level of .05. This was a surprising finding since career planning was integral to the first-year seminar and several seminar meetings were spent, at least in part, devoted to formulating an academic plan. It is likely that students had career planning discussions with their academic advisor before the course was implemented and even though career planning was a focus of the course, it did not change student perceptions significantly regarding their perceptions of the frequency of these discussions.

The first-year experience course attempted to help students with managing their time (life management) between the various responsibilities that may confront students not only academically, but also personally. Handling stress (health and wellness) related to the pressures of the college experience and was also included in the course content. A NSSE item that addressed this topic was a question that asked students to what extent their institution emphasizes helping students cope with their non-academic responsibilities such as work and family (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007,

2009). Comparison of 2007 and 2009 results using a two sample t-test indicate the freshmen in 2009 who took the survey ( $M = 2.51, SD = .85$ ) reported significantly higher rates of emphasis in helping students cope with their non-academic responsibilities than the students in 2007 ( $M = 2.15, SD = .80$ ),  $t(115) = 2.28, p = .05$ . Oftentimes in life, we take care of the most pressing concerns first. If students have limited time with their academic advisors, they may first take care of figuring out course schedules. Because the first-year seminar yielded more time with an advisor than most students would get if not enrolled in the course, it offered the opportunity to go beyond course selection. Advisors had the time and opportunity to help students evaluate how they spend their time on a day-to-day basis, and look for areas that needed balancing. ACT (2004), in their review of 109 research studies on postsecondary retention, found that non-academic factors, such as institutional commitment and social support, influenced retention. After this course was implemented, the university under study realized an increase in student perception of the university's support in non-academic areas, which may have also aided retention efforts.

It was not possible to determine if significant differences in NSSE responses before and after the first-year seminar course was implemented were a result of the first-year experience class or due to other factors. Significant differences were found regarding rating of academic advising, service learning engagement, and institutional emphasis on coping with non-academic responsibilities between groups. Students who were given the opportunity to enroll in the first-year experience course reported higher quality academic advising, more engagement in service learning, and a higher level of institutional emphasis on coping with non-academic responsibilities. This data supports



the belief that after this university implemented a first-year seminar course, more engagement was reported by freshmen in several areas that were tied to seminar outcomes.

### *Discussion of Research Question 3*

Retention at the university where this study took place was lower than desired and below the national rate for bachelor degree granting public universities. National averages for retention were 67.6% (ACT, 2009) for public, bachelor degree granting institutions. At the university under study, from fall 1998 through fall 2007, retention of freshmen students to their sophomore year yielded a high of 60% in 2000, 2003, 2004, and 2007 and a low of 53% in 1998, 1999, and 2001. After the first year of implementation of the seminar course, retention of first-year, full-time freshmen reached a level higher than the university had seen in the previous ten years (61%), but the following year, the retention rate was the lowest the university had seen in the previous 10 years (51%). The low overall retention rate from 2009 to 2010 could have been attributed to a variety of factors, just as the higher than typical rate from 2008 to 2009 for the first-time, full-time freshmen could have been due to factors other than the implementation of the university's first-year seminar.

When retention from 2008 to 2009 yielded a higher rate than the university had seen in 10 years, even a mere one percent, it was natural to attribute higher retention to the one major change that had taken place at the university under study: the implementation of a first-year seminar course. When the following year yielded such a disappointingly low retention rate, many were left wondering what had happened.

One difference that took place at the university between spring 2009 and fall 2009 was that this researcher left the university as director of student retention. During the summers, I contacted students who had been placed on academic probation to see if they knew about or needed help with an appeal. This typically assisted some students with returning to the university. Occasionally, students were not aware that they could appeal a suspension or seemed paralyzed regarding how to start the process. Although a new director was hired, she did not begin until mid-summer and it is not known by this researcher whether the new director provided the same type of assistance to students with probation appeals. Throughout the three years as the director of student retention, this researcher also was able to get to know most freshmen. Many were either enrolled in the first-year seminar sections she lead or in one of the intermediate algebra sections that she taught. When she contacted freshmen during the summer, a previous connection with them had been made and trust had been established. The incoming director, through no fault of her own, would not have yet been able to establish rapport with the students.

#### *Discussion of Research Question 4*

Additional data was analyzed that did lend support for the first-year seminar course. This data included an odds ratio analysis which compared students who took the course and were or were not retained with students who did not take the course and were or were not retained to their second year. Students who enrolled in the first-year seminar course fall 2008 were 3.92 times more likely to return to the university under study the following fall than students who did not complete the course. Students in the fall 2009 cohort were 5.01 times more likely to return to the university under study for a second year than students who did not complete the course. ACT (2004) reported in a

publication titled “What Works in Student Retention” that two of the three greatest impacts on student retention were first-year seminars and academic advising. Combining both of these student services and realizing increased student retention, the university under study provided support for this contention.

The fact that students who took the first-year seminar course were four to five times more likely to be retained at the university under study was compelling evidence in support of making the course a mandatory requirement for all students. Because the course was optional at the time of this study, it is possible that students who chose to enroll in the course also embodied student success characteristics which lead to greater student rates of retention. Those characteristics may have made them more likely to choose a course that was presented to them as a way to increase contact with their academic advisor and aid in their acclimation to the university.

#### Limitations

Changes in the model from Year 1 to Year 2 may have caused some variability in results. During the first year of program implementation, the course was two hours in length, and during the second year of implementation course length was reduced to 1.25 hours. This was due to feedback received from students and course instructors. During the first year of implementation, an attempt was made to not only enroll the students in a particular seminar course, but to also link the first-year seminar course with a common additional course. For example, all students in one section of the seminar course were also enrolled in intermediate algebra. The hope was to provide cross discipline collaboration, a learning community type of environment and application of seminar content. This proved to be a difficult undertaking due to course enrollment capacities.

limited number of course sections, and cross discipline collaboration was not possible in all cases. Because of the scheduling difficulties encountered during the first attempt, as well as the determination of first-year seminar instructors that the ideal of cross discipline collaboration and application of seminar content was not achieved nor necessary for effective delivery, it was eliminated during Year 2 of the seminar implementation.

One question on the end of the course survey was changed from 2008 to 2009 due to readability issues. During 2008, the question read, "Did this course impact your decision to remain or leave (specific university name inserted here)? If so, in what way?" During 2009, the course survey question was expanded to read, "Do you plan to return to (specific university name inserted here) for the spring semester? If yes, did this course impact your decision to remain at (specific university name inserted here)? If so, in what way? If you are not returning, did this course impact your decision to leave (specific university name inserted here)? If so, in what way?" This may have caused misinterpretation of that particular item between Year 1 and Year 2 of this study.

Attempts to mediate the confounding variables related to the course content and delivery were not addressed throughout the research design and analysis. A study using matched groups, and randomly assigned students in these groups to one of three conditions could help determine whether the pairing of the first-year seminar course with the advisor as the instructor aids in student retention and satisfaction. One group would contain students who do not participate in a first-year seminar course. The second group should consist of students who took the course, but their advisor would not be the instructor for the course. The third group of students would take the course and their course instructor would serve as their academic advisor.

This study was completed at one small, bachelor degree granting, public, Midwestern university. It is not known, and cannot be assumed, that the findings from this study generalize to larger universities or universities that are private or offer higher level degrees. Therefore, studying the impact of first-year seminar across institutions of varying size, both public and private across the United States is warranted.

Instruments that rate advisor effectiveness are available commercially or through reviewing published instruments and requesting permission for use by their authors. A potentially confounding variable of advising effectiveness in this study might be controlled by utilizing advisors who share similar quality ratings. This researcher designed such an instrument that can be found in Appendix E. This instrument was created by considering variables that research showed matter to students in the advising relationship. The survey was designed to ask questions addressing those specific factors. The survey was piloted on 113 freshmen at a small university and factor analyzed. Three factors surfaced as being important in the advising relationship including: advisor concern, advisor contact, and the advising relationship quality. Although this instrument was piloted on only one group of students, constructs “demonstrated excellent reliability” (Bitz, 2010, p. 53).

The potential confounding variables in this study related to the fact that the course design changed slightly between Year 1 and Year 2 of the study, and the fact that students self-selected into the course; both are limitations of this study. The changes in the course evaluation instrument between 2008 and 2009 posed some interpretation of data challenges. The fact that matched groups were not utilized in this study is a further limitation which could be mediated in future studies.

## Recommendations for Practice and Further Study

This study has the potential to begin to fill a gap in the literature regarding the synergistic effect on student retention by combining two practices that have been shown to increase student persistence: academic advising and first-year seminar. The direct combination of these two student support activities needs further study. Utilization of matched student groups, assigned to one of three conditions is an important next step. My recommendation for a future study involves placing students in matched groups. Characteristics such as age, gender, race, grade point average, and incoming test scores (e.g., ACT or SAT) should be considered. One student group in the study would not enroll in a first-year seminar, one group would take a seminar where the seminar instructor is not their advisor, and one group would take a seminar where the students' advisor serves as their seminar instructor. Ideally, multiple sections of each of these groups would participate in the study. Retention rates for students in each of these groups from fall to fall would be compared to determine if differences existed between groups. Caution would need to be exercised when considering identical content and layout of the course, delivery, and instructor characteristics to mediate potential confounding variables. Furthermore, if this study could be replicated at universities of varying size and type across the United States, generalizability of findings could be established.

Although this dissertation considered work that was done at one university over the course of three years as well as decades of literature, the possibilities for further research are numerous. It is not anticipated that higher education's concern for student

retention will dwindle soon; the topic of student retention is important for society, students themselves, and institutions of higher learning.

#### Closing Statement

After reviewing the data presented in this study as well as other information gathered, the university made the decision to institutionalize the first-year seminar course and make the course mandatory for all incoming first-year, full-time freshmen. The decision was not made in haste, but rather after extensive discussion and review of data presented to the university's curriculum committee. Although a Title III grant provided initial funding for the program (stipends to course instructors), the university made the commitment to fund the program after the grant ended.

## Appendix A

### First-Year Seminar Course Evaluation Fall 2008

Please circle: Male Female

Your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Instructor/Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

What were the top three best/most helpful aspects of this course (example: format of the class, content, opportunity to interact with other freshman, opportunity to have weekly direct contact with advisor etc)?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What were the top three worst/least helpful aspects of this course?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Circle your response below: One a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the text chosen for this course, "Thriving in College and Beyond"?

- 1= VERY POOR
- 2= POOR
- 3= NEUTRAL
- 4= GOOD
- 5= VERY GOOD

Was the text an important component of this class? YES NO

Did the text provide learning opportunities or information that may not have otherwise been available if a text did not accompany this class? YES NO

Of the topics covered in this class and your assigned reading, please rank your top 7 topics that were covered this semester (1 to 7) with 1 being the most helpful/relevant.

- \_\_\_ Library resources
- \_\_\_ Interpersonal Relationships (Communicating and relating effectively with others)
- \_\_\_ Strategic Learning (Research on human learning and the human brain to acquire knowledge)
- \_\_\_ Improving Memory and Test Performance
- \_\_\_ The Value of a Liberal Arts and General Education
- \_\_\_ Higher Level/Critical Thinking
- \_\_\_ Three Key Academic Skills (Research, writing, and speaking)
- \_\_\_ Educational Planning and Decision Making (Making wise choices about you college courses and major)
- \_\_\_ Finding a Path to Your Future Profession (Career exploration)
- \_\_\_ Diversity (Appreciating the value of human differences)
- \_\_\_ Life Management Skills (Managing time and money)
- \_\_\_ Health and Wellness (The physical dimension)
- \_\_\_ Health and Wellness (The mental and spiritual dimensions)
- \_\_\_ Service Learning and Reflection
- \_\_\_ Event Attendance and Reflection



List any other topics you wish we would have covered in this course?

Do you think this course should be a required course for all incoming freshman?

YES NO

Why or why not?

Regarding the structure of the class.....

How many credits should this class, or a variation of this class, be offered for? \_\_\_\_\_

How often and for how long should this class meet?

\_\_\_\_ Times per week \_\_\_\_\_ hour/s per meeting

Should the course run the whole semester or only a portion of the semester?

If not the whole semester, how long (how many weeks) do you feel the course should last?

Did this course impact your decision to remain or leave this university?

YES NO

If so, in what way?

List a minimum of three things you wish you would have known when you started school here that would have helped you.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Please provide any additional comments regarding this course in the space provided below:

## Appendix B

### First-Year Seminar Course Evaluation Fall 2009

Please circle: Male Female

Your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Instructor/Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Percent of first-year seminar classes I have attended (CIRCLE ONE):

20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

What were the top three best/most helpful aspects of this course (example: format of the class, content, opportunity to interact with other freshman, opportunity to have weekly direct contact with advisor etc)?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What were the top three worst/least helpful aspects of this course?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Circle your response below: On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the text chosen for this course, "Thriving in College and Beyond"?

1= VERY POOR

2= POOR

3= NEUTRAL

4= GOOD

5= VERY GOOD

Was the text an important component of this class?

YES

NO

Did the text provide learning opportunities or information that may not have otherwise been available if a text did not accompany this class?

YES

NO

Of the topics covered in this course and your assigned reading, please rank your top 7 topics that were covered this semester (1 to 7) with 1 being the most helpful/relevant.

\_\_\_ Library resources

\_\_\_ Interpersonal Relationships (Communicating and relating effectively with others)

\_\_\_ Strategic Learning (Research on human learning and the human brain to acquire knowledge)

\_\_\_ Improving Memory and Test Performance

\_\_\_ The Value of a Liberal Arts and General Education

\_\_\_ Higher Level/Critical Thinking

\_\_\_ Three Key Academic Skills (Reading, writing, and speaking)

\_\_\_ Educational Planning and Decision Making (Making wise choices about you college courses and major)

\_\_\_ Finding a Path to Your Future Profession (Career exploration)

\_\_\_ Diversity (Appreciating the value of human differences)

\_\_\_ Life Management Skills (Managing time and money)

\_\_\_ Health and Wellness (The physical dimension)

\_\_\_ Health and Wellness (The mental and spiritual dimensions)

- Service Learning and Reflection
- Event Attendance and Reflection

List any other topics you wish we would have covered in this course?

Do you think this course should be a required course for all incoming freshman?

YES NO

Why or why not?

Regarding the structure of the class.....

How many credits should this class, or a variation of this class, be offered for? \_\_\_\_

How often and for how long should this class meet?

\_\_\_\_ Times per week \_\_\_\_ hour/s per meeting

Should the course run the whole semester or only a portion of the semester?

If not the whole semester, how long (how many weeks) do you feel the course should last?

Do you plan to return to this university for the Spring semester? YES NO

If yes, did this course impact your decision to remain at this university?

YES NO

If so, in what way?

If you are not returning, did this course impact your decision to leave this university?

YES NO

If so, in what way?

List a minimum of three things you wish you would have known when you started school here that would have helped you.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

We are considering adding a peer mentor component to this course where an upper class student would help incoming freshmen in this course with the course and other issues/concerns (service learning, course assignment questions, event attendance, getting involved, meeting people, time management etc.). Do you think this is a good idea (circle one)?

YES NO

Why or why not?

Please provide any additional comments regarding this course in the space provided below:

## Appendix C

### Course Evaluation Results from Selected Items 2008

N = 58

Participation Rate of Enrolled Students = 84%

Males responses = 23

Female Responses = 33

Gender Not Given = 2

1. What were the top three best/most helpful aspects of this course? (example: format of the class, context, opportunity to interact with other freshman, opportunity to have weekly direct contact with advisor, etc.):
  - Learning to take notes
  - Doing reflections
  - Having such a small class
  - Opportunity to get to know freshman
  - Direct contact each week with instructor
  - Learned about useful subjects
  - Content
  - The teacher
  - Students
  - It was a more relaxed class and not so stressful
  - We got to have time with our advisor to ask questions or talk about things
  - Helped us with things we need to know about college as a freshman
  - Interacting with other freshman
  - Learning all the things I have about myself with the surveys we filled out
  - Inspiration movie clips
  - Sit in the front of the classroom.
  - Get involved in events to make friends.
  - Go to class.
  - I really like the two chapters on health and the one on time management.
  - I was glad we kept our same SOS group, I think we became close.
  - I liked that we had the flexibility to meet at other places than just the classroom

- Service learning assignments.
- Class structure.
- Study Skills.
- Volunteer work.
- Registering help.
- Learning your personality.
- Get some helpful tips about college.
- How the instructor did the class
- Not having to stay for the entire 2 hours.
- Being able to have class discussions not just lectures.
- Learning the different types of learning.
- Getting to discuss what we like/dislike about MSU/college.
- Meeting with faculty and sharing information.
- The textbook.
- Opportunity to help others.
- Doing our 4 year plan
- Tour of the campus.
- Event write-ups – getting us to get involved.
- Learning the difference between deductive and inductive learning.
- Finding my future profession.
- Educational planning.
- Learning new things about ourselves and others.
- Got me thinking about my future.
- Movie project
- Relationships

2. Do you think this course should be a required course for all incoming freshman?

Yes =  $38/58 = 67\%$

No =  $18/58 = 31\%$  (Note: Not every student answered this question)

3. Did this course impact your decision to remain or leave (insert name of university)?

Yes =  $19/58 = 33\%$

No =  $39/58 = 67\%$

If so, in what way?

- I made new friends that made me want to stay.
- To stay.
- But I do like my advisor; he is very helpful, even though I am leaving.

- Well I was thinking about transferring but learned about some other classes that were offered.
- It helped me decide what I want to major in.
- It made (name of university) appear to have a relaxed, fun and learning atmosphere.
- It made me notice how nice and amazing all the instructors are!
- It made me realize that (name of university) is not a bad school at all!
- Either way if I had taken or not taken this class, I'm here to play softball.
- I'm staying in (name of town).
- Let's you get one-on-one time with your advisors, you don't get that in the big schools.
- Remaining to play volleyball and become a teacher.
- It helped to influence me to stay here but without it I wouldn't have left.
- I was thinking about transferring but now I want to stay after seeing what classes I would start taking.
- Made me think of what I wanted to do for a career.
- Helped me get the confidence to do what I feel is right.

4. Additional comments:

- My instructor is a great at teaching it
- I liked having (insert instructor's name) as an instructor for the class, she was helpful with the schedule planning.
- Overall it was a very good class.
- It was fun!
- This class was my favorite. It was not stressful but expectations were made clear.
- Possibly this class could be something for upper classmen. As a way to get together and report feedback and acquire social skills (just a thought).
- This class helped, thank you!

## Appendix D

### Course Evaluation Results from Selected Items 2009

N = 92

Participation Rate of Enrolled Students = 74%

Males responses = 50

Female Responses = 36

Gender Not Given = 6

1. What were the top three best/most helpful aspects of this course? (example: format of the class, context, opportunity to interact with other freshman, opportunity to have weekly direct contact with advisor, etc)  
Note: A number in parenthesis behind the response indicates the number of students who gave that specific response. If no number is listed, that specific response was given one time.
  - Weekly contact with advisor. (50)
  - Format of class. (12)
  - Interact with other freshman. (37)
  - Content. (9)
  - Opportunity to interact with other freshmen.(3)
  - Setting up schedules for the next semester. (2)
  - (Name of Guest Instructor) coming to speak (2)
  - Finding the right courses to enroll in. (2)
  - The help registering for classes. (2)
  - Communication(2)
  - Time management. (2)
  - Learning to manage time.(2)
  - The 4-year plan.(2)
  - Opportunity to learn about life lessons.
  - Expressing myself.
  - Talking with other freshman about things in their lives.
  - Getting a weekly check of grades.
  - One to one contact provided.
  - Study of how to study.

- Learning about the school.
- Help making a schedule.
- I liked being about to see our advisors every week.
- It was a very laid back class/environment.
- That it was only once a week as opposed to MWF/TR.
- Help registering for spring 2010.
- Procrastination help.
- Tips to succeed.
- To learn about college stuff.
- The setup of the class was helpful.
- Knowledge.
- Learning the ways of college.
- To find out what's going on around campus.
- To find out specific things we needed to know.
- Planning next semester schedule – the instructors helped us out a lot and answered many questions we had.
- Figuring out future class schedules.
- Being taught and the skills needed for college.
- Event attendance.
- What classes to take
- How to study
- Signing up for all the other classes.
- Being able to talk openly through the course with the advisor.
- Learning steps to succeed in college.
- Help with creating my class schedule.
- To get help planning out my next 4 yrs of college, to know what I have to take.
- Learn about opportunities on campus like online looking for books at the library.
- Reflecting on myself: skills, habits.
- Diversity: everyone's different and thinks differently.
- Making class schedule.
- Encouraging quotes/videos.
- Pizza.
- Knowing how much I drank in cheeseburgers.
- Hearing other freshman talk about their experiences.
- Help with registration and other school events.
- Once a week.
- Went through lots of information.
- Talk about classes.
- Enroll for classes.
- Meeting people.
- Lots of help with classes.



- Timing of class.
- Class interaction.
- Was able to get my questions answered.
- Enrolling in my classes for next semester.
- Talking about teachers and classes.
- About racism.
- Learned about my intended class schedule.
- Be on time.
- Class schedules.
- Showing us how Moodle works.
- Not much homework.
- Learning technique.
- Study skills.
- Money management.
- When we got to pick your service learning projects.
- When we talked about diversity
- When we talked about ways to relax and stuff like that!
- Having the class early.
- Working together on things.
- Going to events.
- Learn things about how we can help out others.
- Learning things about what you might do for the rest of your life like jobs and majors.
- Attitude with others.
- Getting things done.
- Getting to know teacher.
- Getting help planning future.
- Getting good skills for class.
- Getting to know one another.
- Learning how to get along.
- Good info about (insert name of town).
- Heads up to college.
- Opportunity to learn things that are vital to the college experience.
- Interaction in class.
- Instruction from instructors.
- All freshmen.
- Study habits.
- Knowing about the college.
- Managing time.
- Getting involved with the school.
- (Advisor/Instructor name) is helpful to us and to work with.
- Advisor/Teacher is very cool/helpful.
- Meeting new people right away through activities.

- Learned about campus.
- How to use ConnectND for enrollment.
- How to stay focused in college.
- About my GPA's.
- The way the class is organized.
- Being able to ask question of my advisor.
- The class was fun and I enjoyed going to it.
- Community services.
- Helped me with my schedule.
- Reminds me of school events coming up.
- The ability to have "freshmen" question answered.
- Help in becoming more organized.
- About local stuff.
- Stress
- Career websites.
- Help resources.
- Some of the content.
- Environment – open!
- Advisors help.
- First week, where everything is.
- Academic plan.
- Wednesday classes.
- How the class was run.
- Getting used to college.
- Learning how to study.
- Learning how to handle the work load.
- Having my advisor helping me pick my classes.
- (Advisor/Instructor name) cracking down on me.
- Understand more about college.
- Textbook – Great information to help adjust to college life.
- (Advisor/Instructor name) different views because of culture.
- Nice hearing what others thought (discussions).
- Get to know about events.
- Helpful with studying tips.
- Easier way to make the transition from high school to college.
- Meeting with (Advisor/Instructor name) /being able to find (her/him) once a week.
- Learning how to use our resources.
- Alcohol website.
- The inspirational videos.
- Personal with the advisors and getting to know them.
- Helping me get a grip on my life.
- Slideshows.

- Career exploration.
- Service learning.
- Helped me organize my school work, helped me strategize how to get everything done.
- Helped me plan out my future years at (name of university).

2. Do you think this course should be a required course for all incoming freshman?

Yes =  $56/92 = 61\%$

No =  $32/92 = 35\%$  (Note: Not every student answered this question)

3. Do you plan to return to (name of university) for the spring semester?

Yes =  $79/92 = 86\%$

No =  $11/92 = 12\%$

Undecided =  $2/92 = 2\%$

4. If yes, did this course impact your decision to remain at (insert name of university)?

Yes =  $16/92 = 17\%$

No =  $65/92 = 71\%$  (Note: Not every student answered this question)

If so, in what way?

- It helped me plan things out the correct way for spring.
- I learned the college cares and is willing to help me out.
- It showed me how to make college easier in a way where I can pass classes. And it showed me how to manage my time wisely.
- It just helped me better understand (insert name of university).
- Because it helped me realize it was more than a small school but rather a place that is best for me.
- Showed me that most professors are caring people.
- I got to know my advisor and (she/he) helped me plan my 2<sup>nd</sup> year.
- I decided on a major and I did this by meeting with my advisor.
- I was really worried about where this school can take me. This class has given me a visual of my future.
- There are faculty and staff here that do truly care about the students.
- Classes organized.
- I liked the whole atmosphere not just the class.
- Not really but it helped.
- It did!

- Good class.
- To get my teaching degree.
- It's nice to know so many nice people around here.
- It showed me how to make college easier in a way where I can pass classes. And it showed me how to manage my time wisely.

5. Additional comments:

- I want to thank my advisor for helping me understand the guidelines of college!
- Good job! Keep up the good work!
- It helps you learn how things work around campus and to overcome challenges such as procrastination.
- (Advisor/Instructor name) is the MAN! (2)
- This was a good and helpful class.
- Good course, I just felt sometimes I had more important courses to be concerned about.
- The class needs to have defined lessons each week. I felt like when I came to class and just sat there and listened to the teacher ramble on.
- (Advisor/Instructor name) was a great advisor.
- The food provided was amazing! Thank you!
- I Love your food! (brownie points, LOL).
- Less homework and more talking about the future.
- Good course but too long.
- The instructors were very good, but I just did not like the class.
- I found the class very helpful on how to survive not just in college but in life.
- I was pretty boring. I felt like one giant, long lecture on how to be a college student.
- Good class, well taught!
- Class was too early.
- (Advisor/Instructor name) rocks.
- The course was good but 8am is too early!
- Definitely add the mentor! I really enjoyed this class. It was nice to have a class where there was lots of interaction. I also enjoyed learning the things that I did.

## Appendix E

### Advisor Effectiveness Survey

<p>Gender</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Male</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Female</p> <p>Ethnicity</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> White/Caucasian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Black/African-American</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Multi Ethnic or Other _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to respond</p>	<p>Age</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 20 and under</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 21 and over</p> <p>Academic Standing</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> First Year Freshman</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Transfer or sophomore level or above</p>
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1.	I am enrolled in a section of a first year seminar course	Y	N
2.	If enrolled in a first year seminar, I have attended approximately the following percent of first year seminar classes that meet once per week (circle one): 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%		
3.	I know who my academic advisor is	Y	N

Please think of the following questions with respect to your current academic advisor. Rate each of the questions to the best of your ability.		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
4.	My advisor is concerned with my academic development	1	2	3	4	5	6
5.	My advisor is concerned with my personal development	1	2	3	4	5	6
6.	My advisor is concerned about my social development	1	2	3	4	5	6
7.	I am satisfied with the number of meetings I have had with my advisor	1	2	3	4	5	6
8.	I am satisfied with the amount of overall contact I have had with my advisor	1	2	3	4	5	6
9.	My advisor is readily accessible to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
10.	I am satisfied with the depth of information that my advisor knows about me at this time	1	2	3	4	5	6
11.	I trust my advisor will follow through with things he or she says they will do	1	2	3	4	5	6
12.	I trust my advisor to keep information I share confidential unless they deem it necessary to share it for my own well being	1	2	3	4	5	6
13.	My advisor listens to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
14.	My advisor is attentive to what I want to share	1	2	3	4	5	6
15.	My advisor is focused on me during our interactions	1	2	3	4	5	6
16.	My advisor is approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6
17.	I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about academic matters	1	2	3	4	5	6
18.	I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about personal matters	1	2	3	4	5	6

COMMENT:

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