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Perceptions of Skill Development in a Living-Learning First-Year Experience Program

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PERCEPTIONS OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN A LIVING-LEARNING FIRST-YEAR
EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

PERCEPTIONS OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN A LIVING-LEARNING FIRST-YEAR
EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. The researcher conducted a qualitative case study including focus groups with students and interviews with faculty involved with the first-year experience program. Three focus groups with a total of 19 student participants and individual interviews with 11 faculty participants were conducted. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and then the researcher listened to each session multiple times to discern common themes and direct quotes.

The findings demonstrated that: (a) Students felt that their critical thinking and written communication skills were positively influenced through the program. (b) Students felt that the attempt to enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines through co-curricular programming was not as successful. (c) Relationships between peers and faculty were two of the most important aspects of the living-learning first-year experience program for students. (d) Faculty similarly felt that critical thinking and written communication skills were positively influenced. (e) Faculty differed from the student opinion on the program's impact on reflection and engagement across disciplines and felt that the co-curricular programming helped to positively influence the development of multi-disciplinary perspectives. Recommendations for improvements included a stronger focus on the relationship between student affairs staff and academic affairs, more intentionality for co-curricular programming, increased uniformity among first-year seminars, and improvements in marketing of the program to internal and external stakeholders.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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DISSERTATION DUPLICATION RELEASE

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If you know anything about me, you know that I absolutely love music. I often find ways to express how I'm feeling or what I'm thinking through song lyrics. As I sat down to write my acknowledgements, I couldn't help but think of one of my favorite lyrics from the song "For Good" from the musical "Wicked": "I've heard it said that people come into our lives for a reason bringing something we must learn; and we are led to those who help us most to grow if we let them, and we help them in return." Here are a few of the people who have helped me to grow over the past three years and without whom the journey to the dissertation would not have been possible.

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DEDICATION

To my father, James Philip Smith (1948-2005), who wished for me to have “a love of books, for they will give you a lifetime of pleasure and knowledge” and who gave me the gift of life-long learning.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
A.	Statement of the Problem.....	2
B.	Significance of the Study	3
C.	Purpose Statement.....	4
D.	Research Questions	4
E.	Definition of Terms.....	6
F.	Delimitations and Limitations of the Study	7
G.	Overview of the Study	8
II.	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	9
A.	Introduction.....	9
B.	First-Year Experience	9
1.	Theoretical Background.....	10
2.	First-Year Experience Programs.....	12
3.	First-Year Seminars	14
4.	Living-Learning Communities.....	19
5.	Embedded First-Year Seminars in Residential LLCs.....	22
6.	Section Summary	24
C.	Learning Outcomes Assessment	25
D.	Chapter Summary	27
III.	METHODOLOGY	28
A.	Introduction.....	28
B.	Selection of Research Design	28
C.	Setting and Participants.....	30
D.	Data Collection Procedures.....	32
1.	Focus Groups	32
2.	Interviews.....	34
E.	Researcher Bias.....	35
F.	Data Analysis	36
G.	Trustworthiness.....	38
H.	Chapter Summary	38
IV.	PRESENTATION OF DATA	39
A.	Introduction.....	39
B.	Summary	39
C.	Participant Demographics and Overview	39
D.	Data Collection Results.....	40
1.	Focus Groups	40
2.	Interviews.....	42
E.	Results: Responses to Focus Group Questions	44
F.	Results: Responses to Interview Questions	74
G.	Chapter Summary	101
V.	FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	103
A.	Introduction.....	103
B.	Summary	103
C.	Findings.....	103

1.	Research Question One.....	104
2.	Research Question Two	113
D.	Conclusions.....	123
E.	Limitations	132
F.	Recommendations for Improved Practice.....	132
G.	Suggestions for Future Research	138
H.	Closing	139
REFERENCES		140
APPENDICES		145
A.	Appendix A – Focus Group Protocol.....	145
B.	Appendix B – Informed Consent – Student Participants	147
C.	Appendix C – Interview Protocol	149
D.	Appendix D – Informed Consent – Faculty Participants	151
E.	Appendix E – Institutional Review Board Approval – Home Institution.....	153
E.	Appendix F – Institutional Review Board Approval – Host Site	155

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the current economic climate, higher education has been forced to demonstrate the impact that its academic and social programs are having on the retention and graduation of competent students that are able to critically think, reflect, and who have a passion for life-long learning. Often, the first year of college is the make or break period for setting up students for success or failure throughout the remainder of their college career. Without intentional efforts to create a coherent and consistent experience, higher education will continue to lose students throughout the first year and beyond. It is essential for us to figure out how we can create a first-year experience program that will truly be successful in engaging students in their own learning and will eventually lead to graduation.

Currently, many first-year experience programs are focused on “the following overall research-based objectives: increasing student-to-student interaction, increasing faculty-to-student interaction especially out of class, increasing student involvement and time on campus, linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum, increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement, and assisting students who have insufficient academic preparations for college” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 14). What is clearly lacking from these objectives is an emphasis on student learning including the application of critical thinking skills, reflection, and a multidisciplinary approach to learning.

If higher education in the United States is going to remain globally competitive, there needs to be a shift in the mindset about first-year experience programs and retention. It is not enough to merely retain students if they are not receiving the education and skills needed to succeed when they graduate. Barefoot (2004) stated that we need “to reframe the discussion by

focusing on institutional excellence as defined by student learning and engagement, and to consider retention a by-product of institutional excellence rather than a front-line objective” (p. 16). First-year experience initiatives can play an instrumental role in this process of focusing on student learning and engagement as a way to achieve higher retention and graduation rates. Therefore, what higher education needs is more attention concentrated on “the simple, comprehensive, and fundamental concept of student learning: students who learn are students who succeed” (Hunter, 2006a, p. 5).

Statement of the Problem

Even though the first-year experience has been studied for well over 20 years in the field of higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005), colleges and universities are still struggling with creating a comprehensive, coherent program to address the needs of first-year students and ensure their academic and social success and eventual graduation. “Although many of these programs are, in fact, successful for certain student groups...the overall national dropout rate of approximately 33 percent (as reported annually by the American College Testing Program) has been disturbingly consistent for the past several years” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 14). Therefore, more research is needed to determine how higher education institutions can not only retain first-year students, but also ensure that they graduate with the skills to be successful in both their personal and professional lives.

Ideally, “post secondary institutions seek to prepare students for both short-term academic success and a lifetime of intellectual growth and professional success” (Eberly & Self Trand, 2010, p. 9). But if the majority of programmatic efforts in the first-year continue to focus solely on the goal of retention, students will not gain the skills needed to be successful once they

graduate and truly be engaged in their own learning. Barefoot (2000) stated that “advocates of experiential learning argue that linking what goes on in class with students’ out-of-class activities creates a synergy that potentially compounds student learning. Strategies such as first-year seminars, learning communities, and ‘living-learning’ programs in residence halls have been successful in achieving that coherence” (p. 16). Therefore, a link does exist between student learning and first-year experience programs. However, there have been few qualitative studies that explore how first-year experience programs such as first-year seminars and living-learning communities truly affect the experience of learning from both the student and faculty perspective in order to inform the work of higher education faculty and administrators.

Significance of the Study

There are a multitude of studies and articles about the importance of the first year in college and the programming that occurs at many institutions to address the needs of first-year students (Hunter, 2006b; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). However, a majority of this literature is focused on quantitative data about how specific programs at individual institutions affect GPA, retention, satisfaction, and graduation rates (Crissman & Upcraft, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Hendel, 2006/2007; Jamelske, 2009; Porter & Swing, 2006; Strayhorn, 2009). There are few qualitative studies that examine the experiences of both faculty and students to determine what it is about a particular first-year experience program that can produce outcomes such as creating a sense of belonging, encouraging reflection and engagement across disciplines, and developing life-long learners.

There are also very few institutions that require all first-year students to participate in a comprehensive, intentional first year-experience which purposefully combines academic and

social programming for students in the hopes of graduating life-long learners with the ability to critically think and reflect. A majority of institutions offer first-year experience programs to a select group of students who elect to participate in the programmatic initiative. This can be a problem in quantitative studies where researchers have to control for characteristics within the smaller group of participants in the first-year experience program as compared to the total first-year student population. However, by eliminating the choice to participate in the first-year experience program, this study will be able to gain insight into the perception of the first-year student population because all were required to participate in the program.

Finally, Brownell & Swaner (2009) expressed the need for studies that “move beyond grades and persistence to look at student learning” (p. 27) to gain a better understanding of how first-year programs positively impact student experiences both inside and outside the classroom. This study will address that need by providing an in depth examination of a program that views first-year experience programming not just as a vehicle for increasing retention rates but rather as an opportunity to enhance student learning through a variety of approaches to developing life-long learners.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines.

Research Questions

To accomplish the purpose of this study, several research questions needed to be answered. These questions are:

1. Based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution, what are the perceptions of first-year students about developing skills for life-long learning?
 - a. How does the participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of critical thinking skills?
 - b. How does the participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of written communication skills?
 - c. How does the combination of living and learning in the first-year experience program enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?
 - d. What aspects of the living-learning experience are most meaningful to first-year students?
2. Based on their participation in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution, what are the perceptions of faculty about fostering approaches to life-long learning?
 - a. How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students' critical thinking skills?
 - b. How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students' written communication skills?
 - c. How does the combination of living and learning enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?
 - d. How does faculty participation in a living-learning first-year experience program help create a culture conducive to life-long learning?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study there are several terms that need to be defined. These terms include the following:

- *First-year experience* is defined as “the sum of many parts; it is more than a single seminar course, orientation program, or learning community. For some students it represents total immersion – classes, residence life, student activities, Greek affiliation – and for others, it involves a juggling act between home, work, and a handful of first-year classes” (Barefoot, 2005, p. 62). It is the sum of all experiences throughout the first year including participation in both academic and social experiences.
- *Living-learning communities* are defined as including “block scheduling and registration so that a group of students (who may or may not live in the same residence hall) take the same two or three courses at the same time. The courses, moreover, are often thematically or substantively linked” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 422). More importantly, for this study, Shapiro and Levine (1999) pointed out that “regardless of the definition on which the foundation of a learning community initiative is based, learning communities are defined by the participants: those who put them together, those who live and learn in them, and those who mentor and teach in them. Perhaps the best way to understand the essence of the learning community experience is to listen to the voices of those participants” (p. 6).
- *First-year seminars* are defined as “a small discussion-based course in which students and their instructors exchange ideas and information” (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005, p. 275). They further stated that “first-year seminars facilitate learning: learning about a subject or combination of topics, learning about the institution, learning about the

diversity within campus communities, but most important, learning about oneself and one's abilities" (Upcraft et al., 2005, p. 276).

- *Critical thinking* is defined as "analysis, synthesis, evaluation, problem solving, and some of the productive habits of mind. Critical thinking can also include the abilities to seek truth, clarity and accuracy; distinguish facts from opinions; and have a healthy skepticism about arguments and claims" (Suskie, 2004, p. 85).
- *Life-long learning* is defined as "a natural propensity of human beings to continue to learn, grow, and develop that is facilitated by 'uncovering' natural learning tendencies and enjoyment of learning and by reducing or eliminating negative, insecure thoughts and belief systems" (McCombs, 1991, p. 120).

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Delimitations of the Study

The population for this study included first-year students and faculty who have participated in a first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution. This population was selected for this case study due to the fact that all first-year students are required to participate in the living-learning first-year experience program at the institution. In addition, the focus of the first-year experience program on critical thinking, reflection, and engagement makes this case different from other institutions that also focus on the primary goals of retention and graduation rates.

Limitations of the Study

The most obvious limitation to this study is that it involves a specific program at only one institution. Therefore, the results may not be transferrable to first-year experience programs at other colleges or universities. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study limits the results to

personal experiences and perspectives of the students and faculty studied. This further limits the ability to generalize the findings to all higher education institutions.

Overview of the Study

Chapter one contained an introduction to the research problem, significance of the study, purpose and research questions, and the delimitations and limitations of the study. Chapter two provides an overview of the literature relating to both first-year experience programs and learning outcomes assessment. Chapter three provides an overview of the methodology of the study including the selection of the research design, participant and site selection, data collection procedures, researcher bias, trustworthiness, and data analysis. Chapter four reports the data obtained from the study using direct quotes from participants on each of the focus group and interview questions. Chapter five discusses the findings from the study, conclusions, and provides recommendations for practice in addition to suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature and is divided into two major parts. The first major section provides an overview of the research on the first-year experience with a particular emphasis on first-year seminars, residential living-learning communities, and embedded first-year seminars in residential living-learning communities. It also includes the theoretical basis for the creation of programming to support college students throughout their first year. The second part of the chapter covers the literature on assessing learning outcomes in first-year experience programs.

First-Year Experience

Hunter (2006) argued that the first-year experience “is the sum of all experiences students have in their first year of college” (p. 6) and “is far more than a single event, program or course” (p. 6). First year-experience programs have included orientations (Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfe, 1986), student success courses (Allen, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Hendel 2006/2007; Porter & Swing, 2006; Schnell & Doetskott, 2002/2003; Strayhorn, 2009), living-learning communities (Blackhurst, Akey & Bobilya, 2003; Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Jaffee, Carle, Phillips & Paltoo, 2008; Laufgraben, 2005; Lenning & Ebberts, 1999; Stassen, 2003), or some combination of all of the above and continue to evolve as new research concerning the benefits and challenges of the first-year experience emerges (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). As Barefoot (2000) stated, “although many of these programs are, in fact, successful for certain student groups...the overall national dropout rate of approximately 33 percent (as reported annually by the American College

Testing Program) has been disturbingly consistent for the past several years” (p. 14). Swail (2004) reported “average graduation rates for four-year colleges have basically held constant, at about 50 percent, and have been as low as 34 percent at two-year institutions” (p. B16). Even more recently, ACT reported that the national persistence to degree rate for all institutions was 46 percent (ACT, 2011, p. 7). It is essential, if we are to increase the number of engaged and educated college graduates, that we focus on assessing the first-year experience to gain a better understanding of how faculty, staff, and students play integral roles in that process.

Theoretical Background

Throughout the literature and research on first-year students there are two theories that provide both the justification for, and the foundation of, a majority of first-year experience programs: Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure and Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002/2003; Stassen, 2003; Strayhorn, 2009; Wild & Ebberts, 2002). Both of these theories address the reasons why college students fail to persist and offer suggestions about how students can effectively connect with faculty and peers at their institution to ensure retention and eventual graduation.

Tinto’s (1993) theory “recognizes that students enter college with individual traits, abilities, and commitments, and that developing student commitment to the institution and to college success requires integration into the college experience” (Schnell & Doetkott, 2002/2003, p. 380). At the heart of Tinto’s (1993) theory is the concept that students were more likely to stay at an institution if they felt integrated both socially and academically to the community. Singell and Waddell (2010) stated that “the student-integration model predicts that, all else equal, institutional commitment and the goal of college completion are positively related to the degree of student integration into the institutional environment” (p. 548). Overall, Tinto’s (1993) theory

forms the basis for first-year experience programs that attempt to promote the social and academic integration of students into the community in order to ensure their persistence and eventual graduation.

Tinto (1987) also explained that effective retention programs are designed and incorporate three principles: the principle of community, commitment to students, and commitment to education. These principles “can be described as an emphasis upon the communal dimensions of institutional life, an enduring commitment to student welfare and a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of all students” (Tinto, 1987, p. 7). More recently, Schnell and Doetkott (2002/2003) described the principle of community as integration both inside and outside of the classroom; the principle of commitment to students as operating from a student-centered philosophy; and the principle of commitment to education as “the primary function of the university” (p. 380). These three principles guide many first-year experience programs in their efforts to connect first-year students with the community and provide them with an effective and engaging education.

Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement fits nicely with Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure in that it argues that through academic involvement and involvement with faculty and peers, students become engaged in the community and are more likely to persist. One of Astin’s (1984) main points in his theory of student involvement is that “the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (p. 298). Later scholars such as Schnell and Doetkott (2002/2003) have observed that “recommendations that have come from involvement theory include building active learning communities, improving advising, developing co-curriculum activities, increasing

student-faculty contact, and emphasizing the importance of an involving first-year experience” (p. 380).

The combination of Astin’s (1984) involvement theory and Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure provided a solid theoretical basis for first-year initiatives designed to help students make progress toward their degree by ensuring that they become connected both socially and academically with the institution early on in their college career.

First-Year Experience Programs

This first section of the literature review covers research focused on general first-year experience programs including their purpose, programmatic elements, and intended outcomes. In addition, specific initiatives pertinent to this study including first-year seminars, living-learning communities, and embedded first-year seminars in residential living-learning communities are examined in detail.

In a chapter on retention in *The Freshman Year Experience* (1989), Levitz and Noel stated that “approximately one-third of each year’s full-time entering freshmen are not at the same institution one year later” (p. 65) and that this number has not fluctuated a great deal over the past thirty years in higher education. In addition, Crissman and Upcraft (2005) stated that “one of the best predictors of first-year student persistence is the grades students earn during the first year” (pg. 37). The fact that many students struggle academically during their first year of college, which eventually may lead to their dropping or stopping out, is the very issue that first-year experience programs are designed to address. The research and literature on the first-year provides the impetus for programming aimed at improving the transition from high school to college in order to increase retention and help students succeed academically.

First-year experience programs were originally designed to support students through a successful transition from high school to college (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Barefoot (2000) listed several elements that are incorporated into a majority of first-year experience programs. These aspects include: increasing peer interaction, increasing faculty-to-student interaction (both in and out of class), increasing student involvement on campus, linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum, increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement, and assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college (Barefoot, 2000, p. 15). In addition, Barefoot (2000) stated that many schools might develop a first-year experience program out of a reaction to a trend on campus such as higher judicial cases or behavioral issues.

Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot (2005) developed a comprehensive list of factors that are important to first-year student success. These factors included developing intellectual and academic competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career, maintaining health and wellness, considering faith and the spiritual dimensions of life, developing multicultural awareness, and developing civic responsibility (p. 8-10). These themes are a common thread through many of the first-year experience programs and create a good framework for both the creation of new first-year initiatives and assessment of existing first-year programming.

Hunter and Gahagan (2003) argued that “ignoring or discounting the issues faced by first-year students has tremendous costs – to the institution in student attrition and to the individual student in unproductive expenditures of time and effort and a resulting sense of failure” (p. 34). First-year experience programs are designed to address these concerns and assist students through the transition from high school to college. Within the overall first-year experience programs that many colleges and universities implement to help with this transition, there are

often several components designed to address specifically the academic and social integration of students in addition to the overarching goals of increasing first-to-second year persistence. Two of the most common initiatives are first-year seminars and living learning communities.

First-Year Seminars

First-year seminars, also known as student success courses, have become quite commonplace on campuses across the United States with over 95% of four-year institutions reporting having implemented this type of program to support student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Goodman and Pascarella (2006) stated that “the common goal of first-year seminars is to increase academic performance and persistence through academic and social integration” (p. 26). However, the format in which this goal is achieved varies by institution in terms of whether or not the course is required or an elective, who the target population for the course is, how often the course meets, how many credits are offered for the course, how long the course lasts, and who teaches the course.

As a result of the variances in offering the course, research on first-year seminars and student success courses has been mixed in terms of the positive impact of these programs on students. In *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) listed a multitude of studies conducted on first-year seminars and their impact on academic performance and retention. They stated that “an informal examination of evidence of varying degrees of quality from more than 40 reports supports the estimate that FYS participants are 5 to 15 percentage points more likely than nonparticipants to graduate within four years” (p. 402). Specifically, “two single-institution studies matched participants and non-participants on such pre-course characteristics as gender, race-ethnicity, high school achievement, and admissions test scores.

Both estimated that FYS participants had a 7 percentage point advantage over nonparticipants” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 401) in terms of first-to-second year persistence.

A number of studies support the positive impact of first-year seminars on retention and persistence. Allen (2004) stated that the retention rate for first-year students at Drury College has increased from 78 to 83 percent over the course of nine years that their first-year student success course, Alpha Seminar, has been in place (p. 27). Goodman and Pascarella (2006) described a study conducted at the University of Maryland, College Park which “concluded that first-year seminar participants were significantly more likely to persist than similar students who did not participate in the seminar” (p. 27). When Schnell and Doetkott (2002/2003) conducted a longitudinal study to determine what the impact of a first-year seminar was on student retention, they found that “retention rates were significantly greater ($p < .001$) for students in the seminar group when compared to those not enrolled in the seminar” (p. 386). However, many of these studies were institution specific and therefore cannot be generalized to the impact of first-year seminars at all institutions in higher education.

In order to understand “what specific content areas of first-year seminars lead to greater intent to persist among first-year students” (p. 90) Porter and Swing (2006) developed a quantitative study using the First-Year Initiative (FYI) survey which included data from 40 institutions and over 20,000 respondents. The results of the study showed that on the five scales of study skills and academic engagement, college policies, campus engagement, peer connections, and health education, only study skills, academic engagement, and health education had substantial impact on early intention to persist (Porter & Swing, 2006, p. 105). This finding was consistent with previous literature that supports the creation of first-year seminars to assist with the academic transition from high school to college. However, there were several

limitations to this study including a lack of a control group and the fact that the data “were generated for purposes other than this research project” (Porter & Swing, 2006, p. 104).

Several recent studies of first-year seminars have found mixed results. Jamelske (2009) examined the impact of a first-year experience course on GPA and retention after one year at a medium-size Midwestern public university. Surveys were administered to instructors and students to determine successful first-year experience (FYE) courses. The results showed that “participating faculty lacked the appropriate structure, support, and incentive to create FYE courses that are compatible with the goals of the FYE program” (Jamelske, 2009, p. 381) and therefore many of the FYE courses were not much different than non-FYE courses. The study also found that there was no overall positive effect on retention but “that taking a goal compatible FYE course had a statistically significant positive impact on student retention” (Jamelske, 2009, p. 385). This finding has significant implications for practice in that institutions need to be intentional about the goals of their FYE programs and provide adequate support and structure to those faculty and staff implementing the program if the program is to result in increased retention of first-year students.

Schrader and Brown (2008) examined a one-credit first-year experience course at a large northeastern university that was designed to “enhance a student’s time management, communication, social interaction, and study skills, as well as to help develop strategies for problem solving and critical thinking” (p. 318). Their quantitative study looked at the change in participants’ knowledge, attitudes and behaviors over time as compared to first-year students who were not enrolled in the first-year experience course. A pre-test and post-test survey was administered to students and included three scales based on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The overall results of the study did not “support the conclusion that the FYE is valuable in terms

of programmatic objectives” (Schrader & Brown, 2006, p. 330). However, the researchers suggested several areas for further research on gender differences in first-year seminars in addition to the connection between attitudes and retention.

Several other studies found mixed results on the impact of first-year seminars on retention, satisfaction, and social and academic integration. In an attempt to discover what impact a first-year seminar had on student satisfaction and retention, Hendel (2006/2007) conducted a quantitative study at a research extensive, public, land-grant university. He found that enrollment in a first-year experience seminar increased the feeling of community among participants but did not have a significant impact on retention from freshman to sophomore year. Strayhorn (2009) conducted a quantitative study to “measure the impact of first-year seminar participation on three correlates of college student retention: (a) academic integration, (b) social integration, and (c) satisfaction with college” (p. 13). He found that participants in the first-year seminar did not differ from non-participants in terms of satisfaction, academic integration, and social integration (Strayhorn, 2009, p. 18).

In addition to the literature examining the impact of first-year seminars on students’ experience during their first year, several studies investigated the ways in which first-year seminars impacted student learning. Jessup-Anger (2011) wanted to understand how first-year students “made meaning of their experience, particularly in relation to their motivation to learn” (p. 102) in a one-credit pass/fail first-year seminar at a large research institution. This qualitative case study found several themes surrounding the first-year seminar including: “significant motivational barriers were present at the beginning of the class; students’ personal connection to the subject matter enhanced their motivation to learn; and pedagogical strategies served to deepen students’ motivation to learn” (p. 106). These findings demonstrate that first-year

seminars have the ability to affect student's motivation to learn based on subject matter and the faculty or staff's method of teaching.

In a two part series, Self Trand and Eberly (2009) and Eberly and Self Trand (2010) examined the ways in which a focus on developing skills for reading and writing in first-year seminars impacted critical thinking of first-year students. Their quantitative study on reading explored the ways in which teaching various reading strategies in a first-year seminar course impacted student learning (Self Trand & Eberly, 2009). Although they found that teaching reading to first-year students did have a positive impact, they felt that three weeks in a first-year experience course was not enough to adequately evaluate the impact of these learning strategies. They argued that "student responses given in the junior or senior year will more accurately suggest actual usefulness and validity for learning" (Self Trand & Eberly, 2009, p. 18). Therefore, the researchers felt that more research was needed to assess whether or not the techniques taught in the first-year seminar were beneficial throughout the rest of the students' academic careers.

In Eberly and Self Trand's (2010) quantitative study on teaching writing techniques in first-year seminars, they found similarly positive results in terms of the effectiveness of using both the "Going to the Wall" (p. 19) activity and the "Parking Spots" (p. 19) technique in helping students understand the process of writing. They discovered that "both studies report students' views of the methods as useful in terms of their planned or present usage, with all responses exceeding 75%" (Eberly & Self Trand, 2010, p. 19). This study demonstrated the importance of teaching writing techniques in a first-year seminar to help improve the writing process throughout the remainder of the participants' college experience.

As the previous literature demonstrates, although the amount of research on the impact of first-year seminars is growing:

Still, there is much not known about the impact of first-year seminars because so much of the existing research is limited to single-institution studies, and because much of the research focuses on the impact of these courses overall, rather than what specific aspects of the course affect persistence (Porter & Swing, 2006, p. 90).

To gain a better understanding of the impact of first-year seminars, more longitudinal, multi-institutional studies that control for pre-college characteristics are needed. In addition, more qualitative studies are necessary to provide an in depth look at the experience of students and faculty involved with first-year seminars in order to gain a holistic perspective of how these courses affect the overall success of first-year students.

Living-Learning Communities

Another initiative that has been created to assist first-year students successfully navigate the transition to college is living-learning communities (Laufgraben, 2005; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). These communities were created based on the idea that “involving a student in a small community early in his or her academic career will improve the student’s performance and increase the likelihood of retention for that student through developing confidence and facilitating social integration” (Hotchkiss, Moore & Pitts, 2006, p. 197). Laufgraben (2005) reported that according to the National Survey of First-Year Curricular Practices survey, 75 percent of research-extensive institutions, 40 percent of master’s institutions, and 18 percent of baccalaureate colleges used learning communities to promote first-year student success (p. 371).

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) “identified 16 types of student outcomes where positive LC effects have been found. These outcomes included: academic performance (as measured by GPA), retention, institutional satisfaction, greater engagement in learning, and increased quality

and quantity of learning” (Stassen, 2003, p. 583). Laufgraben (2005) also outlined a variety of benefits from living-learning communities including positive effects on academic achievement, retention, and social and intellectual development. In addition, “for faculty, participation in learning communities typically leads to greater attention to pedagogy and enhanced collegiality across disciplines” (Laufgraben, 2005, p. 374). However, much like first-year seminars, living-learning communities can take a variety of forms based on theme, structure, academic or student affairs involvement, and size. Consequently, the literature on the effectiveness of living-learning communities is often mixed in terms of correlating the overall success of these programs to retention and the academic and social integration of first-year students.

Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, and Leonard (2008) stated that “most student-focused learning communities create small group interaction among participants, provide networks of support, promote curricular integration, offer a vehicle for academic and social integration, and intentionally cultivate key learning outcomes” (p. 496). They used data from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs to create a typology for living-learning communities. They delineated 3 types of clusters: (1) small, limited resources, residence life emphasis, (2) medium, moderate resources, student and academic affairs collaboration, and (3) large, comprehensive resources, student and academic affairs collaboration (Inkelas et al., 2008, pp. 502-503). By creating these typologies, Inkelas et al. (2008) wanted to create a tool for universities to use when assessing their living-learning communities in order to make improvements in practice. Although this framework has not had the impact that Inkelas et al. (2008) desired in terms of learning community assessments, it did provide a clearer definition of living-learning communities and the variety of ways that institutions may implement this first-year initiative.

Garrett and Zabriskie (2004) conducted a quantitative study that looked at “student perceptions of their academic and social environment, peer and faculty interactions, cognitive and psychosocial development, and awareness of ethnic, political, and religious differences” (p. 40) based on whether or not they participated in a living-learning community (LLC). They found that students who participated in a LLC were more likely to have both formal and informal interactions with faculty than students who did not participate in the LLC (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004, p. 42). However, even though student-faculty interactions were higher for those students that participated in a LLC, the interactions were still relatively low – somewhere between never and a few times a semester. Therefore, Garrett and Zabriskie (2004) argued that there needs to be more structured interactions between faculty and students in LLCs in order for the development of mentoring relationships to take place.

Blackhurst, Akey, and Bobilya (2003) conducted one of the few qualitative studies on student outcomes in a residential living-learning community. Using focus groups with students from a mid-sized Midwestern public institution, Blackhurst et al. (2003) asked questions about the students’ experiences including:

Why did you join a learning community? What was the best thing about being a member of a learning community? How do you think your first semester would have been different if you had not joined a learning community? If you could change one thing about the current learning community program what would you change and why? What would you say to potential students who were interested in hearing about your learning community experience and were considering the decision to join? (pp. 39-40).

Based on the results of the interviews, the researchers developed seven themes around participants’ involvement in the learning community. These themes included the ways in which the community helped to ease the transition to college, helped facilitate social integration, helped students develop relationships with faculty, and helped facilitate in-class learning. Overall, the findings from Blackhurst et al. (2003) supported “existing theory about the effects of learning

community participation on students' learning, development, and adjustment to college" (p. 54). Other recommendations that came out of this study included the importance of marketing and recruiting both students and faculty to participate in learning communities.

Finally, Jaffee, Carle, Phillips, and Paltoo (2008) conducted a unique study that highlighted the possible negative effects of participation in a living-learning community. The researchers wanted to gain a better understanding of some of the negative or unintended consequences of living-learning communities for first-year students including "social dynamics that can hinder student learning, student development, and faculty-student relations" (Jaffee et al., 2008, p. 58). After a quantitative study that included a survey of students involved in a variety of learning communities, they found that learning communities "promote a sense of community and provide friendship networks that students believe will last beyond the current semester. However, under certain circumstances, intense interaction can have negative consequences, such as cliques and behaviors reminiscent of high school" (Jaffee et al., 2008, p. 64). They hoped that faculty and administrators would use this information to ensure that the living-learning communities they design are not having a negative impact on their students, which may reverse the demonstrated positive effects of these communities.

Embedded First-Year Seminars in Residential Living-Learning Communities

Another initiative that some institutions have implemented to increase faculty and student interaction both inside and outside the classroom is first-year seminars that are included as part of a specific living-learning community. Although there is not a great deal of research on these types of programs, Hunter and Linder (2005) stated that "a recent national benchmarking study of first-year seminars (Swing & Barefoot, 2002) found that linked seminars produce higher

student-reported ratings on learning outcomes and satisfaction measures than stand-alone seminars” (p. 286).

Smith, Goldfine, and Windham (2009) took a unique approach to examining living-learning communities by researching the interaction between first-year seminars and living-learning communities to see if combined programs would have any additional benefits. Their single institution quantitative study used a survey to determine the effectiveness of a first-year seminar in achieving learning outcomes based on whether or not the students were involved in a learning community or not. The results showed that “students participating in embedded seminars were not more likely than their peers in independent seminars to perceive educational benefits associated with the seminar” (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 55-56). Surprisingly, the researchers found that students in independent courses saw more benefits than those in learning communities. However, the researchers felt that some of the differences may have been attributed to demographic differences within the two groups and suggested that further research should be conducted at other institutions in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamic between living learning communities and first-year seminars.

Schussler and Fierros (2008) examined several different types of residential learning communities that included enrollment in a first-year seminar at a private, mid-sized institution. Through a mixed methods study they wanted to determine how participation in these communities affected the academic environment and sense of belonging for first-year students. The most significant finding from this study was “the value of the residence halls in establishing social and academic networks for students. The existence of such networks is key if students are to feel a sense of belonging at an institution” (Schussler & Fierros, 2008, p. 89). Although the degree to which students felt a social and academic connection with their peers and faculty

varied with the size of the learning community, the overall finding confirmed that embedding a first-year seminar in a residence hall learning community is beneficial to first-year students sense of belonging at the institution.

Donahue (2004) also examined the perceptions of first-year students on the learning environment that was created through their participation in an embedded first-year seminar in a residential living-learning community. This study evaluated reflective essays that had been written at the end of the seminar and “data analysis focused on what students need to feel connected with their campus community and create an effective curricular and co-curricular learning experience” (Donahue, 2004, p. 82). The results of this study “revealed that students learn from their peers, not just in the classroom, or in their co-curricular environments, but from a complex interchange of both worlds that can not be duplicated without these interactions” (Donahue, 2004, p. 94).

Section Summary

The first-year experience has been studied for the past twenty years with mixed results in terms of the effectiveness of programs on the transition to college and first-year student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). Programs that have been implemented to address the myriad challenges faced by first-year students include orientations, first-year seminars, and living-learning communities. While a majority of the research focuses on the impact of these programs on GPA, persistence, and retention, little to no research has been done on the impact of these programs on students’ ability to develop skills for life long learning. In addition, most of the research on the first-year experience has been quantitative in nature and does not include an exploration of the perceptions of both faculty and students about the impact of first-year experience programs.

Learning Outcomes Assessment

One reason that the assessment of learning outcomes has become more prevalent in higher education is “that we now realize that students must not only learn while in college but develop a lifelong interest in learning and the ability to learn on their own, so they can continue to learn after they’ve left our institution” (Suskie, 2004, p. 14). Terenzini and Upcraft (1996) stated that “outcome assessments attempt to answer the most important question of all in student affairs: Is what we are doing having any effect, is that effect the intended one, and how do we know?” (p. 218).

Learning outcomes are defined as “the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students take with them from a learning experience” (Suskie, 2004, p. 75). Ideally, learning outcomes should be identified for student experiences both inside and outside the classroom to determine whether student learning is truly taking place. With regards to programs that include both curricular and co-curricular experiences such as living-learning first-year experience programs, it is essential for student learning to be measured in “multiple meaningful and credible ways” (Middaugh, 2010, p. 107).

Several methods for assessing student learning have been developed and applied in higher education (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Suskie, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). One of the most commonly used models for assessing outcomes is Astin’s (1991) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model. Input refers to those pre-college characteristics that may affect how students experience college and may include personal demographics, high school grades and test scores, and socioeconomic status (Suskie, 2004). Environment is the area that most colleges and universities have the most control over due to the fact that it encompasses the experiences that student have while at college and include programmatic elements as well as the

institutional setting as a whole (Suskie, 2004). Outcomes are what students leave college with and can include attitudes, values, and skills as well as GPA and retention (Astin, 1991).

Terenzini and Upcraft (1996) offered a succinct explanation of how Astin's (1991) model impacts the design of any assessment project by "gathering three distinct kinds of information on students: what they are like when they came to college, the nature of their experiences while in college, and what they are like when they leave college" (p. 222).

Another way to assess learning outcomes is Kirkpatrick's (1998) four levels of evaluation of learning experiences. The four levels included reaction to the learning experience, learning, transfer, and results (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Suskie (2004) explained how each of these levels can apply to the assessment of learning outcomes by asking pertinent questions about students' collegiate experiences. For the purposes of first-year experience programs, a majority of the evaluation occurs under the second level of learning which is defined as "a measure of the knowledge acquired, skills improved, or attitudes changed due to training" (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p. 56).

In an article about assessing general education outcomes, Yin and Volkwein (2010) described the outcomes that the AAC & U declared as imperative for today's college students including "cross-disciplinary perspectives and intercultural knowledge, verbal and written communication skills, analytical and problem-solving skills, collaboration and teamwork, information literacy, integrative thinking, and civic responsibility" (p. 80). While there are a variety of ways to assess these outcomes (Tebo-Messina & Prus, 1995) such as interviews and focus groups, standardized exams, surveys, portfolios, and observations, Yin and Volkwein (2010) argued that "a combination of methods, not just one, is necessary for an effective and informative assessment" (p. 86).

Suskie (2004) argued that “today’s college graduates, regardless of major, should have the following capabilities: communication skills, especially in writing” (p. 86), “information literacy and research skills” (p. 86), “thinking skills” (p. 86), and “interpersonal skills” (p. 86). As stated earlier in the literature review, many of the first-year experience programs are designed to teach students these very skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). Therefore, learning outcomes assessment will continue to be an essential part of first-year experience programs if higher education wants to demonstrate to both internal and external stakeholders that they are achieving positive outcomes that influence the ability of college students to be successful after graduation.

Chapter Summary

There is a wealth of literature on both the first-year experience and learning outcomes assessment that helps to create a context for how far higher education has come in addressing concerns about the transition from high school to college for first-year students and how much work is still needed to assess current initiatives and make future improvements. As Gardner, Upcraft, and Barefoot (2005) stated:

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing higher education is to encourage institutions to implement their commitment to the first year of college by providing the resources to promote first-year student success. This is not an easy task and will happen only if higher education makes the first year of college a high priority and develops proven strategies to make institutions ‘walk the walk’ as well as ‘talk the talk.’ This will more likely happen if a culture of assessment develops in each institution that can validate efforts to promote first-year student success (p. 523).

Overall, the literature demonstrates a need for more research on how living-learning first-year experience programs impact the development of skills necessary for life-long learning from both a faculty and student perspective.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter provides an in depth description of the selection of an appropriate research design, site and participant selection, data collection procedures, instrumentation, and data analysis. To establish reliability and validity for the study, researcher bias and trustworthiness are also addressed in this chapter.

Selection of Research Design

A case study design was selected for this study because the intended purpose of the study was to explore outcomes, both intended and unintended, in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution – a bounded system – that has instrumental value for other institutions (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2008). Yin (2008) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (pp. 623-624). Merriam (1988) stated that a case study “design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (p. 10).

With regards to this study, a true understanding of how this bounded system – the living-learning first-year experience program – has helped develop skills for life-long learning cannot be gained from examining only one aspect of the program. Therefore, to gain a “holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 1988, p. 10) of the case it was necessary to investigate the entirety of the program including faculty perceptions, student perceptions, and institutional documents. This ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the outcomes of the program.

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines, two main research questions were developed with several sub-questions under each. These are:

1. Based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution, what are the perceptions of first-year students about developing skills for life-long learning?
 - a. How does the participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of critical thinking skills?
 - b. How does the participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of written communication skills?
 - c. How does the combination of living and learning in the first-year experience program enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?
 - d. What aspects of the living-learning experience are most meaningful to first-year students?
2. Based on their participation in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution, what are the perceptions of faculty about fostering approaches to life-long learning?
 - a. How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students' critical thinking skills?
 - b. How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students' written communication skills?

- c. How does the combination of living and learning enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?
- d. How does faculty participation in a living-learning first-year experience program help create a culture conducive to life-long learning?

These research questions guided the data collection procedures and the development of interview protocols and focus group questions.

Setting and Participants

Site Selection

The site for this case study was a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution. This site was selected based on extreme case sampling (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) recommended using this type of sampling strategy when the researcher is “interested in learning about a case that is particularly troublesome or enlightening, or a case that is noticeable for its success or failure” (p. 215). There were several reasons why this site fit the description of “enlightening” and “noticeable for its success.” First, the fact that the first-year experience program at this institution focused on developing life-long learners and not retention made it different from many other studies on the first-year experience.

As seen in the literature review chapter, a majority of the research and literature on first-year experience programming has focused primarily on quantitative data about how specific programs at individual institutions affect GPA, retention, satisfaction, and graduation rates based on the goals and outcomes of the individual programs. There are few qualitative studies that look at the experiences of *both* faculty and students involved in first-year experience programs to determine how a focus on outcomes such as creating a sense of belonging, encouraging

reflection and engagement across disciplines, and developing life-long learners can influence the first-year experience.

A second reason for selecting this site was the fact that there are very few institutions which require all first-year students to participate in a comprehensive, intentional first year-experience that purposefully combines academic and social programming for students in the hopes of graduating life-long learners with the ability to critically think and reflect. A majority of institutions offer first-year experience programs to a select group of students who make a choice to participate in the programmatic initiative. This can be a problem in quantitative studies where researchers have to control for characteristics within the smaller group of participants in the first-year experience program as compared to the total first-year student population. However, in this case, by eliminating the choice to participate in the first-year experience program, this study will be able to gain insight into the perception of the first-year student population because all were required to participate in the program.

Finally, the first-year experience program at this site has a long history and has been successful enough to expand from students in only one residence hall to the entire first-year student population at the institution.

Participant Selection

The population for this study included faculty and sophomore students who have participated in a first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution. In selecting the faculty and student participants, a purposeful sampling strategy was used (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1988). Patton (1990) stated that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in the selection of information rich cases for studying in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the research” (p.

169). Both faculty and student participants were selected with assistance from assessment staff at the institution as determined by their involvement with the first-year experience program in the past four years.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for this study included transcripts from both the three focus groups with sophomore students and the 11 individual interviews with faculty members.

Focus Groups

To collect information on their perceptions about their participation in the living-learning first-year experience program, single category design focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000) were conducted with three focus groups of six to eight sophomore student participants. Focus groups were selected as the best method of data collection with student participants based on several factors including interactions between participants will provide the best information, there is limited time to collect data, and students may be hesitant to provide in depth information in an individual interview (Creswell, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Patton, 2002). Focus groups lasted for approximately a half hour to an hour in length and were digitally recorded. In addition, the researcher took notes both during and after the focus groups to supplement the data. To provide confidentiality, participants were not explicitly named when using direct quotes from the focus groups. Approval was granted for the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects research at both the host institution (Appendix F) for the living-learning first-year experience program and the researcher's home institution (Appendix E).

In order to create a protocol for the student focus groups, the first research question and sub questions were used as a guideline (Appendix A). Each research question was addressed by

several questions within the focus group protocol. In addition, the questions for the focus groups were written based on previous relevant research in the area of living-learning first-year experience programs (Blackhurst, Akey & Bobilya, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Self Trand & Eberly, 2009; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005), the goals and outcomes for the program as set forth by the institution, and the researcher's experience and knowledge.

The first research question and sub questions for this study focused on student perceptions of developing skills for life-long learning based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program. As shown in Table 1, data for the first main research question and sub questions were addressed by specific questions within the focus group protocol (Appendix A).

Table 1

1st Research Question and Corresponding Focus Group Questions

Research Question	Corresponding Focus Group Questions
1. Based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program, what are the perceptions of first-year students about developing skills for life-long learning?	1 – 10
a. How does participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of critical thinking skills?	3 & 4
b. How does participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of written communication skills?	4, 6, 8
c. How does the combination of living and learning in the first-year experience program enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?	3, 5 & 6
d. What aspects of the living-learning experience are most meaningful to first-year students?	2, 6 – 9

An informed consent form (Appendix B) was given to each participant of the focus group to ensure that they understood the purpose of the study, the procedures used for collecting data,

confidentiality, the benefits and risks of participating in the study, and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2007, p. 123).

Interviews

An in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol was used to solicit information from 11 faculty participants about their perceptions on nurturing approaches to life-long learning based on their experiences with teaching a seminar in the living-learning first-year experience program. This type of interview structure was selected due to the fact that “respondents answer the same questions, thus increasing comparability of responses, and data are complete for each person on the topics addressed in the interview” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 64). In addition, “this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1988, p. 74).

Interviews lasted for approximately a half hour to an hour in length and were digitally recorded. Notes were taken by the interviewer both during and after the interviews took place. Interviewees were not explicitly named nor were their official title and rank given in order to provide confidentiality. Member checking occurred after the interviews were coded to ensure the accounts were accurate and representative of the participants’ experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2008). Approval was granted for the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects research at both the host institution (Appendix F) for the living-learning first-year experience program and the researcher’s home institution (Appendix E).

Interview protocols for faculty members were created from the second research question and sub questions (Appendix C). Each research question was addressed by two to three questions within the interview protocol. Due to the fact that there was not a great deal of prior research in this area, the interview questions were developed based on the researcher’s

experience, the goals and outcomes for the program as set forth by the institution, and the small amount of literature available (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The second main research question and sub questions focused on the perceptions of faculty about developing skills for life-long learning based on their experience teaching a seminar in a living-learning first-year experience program. As shown in Table 2, data for this question and sub questions came from specific questions within the interview protocol (Appendix C).

Table 2

2nd Research Question and Corresponding Interview Questions

Research Question	Corresponding Interview Questions
2. Based on their participation in a living-learning first-year experience program, what are the perceptions of faculty about fostering approaches to life-long learning?	1 – 9
a. How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students' critical thinking skills?	5 – 7
b. How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students' written communication skills?	4, 6
c. How does the combination of living and learning enhance reflection and engagement against disciplines?	7 – 9
d. How does faculty participation in a living-learning first-year experience program help create a culture conducive to life-long learning?	3, 4 & 9

An informed consent form (Appendix D) was given to each participant to ensure that they understood the purpose of the study, the procedures used for collecting data, confidentiality, the benefits and risks of participating in the study, and their ability to withdraw at any time from the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 123).

Researcher Bias

In qualitative research, it is essential to identify the ways in which the interpretation of the data could be affected by the experiences of the researcher. Merriam (1988) stated that

“clarifying the researcher’s assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study” (p. 170) could help provide internal validity to the study. For the purpose of this study, the researcher has attended and worked at small, liberal arts institutions. However, the researcher did not participate in a living-learning first-year experience program during her undergraduate career but witnessed the value that those programs brought to her peers throughout their undergraduate experience in terms of connections with other students, faculty, and staff. The researcher previously worked at a small, liberal arts institution with first-year students that were involved in living-learning communities and helped to create programming based around the needs of first-year students in their transition to college.

Currently, the researcher works with living-learning communities for first-year students at a large, research institution. The variation between living-learning communities and the challenges that first-year students face during the transition to college that the researcher has witnessed over seven years in higher education led to the interest in this topic. Since, based on all of the aforementioned factors, the data analysis in this study may have been affected by researcher bias, several steps were taken by the researcher to ensure the validity of the study. Some of the techniques used to minimize researcher bias included semi-structured interview protocols, focus group protocols, member checking (Creswell, 2007, Denizen & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998), journaling, and triangulation with institutional documents (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1988).

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study consisted “of preparing and organizing the data...for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2007, p.

148). In addition, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) described the process for qualitative data analysis as using “an inductive approach, often organizing, interpreting, codifying, and categorizing information both during and after data is collected, drawing conclusions from both the data and the researchers’ experience” (p. 60). For this study, the process of data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process and involved the identification of codes and patterns from the focus groups and interviews that could be translated to larger themes.

Instead of transcribing the interviews verbatim, the researcher listened to the tapes of the interviews and focus groups multiple times and took notes to decipher codes and glean direct quotes from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Upcraft and Schuh (1996) argued that this process of analyzing data “saves time, avoids the cost of transcription, and if there is any question about what was said, there is still an accurate record” (p. 77). Codes were established by counting the number of times they appeared in the data. Merriam (1988) stated “there are at least three good reasons for counting something that is found consistently in the data” (p. 148). Two of these reasons include discovering “the general drift of the data” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 215) and protecting against researcher bias (Miles & Huberman, 1984, pp. 215-216).

The codes that were established from the focus groups and interviews were then combined into larger themes that were described in depth using direct quotes to answer each of the research questions. Finally, the themes were analyzed for their ability to be transferable to other programs and institutions. Merriam (1988) stated that “the case study researcher can improve the generalizability of his or her findings by providing a rich, thick description” (p. 177) that allows other readers to interpret the data accurately and make decisions on their own as to the transferability of the information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Several methods were used to establish trustworthiness of this study. Multiple sources of data including descriptive statistics, interview transcripts, and focus group transcripts were used for the purpose of triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1988). Researcher bias was identified to allow readers to understand the perspective of the researcher and how it might have affected the interpretation of data (Merriam, 1988). In addition, to allow participants to “judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208) member checking was used for both the individual interviews and focus groups (Denizen & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Lastly, “rich, thick description” was used in describing the participants and setting in order to allow “readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred” (Creswell, 2007, p. 209).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology for the study including a rationale for the selection of the research design, site and participant selection, instrumentation, researcher bias, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the participants including basic demographic information and a summary of the data collection results. In addition, the data obtained from the study are reported using direct quotes from student participants to address the focus group protocol questions and direct quotes from faculty participants to address the interview protocol questions.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. A majority of studies on first-year experience programs focus on retention, GPA, and persistence (Barefoot, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). This study was unique because it focused on the perceptions of both faculty and students at an institution where all first-year students participate in a living-learning first-year experience program. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study allowed for an in depth exploration of the perceptions of participants in the program to allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of the program on developing skills for life-long learning.

Participant Demographics and Overview

Even though a purposeful sampling strategy was used to select participants (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1988), the faculty and student participants represented a wide range of disciplines, gender, race and ethnicity. Although sophomore, junior, and senior students were invited to participate in the focus groups, the first students who responded and attended were

sophomore students. Of the nineteen students who participated, 10 were female and nine were male which is similar to the gender breakdown of the 2010 first-year cohort of 52% female and 48% male students. There was also a wide range of majors represented among the participants including political science, economics, math, classics, English, accounting, psychology, biology, and history. Several participants also had minors in areas such as peace and conflict studies, philosophy, women and gender studies, and anthropology.

The faculty participants represented a wide range of experience in academia. The 11 individuals had been at the institution as faculty members from a range of approximately 10 to 30 years and represented ranks from professor to associate professor. The gender breakdown of the interviewees was five female faculty members and six male faculty members. In addition, they represented the spectrum of number of year's participation in the living-learning first-year experience program. Some participants had taught in the first-year experience program for one year while others had taught all four years that the program had been in place. Finally, the faculty members represented a wide range of disciplines from math to physics to history to religious studies.

Data Collection Results

Focus Groups

A total of three focus groups with student participants were conducted during the month of April 2012 in various residence halls at the institution. The first focus group consisted of eight sophomore student participants and lasted for 39 minutes (see Table 3). The second focus group consisted of six sophomore participants and lasted for 1 hour and 6 minutes (see Table 4). The third focus group consisted of five sophomore students and lasted for 30 minutes (see Table 5). The student participants were recruited through the staff in the residence life office. Emails

were sent out to all residents in the upper-class residence halls to invite them to participate in a focus group based on their experiences in the living-learning first-year experience program. The first 10 students who responded for each focus group were selected to participate.

At each focus group the students were given a copy of the informed consent form to sign (Appendix B) and one to keep for themselves. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the researcher informed the participants that the focus group would be digitally recorded. After each focus group had concluded, the researcher wrote a journal entry about the experience including initial reactions to the focus group and non-verbal interactions that were observed within the group.

Table 3.

Focus Group #1 Participants

Assigned Name	Gender	Major	Classification
Donna	Female	Accounting	Sophomore
Leslie	Female	Psychology	Sophomore
Susan	Female	English	Sophomore
Brendan	Male	Economics	Sophomore
Troy	Male	Economics and Math	Sophomore
Cameron	Male	Biology	Sophomore
Jack	Male	Economics	Sophomore
Tyler	Male	Biology	Sophomore

Table 4.

Focus Group #2 Participants

Assigned Name	Gender	Major	Classification
Robert	Male	Political Science	Sophomore
Rachel	Female	Economics	Sophomore
Elizabeth	Female	Math	Sophomore
Katie	Female	Economics	Sophomore
Paul	Male	Classics	Sophomore
Audrey	Female	English	Sophomore

Table 5.

Focus Group #3 Participants

Assigned Name	Gender	Major	Classification
Becky	Female	English	Sophomore
John	Male	History/Political Science	Sophomore
Alisha	Female	Math/Pre Med	Sophomore
Adam	Male	Biology	Sophomore
Julie	Female	Math	Sophomore

Interviews

The 11 interviews with faculty members were conducted in the offices of the individual faculty members during the month of April 2012 and ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour long. The 11 faculty members were selected out of a group of over 70 faculty members who had taught in the living-learning first-year experience program over the past four years. A

gatekeeper at the institution provided a list of all faculty members who had taught in the program and the researcher identified 13 that would represent a wide range of experience, a variety of disciplines, and an equal representation of genders (see Table 6). The gatekeeper then sent an email of introduction to those faculty members informing them of the purpose of the study and introducing the researcher. The researcher sent follow up emails to each faculty member to schedule the interviews over the course of a week in April 2012. Eleven of the 13 faculty members agreed to participate in the study.

Table 6.

Interview Participants

Assigned Name	Gender	Discipline
Frank	Male	Math & Sciences
Bill	Male	Math & Sciences
Kelly	Female	Humanities
Manuel	Male	Business
Megan	Female	Humanities
Jenna	Female	Humanities
Grant	Male	Math & Sciences
Darren	Male	Humanities
Isabelle	Female	Math & Sciences
Todd	Male	Humanities
Sophia	Female	Humanities

At each interview the faculty member was given a copy of the informed consent form to sign (Appendix D) and one to keep. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and the

participant's right to withdraw at any time. In addition, the researcher informed the participant that the interview would be digitally recorded. During the interview the researcher took notes and after each interview had concluded the researcher wrote a journal entry about the experience including perceptions of the interview.

Results: Responses to Focus Group Questions

Opening Question A: Tell us who you are, your major, and your favorite thing about your college.

This opening question was asked to learn a little more about the participants in the focus group and to get the students talking about topics that were comfortable to start the conversation. Information on each individual's major, gender, and pseudonym can be found in Table 3, 4, and 5. The responses with regards to the students' favorite thing about their institution varied but the most common theme was the sense of community, which was mentioned by eight out of the 19 participants.

From the first focus group, Donna, Leslie, Susan, and Troy all referenced the community as their favorite thing about the institution. Leslie described how "you know a lot of people – you get to know people really well. You can also recognize faces and meet new people every day at the same time." Susan expanded on Leslie's description stating, "there's a lot of support here either from your fellow classmates or from faculty or from the people in Res Life." By the time Troy gave his answer of "community" there was a great deal of laughter in the group. But Troy expanded on the sense of community not only among current students but from alumni of the institution as well:

I feel like the alums love this place a lot and they're so eager to help you out and help you with the job search, help you out after you graduate. And they really love this place so I guess that goes along with my sense of community.

Brendan and Cameron referenced the people as their favorite aspect of the institution. Brendan called it “kind of like a second home” and Cameron spoke about how “everyone’s so nice – holding doors and stuff for you. You always hear friends walking to class saying hi and talking.” Tyler’s favorite thing was that “the professors really care about you. They are willing to talk with you whenever you want – help you out with anything.” And finally, Jack appreciated that the institution stressed the importance of:

Trying different things rather than just saying – like preparing for your career or simply concentrating on school. I thought they were really good about saying ‘hey, these four years are more about what you’re going to learn out of the classroom, too.’ I thought, even though it’s a very, it’s a pretty hard school – like academically it’s pretty rigorous – but I thought they really stressed doing other stuff too, which I loved.

In the second focus group, Elizabeth and Audrey enjoyed the sense of community. Both Katie and Rachel felt that “the connections you can make with the professors” was the best part of being a student at the institution. Paul liked “the variety of opportunities for students” at the institution.

The third focus group was slightly more eclectic in their answers to the opening question than the other two focus groups. Each had a different answer for what their favorite thing was about the institution. Becky felt that the people were her favorite aspect whereas John felt that the opportunities were what made the institution special. Alisha paused before answering the question and finally decided that her favorite thing was that “it’s a nice campus.” Adam, somewhat jokingly, stated that his favorite part of the institution was “the hills, so that I don’t have to go to the gym.” And finally, similar to previous groups, Julie explained that her favorite part was the sense of community.

Opening Question B: Why did you decide to attend this institution?

This second opening question sought to gain more information about why each of the participants selected this particular institution and to warm up the group to start reflecting on their experience. The answers to this question ranged from the small community, to the diversity of experiences available, to its academic reputation, to just a feeling the students had when they visited campus for the first time.

From the first focus group, Leslie liked the fact that “there’s a lot of student engagement here. I could tell that people here are really active whether it’s with sports or extracurriculars, like, everybody’s involved with something.” Jack, Brendan, and Tyler all decided to attend the institution because there was a diversity of options for majors. Cameron was looking for “a small school close to home” that had an excellent pre-med program. Troy mentioned that there was not “one deciding factor” and that after visiting campus “it felt right.”

The second focus group had similar responses in that many were looking for a small community with a strong academic program. In addition, the concept of “fit” came up several times. Rachel said that she liked “to say that the institution chose me.” Robert, Elizabeth, and Katie were all searching for a school with a good community. Robert explained that he “didn’t want to be, like, just a number on, like, a huge campus where I didn’t know anybody.” He also mentioned that the first-year experience program played a part in his decision because “it wasn’t just a word in a pamphlet – it was an actual program they had set up to, like, you know, immerse you in the school.” Paul felt that the academic reputation of the institution was what drove his decision to attend. And finally, Audrey talked about having no idea what she wanted in a college or university and when she eventually visited the institution “everything about it just seemed

right and I loved the people that I met. I felt welcomed right away and I just – I could see myself here.”

The third focus group touched on the small community, the academic programs, and the feeling of natural fit. Becky and Adam were interested in the good academic reputation of the institution. Adam was specifically interested in the pre-med program. Julie and John fell in love with the institution after their campus visit. Finally, Alisha felt that she would be able to make more connections at a smaller school than a larger institution.

Question 1: What does “life-long learning” mean to you?

The first question on the focus group protocol was included to determine what the term ‘life-long learning’ meant to each of the participants due to the fact that the concept of life-long learning played such a central role in the purpose and research questions for this study. The answers from all three focus groups had little variability with two major themes emerging from the student responses to this question. The first theme was intellectual curiosity and questioning and the second theme involved the application of classroom material to the outside world.

Intellectual Curiosity

The first major theme that came out of the question about life-long learning was the concept of intellectual curiosity and questioning. Of the 15 students who responded to this question in the focus groups, seven talked about the concept of curiosity and the desire to raise more questions. As an example, Susan defined life-long learning as “a general curiosity to keep learning, like, it just shows, like, if you’re a life-long learner you’re curious to learn more and you’re never happy with one level of, like, knowledge.”

Jack also mentioned the importance of questions but did so through a comparison of his experience during college to his experiences with learning in high school. He stated that:

A lot of the professors here, they're content with, like, if you come up with more questions, those are the answers. The mission is to get more questions and that kind of taught me to be comfortable with that. Because at first, in high school, it's like question, answer – that's the structure of learning. But now it's actually forming more questions, which don't necessarily get answered.

Audrey also felt that her experiences in college have inspired her to ask more questions but went a step further by connecting that process of questioning to critical thinking, stating that:

My experiences so far in classes, I think they've raised more questions than like answered anything for me, like, and I think one of the biggest things I've learned here is how to ask a question and to think more critically and the importance of learning in everything you experience, not just in the classroom.

Robert was quick to express his agreement with Audrey stating “Yeah I'd definitely agree with that – the point about raising more questions than they answer...it's not about learning definitive answers it's about, like, building opinions and building ideas and knowing that, like, most questions in the world aren't solved.”

Real World Application of Class Content

Another common theme with regards to life-long learning was the application of what was learned in the classroom to real life situations not just during college but also throughout the rest of your lifetime. Of the 15 students who responded to this question during the focus groups, seven mentioned the translation of experiences in college to how they were going to continue that learning throughout the rest of their lives.

From the first focus group, Audrey explained how the connection with the real world application of class content came from a reframing of how many college students are approached about their education:

It's, like, so often people ask like, ‘oh, what's your major?’ and it's always followed by ‘and what are you going to do with that?’ and here it's, like, that's so not the emphasis [agreement from the others in the group] it's, like, who you are as a person and learning how to think critically instead of just memorizing things it's, like, analyzing and challenging and struggling.

Rachel described life-long learning as an attitude that students at this particular institution brought with them from high school. She said:

The students that come here, they come here because they want to learn so it doesn't stop after you graduate because you keep seeking other things through – sort of delve into other stuff that you don't know to just explore. And I – that drive and that hunger for knowledge is, it rings within the students because you always are, not always seeking answers but looking in, sort of discovering new things and you're not limited by the classes you take but you keep thinking, you ponder outside, like, what's going on in the world, you apply it in the classrooms, apply what you learn in the class out in the world so it's sort of like you embrace that sort of lifestyle to always keep wondering and to never, to purposely seek an answer but just wonder how that answer came to be.

Elizabeth agreed with Rachel's description and added:

It's, like, you're almost not just learning things but continuing to learn how to learn so, like, when you do graduate you're learning subjects but you're not going to remember everything you learned in a certain class but it's just going to be, like, what you took away from the class and how to apply it, like, applies to things, like, in the world.

The discussion about life-long learning among the participants in the third focus group was centered on the application of class content to real life situations as opposed to the focus on intellectual curiosity from the first and second groups. Their responses focused more on the experiences gained during college and how those experiences connect with the real world and the continuation of growth after college. For example, John felt that:

Life is just a collection of good and bad experiences so I think taking what you learn from this institution and using that to apply to the real world and see how you've learned from those experiences in a good way or a bad way or how you can grow from them.

Julie further connected learning to personal growth and stated:

I think it's good to take life experiences and what you've learned to not only learn about other things but to always come back to learn new things about yourself and how you adapt to new situations and take things in and just continue to grow.

Overall, the participants stated that life-long learning was connected to the process of questioning and maintaining curiosity throughout one's life surrounding topics that were discussed in courses both during the first-year and beyond. All three focus groups reflected on how their perception of life-long learning had changed since high school due to their experiences within the living-learning first-year experience program.

Question 2: How did participation in the first-year program affect your first-year experience overall?

The second focus group question was designed to start the reflection process about how the students' overall first-year experience was affected by the various elements of the living-learning first-year experience program. The responses to this question from all three focus groups were overwhelmingly positive with only a few students expressing their dissatisfaction with one or two specific aspects of the program. The major themes that arose from the student answers included the connections with peers, the connections with the professor, and the introduction to different perspectives.

Connections with peers.

Seven of the 17 participants who answered this question mentioned the connections developed with peers through the first-year experience program. From the first focus group, Susan stated that “our class was like freakishly close” and explained how:

We would walk back to our residence hall together – like, we were really close and we would have meals together and we actually are still pretty close – like, some of my best friends are from that class. And our professor would comment on that and we would have little jokes about the whole class.

Brendan concurred with Susan's experience and explained how “with the first-year experience program I feel like you actually got to meet the members of your class more than, like, other classes that you take here.”

In the second focus group, Robert described the first-year experience as “a community within a community which was really great because when you’re a freshman you don’t really have a – you don’t necessarily have like a big community on your hallway because you don’t really pick who you’re living with.” He went on to explain how the students in his first-year seminar became “a community I could kind of rely on a little bit even if I didn’t really feel like I could rely on my roommate or my neighbors or whatnot.”

Also from the second focus group, Audrey took that connection with peers a step further:

Being able to connect with people based on a common interest like the subject matter as opposed to just somebody down the hall that you could eat dinner with but didn’t necessarily have anything in common with them, so like being able to connect on that deep of a level that early on was really important to me anyway – that’s why we’re still having dinners and things like that.

Katie’s response was slightly different from the rest of her group. She felt that it was not the first-year seminar that brought students together but rather it was the larger co-curricular events that helped her to create community and see connections. She explained "for me the community was more, like, the cluster. Like we had different events so it was cool to see my friends during those events and maybe even talk with Audrey about different things that were going on."

However, Paul had a slightly different perspective from Katie with regards to the community that was developed outside of the classroom. He described it as:

Just like having a community under an academic goal makes you really like stronger together and even if you guys, like, talk after class about how miserable you were at certain tests, that’s, like, something to talk about and I think that brings people together.

In the third focus group John explained that from his experience, the class environment was the most important way that he connected with peers but that it did not extend beyond the classroom walls. He stated that he:

Really got along with the people in my class but it didn't really go outside of the class. So, you know, I think the idea with this program is that you have this environment in this building where, like, everyone does homework together, like, you all talk about current events and all this stuff and I don't think it was anything like that for me.

Julie talked about how she was in the same class as Becky and it helped them become close “and now we’re roommates so it was a good experience.” Becky agreed with Julie’s assessment of the impact on the connection with peers but also felt that the structure of the first-year experience class was what helped to create connections. She stated that the seminar:

Was just kind of different than a typical lecture that you’re going to be going into your freshman year, like, you’re going to meet people but you saw the same faces, you know, every other day for a whole year and you really got to know those people.

Overall, the connection with peers played a large role in the first year for many of the participants in the focus groups. This connection was largely forged through the experiences in the living-learning first-year experience program and the environment that was set up by having students in a first-year seminar living together in the same residence hall.

Connection with the professor.

Of the 17 participants, six mentioned how the connection that they established with the professor of their first-year seminar played a large role in their first-year experience. Donna, who was the quietest member of the first focus group, spoke about the positive relationship she was able to develop with her faculty member. She said:

It set me up with – to develop a good relationship with my professors. Since it was a year long course I was able to establish a relationship with him where I’d be comfortable to ask for a reference if I needed one. So that I feel was good for me in the sense of, like, starting to develop those relationships with professors.

From the second focus group, Robert said simply “I think it had a big impact” because “both teachers were, like, great and they’ve written recommendations for me and we’re still

really close to them – like, I’ll go to their office hours just to see how their doing or whatever.”

He went on to explain:

Mine was like a seminar so our teachers...were just really interested in the subject so it was kind of like we had discussions so they would raise a point and they wouldn’t necessarily know what they wanted to hear. It wasn’t like ‘so what is this answer?’ it was more like ‘so what do you guys think about this fact?’ or like ‘I found it interesting in this way’. So it was almost like, it was a lot of people just talking – it wasn’t a teacher-student dynamic – it was like a discussion that you’d have among friends so it was really neat.

Rachel simply stated “I loved my first-year seminar” mainly due to her professor. She explained that:

The class had a lot of debates and she [the professor] made us like – she made us do everything. The reason why I loved the class – it was definitely because of the professor. The things that she made us do prepped me for my classes. Like that was the first time that I wrote a research paper. And so she made us do every step like annotated bibliography, how to think of a good question, make us present...and the things she made us write was difficult and challenging but, um, I’m happy I was able to live up to the expectations and, like, was able to execute it well and it was good because that - what I think this program should be doing is prepping us for the other classes.

Audrey felt similarly that “we were all really interested in the class and we really loved it and we loved our professor.” The connection with a professor was something that expanded beyond the classroom and included advice on classes to take, writing letters of recommendation, and general academic assistance.

Introduction to different perspectives.

Lastly, five of the participants spoke about how the first-year experience program opened their eyes to different perspectives and disciplines. Tyler began the discussion in the first focus group by describing his experience with the program as “a breath of fresh air” given that it provided “a nice break from all the science classes that I had to take.” In addition, Tyler

mentioned how “it was something that I never would have taken before so it was a nice way to open up that section of the institution to me.”

Similarly, Brendan and Troy felt that their first-year seminar covered a topic area that they would have never considered taking before. Brendan described how “it kinda opened up like a whole bunch of new aspects of art and religion and kind of comparing that – and that was just, like, really cool in general.” Troy quickly agreed with Brendan and explained:

I never would have taken that class and it turns out I had an amazing professor and that, like, it was just really cool cause like the whole class she would prompt the discussion and the whole time we would just discuss with ourselves and it, like, opened so many new doors and, like, it was just a really cool class and a great experience for me for something that I never would have taken on my own.

Cameron was last to speak up and had a slightly different experience from the rest of his group. He stated, “Yeah, you know, Tyler said his was a breath of fresh air? Mine was kind of like a time vacuum.” This response was met with a great deal of laughter from the rest of the group. He went on to say that it was “one of the most interesting courses I had but really intense” and described a variety of co-curricular activities that, to him, felt somewhat pointless and took time away from his other courses.

From the second focus group, Elizabeth described how the first-year experience program:

Helped me keep an open mind – it kind of taught me the importance of an open mind because I was – the one [first-year seminar] I picked was not one of my first ones...and I just freaked out. I was like ‘oh my god, how am I going to do this?’ and it ended up being one of the best classes. It kind of made me want to be – to major in math because my professor was, he was so enthusiastic and it just made the class just so interesting and I ended up loving it.

In the third focus group, Julie explained that “it definitely affected my experience because my class was an anthropology class and I never had known anything about that and, um, because I really enjoyed the class I’m an anthropology minor so it affected me that way.”

In summary, the connections with peers, the development of a positive relationship with the first-year seminar faculty member, and the exposure to different disciplines and perspectives were the main aspects of the program that the participants felt had the largest impact on their first year.

Question 3: In your opinion, to what extent did the first-year experience program affect your critical thinking skills? Examples?

This question was asked in order to hear the students explain, in their own words, to what extent they felt that the first-year program affected their critical thinking skills. In addition, by asking for examples, the researcher hoped to be able to determine specific ways that the program impacted skill development. Of the 13 students that answered this question, 10 felt that the program affected their critical thinking skills in a positive way. Three students from the third focus group felt that the program had little to no effect on their ability to critically think and analyze. The main themes that emerged from the responses to this question included the written assignments contributing to the development of critical thinking skills and the professor's contribution to the development of critical thinking.

From the first focus group, Tyler was first to speak up on this question and gave an example of how critical thinking was emphasized in his class:

Well I was in the same first-year seminar as Troy and since it was philosophy there was obviously a lot of formulating arguments and defending your opinion. One of best things for me was just the writing assignments because for each paper we had to do – we had to present some type of issue and then defend it responding to whatever theory we were learning about. And then what we had to do was we had to think of all the counter arguments to what we were writing about and we would have to defend them in the paper so I thought that helped me to think on both sides of the spectrum in whatever I was doing cause it leaked over to my other classes too.

Leslie quickly agreed with Tyler's explanation of the development of critical thinking skills through reading and writing assignments and said:

Mine was a lot of reading and writing too...but I really felt like I developed a lot of skills in it...I know that like personally I was never really like, I never really read the paper and I'm not really that great with like keeping up with the news and stuff so even just like that different global perspective of like looking at the reading differently and talking out like 'what is vulnerability?' and 'what is this?' kind of helped me expand critically what I – how I was thinking when I read.

In the second focus group the sentiments of the participants was very similar. Paul felt that beyond just the assignments in his first-year seminar, it was truly his professor who helped to develop the group's critical thinking skills when:

She really focused on making sure that we were the ones developing the questions and we were the ones completely analyzing. Like she would pull up a picture on the white board and we would have to completely like break it down, like see what's happening in the image, how that plays out historically context, and everything else and like – but we were responsible for doing it. Like she would give us her opinions but she would never reject any of ours...we went into such depth...I think that really relates to how I do my other classes now where like critical thinking really comes into effective use.

Rachel connected the critical thinking process with the process for writing in her first-year seminar and stated:

The way that my professor was able to instill critical thinking was the fact that like we had a boat load of information and she forced us to write in 2 – 3 pages making it so that each word had significance to the very point. So you had to analyze your own writing – like it was way beyond just regular editing and it made us think 'why is this word used?' 'Why is this sentence here?' 'Is it proving my point?' 'Is it proving this?' and just that sort of micro detail so like sort of translated how the class sort of – how students spoke and communicated because we chose how to approach and say things wisely.

Robert felt that the first semester "really wasn't that much critical thinking" but then the second semester was focused on debates which:

Ended up being really good because it made me – and I think everyone else in the class – think about like how Rachel said – how do you order your arguments, raise them – and it's helped for, like, papers, too, because it's kind of the same

way. You don't want to just throw everything at the – like, whoever's reading it. You want to build up to a point and then, like, follow that up with other stuff, too. So it was really good at helping most of the students step out from high school shell, like, tests, paper, tests, paper, and like you're done. And it being much more like 'here's the real world. You have to be coherent and clear.' And that was really helpful.

Katie felt that what made her first-year experience course different from her other courses in terms of critical thinking was that:

We actually took the things we were learning in the classroom and applied them to the broader spectrum and actually took the theories and the different things and saw how they were affecting the real world and it was really cool to like witness the, like, I guess the, how they were affecting each other.

Only two participants in the third focus group felt that the first-year experience program affected their critical thinking skills. Julie compared her critical thinking in high school to the development of critical thinking through the first-year experience program:

I think it definitely helped mine [critical thinking skills]. I know that first semester I pretty much got flat Bs on all my papers and just like, even though I did critical thinking in high school it was a lot more, I don't know, didn't click and then second semester I did a lot better and I don't know – and now it's helped me in all my classes.

Becky agreed and went a step further by connecting critical thinking with exploration of different topics and majors. She explained that:

I feel like it, what it helped me most was to like think about a subject that I've never, like, learned about before like Julie said, I never knew what anthropology was and what it means to analyze things in terms of that so I think by learning how to like, it wasn't just learning how to analyze English – like I'm an English major now – I don't know it was helpful to, like, kind of go into something new.

The other three students in the third focus group felt that the first-year experience program did not help them to become better critical thinkers. John felt that his first-year seminar was more focused on "statistics and memorizing things so there wasn't much analyzing for me so I wouldn't say that it increased my ability to critically analyze things." Both Alisha and Adam agreed with John that the seminar did not have an effect on their critical thinking skills. Alisha

stated that “it was really my only class where I had to write papers but I mean even without reading you could do well on the papers so I don’t think it helped that much.” Adam’s response was completely honest and was met with laughter from the rest of the group when he stated “I didn’t have to read the book and we still got A’s in it basically; so it taught me not to read to do well but I don’t think that’s what you want but I was happy with it.”

Overall, of the 13 participants who answered question three, 10 felt that the program did help them develop critical thinking skills that they continued to apply in their courses throughout their sophomore year. Many of the participants linked their critical thinking to both reading and writing assignments within their first-year seminars. In addition, the application of content within the program to real-life situations helped to bring the critical thinking outside of the classroom and made it more relevant to their day-to-day lives.

Question 4: How have your reading and writing skills changed since your freshman year?

This question was asked so that participants could reflect on how their reading and writing skills had changed since their first year and how the first-year experience program may have played a part in that transformation. Four of the seven students who answered this question felt that the first-year experience program had an impact on their writing whether it was teaching them how to develop a thesis question or how to present various perspectives and create an argument.

Donna was not enthusiastic about the writing within her class but expressed that “I would say my first paper wasn’t – and this is typical at this institution - the grade you get wasn’t what you expected so it definitely helped me kinda work more on my writing.” Troy described how his major was not writing intensive but that the first-year experience program helped him to develop his writing skills. He elicited laughter from the group when he stated:

Yeah, like, I'm an economics and math double major so I don't write a lot of papers really or any papers really, but, um, but like writing philosophy papers is a lot different because you have to like make, like, you have to think about every sentence you write and make sure it's, like, justifiable with the previous sentence. Like, it's really – it takes a really long time to write a couple page paper and I thought that was a great experience for me because, like, down the road maybe I'll have to write like a paper in another class and I know I'll be a lot more prepared – like, my writing in any class – because of that class, of that program.

From the second focus group, Audrey was overwhelmed at first with the writing requirements in her first-year experience class and explained her distress when she:

Got my syllabus the first day of class and had a 25 page paper on the syllabus and I freaked out and it turned out that it was your own political autobiography so it was pretty easy to write...so it ended up not being as traumatic as I thought it would be.

She went on to explain how her first-year seminar professor had a profound impact on her ability to critically reflect on texts and develop her own voice in her writing. She described her experience as:

I've since then had professors in my classes who have said 'ok, we're going to write a paper on this book or this play we just read and I want you to take it in a new way and tell me something I don't already know about the book and a new insight' which is so different than let me regurgitate all of my class notes into a paper so I think from her I learned, from my first-year experience professor, about the importance of putting your own spin on something and paper being used not as 'let me show you how much I've learned in memorizing class notes' but applying those notes to my own thoughts.

Similar sentiments were expressed in the third focus group about the impact that the focus on writing in the first-year experience class had on their skill development. Becky stated:

I always have liked to write but there definitely has been a big difference in how I write, I would say. It's hard to like pinpoint one thing but I think it has a lot to do with learning to, like, analyze in a deeper way than I ever did in high school if that makes sense.

Two participants expressed that their experience within the first-year experience program lacked a focus on reading and writing and therefore they did not feel as though their writing

skills improved based on their participation in the program. Tyler simply stated that his experience was “we had two research papers the entire year so my reading and writing skills didn’t get any better at all.” Katie also explained that “we didn’t write papers, we took exams so it helped a lot with my studying skills...I mean I can’t say that I’m a more critical writer but I definitely honed my studying skills.” Their honest feedback demonstrated the variety of experiences within the various seminars based on the individual faculty member or the discipline in which the seminar was primarily focused.

Overall, the general consensus on the development of written communication through the first-year experience program was positive but a great deal depended on whether or not writing was a focus of the individual course.

Question 5: How did the combination of living and learning impact your experience during your first year?

The fifth focus group question looked at how the combination of living and learning in the first-year experience program impacted the students’ experience during their first year. The participants were mixed in their responses as to whether or not the living and learning aspect of the program had any sort of impact. The major theme that came out of this question was the connections that students were able to develop with peers within the residence halls.

Eight of the 14 participants who answered this question discussed how the element of living in the same residence hall as others in their courses affected their experience in a positive way. Brendan explained that “you just ended up starting to get to know, like, kind of everyone and where everyone lived and you would go and ask what the assignment was or go talk about class or something like that.” Troy felt “like our class was a lot closer together because we lived

together." Susan agreed with both Troy and Brendan that the living-learning element of the program helped to create connections and stated that:

A lot of my hall, we were able to pop into each other's rooms and, like, help each other with the reading when it got pretty heavy and things like that. Um, it was fun to be able to like bond over that and had something else in common, too. And like I said we used to like walk back together and we'd like talk about class as we were walking back [to the residence hall].

Cameron's slightly sarcastic opinion was that the program "gave us a good amount to talk about, um, especially like 'oh no – we have to go to New York tomorrow [laughter from group]. It kind of brought us together – a little bit closer like that." Even though he did not agree with the amount of time spent on the co-curricular events, Cameron still appreciated the fact that the living-learning element of the program brought people together – even if it was bonding over how miserable they were to be attending programs outside of class time.

In the second focus group there was some healthy debate as to whether or not living with other students in your class had any sort of impact. Audrey was first to reply and she enthusiastically stated:

I loved it. My class met on Mondays and Wednesdays and we'd walk from class back to the dorm together and I know it was only like about a 5 or 10 minute walk but that time together just walking as a group was so special.

Robert agreed with Audrey and described the relationship that he developed with his friends through the first-year experience program as:

Seeing a friend from home over break because you don't see them every day or even like every week necessarily but you see them once in a while and you'll be like 'oh hey, like, Jeff, how are you doing? Like what have you been up to? How are classes?' in a way that you don't get with, like, your close friends...so that's kind of nice just to have that kind of special bond.

There were six participants from the focus groups that had slightly less positive viewpoints when it came to the living and learning aspect of the program. Donna was not as

enthusiastic about the living-learning connection and stated that "it didn't really affect me in any way so I would have lived with people from another group...so I didn't really like see a difference whether I lived in one residence hall or another."

Rachel commented "I understand the sense of community – how that works – because it's the same people you see every day but I don't think it makes a difference." Katie followed up to Rachel's response and reflected on her experience in the residence hall during her sophomore year as compared to her freshman year:

I'm just thinking about comparing the two years and I mean, like, I get what everybody is saying about separating everybody and it was nice to see familiar faces but, I think, I mean for me I can't attribute that to my first-year seminar. Like, I think that I was friends with a lot of people in the dorm just because they were freshman [laughter] like I was a freshman...I mean it was nice to study together but I think we could have done that even if we didn't live in the same building. So, I mean, for me living together didn't really affect the community I had.

Adam felt that it didn't have an impact because he would have talked to the people in his residence hall regardless if they were in the same courses together. Alisha felt it was simply "more convenient to do like group projects - you would just have to go down the hall instead of like a different building." Becky's response was more mixed because she:

Always thought that it didn't [have an impact] and I guess it didn't make a huge impact at all but I mean, if they hadn't been in that group then like there's a chance that me and Julie wouldn't be in the same building and it was nice to see those faces more than just, you know, in class. You kind of saw them more often and to that extent it did help to foster relationships.

Of the 14 students who answered question five, eight felt that the combination of living and learning had a positive impact on their first year due to the fact that it fostered relationships with peers that were connected to an academic interest for an entire year. The six students that felt the living-learning aspect of the program did not have a huge impact on their first year

focused on the fact that they would have made connections with their peers regardless if they were in the first-year experience program and therefore, it was not an essential element.

Question 6: How would you describe your experience in the first-year seminar as compared to your other courses?

This question focused on how the first-year seminar experience differed from the other courses that the students took during their freshman and sophomore years. Of the 12 students who responded to this question, 10 spoke about the structure of the first-year seminar being the most distinguishing factor from their other courses.

In the first focus group, Susan explained that:

I think, in general, like, the first-year seminar is just more open than, like, other classes you take, like, because it is the seminar and I found the idea was just to get everybody talking and just, like, get a lot of ideas on the table whereas, like, sometimes in other classes it can feel like they [professors] want a specific thing or like you want to be talking about something that's a little bit more focused; whereas I thought in the first-year experience program it was much more like, 'let's talk about what's happening and try to get a sense of it.'

Jack was quick to agree with Susan's description and went on to explain how the discussion element of the first-year experience course allowed for reflection and a deeper exploration of topics:

I think the – if I had been given a bunch of things to read on the subject that we had I might not have liked it and that goes for any class because, I mean, if you gave me a textbook to read with any subject I probably wouldn't like it but the fact that you're talking about it makes it a lot more interesting – just to be talking with the people that are living with you too it's really nice – just the discussion setting rather than lecture.

The second focus group described how the “atmosphere” in the first-year seminar was different from their other courses in college and high school. Robert described how the class was similar to his small, seminar style classes from his high school and that with his other classes in college:

It was kind of shocking to have all the classes being like rows of seats, teacher lecturing, and like asking yes or no questions to the class – or not yes or no but, like, your answer is right or wrong. So it [the first-year seminar] was definitely positive in that respect and it's definitely – no other class was like that.

Rachel expressed that she missed her first-year seminar because she loved the discussions that were an essential part of the class:

I got 118% participation from my first semester grades...and I just loved it! And I see other professors who try to get students to speak but they're like silent...they're not able to get the conversation going cause it's not the right atmosphere. Because the first-year seminar allows you to discuss and everything but regular classrooms, when they [the professor] turn around and say, like, 'what do you guys think?' no one will say anything because they don't prompt it well – it's not made for that.

Audrey and Kate both strongly agreed with both Rachel and Robert's assertion that the setting was right in the first-year seminar for discussion as opposed to a majority of their other classes.

In the third focus group, Julie expressed a similar sentiment about the discussions in class that:

It was very different because it was seminar style and, um, rather than just lecture. And, like, every day you were expected to, like, basically participate which in a lot of my other classes you can just be quiet...I think it was good overall because then you learned from other people what they have to say rather than the same teacher talking at you the whole time, like you get other opinions and stuff. And so I think it was, it really helped like see different perspectives and stuff from the same readings so even your own thoughts and you would see somebody else's and it was like totally different.

Becky took a moment to reflect on how the first-year seminar experience was different than her other courses and finally stated:

We actually just signed up for classes today and I'm in two seminars next semester and thinking about it I haven't had any since the first-year experience class and I'm definitely excited for it...it's definitely nice to, just to be more involved. Like even though they're definitely, you don't want to be talking all the time, like I think it taught me how to, like how I was supposed to participate in college.

Also in the third focus group, John reflected on how he appreciated the difference between the first-year experience class and other classes within his major. He said that:

I guess that the one thing that I really, really like about the first-year experience class was that it wasn't a lecture the entire time, it was discussion – I'm a political science and history major so all my other lectures are literally me like staring up to the front of the class and the professor talking for 50 minutes so just having the opportunity to, you know, come into a discussion and hear from other people was a nice change.

There was only one participant who felt that his first-year seminar was no different from any of his other courses. Amidst laughter from the group, Cameron explained that “mine was more of a lecture. Uh, it was like heavy reading and especially second semester.” However, Cameron was the only participant that described his first-year seminar experience as similar to his other courses. The majority felt that the seminar was drastically different from their other classes simply due to the fact that the class was discussion based.

Question 7: What was/were your favorite part(s) of the living-learning first-year experience program?

The seventh question was designed to determine what the students' favorite aspects of the living-learning first-year experience program were. The hope was to ascertain what the students' truly valued about the program. There were two major themes that emerged out of the responses to this question: the first-year seminar itself and the connection created with the faculty member.

First-year seminar.

Ten of the 17 students who responded to this question felt that the first-year seminar was their favorite part of the first-year experience program. A majority of the participants talked about the benefits of a seminar style class in terms of their participation and overall enjoyment of the experience. In addition, for several participants, the connection with peers within the first-year seminar was included as a favorite aspect of the program.

Susan stated simply “I think my favorite was just my class. We were, like, really close – like, we all got along really well. I felt like everybody had their place, like, everybody had their own little identity.” Brendan agreed saying “definitely have to go along with that, I mean, like, I said before, you really got to know the kids in your class more so than any other classes that you’ll take.” Becky said that the seminar structure was her favorite part of the program and “the one thing that I wouldn’t change. I guess that’s the point of the first-year seminar – to get freshmen the chance to be in a small group of people and have that experience right off the bat.”

Jack enjoyed the fact that the relationships he established with his classmates due to the seminar structure allowed for deeper discussions and debates during class without affecting friendships. The way he described the experience was as if it was drastically different from other courses that he had taken since:

I thought it was cool that we could go into class and half of us would all disagree vehemently about anything that we were talking about and then we’d get out of class and, you know, we’d still be friends, it was fine.

Both Adam and Tyler’s favorite part about the first-year seminar was how easy it was compared to their other classes. Tyler explained that “freshman year for a bio major is really, really hard and so that was a nice weight off my shoulder.” Adam also “liked that it wasn’t very demanding. Like it was enough where you could learn how to write but it wasn’t like too much where it was like a science class or something.” However, this sentiment was not shared by others in the focus groups and John actually disagreed with Adam’s statement because he felt like his seminar was “really, really demanding and, um, it was something that I didn’t expect.”

Finally, Audrey explained that although the work wasn’t that demanding, the impact that the first-year seminar had on a majority of her peers was significant:

For most of us it's what drove all of our other classes so it's funny what an influence - like it's still to this day I'm taking classes based on how that class

influenced my education - so even though it was only that one credit it had such an impact.

Several students mentioned the connection with their first-year seminar as a bonding experience over both the positive and negative aspects of the first-year experience program. Cameron became quite sarcastic when asked what his favorite part of the living-learning first-year experience program was and replied “when we had this thing that we did, we had to wake up before dawn and then go and eat a bagel and then not eat for the rest of the day.” He was not able to explain in any depth what this activity was meant to do or the connections that it made with his course work or the other disciplines represented in his group. He viewed this co-curricular event as a random activity that simply took time away from his other studies and that did not enrich his experience in any significant way. Several other participants in Cameron's focus group agreed with this assessment of the co-curricular programming. Brendan explained that:

They did a lot of trips, a lot of cool trips. But like Cameron said before, it's just like, some were just like really long and you just had a lot of work to do and sometimes you didn't see the correlation...there were just like other aspects that I was like 'why am I doing this?'

Susan agreed that:

A lot of them just weren't really related to my topic...it was hard to be able to connect it to what we were learning and I felt like that was the point. Like the point was that they were supposed to build on what we were learning and they like didn't really connect and they were really long.

Connection with professor.

Although many participants felt that the first-year seminar was their favorite part of the first-year experience program, several others felt that their connection with their professor had more of an impact. Troy stated that “my class was great but my professor was even better. Like

Jack can attest, we had an amazing professor and she's like – you talk about her now and people are like 'oh, yeah she's amazing.'” Leslie explained:

I know for me it was not like only the relationship I built with my class but also with my professor like I mentioned before – just the ability to just go and talk to her about anything that was going on in class and also the relationship we built after. She wrote a reference for me...and she actually offered me the opportunity to go and do research with her...so I feel like this program is, if you take advantage of it, it can definitely open up opportunities.

Audrey felt similarly that:

I had the same professor for the full year and I thought it was so important to have her for the full year because a lot of professors you don't – one, you're afraid to go to office hours, you don't really understand how they work or asking for recommendations was, like, kind of awkward with professors you didn't know if you made an impression on or not and just having that full year with that one particular professor who is focusing on helping you adjust to college.

Katie also picked up on the concept of office hours and her appreciation of the connection with her professor in that it helped her become more comfortable overall with faculty members. She explained:

I think, for me, coming to college the whole idea of office hours kind of scared me so it was nice to like be comfortable initially going right to his [the faculty member] office. Like you already had that bond and that kind of helped me transition into the second semester and then this year, now I like live in office hours so it kind of like warmed me up to that and it was nice to have that relationship with the professor and he's like, he's not my official advisor but like I can go to him with anything and he's like always there and he has really good advice so it's good to have that.

Rachel's response was triggered by Katie's description of visiting office hours:

I definitely loved – I forgot about that – my professor graded you if you didn't go to office hours. You got a grade for that if you went a certain amount of times. So she, like, because like everyone, like everyone loved my professor they would wait for like an hour and a half just to talk...I think I attribute my love for the first-year experience program because my professor is fantastic and, like, we still talk to her – she's like really great. I think that makes a difference.

Overall, the favorite aspects of the first-year experience program for the students included the connections that they were able to create with classmates through the discussion based structure of the first-year seminar and the connections they made with their faculty member. These elements were consistent across the focus groups regardless of the specific seminar in which the students participated.

Question 8: In your opinion, what aspect of the living-learning community had the most impact on your academic experience?

This focus group question was designed to better understand how the living-learning first-year experience program impacted the academic experience of first-year students. Of the seven students who responded to this question, only one felt that the program had no impact on their academic experience. In Alisha's own words she said, "Yeah, it didn't teach me anything." The other six students felt that the largest impact was on their writing ability and their ability to appreciate other perspectives and disciplines.

Adam stated "it taught me to use the writer's workshop, I guess, because I used it a lot during the first-year experience program and I guess I still do now." Becky felt similarly that the program:

Impacted me most through one – just the writing, like it was nice to kind of be exposed to different essays and like we would have a final paper at the end of the semester – like a 10 page research paper – which I had never done something like that really before. So that was nice and it definitely - being an English major now - that's like a big thing that I do so it was nice to learn through that.

John explained how the first-year experience program:

Helped me value the opinions of others a lot more, you know, and just to take that into consideration...the conversations went back and forth so it kinda, it allowed me to see both sides of the story so in a way I think that helped me out.

Brendan and Tyler both felt that since their first-year seminar was so different from anything else that they were studying that it helped to broaden their horizons and gave them the confidence to explore new topics. Brendan described how he would often go back to the things that his professor said in his first-year seminar about analyzing pieces of art. Tyler said “now I’ve been taking more and more classes that have been bizarre, and, you know, I have to fill my common area requirements, but I’ve been doing them in different ways than I thought I would.”

Question 9: What advice would you offer to first-year students just starting the first-year experience program?

The ninth question was designed to understand what the participants had learned from the living-learning first-year experience program by asking them what advice they would offer to incoming freshmen. The hope was that the advice would reflect elements of the program that may not have seemed important when they were first-year students but that they realized were essential to the overall experience.

The most common piece of advice for incoming first-year students was to choose a first-year seminar that was based in a discipline that was completely different from their preferred major in order to broaden their horizons and expose them to different perspectives. Ten of the 19 participants felt that it was essential to, in the words of Katie, “choose something you’re not interested in.” Troy worded it slightly differently than Katie:

Pick something that, like, you’re interested in but you don’t want to, like, major in really, I’d say. Something that you always wanted to learn about but you don’t want to be a major about because then it, like, really broadens your horizons. You’re not, like, focused on one thing here – you want to focus on a lot of things.

Brendan, Jack, Leslie, and Becky all emphasized the importance of choosing something different and keeping an open mind. Brendan said “just take something right out of the blue, you know, something different.” Jack agreed that taking something random from each topic area

could help clarify any confusion about majors. Leslie felt that the most important piece of advice was to “stay open and positive” because the first-year seminar “might be completely different or something that you didn’t want to do but you can see from this table – like everyone got something out of it.” Lastly, Becky was surprised at first by her first-year seminar selection but in the end she “loved it so I’m happy I got it.”

Katie was extremely honest in her advice about the first-year seminar:

I initially hated mine but I ended up loving it. But it’s easy to kind of fall into the, like, if everybody in your class doesn’t like the class it’s easy to just go with that and be like ‘oh well, I don’t like it either’ but I think you have to keep an open mind.

Robert put it more simply that “if you’re discouraged by what you get, don’t be, because it will probably end up surprising you.”

Audrey felt similarly that "it was cool that I was able to do something that I definitely wouldn't have signed up for but I'm so glad I had it" but she also explained that the seminars helped "you to see something from a different discipline that you are studying and a new perspective - I think that's what liberal arts in general is all about.” Rachel put it more simply by saying it really important to “do something different.” Katie chimed in that “it might end up being your major so who knows. I had no idea. I really had my heart set on math [laughs] and I tried it. It didn’t work. So I went with econ.” Rachel and Elizabeth agreed that their experience in the first-year seminar completely changed their mind about their major and reiterated that it was important for incoming students to be open to different disciplines and seminar topics.

The other pieces of advice from participants included the importance of speaking up in class and coming in with the understanding that the seminar is going to be different than any other classes during the first year. John stated:

I think incoming students should see it as a class that challenges you a little more than your other classes and maybe in more unconventional ways but it definitely, um, definitely just as challenging, if not more challenging, than all the other academic work you'll have here.

Becky agreed that “they should come in knowing that...it’s gonna be just unlike any other class that you have taken before. Definitely be expected to work hard.”

Overall, the advice from participants centered on the importance of keeping an open mind and choosing a first-year seminar that was different from anything else they had studied before. This advice clearly came after a great deal of reflection and distance from the first-year experience program that allowed the participants to truly appreciate the elements of the program which helped them be successful in their sophomore year.

Question 10: Is there anything that we missed or that you didn’t get a chance to say about the first-year experience program?

This last question was designed to provide the students the opportunity to share any feedback that they felt was left out of the focus group about the living-learning first-year experience program. Although there were only a few students who answered this question, the two themes that emerged from the responses were dissatisfaction with the co-curricular events and the diversity of experiences within the program.

Dissatisfaction with the co-curricular events.

Six of the 10 students who responded to this question spoke about dissatisfaction with the co-curricular events associated with the first-year experience program. Brendan explained that “I think the co-curricular events, um, it’s nice seeing everyone in your whole cluster but I think maybe just one of those instead of, like, a whole bunch of different ones that might not pertain to what you’re doing.” Cameron, Tyler and Susan agreed that the events should be focused on the

seminar level because it was easier to create connections with peers and the content would be more relevant to the classroom material.

In the second focus group, Rachel and Robert explained how the co-curricular events were awkward because they did not feel they had the same connection with the entire cluster that they did with their individual seminars. Rachel “realized I wasn’t friends with the cluster...and it’s kind of odd how that happened when it’s supposed to be a sense of community.” They felt that an emphasis on events for the seminar would help to build to community and be a more effective use of time for the faculty and students.

Diversity of experiences.

Four of the 10 participants who answered this question felt that there was a wide range of experiences within the program and that it was necessary to provide some consistency across seminars and cluster. Audrey felt that “getting the professors together on the same page, like, what the mission of the program is” was essential to the future success of the program. Robert felt that it was important to “emphasize the seminar” as opposed to a lecture format. Katie took Robert’s advice a step further and said:

I mean I think that the seminar part of it is more, like, geared towards, like, the theme of the living-learning first-year experience program with the community and all that so I think definitely seminar versus lecture and like, I think it’s really good to have that paper – like paper versus exams – because, like, it’s a good way to, like, get freshmen to write critically and think critically and all of the above.

Becky described how she had come on a visit to campus when she was a senior in high school and was talking with some of the college students in the first-year experience:

I got the sense of how they are all just very different and I wasn’t sure exactly what to expect in terms of, like, the work or, like, what exactly I’d be doing but I did get the sense that, you know, there’s a broad range of topics and they’re not all kind of the same.

Overall, the responses to the last question demonstrated that the two areas of frustration with the program revolved around the co-curricular programming and the fact that the experiences of first-year students in the program were not universal.

Results: Responses to Interview Questions

Opening Question A: Tell me what is your current rank and how long have you been at the institution?

The first opening question was designed to gain some basic demographic information about the participants. The ranks of the 11 faculty members interviewed ranged from professor to associate professor. The number of years at the institution ranged from as little as 10 years to over 30 years.

Opening Question B: How did you know that you wanted to be a faculty member?

This question was designed to start the reflection process and to better understand what motivated each of the participants to become a faculty member. The responses to this question ranged from several faculty members always knowing that academia was their chosen career path to stumbling upon the profession through various other pathways. In addition, several participants talked about their experiences with research leading them to life as a faculty member whereas others described their experience as a teaching assistant in graduate school as the main motivation for their decision to teach at a liberal arts institution.

Opening Question C: What courses do you teach with the first-year experience program?

The third opening question provided information about the specific courses that each faculty member taught in the first-year experience program. Several of the participants had taught the same class multiple times in the program whereas others had changed their course each year. A few participants taught the same seminar for the full year whereas others team

taught – one professor each semester – two seminars under a similar theme. The course titles were extremely varied, specific, multi-disciplinary, and very different from the typical introductory college course.

Question 1: How did you get involved with the first-year experience program?

This first question was designed as an introduction to the conversation and to gain an understanding of how the faculty members got involved with the first-year experience program. Several faculty members provided some historical context for the first-year experience program and were able to describe the initial faculty senate meetings before the universal implementation of the program. Darren was one of the participants who had been involved with the program from the start and explained that the original intent of the first-year experience program was “to create a program that unified residence and intellectual activity.”

Sophia also spoke about being involved since the inception of the first-year experience program and how she felt strongly that there should be a writing intensive component to the program. In addition, she explained that there was a group of faculty who felt that the institution “had to do a universal first-year experience” and what was developed could be considered “the Cadillac version” of a first-year experience program as it consisted of a year long first-year seminar combined with a living-learning component.

Frank felt that the first-year experience program was “a very valuable thing to be able to provide the students and also a good experience for me.” Grant stated that the decision to be involved in the program was not “a big moment” but rather that he “was kind of excited about the program” and was “just looking for something a little different to do.” Manual explained:

I have always thought that having a program for first-year students would be important because the psychological research so clearly shows that students go through very big changes in the first year and so it’s an ideal time to get them all

together and treat them differently than they would be treated if they were in a class with different levels of students.

Megan became involved with the program “because I valued the idea of first-year teaching...I really like the idea of reaching them early and socializing them before they socialize in other ways [laughs] when they’re still green, eager – before you lose them to other things.”

Jenna spoke with passion about the structure of the first-year experience being an essential part to her initial appreciation of and involvement with the program:

It’s such a different teaching experience and I can’t believe it isn’t a different learning experience. So I was convinced that smaller numbers enhanced the learning experience – it created an environment more conducive to engagement...so it seemed to me to bring the smaller numbers and to bring the greater interaction to students – first-year students – that just seemed to me like an obvious good thing to do.

Jenna also talked about the personal benefits to being a part of the first-year experience program:

What I *loved* was during the summer when different people would throw out different books that they would think might work for our topic. I would be reading stuff that I wouldn’t otherwise read...so to read it, not be expected to be the expert on it, but to – it was better than going to a lecture!

So I was also engaged as a student reading and so on. So I very much saw if you have these shared experiences with faculty intellectually, you know them in different ways. So you’re not just saying ‘what’s good for the student?’ you know, but you’re also saying ‘that character in such and such’ you know so it’s a different kind of experience so I liked that part of it.

Isabelle felt similarly to Jenna with regards to the personal benefits from the program for faculty members but then went one step further to make the connection between the first-year experience program and the distinctiveness of a liberal arts education:

Part of my drive is that part of what I like about teaching at a liberal arts college is the opportunity, right, to step outside narrow confines of discipline and teach in a way that’s a little bit more representative of what I think a liberal arts education is always meant to be.

In conclusion, all 11 of the faculty members had been involved with the first-year experience program for at least one year or more. Many remembered when the program was

first proposed to the faculty senate and described some of the debate that occurred among faculty members in regard to the pros and cons of implementation of a universal first-year experience program. In addition, many of the faculty felt that there were both personal and professional benefits to teaching first-year students in small seminars with a focus on first-year transitional issues and the ability to socialize students to the academic rigor of college level work.

Question 2: How do you define “life-long learning”?

The second question on the interview protocol was included to determine what the term ‘life-long learning’ meant to each of the participants. A common theme in the responses to this question was the concept of intellectual curiosity and questioning. In addition to intellectual curiosity, 10 of the 11 faculty members mentioned the connection with learning during college and learning after college as an important part of being a life-long learner.

Darren defined life-long learning as intellectual curiosity and explained "if they [students] have a good grounding in it, if they really manage to retain their intellectual curiosity, then even if that's interrupted they go back to it." Grant described life-long learning as a “curiosity about the intellectual life...that carries on throughout your life so that you're not just reading or absorbing things that are related to what your profession is but a general curiosity about the life of the mind and so forth." Kelly also connected life-long learning to curiosity and openness as well as:

Being able to sort through evidence, evaluate evidence, and discuss it and then there's a kind of feeling dissatisfied until you have some. So there's that and receptivity to what you don't know and not approaching learning as a task to be mastered, right? So that you want to know something in order to have completed knowing it but that emphasis on the process and really wanting to spend some time with the things that you don't quite understand and getting some pleasure out of that actually.

Megan and Isabelle both spoke about life-long learning from the perspective of critical inquiry as it relates to both the classroom experience and to life after college. Megan connected the concept of life-long learning directly to the pedagogy of the first-year experience program in that it is not necessarily content driven but:

Instead it's much more about modes of critical inquiry and by that I mean how to formulate motivated questions – what kinds of questions are worthwhile...so they're much more, in some ways they are kind of meta questions that the content serves. So the content serves the bigger questions as opposed to the questions only come out of the content.

Jenna talked about how she explained the importance of being a life-long learner to her students:

What they tell me is that if you go to a computer school right now, what you learn as a first-year student is out of date by the time you're a junior. So if we're going to teach you, we're going to not teach you stuff that is going to be in a little box permanently that you are going to pull out. We're going to teach you that you're about learning all the time.

Question 3: Based on that definition, how do you help students become life-long learners?

This question was included to understand the ways in which faculty members helped students to become life-long learners. Bill explained that helping students to become life-long learners is a large part of the living-learning first-year experience program. Kelly stated:

I think part of it is when constructing a syllabus and thinking about readings and putting together a course you're always making decisions because you can't do everything, you have to leave some stuff out and pull some stuff in. Stuff that hits them, I hope, not just on an intellectual level but sort of on an existential level.

Darren simply said, "I blitz them. I don't know if it works or not. I give them a variety of things and hope that the variety will excite them." Manuel also spoke about the importance of "finding things that interest them and that they recognize are important...so that they get enthusiastic about them." Grant explained the importance of being a role model to students in regard to life-long learning but also creating connections to real life application of the material

through “making it exciting and making things feel relevant...that whatever you’re studying has broad connections everywhere and is not only theoretical but practical import to how you live your life and so forth.”

Jenna described specific ways that she tried to role model being a life-long learner:

I’m trying to say to them ‘you are responsible for your education. What you put into it you will get out of it.’ You know nobody is going to give me an ‘A’ for reading this book, you know, but I have to have the curiosity and have the interest to want to learn...what I’m trying to do – I mean this has nothing to do with the formal relationships and connections – but it does have to do with, um, how to succeed in the world. I mean, how to take your mind, which is a good mind or you wouldn’t be here, and get into the habit of continually learning.

Todd was also able to give a specific example of connecting writing to the concept of life-long learning saying:

I think we often say ‘well, first-year students should learn how to write’ but you can’t write about nothing so you can’t learn how to write without being moved to wonder and think about something. If writing is about saying what’s on your mind, you have to have something on your mind!

Overall, the way that faculty helped to encourage students to become life-long learners was to intentionally incorporate concepts that were exciting to students and demonstrate how those concepts connected with real world applications. Faculty also mentioned the importance of role modeling behaviors consistent with life-long learning to make it easier for students to see how that process works in practice.

Question 4: What skills do you think are essential for first-year students to succeed?

This question was asked to determine what the faculty members at this particular institution felt were essential skills for first-year students to be successful. Megan’s initial response to this question demonstrated the variety of answers from the faculty members: “oh my god, what skills aren’t essential?” The most common skills that were mentioned included the

ability to write effectively and reading comprehension. However, the ability to present in front of a group, research skills, and the ability to critically think were also addressed.

Written communication.

Of the 11 faculty participants, eight mentioned writing as one of the essential skills for first-year students to succeed. When asked what skills were essential for first-year students to succeed, Isabelle was quick to state:

Well they do have to know how to write, I mean there's no doubt about that...they have to know how to construct a thesis statement; they have to be able to construct a paper; they have to know how to use evidence; they have to know how to argue against other evidence – all of that they have to know.

Bill, Manuel, Grant, and Kelly also mentioned writing skills as one of the first and most important skills that first-year students need to be successful in college.

Megan spoke about the importance of written communication and described how she intentionally incorporated writing into her first-year seminar:

We've done whole classes – probably seven or eight classes a semester – are about their research paper where we're either in the library or we've got this book on writing and we talk about how you structure an argument, how you structure topic sentences, what are claims that make sense. I mean we're workshopping each other's paragraphs and really building that in and not taking it for granted...and of course a lot of them are blown away and are so scared because they've never had to do it. And I think 'gosh if you've never had to do it, at least I'm giving you time in this class to be really intentional about it.'

Darren also described how in his first-year seminar they also:

Spend a whole class writing one [paper] together or at least trying one out so they get a sense of how to brainstorm and how to move from the evidence that they see to actual points that develop a thesis and that's very hard for them. And the intellectual process that requires is hard for them – they don't, they have a hard time thinking through ideas and you know, they'll come up with an idea that sounds really great to them and then they will often – the paper that they hand in will often be confused and kind of blocked up.

Reading comprehension.

Of the 11 participants, five stated that reading comprehension was an essential skill for first-year students to succeed. Manuel felt that first-year students need to know “how to read carefully – I don’t know just mean knowing what the words mean but being able to distinguish, to be able to look at a paragraph and understand what it’s really saying and what it’s not saying.” Darren and Kelly also mentioned reading as one of the top two skills that were necessary for first-year students to succeed – the other skill being the ability to write.

Sophia explained the importance of reading in college as different from the reading that most students were used to from their high school experience:

The sort of text that a history department for instance or an anthro program would present even first-year students with are quite complex and, um, I think sometimes students from high school are used to just rapidly skimming something and going basically for the summary [laughs]. But in college we want them to know all the content of the article but we want that extra measure of critical reflection on it. We want to know what they think of the validity of the arguments and that takes some work [laughs]. So often they come into college not being fully wonderful in critical reading skills but they definitely need that, I think, to succeed in college.

Isabelle also talked about the importance of reading for first-year students and the challenges with being intentional in teaching them how to read. She stated:

I think we need to do more work in helping them to understand how to read. And that you read a philosophy text differently than the way you read a literature text and that is certainly different from the way you read a science text. And by the way – the text in your math book is there not just to put space between the problem sets! And so I think we need to be more intentional about teaching them to read...now the tension with that is that – what I don’t think we have good strategies for – some faculty do – but I think universally is how to be more directive about that process of reading closely and carefully. I think we can learn a lot from folk in philosophy and folks in English who spend a lot of time on that. But I think we have to do a better job of both helping them to do it and figuring out how to hold them accountable for it.

Beyond writing and reading comprehension, only a few participants mentioned other skills of researching, the ability to present in front of a group, the ability to ask good questions, and critical thinking. Sophia, Kelly, Megan, and Bill talked about the ability to research as an essential skill for first-year students to succeed. Bill described research skills as “being able to find sources, evaluate them, recognize what’s a scholarly source, what’s not, recognizing what’s a pure opinion piece and what’s not.” Sophia’s perspective was that:

Students from high school don’t have the most sophisticated understandings of how to do research. They do kind of google.com and type in a topic and out come all of these wonderful things but out comes a lot of garbage. And what I think particularly in the first year we can help them with is to – with the help of our reference librarians and our very good library – to be able to prioritize the relative authoritativeness of different sources and to ask themselves ‘has such and such been vetted by professionals in the field? Therefore, is it a good source for my topic?’ And then to be able to read multiple sources that they’ve acquired from a search engine but then again integrate them into their own perspective and that’s something that takes four years at least for them to do.

Isabelle, Kelly, and Todd all mentioned the importance of being able to ask questions for first-year students. Isabelle said “if we can teach them how to ask good questions, that will set them up for what they need to do next.” Todd took the concept of questioning a step further and explained how first-year students:

Have to learn things like the point of being in college is not to show your professor how much you already know because then there’s really no point in you being here. They do have to learn how to figure things out and how to acquire knowledge and answer questions but if they’re really going to answer the question they first have to learn how to ask it. And there are different ways of asking questions. And they’ve got to learn to really *ASK* it as a question and not as something that appears on the test.

Similar to Todd’s description of being able to ask questions that are not related to specific material on a test or in class, Frank mentioned the need for a general open attitude with regards to learning:

I think attitude is very important. That they don't have a fixed idea of what the class is supposed to do or the curriculum is supposed to do; but they're open to hearing things and that they recognize, at some point, or they learn at some point, that it's not about crossing off items on their agenda or their to do list or to meeting sort of just obligations. That it's actually about thinking about things – that it's actually about effort or that it's not just activity.

Finally, Grant identified presentation skills as essential for first-year students:

I thought that I could help students more with that kind of thing. And I think that's also a very important skill and something that generally students are pretty bad at when they come in [laughs] and it's not hard to give them a little help that really improves their ability to present themselves which will be a real important life skill for a lot of them. Not only to mention college where maybe it's not so important but later on as they go out into the workplace.

Overall, the skills necessary for first-year students to succeed included reading, writing, critical thinking, the ability to present, the ability to research, and the ability to ask good questions. These skills were mentioned in varying degrees by each of the faculty members. In addition, many of the faculty members connected the skills that were listed to the goals of the first-year experience program.

Question 5: What aspects of the first-year experience program, if any, impact critical thinking?

The fifth interview question focused on how the faculty felt that first-year experience program affected the development of students' critical thinking skills. Of the 11 faculty participants, all of them felt that the first-year experience program impacted critical thinking in some way. However, there were a variety of responses in terms of how critical thinking was developed and the degree to which critical thinking skills were emphasized in the various first-year seminars.

Megan began her response to the question about critical thinking with the caveat that the first-year experience program:

Is a lot of different things and so every teacher teaches it differently and that's where I think one of the problems with the first-year experience program – one of the great things is the variety of modes of learning – but one of the problems I think is that it is very inconsistent across seminars.

Sophia, Kelly, Jenna, and Isabelle also spoke about the lack of standardization for seminars which meant that critical thinking was not necessarily emphasized to the same degree by individual faculty members and therefore, students may have experienced different levels of critical thinking in their courses.

In addition to the diversity among seminars, the responses from the interviews regarding the development of critical thinking skills can be grouped into two major themes including the structure of the first-year seminar and the content of the course.

Structure of the course.

One of the most common answers to how the first-year experience course impacted critical thinking was the structure of the class as a year long seminar. Kelly explained that:

I think that from what we hear from faculty...is that they are consciously trying to do that with students...it seems to me that if you're in a year long course where you're not trying to cover the equivalent of two full econ courses, right, it's a different animal. Then you have some time to make some of those things a little more explicit for the students and hopefully then sensitize them to that dimension of their education in other courses as well where it would not be talked about quite so explicitly but it's there and now they can actually tap into it because they've been primed in a way to see that so there's a kind of continuity among the different kinds of courses – they're all sort of doing the same thing – but the emphasis on the first-year seminar course *shifts* a little more toward making that more explicit.

Darren felt similarly that both the “length of the class, the fact that you teach them all year and therefore the same kinds of question come up and...so you can see the critical thinking going on.” Darren also mentioned “the fact that it's a discussion, it's a seminar” helped to be able to teach critical thinking and to “see where they're not getting it.” Todd spoke about how the structure of the first-year seminar as a year long process allowed:

The time and space to work through that with them in a way that you wouldn't if it were a bigger class or you were moving at a faster pace. And you can gauge their progress and are they getting into it deeply enough – are they getting past the clichés...It's because of a certain intellectual experience they can have in that setting. It's not necessarily because you can assign more papers.

Sophia agreed that the year long structure helped professors work with students “in a developmental sense” but felt strongly that the seminar structure of the class was what really helped students:

Learn what it is to debate an issue in a thoughtful, scholarly way. Not just kind of popping off and saying ‘this is my opinion’ in a bull session sense but reading something, coming to their own perspective on that reading, triangulating that reading with another reading, with what they're learning in other classes, and then contributing something rhetorically in a seminar format.

Content of the course.

The second theme that emerged was how the content of the first-year seminar emphasized the development of critical thinking through specific assignments and topics.

Sophia spoke with passion about the need for the first-year seminar to be an intentionally writing intensive course:

I think in mine certainly where you start out with smaller writing assignments and you build on those and they [the students] get a lot of written feedback and office hour feedback from the professor and they are able to write successively more complex papers...sometimes they are very short little responses but they get a quick written response from me and it's not just to get them a grade quickly but to get them into a conversation with somebody who can help them with their writing.

Todd gave this metaphor to describe how the content of the first-year seminar impacted critical thinking:

Because it's not one of these upper level courses where there's the set content you can kind of – it's like you're out for a walk with them and you can kind of ‘oh look at this, look at that, we should stop and think about that.’ So I think that's really good – you have the time to move them to wonder...It sets up a kind of environment for those big questions or big books or little books are still really challenging – or films – can really kind of make them stop and think.

Manuel spoke about the content of the course being connected to research papers and provided a specific example of how that process worked in the classroom. He explained how:

We'll have one of the reference librarians do an introduction for students on how to use the databases and how to find different kinds of information. And then I think most of us spend some time in our classes explaining the differences between things like newspaper articles, and scholarly articles, blogs [laughs], Wikipedia...so I think that's how we try to approach critical thinking.

Lastly, Megan and Frank spoke more generally about the content of the course being linked to critical thinking. Megan described how she started with concepts that students are familiar with from high school and then intentionally introduced more challenging topics:

So you establish the critical thinking premises with something they are more willing to entertain and then you apply those premises to other topics that they may be less ready to entertain or from which they have more givens and that's fantastic in terms of challenging them to kind of be puzzled. Listen, it's all about perplexing them. Not necessarily making them uncomfortable – I meant there's always that – but perplexity is a good thing, right?

Frank was slightly more skeptical about the connection but described the link as:

The idea of not concentrating on the knowledge or declarative facts but stressing underneath that people need to know 'why do I know this, how do I know this, why do I believe this, what's the evidence for this' – for insisting that for the things they know that they have good reasons for claiming that they know it. In fact they may almost never get it because they have a – most students come here with a really skewed sense of what it means to know something and even the sense of what an opinion is.

Overall, participants felt that students' ability to critically think was affected by the structure and content of the first-year seminar. The fact that the seminar was year long and discussion based helped faculty members intentionally build in time in the syllabus to address concepts that were more challenging and helped students critically analyze course content.

Question 6: How does the curriculum in the first-year seminar differ from other courses that you teach?

This interview question looked at how the curriculum in the first-year seminar differed from other courses that the faculty member taught. The goal was to determine the uniqueness of the first-year experience program and to discover how the class incorporated aspects that addressed skills for life-long learning. Sophia and Bill went more into depth as to how they incorporated writing into their first-year seminars to ensure that their students felt comfortable with the writing process. Bill explained how it was unique to have a writing component in his first-year seminar because “very few of my other courses have the writing assignments.”

Sophia described the unique content of the first-year seminar course as:

These are not kind of a seminar style Soc 101 or Anthro 101. They are not just meant to be just a seminar version of a generic intro course at all. I mean look at the topics in the first-year seminar – they’re going to be very specific things...and that immediately introduces college students right in their first week, their first class, to the type of discourse you’re getting into in college – that it’s about concrete, important topics that the professor has done some research on.

Megan, Sophia, Todd, and Grant explained how the content of the course was more flexible due to the year long structure. Darren stated that “because you have so much time you’re not so bound by the syllabus.” Grant gave this example:

As things come up, maybe even current events, something happens – 9/11 for example – if I was teaching a first-year seminar when that happened I might have taken a week off just to talk about that. So I feel like in the first-year seminar I can be much more flexible. I don’t have a point that I have to reach at the end of the semester or the end of the year.

Frank described the other courses he taught having:

A much more content driven agenda. Even though you’re trying to stress critical thinking and you want them to know why they know certain things there’s still an agenda that so much material much be covered...whereas the content of the first-year seminar course is quite arbitrary. You have complete leeway to structure it

as you want and what the content learned in that course is generally not, does not become an expectation for any other course.

Megan explained how the content of the first-year seminar allowed for the incorporation of some of the skills that were mentioned as essential for first-year students to succeed in question four:

Since we have the whole year, there is that luxury in the year to really give yourself time to talk about the co-curricular events, to schedule into the syllabus in very intentional ways public speaking, and writing as process where it's happening in the classroom and not just outside of the classroom.

Several participants also mentioned how the year long discussion based structure also allowed for faculty to get to know their students better in the first-year seminar than some of their other courses. Manuel explained that the smaller size of the class allowed for “an emphasis on the professor getting to know the students” more than any other classes. As Darren stated, “I know the students [in the first-year seminar] so much better” than students from his other classes. Todd spoke about how the seminar structure impacted how he taught the course in that “it’s a more responsive kind of teaching in that, you know, I can see the looks on their faces and I get to know them individually.”

Question 7: What do you think are the effects of combining living and learning for students?

This question was designed to understand how faculty perceived the effects of having students live in a residence hall with the same students in their first-year seminar. Almost all of the faculty members mentioned how the living-learning environment helped to create stronger connections with peers. In addition, the co-curricular events in the residence halls were mentioned by 10 of the 11 faculty members as an important component of the program that allowed for the continuation of learning beyond the classroom.

Manual and Grant talked about the relationships that developed between the students in the seminar simply because they spent so much time in and out of the classroom together over the course of the year. Frank described how the students:

Tend to know the people in their seminar very well and much sooner and they tend to develop a comfort in the seminar...even if their seminars don't actually address the question of living together and working together. Just the more times they bump into each other serendipitously the better.

Isabelle felt similarly that:

One thing that's definitely happening is that the fact that the students in a particular seminar live in the same residence hall means that there's more communication and there's more conversation outside of class. If for no other reason then they're walking to the seminar and from the seminar together, right? And that's a big plus. And I think there's more happening in the residence halls as well just cause they're around each other, right? So having that space, having that place means that the seminar conversation – I know – is extending beyond the bounds of the seminar in ways that it would not if they were going to three different places when they left.

Bill also felt that the program was “missing out on an opportunity for those conversations starting outside of the classroom setting” and that there was a need to “move the engagement with intellectual things outside of the way students usually do it.” Megan felt that there had been some improvements over the past few years with the co-curricular events:

I think we've gotten a little bit better not replicating the classroom experience – more experiential – and also really framing it for the students as ‘this isn't necessarily related to your classroom content but it is directly related to the goals of the first-year experience program and of being an engaged citizen.

Todd spoke about how the programs in the residence halls were “planting these seeds” in order to “habituate them [the students] so maybe they'll start going to things like lectures or whatever, not because they have to but because it becomes more second nature.” Todd went on to further explain how some of his students from previous years started putting together their own programs in the residence halls and inviting faculty to lead a discussion afterwards. He felt:

That's the best thing – so it's not so much when we march into the dorms and say 'we're going to have an event now' but when they take that with them and say 'this is something we can do with our life here at college.' I think that's in a way, the best part of it.

Isabelle also referenced the importance of letting things develop more naturally in the program with regards to some of the co-curricular events and conversations:

I think there are some ways in which we could imagine how to throw some seeds at that to use that metaphor again – how to throw some seeds out that would help kind of spark possible conversations, you know. But I think we have to do – I think we have to be more creative about that. I also think that we have to just accept that some of that is going to be out of the sight of the faculty and that's ok. I mean it's ok for us to throw those seeds out there and let things happen without us controlling it or being necessarily involved in it, you know. But I think we have to be more intentional about throwing more seeds out there.

Kelly and Jenna were able to give specific examples of how the living and learning component of the program helped to facilitate academic discussions outside of the classroom. Kelly spoke about a group that had developed out of one student's experience in his first-year seminar:

It was student generated and it's students encouraging other students to kind of, in a semi-structured way, Sunday afternoons at 2 o'clock, to meet in the student center and there's some kind of big question topic for discussion and they get together and talk. And now they have a website – it's kind of growing. They've been trying to think about ways of having a presence in the other residence halls...so I mean that's evidence that they got a taste for something, liked it, and took the initiative on their own to try to make that happen.

Jenna described how a student in her seminar described to the class a book that he had been talking about with his roommate from a different first-year seminar. Jenna ordered the book, read it, and then reported back to her seminar what she thought of the text. She explained that:

I wanted to pick up on – I took it back to them because I wanted to affirm explicitly that precisely because this roommate whose name I did not know – and this is what I told them – talked to my student and my student talked to us and I

listened and picked up on it – that is the model of what we are hoping to have happen.

Megan and Isabelle both felt that a major area for improvement was the connection between the academic side and the student life side. Isabelle explained, “the place where I think we have to do more work is to figure out how to leverage the residence hall to develop the cluster interactions more. That’s the thing that I think we haven’t quite mastered.” Megan also felt that because there was not a strong “relationship with student life,” the amount of activities in the residence halls became overwhelming. She stated that “there’s so much programming that it all kind of gets lost and the students can’t really prioritize what is valuable for them versus something they have to do.”

Overall, the effects of combining living and learning for first-year students were the creation of stronger connections with peers both inside and outside the classroom and the extension of learning through co-curricular programs in the residence halls.

Question 8: In what ways, if any, does the first-year seminar create connections between disciplines?

This interview question asked faculty to reflect on how the first-year seminar created connections between disciplines. There were several themes that emerged from the answers to these questions about how the combination of living and learning enhanced reflection and engagement across disciplines including, the common events in the residence halls, the multi-disciplinary approach within first-year seminars, and faculty development.

Common events in the residence halls.

Of the 11 faculty members, nine mentioned the common events in the residence halls as one of the main ways in which the first-year experience program fostered connections between disciplines. However, there were mixed results as to whether or not the common events in the

residence halls were truly successful at getting students to engage with a variety of disciplines. Manuel explained “most of the common events are not based in one discipline so all of the students in the cluster have to learn something outside of the discipline that they are in.”

Sophia felt that when structured right, the common events could be very successful at engaging students across disciplines. She discussed the intentionality that went into selecting the various speakers for one of the common events that included a debate on a specific topic:

You know one thing that was very important is we consciously picked people who would have different perspectives out there. That was to model the fact to the students that sensible, mature people don't have to agree. That they can really have fundamentally different views of the world and they're all good human beings [laughs] and can debate and that's what adult life is like – you don't have to come to some artificial happy face consensus.

So we were sort of subtly modeling that for the students where we know that adult life is complex and the life of the mind is going to have different perspectives – sometimes radically different perspectives on a single important issue...and so that event I think really worked very well in terms of modeling the fact that there is diversity of opinions and then, um, helping the whole cluster of classes come together in a way that was kind of organic. You know some – you have to be really careful with those common events. It can be really artificial and it can make people feel they're forced to read something they don't want to read. You know some of our common events fizzled and some were good but that debate I think was a big success.

Bill had a different perspective on the success of the common events and offered an explanation as to why he felt that the programming outside of the classroom was not working as well as they hoped it would:

By doing the common readings and the co-curricular events we're trying to get the students to have these conversations across class boundaries and across the cluster. My impression is that that hasn't been as successful as we had hoped. Part of it is that I think students are just not used to thinking that way.

Darren felt that the common events from his cluster were successful and that students were “immediately seeing these links across the disciplines” but felt that there was a great deal of variation among the clusters and so “students don't experience other clusters in the same way.”

Kelly spoke about the balance of being too intentional versus letting the interdisciplinary connections emerge more organically from the programs in the halls. She also described the need to assess what was happening since:

We've kind of left a lot of freedom up to the cluster to kind of find their way...so now we can look back and have a chance to say 'well, do we need to be a little more intentional or is it ok?' Or is it happening enough that we can let it bubble up.

In addition to the challenge of helping students to think in a different way through the co-curricular events, several faculty members mentioned the missed opportunity of working with the residence life and student affairs staff to capitalize on the co-curricular events and the living aspect of the living-learning program. Grant described the need to "bridge that gap between the student life people and the faculty people" to ensure that students were not getting overwhelmed with the amount of activity in the residence halls.

Multi-disciplinary approach within first-year seminars.

Of the 11 faculty members interviewed, six mentioned the multi-disciplinary approach within the first-year seminars as one of the ways that the first-year experience program created connections across disciplines. Manuel explained that "because we have more time built into the schedule for things other than the disciplinary material there's more interdisciplinary content in the seminars themselves."

Todd used this metaphor to describe the approach in the classroom:

Both Thoreau and Emerson went to Harvard and Emerson was older and supposedly wiser but Thoreau loved to complain about things and about life and he was complaining about Harvard and Emerson said 'well, but you have to admit that they teach all the branches of knowledge.' And Thoreau said 'yeah, all of the branches but none of the roots.' And I love that metaphor because what he meant was that the branches are like the different disciplines but that comes from a deeper source.

Now, the branches need the roots – and the roots need the branches too if you really go to town with that but it's the kind of root questions. So to the extent

that you can see yourself in this first-year experience program not just teaching an Introduction to Economics but teaching the Introduction to Economics in a way that helps students to kind of see what economics is and why economic thinking is, and why we would need or want to think that way in the first place, where these are coming from. And so that on some level is going to connect up with other disciplines.

Grant also spoke about how the first-year seminar helped students to see the connections between disciplines:

It does help them to see the connections because there are a lot of, you know, just talking about my own course...it has connections to biology, to psychology, to political science. And I try to play these things up so I think they can definitely see those and sometimes they get quite excited about those. They will come back to me and say 'oh, the stuff that we learned – I just saw in my political science course' or 'I just saw it in my economics course and I was so excited because I already knew a little bit about it.'

Frank also felt that a majority of faculty members tried to make references to other disciplines within their first-year seminar but also explained how the students themselves helped to create the connections within disciplines in the class:

The students you have are not taking the course as much for disciplinary reasons as most other groups of students. I mean they still have the sense that they're still trying to get some credit to meet their common requirements but the course they get may not always serve that purpose and again, it only meets one common requirement and it's two courses, and so the students in the classes are mixed in their own disciplinary strengths and their own – what's eventually going to be their majors...and I think that's a good thing and the weaker you make it, the more you treat it as not so much a disciplinary course but a course in a subject that is not tied to a single discipline is better.

Jenna spoke about how she encouraged students to attend multi-disciplinary events on and off campus by giving them a check mark for each event they attended. She explained that:

My goal is that they get into...the habit of attending stuff that is just not within the box of their four classes. That so many things fall between the cracks and so if you only go to your four classes you have 32 blocks of knowledge but guess what? Some of the most interesting stuff is in the cracks!

She went on later to explain how she assigns students to teach different readings throughout the semester to their peers and challenges them to make the experience as exciting and engaging as possible:

So what I'm trying to do is basically get them to use their imaginations, get them to use their creativity, get them to take this reading and then to transform it into a dialogue with their experience that will engage the other students in the class. And I tell them they can do a better job of that than I can and I deliberately make a point – I mean it's not hard, I have examples – but I deliberately make a point to say, 'you know, I learned that from you. I didn't know that – I wouldn't have done it.' Because I think that it's both true and it's a way of validating what's happening in their minds when they're taking that experience and they're not just chewing the cud and spitting it back but they're transforming it in a way that makes sense for them.

One anecdote that reflected the long-term effects of the program in regard to connections within disciplines came from Megan's interview. She was talking about how, in her opinion, "a lot of students appreciate the first-year experience program after they've left." She described an email that she received from a student who had transferred to another institution:

I had a kid who transferred to another institution write me an email – and I was never gonna see this guy again – and he wrote me this email saying 'I just want to tell you, your class more than any other prepared me to do well at my new institution.' And I think he actually said he got a B- in the class and he said 'I think I was just looking for short term gains versus long term but the emphasis on writing really prepared me, blah, blah, blah.' And you know – in fact he was a kid from Oklahoma – and he never – he didn't have to do that. I was never going to write him a letter, he wasn't kissing ass but I think he saw the kind of impact, the repercussions after the fact.

Faculty development.

Lastly, a few participants mentioned that the students' ability to reflect and engage across disciplines was substantially improved by the faculty development that occurred through the interdisciplinary nature of the seminars and the co-curricular programs.

Grant pointed out that:

Part of what I really like about teaching in the program is you do get to work with faculty from other departments and see these perspectives that are vastly different from mine, really, academically, and think about things that I would never think about otherwise. And to just hear from people about what books that they're reading and the things they're thinking about. And to me that's another really important part of this is just mixing the faculty and getting them to listen to each other a little more...it's very easy as an academic professional to just get really narrowly focused on your own specialty and I think this is a great antidote to that. And for me that's been one of the most rewarding things about doing it.

Isabelle also reflected on the connections forged between faculty members through the multi-disciplinary nature of the first-year experience program and how that may impact the students' experience:

It turned out to be a real boon for faculty because it is hard for faculty to get outside of their departments and outside of their disciplines to have the kinds of conversations we all want to have...you engage more faculty in different ways and I think that the relationships that faculty develop are still really important relationships. The downside is that it's not an identical experience across years or across clusters. What you hope for is that the experience is sufficient, right, to give students the lift that we think we wanted them to have. And by and large I think that that's true.

Overall, the participants felt that the first-year seminar created connections between disciplines through the implementation of co-curricular events in the residence halls and the multidisciplinary approach of the seminars. In addition, the connections created among faculty from different disciplines in the design and teaching of the first-year seminars helped to create an environment that was supportive of multi-disciplinary approaches to learning.

Question 9: In your opinion, how does this program affect the culture of the institution with regards to learning?

The final interview question focused on how the first-year experience program affected the culture of the institution with regards to learning from the faculty perspective. There were three major themes that emerged from the faculty interviews: the impact on students, the impact on faculty, and the impact on the institution as a whole.

Student culture.

There were mixed reactions from the faculty members about the degree to which the first-year experience program affected the student culture at the institution. Of the 11 participants, seven spoke about the impact that the program had on first-year students. Five of those seven participants felt that the program had a positive impact on students in terms of their academic and social development. Todd felt that the first-year experience program:

Has turned a fair number of students into life-long learners...a lot of students that I have – in fact, it's not even clear they liked it at the time but they start coming back in one way or another asking for more. Like 'what other kinds of courses can I take that will be like that?' or 'are you going to teach something else?'...so if a mere handful – it's like where two or three are gathered together – are turned on by unrealistic questions from the point of view of the world that are really more real than other questions, that's a good success.

Isabelle described the effect of the first-year experience program on the student culture through the recurring theme of planting seeds:

The bottom line is we're throwing out the seeds, right? We are sowing seeds everywhere, wherever we can, and they are falling some on fertile soil and some on the rocks and some are getting choked on weeds, some of them trampled on the road [laughs] whatever. All of those things are happening. But for most of them, when they get a little past it, they can look back and say something different happened there, right?

What I think is happening is that when they go into their sophomore and junior and senior year classes they are generally more engaged, that is they're generally more willing to speak in class. And again, this is a little erratic across seminars but for a number of them they're generally better writers, you know, that smaller size and the attention has made them generally better writers...the other thing I think it's done is that I do think that it's made them understand that it's possible to have a different relationship with a faculty members than you thought when you walked in the door.

Similarly, Sophia explained how she had started to hear from colleagues that the program was "having a spillover effect in terms of students being more willing to speak out in class in a thoughtful way." In addition to the first-year program helping to develop students that were more engaged in their courses, Manuel pointed out that:

If you teach both semesters you really do see progress in terms of writing and often in terms of self-discipline. You do see students starting to think about what they want to do in terms of choosing a major or a career goal.

Jenna believed strongly that:

The truth is I don't think that the faculty person is the most significant part of this program. I do think that attitudes toward learning can be but it is the relationships that they [the students] make over a full year with a small group of people who do live with them. And I think that really is probably the biggest value they recall...the habits that they develop and the relationships that they develop over that time that can see them through in good ways for the next three years.

Two of the seven participants who spoke about the impact of the program on the student culture had slightly less positive perspectives. When asked how the program affected the culture of the institution, Darren stated, "Not as much as I wish it had. I think it's had more of an effect on individual students than it has on the culture, frankly." Frank felt that:

It has not affected the student culture a great deal at this point...I think the students have not embraced it to a great extent at this point so they don't appreciate what the good experience is and they might not until much later.

Overall, the perception of faculty on the impact of the program on the student culture was positive, specifically in relation to academic engagement and community development. There were a couple faculty members who felt that the program did not have as great an impact on the student culture as they would have hoped and indicated that student appreciation for the program took longer than expected.

Faculty culture.

Of the 11 participants, six spoke about the positive impact of the program on the faculty culture at the institution. Manuel stated that "anything that gets faculty members from different departments together is good for the atmosphere." Megan agreed that "it's done some good things for faculty collegiality because it's nice to work with people across disciplines." Todd felt that the experience of students in regard to learning "has been mirrored to some extent maybe

between faculty who are starting to experience this collaborative roots rather than just branches thing.”

Kelly spoke about the effect on individual faculty members who were not thrilled about teaching in the program at the start but who experienced moments of success in their seminar that convinced them of the importance of the program for first-year students. She explained:

I think there have been – each year there are a few more – what I would call – success stories...I’ll give you an example. I don’t know what to label it but the faculty member who agreed to do it, it was their turn, you know, not with a wild degree of enthusiasm and in kind of a minimalist approach like ‘ok there’s some things I have to do, co-curricular events – that’s not the part I’m enthusiastic about. I want a small seminar, great.’

I have received two or three emails or, you know, in the hallway of just ‘well I just gotta say I had a moment in my seminar and it was just great’...it’s baby steps but I think a couple of those people saying ‘yeah, maybe there is something to this’ moves in the direction of an opportunity to have conversations across disciplines that we wouldn’t have had.

Kelly went on to talk about the impact the program had on faculty culture:

Faculty do say that teaching in it was an opportunity to reflect on their teaching, to experiment pedagogically, and that it even has – they report...that they feel it’s kind of spilled into their other courses, right? So that the pedagogical reflection and experimentation had had an effect on how they teach their other courses. Seems to me that would be some indication of an institutional impact.

Isabelle spoke about the impact of the program highlighting for faculty “what it’s like to be just thinking about first-year students.” She explained how that was a new concept to many faculty members because the developmental needs of first-year students can be “masked” when you have a class made up of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. Therefore, the challenge was how to “be much more intentional about who they are and where they are. That was surprising to faculty.” Isabelle felt that the impact on faculty culture was that:

It made them more aware of the fact that when they see these kids as juniors and seniors and they’re able to do these things – someone got them there. And so we can be attentive to how you actually do get them there. So I think that’s been a huge plus for us in terms of faculty culture and faculty thinking differently about

our students developmentally because we've made them focus on the first year. Well, once you focus on the first year you have to think about 'so then what happens second, third, fourth, right?' that gets them to the place we want them to be when they walk out the door.

Institutional culture.

The third theme that emerged from this question was the impact that the first-year experience program had on the culture of the institution as a whole. Eight of the 11 participants referenced ways in which the institutional culture had changed as a result of the implementation of the universal first-year experience program. Grant described how a majority of faculty have "accepted it now, generally speaking. There may be a few hold outs but I think it's just part of who we are now I think. So in that sense it's a change." Jenna spoke about how "there is less chance for students to fall between the cracks. That the fact that everybody has now an advisor and a first-year seminar person – if the one doesn't work out they can use the other one."

Bill mentioned that the program involved "really not just faculty" and that librarians, residence life, and counseling staff were connected with each of the clusters to ensure that first-year students were being supported through all of their transitional issues. However, several participants spoke about the need to continue to improve the relationship between the faculty and the student life staff. Isabelle felt that "one of the things that we have to work harder on is how to, what I would say, how to leverage the residence hall in better ways" and:

We have a lot of work to do in helping faculty understand the work that student affairs does. I think there are ways in which – we're still at a stage where that's tension. You know, 'if they're doing their stuff they're not doing my stuff', right? It's a competition over students' attention and their time. I don't think it has to be that way but I think we have to understand better what they do and they have to understand better what we do and I think we could probably work better together.

Kelly expressed a similar sentiment and explained the relationship between faculty and student affairs staff in a slightly different way:

We have a very positive relationship with Res Life and Student Affairs side of things; we're still kind of Mars and Venus, you know? So, not in a negative way, but approach things a little differently, different cultures and still trying to figure out how to really leverage that and make the most of it. There's no friction. Could there be more synchronization? I think on both sides there's...some good will there.

Frank, Megan, and Sophia spoke about the amount of resources needed to maintain the first-year experience program and the strain that was placed on certain faculty and staff to ensure success. Megan described how:

Faculty feel more and more pulled in a lot of directions and less time – a lot of sort of bureaucratic work – and I think the first-year experience program, it does require meetings for programming, and it does require collaboration and it does require cooperation on the part of departments and we have committed to it as an institution and I'm not sure the institution at the upper level realizes the strain it puts on department and, quite frankly, even individual faculty.

Sophia agreed that:

If we're making it a core part of the institution, it should be staff-able by the regular faculty and, at present, it doesn't seem to me that it is so I'm hoping that we won't have such a crisis that we have to scale back the program to just the one semester.

Lastly, in regard to the impact on institutional culture, Kelly offered a unique perspective on the program and some of the challenges moving forward:

In any of this we try to be intentional creating these connections, the living-learning on the student side. The hard part is in our enthusiasm to not try to over determine it or over program it, to kind of create spaces where you just kind of stand back and say 'let it happen' and sometimes it's just – you created the space, you threw the party, and nobody came. And I think that we're trying to figure out how much of that we can live with and what the pros and cons of a little more laissez faire approach versus the pros and cons – especially the cons – of the kind of highly structured, programmed approach. So that's a tricky balance.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the results from the three focus groups and 11 individual interviews using direct quotes from student participants on each of the focus group questions and

from faculty participants on each of the interview questions. The first part of the chapter provided a summary of the study and an overview of the participant demographics. The next section provided answers to each of the 13 focus group questions (Appendix A) and the 12 interview questions (Appendix C). A summary of the responses to each question was given in addition to an explanation of the themes that emerged from the student and participant data.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter covers the findings from the study, conclusions based on the data and the literature reviewed in chapter two, and recommendations for improved practice. In addition, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are addressed.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. Based on this purpose, two main research questions and several sub questions were created. Three focus groups with a total of 19 students and 11 interviews with faculty members were conducted. These interviews and focus groups were guided by protocols (Appendix A & Appendix C) that were developed from the literature on first-year experience programs and the researcher's experience. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and then the researcher listened to each session multiple times to discern common themes and direct quotes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). The themes and quotes as well as descriptions of the participants are presented in the previous chapter.

Findings

This section covers the findings of the study based on the two main research questions which examined the perceptions of students and faculty about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement

across disciplines based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program. In addition, four sub questions were developed under each main research question to more specifically address items within the two main questions. The findings for each research question are presented by themes that emerged from the responses of the student and faculty participants to corresponding focus group and interview protocol questions.

Research Question One

Research Question One: Based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution, what are the perceptions of first-year students about developing skills for life-long learning?

This question was answered through research sub questions A through D and through questions one to 10 on the focus group protocol (Appendix A). Two major themes emerged from the student answers. The first was the development of intellectual curiosity and questioning through the various elements of the living-learning first-year experience program. The second was the development of skills for life-long learning based on the application of classroom material to the outside world.

Intellectual Curiosity

Of the 15 focus group students who responded to the first focus group question, seven talked about the concept of curiosity and the ways in which the program helped foster the desire to raise more questions. As stated earlier, one of the participants defined life-long learning as “a general curiosity to keep learning, like it just shows, like, if you’re a life-long learner you’re curious to learn more and you’re never happy with one level of, like, knowledge.” In addition, each of the focus groups discussed the difference between asking questions in high school and asking questions in college. Many participants talked about how they had become more

comfortable with asking questions that were not able to be answered in a semester, year, or even during their college career.

Real World Application of Class Content

The second theme to emerge related to skills for life-long learning was the application of what was learned in the classroom to real life situations not just during college but also throughout a lifetime. Of the 15 focus group students who responded to the first focus group question, seven mentioned the translation of experiences in college to how they were going to continue that learning throughout the rest of their lives. This was reflected by one participant's definition of life-long learning as "the idea of bringing what you learn in the classroom and applying it to real life situations." The connection between learning during college and learning after college was clearly an element of life-long learning that resonated with the student participants.

Overall, the participants from all three focus groups stated that life-long learning was connected to the process of questioning and maintaining curiosity about topics learned in college throughout one's life. In addition, all three focus groups reflected on how their perception of life-long learning had changed since high school due to their experiences within the living-learning first-year experience program.

Research Question One – Sub Question A

Sub Question A: How does the participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of critical thinking skills?

Data for this sub question came primarily from focus group protocol questions three and four that asked students to explain if, in their opinion, the first-year program affected their critical thinking skills and how their reading and writing skills had changed since their freshman

year. Responses about critical thinking also emerged from several of the other focus group questions but most frequently from question two which asked the participants to reflect on how their participation in the first-year program affected their experience overall.

Of the 19 participants, 10 felt that the program did help them develop critical thinking skills that they continued to apply in their courses throughout their sophomore year. Several participants gave specific examples of how their ability to critically think was influenced by the reading and writing assignments in their first-year seminars. As one participant expressed, it helped students learn “how to think critically instead of just memorizing things – it’s like analyzing, and challenging, and struggling.”

Three of the 19 participants however, felt that the program had no impact on their ability to critically think. They felt that their first-year seminars did not have a focus on developing critical thinking skills and that they were able to excel without completing a great deal of work. As quoted in the previous chapter, one participant stated “I had to write papers but I mean even without reading you could do well on the papers so I don’t think it helped that much.”

Overall, many of the participants who had a positive perspective on the first-year experience program’s ability to facilitate the development of critical thinking skills linked their critical thinking to both reading and writing assignments within their first-year seminars. In addition, participants felt that the application of content within the program to real-life situations helped to bring the critical thinking outside of the classroom and made it more relevant to their day-to-day lives.

Research Question One – Sub Question B

Sub Question B: How does the participation in a first-year experience program affect the development of written communication skills?

Data for this question came primarily from the focus group protocol questions four, six, and eight. These questions asked participants to reflect on how their reading and writing skills had changed since their first year, how their first-year seminar differed from other classes that they had taken in college, and what aspect(s) of the first-year experience program had the most impact on their academic experience.

Eight of the 19 participants felt that the first-year experience program had influenced their writing whether it was teaching them how to develop a thesis question or how to present various perspectives and create an argument. As one participant explained, “there definitely has been a big difference in how I write, I would say. It’s hard to, like, pinpoint one thing but I think it has a lot to do with learning to, like, analyze in a deeper way than I ever did in high school.” Four students spoke about writing a first-time ever research paper in their first-year seminar and the challenges that presented. Two students mentioned that the first-year experience program positively affected their written communication even though they were in majors that were not writing intensive. Lastly, three of the participants expressed the belief that their experiences within the first-year experience program lacked a focus on reading and writing and therefore they did not feel as though their writing skills improved based on their participation in the program.

Overall, the general consensus on the development of written communication through the first-year experience program was positive but it was obvious that their answers depended on whether or not writing was a focus of the individual course. Additionally, the contrast between writing in high school and writing at the college level played a large role in the students’ perception of how the first-year experience program influenced their writing skills.

Research Question One – Sub Question C

Sub Question C: How does the combination of living and learning in the first-year experience program enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?

Data for this question came primarily from focus group protocol questions three, five, and six. These questions asked participants to reflect on how the first-year experience program affected their development of critical thinking skills, how the combination of living and learning influenced their first-year experience, and how their first-year seminar experience compared to their other courses. The participants were mixed in their responses as to whether or not the living and learning aspect of the program helped them to see connections between disciplines. The major themes that came out of this question were exposure to different disciplines and perspectives through the first-year seminar, connections within the residence hall, and dissatisfaction with co-curricular programming.

Exposure to different disciplines and perspectives.

Of the 19 participants, 10 spoke about how the first-year experience program helped expose them to other disciplines and majors that they had never considered before their first year. Five participants even changed majors or minors based on their experience within the program. Not only did the students speak about exposure to different disciplines, but they felt that the structure of the program helped to introduce them to different perspectives as well. One participant's response represented many of the opinions from the three focus groups when he said that the first-year experience program "helped me value the opinions of others a lot more," and created the opportunity for open dialogue on various topics in and out of the classroom.

The effect of exposure to different disciplines and perspectives was also addressed when the students were asked what advice they would give to incoming first-year students. Ten of the

19 felt that it was important for incoming first-year students to choose a first-year seminar in a discipline that was completely out of their desired major in order to broaden their horizons and expose them to different perspectives. As one participant stated, “just take something right out of the blue, you know, something different.” Many of the participants spoke about their disappointment when they first received their seminar assignment but ended up falling in love with the class and wanting to learn more about the seminar topic.

Connections within the residence hall.

Five of the 19 participants discussed how the element of living in the same residence hall as others in their first-year seminar affected their experience in a positive way. As quoted in the previous chapter, one of the participants felt “like our class was a lot closer together because we lived together.” Although the connections in the residence halls did not necessarily impact engagement across disciplines, the relationships that students were able to develop in the first-year seminars helped to create an atmosphere that was conducive to reflection and discussion. Several participants talked about how walking back to their residence hall with the other students in their first-year seminar helped to continue discussions beyond the classroom environment. Not only was the development of close relationships with peers based on proximity within the residence hall mentioned several times throughout the focus groups, the convenience of walking down the hall to ask about an assignment was also brought up in each of the focus groups.

Three of the 19 participants had slightly less positive viewpoints when it came to the living and learning aspect of the program and the impact that it had on their ability to reflect and engage across disciplines. One of the participants explained that “it was nice to study together but I think we could have done that even if we didn’t live in the same building. So, I mean, for me, living together didn’t really affect the community that I had.” Judging the feedback from

some of the students, the lack of community based on a first-year seminar meant that discussions across disciplines were not as prevalent in the residence halls as they were in the classroom environment. Therefore, the living and learning element of the first-year experience program was seen by some students as more of a convenience than a means to facilitate intellectual activity in the residence halls.

Dissatisfaction with co-curricular programming.

There were mixed reactions to the co-curricular programming that was designed to address issues from multiple disciplinary perspectives within the first-year experience program. It was clear that, from the students' perspectives, the application of classroom material to real world situations appeared to be a much more effective way to encourage reflection and engagement across disciplines than some of the programming that occurred outside of the classroom environment. Several participants spoke about their frustration with the amount of time spent on co-curricular events that, to them, had no application to what they were learning in their first-year seminar. There were a few specific examples of co-curricular activities and trips that were seen as "cool" but the overall consensus was that the activities outside of the seminar with the larger cluster in the residence hall did not have a positive impact on the students' experience nor did they enhance their ability to reflect and engage across disciplines. However, several participants did speak about how the dissatisfaction with co-curricular events helped the group to connect as well. One student said "it kind of gave us something to bond over, like, we could all mourn about it and, you know, complain and stuff like that [laughter from group] which was kind of fun."

Research Question One – Sub Question D

Sub Question D: What aspects of the living-learning experience are most meaningful to first-year students?

The data for this question came primarily from questions two and six – nine on the focus group protocol. Question two asked the students how the first-year experience program affected their overall experience at the institution. Questions six through nine examined how the first-year seminar was different from other classes, what the favorite parts of the first-year experience program were, what aspects of the program had the largest impact on the students' academic experience, and what advice students would give to incoming first-year students about the program. There were three areas that emerged from the focus groups as the most meaningful to the students about their experience in the living-learning program: the structure of the class, the connection created with classmates, and the connection created with faculty members.

Structure of the class.

Ten of the 19 students stated that the structure of the first-year experience class as a seminar style versus a lecture style course had a huge impact on how meaningful the experience was. A majority of the participants talked about the benefits of a seminar style class in terms of their participation and overall enjoyment of the experience. One participant's response was representative of the responses in the three focus groups:

I think my favorite part was just the fact that it was a seminar. I think that the one thing that I wouldn't change, I guess, that's the point of the first-year experience program, is to get freshmen the chance to be in a small group of people and have that experience right off the bat so I like that.

As one participant stated in the previous chapter, how, "still to this day I'm taking classes based on how that class [the first-year seminar] influenced my education. So even though it was only that one credit it had such an impact." The participants spoke about how the seminar

structure was so different from a majority of their other classes and how much they enjoyed the experience of being able to truly engage with their peers and their faculty member in discussions about a variety of topics.

Connection with class.

Nine of the 19 participants spoke about the connections established with classmates within the class as one of their favorite aspects of the first-year experience program. One participant said, “I think my favorite was just my class...we were really close and we would have meals together and we actually are still pretty close – like some of my best friends are from that class.” Apparently, the year long structure of the seminar combined with the residential component of the program allowed the participants to get to know their peers in a way that was more substantial than the relationships they developed in their other courses.

Participants also spoke about the bonding with classmates that occurred over both the favorite and least favorite aspects of the program. For example, one participant talked about the camaraderie that developed out of a collective bitterness towards an all day trip that the cluster was required to attend. Although this was not a positive experience, it did help to bring the students together and created a shared memory for the class that lasted well into their sophomore year. Lastly, many of the participants spoke about how their current roommates were members of their first-year seminar and how the relationships they were able to develop with peers in that seminar continued well into their sophomore year.

Connection with professor.

Although there were some participants who agreed that their class was an important part of the experience, others felt that their connection with their professor had more of an impact and was more meaningful to them. The terms “loved” and “awesome” were used multiple times by

the participants to describe their first-year seminar faculty member. In addition to the admiration for the first-year seminar faculty member, the concept of creating a strong enough connection with a faculty member so that they would write letters of recommendation for them came up at least two or three times in each focus group. Another way that students were able to develop a strong connection with their professor was through office hours. Multiple participants spoke about their increased level of comfort with visiting faculty members during their office hours because of the connection that was created during the first-year experience program. As one participant stated:

It was nice to have that relationship with the professor and he's like, he's not my official advisor but, like, I can go to him with anything and he's, like, always there and he has really good advice so it's good to have that.

Overall, the most meaningful aspects of the first-year experience program for the students included: the connections that they were able to create with classmates and their faculty members as well as the discussion based structure of the first-year seminar. These elements were consistent across the focus groups regardless of the specific seminar in which the students participated.

Research Question Two

Research Question Two: Based on their participation in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution, what are the perceptions of faculty about fostering approaches to life-long learning?

The second research question was answered through the various sub questions and through questions one – nine on the interview protocol (Appendix C). Because the central purpose of the study was to determine how the first-year experience program influenced the development of students' skills for life-long learning, the first question on the interview protocol

was included to determine what the term life-long learning meant to each of the faculty participants.

A common theme in the responses to the questions about fostering an approach to life-long learning was the concept of helping students to develop a passion for questioning and intellectual curiosity. As one of the participants described in the previous chapter, “if they [the students] have a good grounding in it, if they really manage to retain their intellectual curiosity, then even if that’s interrupted they go back to it.” In addition to intellectual curiosity, 10 of the 11 faculty members mentioned the connection with learning that occurred during college and learning that occurs after college as an important aspect of being a life-long learner. Several faculty members also mentioned the impact that technology has had on higher education and how the things that their students learned in college may be out of date by the time they graduate. Therefore, it was imperative to teach students, as one participant stated, “that you’re about learning all the time.”

When asked how to help students to become life-long learners, many of the faculty members spoke about the elements of the first-year experience program that helped to facilitate that development such as the reading assignments, the writing assignments, and intentional discussions. Several faculty members also spoke about the importance of role modeling life-long learning for their students. Overall, the concepts of intellectual curiosity and extending the learning process beyond the college experience were recurring themes throughout the interviews and provided a common thread throughout the following sub questions.

Research Question Two – Sub Question A

Sub Question A: How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students’ critical thinking skills?

Data for this sub question came primarily from interview protocol questions five, six, and seven. These questions included: what aspects of the first-year experience program impact critical thinking, how the curriculum in the first-year seminar differed from other courses that the faculty member taught, and what were the effects of combining living and learning for first-year students.

The 11 faculty participants unanimously felt that the first-year experience program affected critical thinking in some way. However, there were a variety of responses in terms of how critical thinking was developed and the degree to which critical thinking skills were emphasized in the various first-year seminars. Several participants mentioned that there was a great deal of diversity within the first-year seminars and, therefore, not every seminar was able to have as strong an impact on students' ability to critically think. Beyond the diversity of experiences within first-year seminars, the responses from the interviews regarding the development of critical thinking skills can be grouped into two major themes focusing on the structure of the first-year seminar and the content of the course.

Structure of the course.

One of the most common responses to how the first-year experience course affected critical thinking was the structure of the class as a year long seminar. Many faculty members described how the small, discussion based course allowed them the opportunity to truly see where their students were developmentally and thus facilitated their adjusting their teaching style to ensure that the students were gaining critical thinking skills. In addition, the year long structure provided a unique opportunity to monitor progress of each student over an extended period of time as well as the opportunity to be more intentional about assignments and critical analysis of material. As one participant explained, "you have the chance to give them something

that deserves to be critically thought through” because the time and space are built into the first-year seminar structure.

Content of the course.

The second theme that emerged from faculty responses was how the content of the first-year seminar enhanced the development of critical thinking through specific assignments and topics. Several participants compared the content of the first-year seminar to other courses for their discipline. Whereas at the end of a history or calculus course faculty had to be sure that students understood a certain level of content to be able to move to the next level, the first-year seminar did not have the same restrictions about content and could be more fluid. One participant described the first-year seminar as not being “bound by the syllabus” because it was not an introductory course for any specific major or discipline. Another participant described how he was “happy to take a couple or three days to leave behind what we were doing and talk about the common reading...in that way it’s totally unlike a calculus course or something which has a very rigid schedule to it.” Therefore, the content of the first-year seminar was driven by the needs of first-year students and could truly focus on helping them to understand and develop skills for college level reading, writing, and discourse.

Overall, the 11 faculty participants felt that the first-year experience program did influence first-year students’ and their ability to critically think. Both the structure and the content of the first-year seminar were cited as means to provide faculty with the time and space to intentionally focus on the concept of critical thinking with their students.

Research Question Two – Sub Question B

Sub Question B: How does the first-year experience program affect the development of students’ written communication skills?

Data for this sub question came primarily from interview protocol questions four and six which asked the faculty members what skills were essential for first-year students to succeed and how the curriculum in their first-year seminar differed from their other courses. Of the 11 faculty participants, eight mentioned writing as one of the essential skills for first-year students to succeed.

Several participants went further into depth as to how they incorporated writing into their first-year seminars to ensure that their students felt comfortable with the writing process. One participant described the intentionality of writing in the first-year seminar “where you start out with smaller writing assignments and you build on those and they [the students] get a lot of written feedback and office hour feedback from the professor and they are able to write successively more complex papers.” In addition, multiple participants described how they facilitated the writing process during class time to ensure that their students were able to construct a thesis statement and structure arguments appropriately.

A few participants mentioned that writing was not a main component of their first-year seminar due to the fact that their discipline was not typically writing intensive. However, they spoke about the need to incorporate writing into the first-year seminars because so many first-year students arrived at the institution unable to conduct simple research and craft well written papers. Overall, a majority of the participants felt that the first-year experience program positively affected the development of students’ written communication through specific assignments in the first-year seminar and intentional structuring of the syllabus to include demonstrations of the writing process during class time.

Research Question Two – Sub Question C

Sub Question C: How does the combination of living and learning enhance reflection and engagement across disciplines?

Data for this sub question came primarily from interview protocol questions seven, eight, and nine. These three questions focused on the effects of combining living and learning for students, how the first-year program helped to create connections between disciplines, and how the program affected the culture of the institution with regards to learning. Several themes that emerged from the answers to these questions pertained to how the combination of living and learning enhanced reflection and engagement across disciplines including the common events in the residence halls, the multi-disciplinary approach within first-year seminars, and faculty development.

Common events in the residence halls.

Of the 11 faculty members, nine mentioned the common events in the residence halls as one of the main ways in which the first-year experience program fostered connections between disciplines. However, there were mixed opinions as to whether or not the common events in the residence halls were truly successful at getting students to engage with a variety of disciplines. For example, one participant explained how his cluster facilitated “a panel on tragedy” from the point of view of several different disciplines in the residence halls and described how the students were “immediately seeing these links across the disciplines.” Conversely, other participants felt that the success of the common events varied from cluster to cluster. As one faculty member explained, “although we try to put together something coherent in terms of the common events and the common readings, it’s not as strong of an identity.” As a result, even though the common events were structured in such a way to present topics from a variety of

disciplines, first-year students did not always see the connections or fully engage in the topics presented.

In addition to the challenge of helping students to think in a different way through the co-curricular events, several faculty members mentioned the missed opportunity of working with the residence life and student affairs staff to capitalize on the co-curricular events and the living aspect of the living-learning program. As stated earlier, one participant described the need to “bridge that gap between the student life people and the faculty people” to ensure that students were not getting overwhelmed with the amount of activity in the residence halls. This sentiment was shared by several participants and was highlighted as an area for improvement for the program as it continues to grow.

Multi-disciplinary approach within first-year seminars.

Six of the 11 faculty members mentioned the multi-disciplinary approach within the first-year seminars as one of the ways that the first-year experience program created connections across disciplines. As previously quoted, one participant explained that “because we have more time built into the schedule for things other than the disciplinary material there’s more interdisciplinary content in the seminars themselves.” Besides the content of the first-year seminars being multi-disciplinary, the students in each seminar came from multiple majors and therefore represented a variety of perspectives on the specific seminar topic. Therefore, the discussions in class were often more interdisciplinary than other courses within a specific major or area of focus.

Faculty development.

The last theme that emerged from this sub question was the concept of faculty development through the interdisciplinary nature of the seminars and the co-curricular programs.

The planning that went into the selection of the common texts and the co-curricular activities helped facilitate discussions between faculty members from different disciplines and, in many ways, mirrored the experience that the faculty hoped the students were gaining from the first-year experience program. Many participants spoke about the personal and professional benefits gained from their participation in the first-year experience program because they were able to connect with faculty from across the institution that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to meet. As one participant described the unexpected benefit of the first-year experience program:

It was an extraordinary faculty development program. And it was not what we expected, right? We had done this for students – that was our intent – to do it for students. But it turned out to be a real boon for faculty because it is hard for faculty to get outside of their departments and outside of their disciplines to have the kinds of conversations that we all want to have.

Overall, the faculty participants felt that the co-curricular events in the residence halls, the multi-disciplinary approach of the first-year seminars, and the faculty development that emerged from the first-year experience program were the three main ways that the program helped to facilitate reflection and engagement across disciplines. In addition, the fact that the students within each first-year seminar represented a variety of majors and disciplines helped to bring various perspectives to the table during seminar discussions that could then be continued outside of the classroom environment in the residence halls.

Research Question Two – Sub Question D

Sub Question D: How does faculty participation in a living-learning first-year experience program help create a culture conducive to life-long learning?

Data for this sub question came primarily from interview protocol questions three, four, and nine. These questions focused on how faculty help students to become life-long learners,

what skills were essential for first-year students to succeed, and how the first-year experience program affected the culture of the institution with regards to learning. The three major themes that emerged from the faculty interviews were the impact on student culture, the impact on faculty culture, and the impact on the institutional culture as a whole.

Student culture.

Seven of the 11 faculty members spoke about the influence that the first-year program had on the student culture. A recurring theme of “planting seeds” to cultivate certain behaviors that would encourage life-long learning emerged throughout the interviews. Faculty members described how the first-year experience program helped to plant the seeds of life-long learning that first-year students continued to return to throughout their four years in college. Several participants also mentioned how the student culture was positively impacted by the faculty culture that was fostered through the first-year experience program. By allowing faculty members to work across disciplines, students were able to witness the excitement that approaching topics from a variety of perspectives can create. Finally, several faculty members said that the first-year experience program had had a positive effect on the level of engagement of students at the institution. As one participant stated, “I think it is having a spillover effect in terms of students being more willing to speak out in class in a thoughtful way.” This increase in engagement was attributed to the discussion-based seminars in which all first-year students were required to participate.

Faculty culture.

Six of the faculty participants spoke about the positive impact that the first-year experience program had on the faculty culture at the institution. One participant described the impact on faculty culture as “baby steps but I think a couple of those people saying ‘yeah, maybe

there is something to this' moves in the direction of an opportunity to have conversations across disciplines that we wouldn't have had." Not only did the program provide the opportunity for faculty from different departments to come together to discuss common readings and plan co-curricular activities, but it also forced faculty to think about the academic and developmental needs of first-year students. As one participant explained:

There was a lot that had to be done to help faculty think about 'ok, if there are first-year students only and it's a first-year seminar, it's not a seminar at an upper-level, what does that mean that I do with them? What kind of expectation for both their level and their participation should I have?'

Finally, although two faculty members felt that the program had not had as large of an impact on the culture as they had hoped, they pointed out that the universal program was still relatively new to the institution and it was possible that a cultural change might occur later.

Institutional culture.

Eight of the faculty members spoke about how the culture of the institution was influenced due to the universal nature of the first-year experience program. As one participant previously stated, a majority of the institution "have accepted it now, generally speaking. There may be a few hold outs but I think it's just part of who we are now I think. So in that sense it's a change." Several participants also explained that since the program was no longer only comprised of a small number of faculty, staff, and students that were concerned with the first-year experience, the institution as a whole had to adapt to what it means to intentionally focus on the skills that first-year students needed to be successful. For example, the areas of counseling, residence life, and librarians were all mentioned as essential elements to the program.

Although many changes to the institutional culture were positive, several faculty members did speak about the challenges of staffing the first-year experience program and emphasized the importance of adequate resources in the future. One participant succinctly

expressed this sentiment by arguing, “if we’re making it a core part of the institution, it should be staff-able by the regular faculty and, at present, it doesn’t seem to me that it is.” Others mentioned the need to work on the relationship between academic affairs and student affairs as improvements are made to the co-curricular aspects of the first-year experience program. As one faculty member stated “we have a lot of work to do in helping faculty understand the work that student affairs does...I think we have to understand better what they do and they have to understand better what we do and I think we could probably work better together.”

Overall, nine of the 11 the faculty members interviewed felt that the first-year experience program did have an effect on the culture of the institution although they did make distinctions between the student culture, faculty culture, and institutional culture. According to the faculty members, the first-year experience program had affected each of those groups in some way but the amount of change had been different for each.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution affected the development of skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. Both faculty and students were interviewed to determine their perceptions on how participation in the program affected skill development. Based on the findings, here are conclusions drawn from the study and from related literature:

1. *The theoretical basis for first-year experience programs is applicable to the living-learning first-year experience program in this study.* As demonstrated by the connections that the first-year students in this study made to peers and faculty through the first-year experience program, Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure and

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement are still relevant for guiding programs to ensure first-year student success. As described in the literature review, Tinto (1987) spoke about the three principles that are essential for effective retention programs: the principle of community, commitment to students, and commitment to education. Most relevant to this study, Tinto (1987) defined these principles as "a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention of all students" (p. 7). By focusing on specific skills for life-long learning, the living-learning first-year experience program in this study followed these three principles and therefore was able to create an environment that fostered first-year student success without solely focusing on retention of students.

2. *The living-learning first-year experience program at this institution integrated many of the elements that are reflected in the literature as essential for successful first-year experience programs.* As mentioned in the literature review, Barefoot (2000) described the following essentials that have been incorporated into a majority of first-year experience programs: increasing peer interaction, increasing faculty-to-student interaction (both inside and outside of the classroom), increasing student involvement on campus, linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum, increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement, and assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college (p. 15).

Due to the small size and discussion-based structure, the first-year seminars were able to provide students with the opportunity to increase interaction with faculty both in and out of the classroom. In addition, the fact that the seminar was year long helped students to develop stronger relationships with both their faculty member and

peers. The living and learning element of the program helped to link the curriculum with the co-curriculum and increase student involvement on campus. Finally, the small size of the first-year seminar allowed faculty members the opportunity to focus on those students that had insufficient academic preparation for college and to work on skills for success including reading, writing, and critical thinking.

3. *The living-learning first-year experience program in this study addressed a majority of the areas highlighted as essential outcomes for students in the research on*

learning outcomes assessment in higher education. Suskie (2004) defined learning outcomes as “the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students take with them from a learning experience” (p. 75). In this study, the skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students gained from their experience in the living-learning first-year experience program were focused around the concept of life-long learning.

Furthermore, the outcomes from the program in this study were consistent with those described by the AAC & U (Yin & Volkwein, 2010): “cross-disciplinary perspectives and intercultural knowledge, verbal and written communication skills, analytical and problem-solving skills, collaboration and teamwork, information literacy, integrative thinking, and civic responsibility” (p. 80). What was intriguing about the results of this study was the fact that *both* the faculty and student participants felt that these skills were being developed through various aspects of the first-year experience program.

4. *The benefits of the living-learning first-year experience program in this study are consistent with the research on living-learning communities as well as the research on embedded first-year seminars within a residential learning community. However,*

the qualitative nature of this study adds depth to the quantitative research presented in the literature review on living-learning programs. The literature on living-learning communities presented several areas where these communities contributed to positive effects for first-year students such as academic achievement, retention, and social and intellectual development (Laufgraben, 2005). Hotchkiss, Moore and Pitts (2006) described how “involving a student in a small community early in his or her academic career will improve the student’s performance and increase the likelihood of retention for that student through developing confidence and facilitating social integration” (p. 197). The students in this study spoke candidly about their experiences within the living-learning first-year experience program contributing to their academic success and social development as well as helping them to become socially integrated to the institution through the connections made with peers and faculty.

Specifically in regard to embedded first-year seminars within a residential learning community, the results from studies by Schussler and Fierros (2008) and Donahue (2004) mirrored the experiences of the students in this study. As Donahue (2004) found in her mixed methods study, “students learn from their peers, not just in the classroom, or in their co-curricular environments, but from a complex interchange of both worlds that can not be duplicated without these interactions” (p. 94). Therefore, as seen in this study, it is difficult to isolate one aspect of the living-learning first-year experience program that has the most impact on the learning environment but rather the combination of elements that helps to create a culture conducive to learning.

5. *The opportunity to develop positive relationships with peers and faculty are two of the most important aspects of the first-year experience program for first-year students.* As seen from the themes that emerged from many of the questions on the focus group protocol, connections with peers and faculty members were two of the most meaningful aspects of the first-year experience program for the student participants. Whether they were talking about attending office hours, asking for letters of recommendation, or fostering an interest in a new discipline, faculty members played a large role in the support, learning, and decision making of first-year students. Although this is not a surprising result of the study, it confirms what Astin (1993) and others have stated about the importance of first-year students creating positive relationships with faculty and peers to keep them engaged and ultimately retained at the institution. Donahue (2004)'s qualitative study on an embedded seminar in a living-learning program at a comparable institution found similar results to this study and confirms the need for more studies that give first-year students a voice in the development of positive learning environments on their campus.
6. *Students were able to critically engage and reflect on their experiences through the focus groups.* I was surprised at the students' ability to reflect on their experiences through the focus group questions and truly debate with each other when conflicting views were on the table. One example was when one participant said, "I disagree with both of the arguments on the table" and then proceeded to offer his unique perspective without fear of judgment from the other participants. This offering of a unique perspective happened several times in each of the focus groups. One thing

that I was worried about going into the study was the possibility of groupthink within the focus groups. However, the students were able to truly offer their own opinions whether they complemented or contradicted others within their group. As I reflected in my journal after each of the focus group, I commented on witnessing first-hand the skills that the students had developed through their discussion-based first-year seminars and was impressed with their level of engagement, honesty, and reflection.

7. *Faculty and students have many of the same perceptions of the first-year experience program in all areas except co-curricular programming.* Unexpectedly, the students and faculty had very similar perceptions of the first-year experience program and the development of skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. I was especially surprised to find the connections between definitions of life-long learning and the concept of intellectual curiosity as well as the development of critical thinking within the first-year seminars. I was also pleasantly surprised to hear how much the faculty member played a role in the students' appreciation for and excitement about the program.

However, one area where there was some disconnect between the faculty and student perceptions was the co-curricular programming that took place outside of the classroom. The students in this study, for the most part, did not enjoy the co-curricular programming and did not feel it enhanced their experience or enabled them to reflect and engage across disciplines. A majority of the time they were confused about the connections between the programming and the material they were learning in class. The faculty participants, on the other hand, felt that the co-curricular

programs were one of the key areas where multi-disciplinary learning was emphasized.

8. *Resources are a concern for the future of first-year experience programs.* Several faculty spoke about the strain that the first-year experience program placed on resources at the institution. As discussed in the literature review, Jamelske (2009) had conducted a study that examined the impact of a first-year seminar on GPA and retention at a mid-sized Midwestern public university. His findings emphasized the need for intentional goals and adequate support for faculty and staff in implementing the program for an increase in retention of first-year students. Therefore, both the intentionality of the program and the support from the institution are essential for success of first-year programs.

It was clear from the responses in this study that the program was valued for the skill development it provided to both faculty and students. It was also evident that from both a student and faculty perspective, the program required a large investment of time and energy to create the connections necessary for its success. In addition, I sensed that many faculty participants felt that without continued support and recognition of the time put into the planning and implementation of the program, continuation of the universal program may not be possible. Therefore, it is essential for the institution to focus on the support structure for the program and research ways to increase both human and fiscal resources to ensure continued success. A cost benefit analysis should show that investment by the institution in this program would be well worth the expense through increases in student retention, faculty engagement, and overall satisfaction.

9. *The effectiveness of first-year experience programs can be measured by more than just quantitative measures of GPA, persistence, and retention.* A majority of the studies in the literature review chapter focus on quantitative measures of success for first-year experience programs. There are few qualitative studies that examine individual experiences of faculty and students in order to understand why certain elements of first-year experience programs are more influential than others in regards to increased GPA, persistence, or retention. Several of the areas that are mentioned in the research as essential for student success and persistence such as social and academic integration (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993) might be better studied through qualitative rather than quantitative measures.

As demonstrated in this study, the students spoke about connections with faculty members and peers as two of the most meaningful aspects of the first-year experience program. In addition, the content and structure of the first-year seminar was expressed as instrumental to their development of critical thinking skills and passion for life-long learning. Quantitative measures would not have provided the depth of information or highlighted the specific elements of the first-year experience program that helped students achieve success during their first year and beyond. In the future, both qualitative and quantitative research is needed to fully understand the experience of students within first-year programs to ensure that they are able to graduate with the skills necessary to be successful in a world economy.

10. *Faculty development was a surprising by-product of the living-learning first-year experience program.* One aspect of the study that was surprising and not fully represented in the literature review was the added benefit of faculty development that

came out of the first-year experience program in this study. There was only one study by Laufgraben (2005) that mentioned that faculty “participation in learning communities typically leads to greater attention to pedagogy and enhanced collegiality across disciplines” (p. 374). Not only did participation in the program in this study enhance collegiality across disciplines, it set up conditions for faculty that mirrored the experience they hoped the first-year students were gaining from the program. Therefore, the culture of the institution as a whole was moving toward becoming more focused on ways to increase reflection and engagement across disciplines for students, faculty, and staff.

11. *Marketing of the living-learning first-year experience program is essential for future success.* One of the recommendations from the student participants in this study was to be more transparent about the program to incoming first-year students. In addition, several faculty members spoke about the need to help those not involved with the program understand the value and the large commitment that accompanied teaching a first-year seminar. This emphasis on marketing of the program to future students, parents, faculty, staff, and institutional stakeholders was similar to recommendations that emerged from a qualitative study by Blackhurst, Akey, and Bobilya (2003) that examined student outcomes in a residential living-learning community that included the facilitation of the transition to college, social integration, the development of relationships with faculty, and facilitation of in class learning. The results of their study emphasized the need for marketing of living-learning communities to enable students and faculty to fully understand the benefits and expectations of these programs. This recommendation could be easily implemented from the results of the

current study by using the responses from faculty and students to help others understand the benefits, challenges, and expectations of the program.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation to this study was that it involved a specific program at only one institution. Therefore, the results might not be transferrable to first-year experience programs at other colleges or universities. In addition, the fact that the only participants in the focus groups were sophomore students limited the experiences about the program to only one class year. This limited the ability to generalize the experiences of the participants beyond that class cohort to the entire student population at the institution. Finally, the qualitative nature of the study limited the results to self reported personal experiences and perspectives of the students and faculty studied. This further limited the ability to generalize the findings to all higher education institutions.

Recommendations for Improved Practice

The findings and conclusions of this study lend themselves to several recommendations for improved practice in regard to skill development for life-long learning and first-year student success for the institution. Additionally, recommendations for all higher education institutions are provided based on the findings, conclusions, and related literature. These recommendations are as follows:

Recommendations for the Institution

1. One area where this institution has struggled is the disconnect that has occurred between academic affairs and student affairs. As seen from the responses from faculty, it is imperative that this institution investigates ways to strengthen the relationship between faculty and student life staff. In order for this program to

- successfully incorporate living and learning for first-year students, more opportunities for faculty and student affairs to interact and learn about each other from a professional standpoint need to be implemented. Whether those opportunities are formalized training sessions, more informal gatherings, or a combination of both, the more information that can be shared between the two areas, the stronger the first-year experience program will become.
2. The marketing of first-year experience programs to faculty, students, and staff often gets lost in the planning and implementation stages. The cost of failed marketing can be a lack of buy in or knowledge about the benefits of the program from various stakeholders. Therefore, it is essential for this institution to market the first-year experience program to faculty, students, staff, and parents based on the needs of each group. For example, by asking students what advice they would give to incoming first-year students about the first-year experience program, the researcher gained a wealth of information that could be given to prospective students to help them to understand the program and how to make the best of their first year. In addition, insights from the faculty participants about how the program has helped them to connect personally and professionally with faculty members from other disciplines could encourage more faculty involvement throughout the institution and help address some of the struggles with staffing the program each year.
 3. As demonstrated by the student responses to a question about the most meaningful aspects of the first-year experience program, this institution should continue to focus on faculty and peer connections as a way to increase student retention, satisfaction, and loyalty to the institution. However, the one area where these connections were

not as strong was the co-curricular programming that occurred with the bigger clusters in the residence halls. A reexamination of how those programs are planned and implemented or whether they are needed could help eliminate some of the frustration from students and some of the extra burden on faculty. If the total number of co-curricular programs per semester was decreased and more of a focus was placed on activities with the individual seminars, both students and faculty at the institution would be able to create stronger relationships and build connections across disciplines.

4. This study established that students truly appreciated the seminar structure of their first-year class because it allowed them the opportunity to engage with their peers and create strong connections with faculty from the very beginning of their first year. The seminar structure also helped introduce students to college level work in a small group setting in which faculty could intimately witness the development of each student and focus on their specific needs and areas of interest. However, as seen by the responses from the students and faculty, not all of the seminars were structured in the same way. Therefore, a reexamination of the need for more uniformity of the structure of the first-year seminar could help ensure that all students have the same experience with a discussion-based course during their first year at college. Additionally, the content of the first-year seminar could be slightly more regulated with respect to specific skills that were mentioned by both students and faculty as essential to success in college including critical thinking, researching, reading, and writing.

5. Finally, the data from this study could be compared with institutional assessment documents that have been collected over the past four years. Examples of these documents could include assessment instruments for the first-year experience program, learning outcomes and goals for the program, and previous assessment data for first-year experience program. Whitt (1992) pointed out that “documents are a potentially fruitful source of both primary and secondary data, and as such, demand attention in any study of college student experiences” (p. 89). These documents could be used to triangulate the data collected from the focus groups with students and interviews with faculty and to create a larger context for the first-year experience program and provide internal validity for future studies (Merriam, 1988).

Recommendations for Higher Education

1. Higher education institutions could do more with focusing on the faculty and peer connections as a way to increase student retention and loyalty to the institution rather than simply looking at GPA and persistence as essential prerequisites for determining whether or not a student will graduate. Although GPA and persistence are important factors for first-year student success, they should not be the sole outcomes for first-year programs. As stated by Barefoot (2004) in the introduction to this study, we need “to reframe the discussion by focusing on institutional excellence as defined by student learning and engagement, and to consider retention a by-product of institutional excellence rather than a front-line objective” (p. 16).

As demonstrated by this study, students received many benefits from the living-learning first-year experience program that were not tied to increases in GPA or retention. The development of skills for life-long learning through the program

- helped them be successful throughout their freshmen and sophomore years. By focusing more research on factors related to student learning and engagement, higher education institutions would be able to demonstrate that their graduates received their degree with the skills necessary to be successful in their occupation of choice.
2. In addition to the shift from retention to student learning, higher education needs to make a shift from focusing solely on pre-college characteristics and the outcomes of retention and graduation to focusing on the environment created during the four to six years that students are in college. As Astin's (1991) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model for assessing outcomes demonstrates, the area where institutions have the most control is the environment that their students are immersed in while attending their institution. Therefore, finding ways to increase peer interactions and student-to-faculty interactions both inside and outside of the classroom can have a huge impact on retention and student success. In addition, creating connections between first-year students, peers, and faculty will help to create a support structure that will allow less students to "fall through the cracks" as one faculty participant in this study explained.
 3. As this study has shown, even at small, liberal arts institutions, first-year students are arriving at college needing more assistance with reading, writing, and critical thinking in order to be successful throughout their college career. In order to address this gap, partnerships between secondary education and higher education need to be established to ensure that students are developing these skills earlier on. This would allow higher education to focus on higher levels of critical inquiry and skill development in specific majors or career paths rather than addressing deficits in reading, writing, and researching.

Additionally, increased communication between secondary and higher education may lead to innovative solutions to the skills gap that exists for first-year students and allow for cohesion in the curriculum so that college students are not forced to take remedial courses to catch them up to college level work. Less remedial courses would also mean that more students could graduate in four years rather than six or more and may help address the increasing cost of college. Overall, cohesion between secondary and higher education would start the process of addressing the concerns of both faculty and students in this study in regards to under preparedness for college level work.

4. Finally, more qualitative research is needed on how first-year experience programs affect students' ability to be successful throughout their college career and beyond. A majority of the studies on first-year students are quantitative and examine GPA, persistence, retention, and graduation rates to determine the success or failure of specific first-year initiatives. However, the research has shown that regardless of the programmatic initiatives that have been put in place to assist first-year students with the transition to college, the national graduation rate has remained consistent at around 50% for all institutions (ACT, 2011; Swail, 2004). In addition, it is unknown whether those that are graduating have the skills necessary to be successful in their chosen career field. More qualitative research is needed to determine the specific ways in which first-year experience programs are helping students to graduate with the skills necessary to be successful. This study is a good step in that direction but more information is needed from both students and faculty at a variety of institutional types.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study sought to understand the perceptions of students and faculty at one institution about the development of skills for life-long learning based on their experiences in a living-learning first-year experience program. As I reviewed the literature and reflected on the findings from my study, I became aware of many opportunities for future research on this topic. They are as follows:

1. Although the original research design for this study included focus groups with sophomore, junior, and senior students, only sophomore students participated in the focus groups. Therefore, future research could include focus groups of juniors and seniors at the institution to see if there are differences in the perceptions of how the program helped to develop skills for life-long learning based on class year.
2. This study was limited to the experiences and perceptions of faculty and staff at a specific institution. A study at similar institutions with comparable living-learning first-year experience programs would allow for comparisons across institutions and possibly help to make the results more transferrable. In addition, studying similar programs would allow researchers to determine which aspects of the living-learning first-year experience help to develop skills for life-long learning.
3. In addition to comparing and contrasting equivalent institutions and programs to this case study, similar studies could be conducted at institutions with various missions (research institutions, community colleges, etc.) to determine if the type of institution has an impact on the development of skills for life-long learning.
4. Finally, due to the fact that this study explores the concept of skill development for life-long learning, a longitudinal study of the student participants throughout the

remainder of their college careers and into their professional lives may demonstrate to a greater extent if the skills acquired during the first-year experience program did, in fact, continue beyond the students' time at the institution.

Closing

This study sought to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. It was a pleasure to interview the 11 faculty members and 19 students in this study. I have gained an appreciation for the connections that can develop between peers and faculty members and the importance of those mentoring relationships in the success of first-year students. I hope that more qualitative research will be conducted to determine how living-learning first-year experience programs are contributing to the development of skills for college students that will allow them to be successful in college and beyond.

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Appendix A
Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Protocol

Project: Perceptions of Life-Long Learning

Time of Focus Group:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Participants:

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. Interviews with faculty members and focus groups with sophomore, junior, and senior students are being conducted. To provide confidentiality, at the individual level, no participants will be cited by name. However, participants may be cited by their role in the school community. For example, I may refer to someone as “a faculty member” or as “a second-year or third-year student.” Consequently, it is possible that members of the school community may be able to determine who was interviewed. Focus groups will be recorded and will last approximately an hour and a half.

Opening questions:

- a. Tell us who you are, your major, and your favorite thing about your college.
- b. Why did you decide to attend this institution?

Focus Group questions:

1. What does “life-long learning” mean to you?
2. How did participation in the FY program affect your first-year experience overall?
3. In your opinion, to what extent did the FY program affect your critical thinking skills? Examples?
4. How have your reading and writing skills changed since your freshman year?
5. How did the combination of living and learning impact your experience during your first year?
6. How would you describe your experience in the first-year seminar as compared to your other courses?
7. What was/were your favorite part(s) of the LLC?
8. In your opinion, what aspect of the LLC has had the most impact on your academic experience?
9. What advice would you offer to first-year students just starting the FYE program?
10. Is there anything that we missed or that you didn’t get a chance to say about the FYE program?

Appendix B
Informed Consent – Student Participants

INFORMED CONSENT

Title: Perceptions of Developing Skills for Life-Long Learning by Students and Faculty
Involved in a Living-Learning First-Year Experience Program

Researcher:

Kerri Smith
Dr. James Hammons, Faculty Advisor
University of Arkansas
College of Education & Health Professions
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Administrator:

Ro Windwalker, CIP
IRB Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance
210 Administration Building
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

Description: The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. You will be asked to participate in an hour to an hour and a half focus group with your peers in a discussion of your experience in the living-learning first-year experience program.

Risks and Benefits: The benefits include contributing to the knowledge base on living-learning first-year experience programs and the ways in which skills for life-long learning can be fostered. There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. There are no payments for participation.

Confidentiality: To provide confidentiality, at the individual level, no participants will be cited by name. However, participants may be cited by their role in the school community. For example, I may refer to someone as “a second-year or third-year student”. Consequently, it is possible that members of the school community may be able to determine who was interviewed. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy.

Right to Withdraw: You are free to refuse to participate in the research and to withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision to withdraw will bring no negative consequences – no penalty to you.

Informed Consent: I, _____, have read the description, including the purpose of the study, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each of these items has been explained to me in detail by the investigator. The investigator has answered all of my questions regarding the study, and I believe I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this exploratory study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator.

Signature

Date

Appendix C
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Project: Perceptions of Life-Long Learning

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. Interviews with faculty members and focus groups with sophomore, junior, and senior students are being conducted. To provide confidentiality, at the individual level, no participants will be cited by name. However, participants may be cited by their role in the school community. For example, I may refer to someone as “a faculty member”. Consequently, it is possible that members of the school community may be able to determine who was interviewed. Interviews will be recorded and will last approximately an hour and a half.

Questions:

Opening questions:

- a. Tell me what is your current rank and how long have you been at the institution?
- b. How did you know that you wanted to be a faculty member?
- c. What courses do you teach with FYS?

Interview questions:

1. How did you get involved with the FYE program?
2. How do you define “life-long learning”?
3. Based on that definition, how do you help students become life-long learners?
4. What skills do you think are essential for FY students to succeed?
5. What aspects of the FYE program, if any, impact critical thinking?
6. How does the curriculum in the FYS differ from other courses you teach?
7. What do you think are the effects of combining living and learning for FY students?
8. In what ways, if any, does the FYS create connections between disciplines?
9. In your opinion, how does this program affect the culture of the institution with regards to learning?

Appendix D
Informed Consent – Faculty Participants

INFORMED CONSENT

Title: Perceptions of Developing Skills for Life-Long Learning by Students and Faculty
Involved in a Living-Learning First-Year Experience Program

Researcher:

Kerri Smith
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Description: The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students and faculty involved in a living-learning first-year experience program at a small, liberal arts institution about developing skills for life-long learning including critical thinking, written communication, and reflection and engagement across disciplines. You will be asked to participate in an hour to an hour and a half interview on your perceptions of developing skills for life-long learning based on your experience with a first-year seminar within that program.

Risks and Benefits: The benefits include contributing to the knowledge base on living-learning first-year experience programs and the ways in which skills for life-long learning can be fostered. There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. There are no payments for participation.

Confidentiality: To provide confidentiality, at the individual level, no participants will be cited by name. However, participants may be cited by their role in the school community. For example, I may refer to someone as “a faculty member”. Consequently, it is possible that members of the school community may be able to determine who was interviewed. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy.

Right to Withdraw: You are free to refuse to participate in the research and to withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision to withdraw will bring no negative consequences – no penalty to you.

Informed Consent: I, _____, have read the description, including the purpose of the study, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each of these items has been explained to me in detail by the investigator. The investigator has answered all of my questions regarding the study, and I believe I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this exploratory study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator.

Signature

Date

Appendix E
Institutional Review Board Approval – Home Institution

April 5, 2012

MEMORANDUM

TO: Kerri Smith
James Hammons

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 12-03-620

Protocol Title: *Perceptions of Developing Skills for Life-Long Learning by Students and Faculty Involved in a Living-Learning First-Year Experience Program*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 04/05/2012 Expiration Date: 04/04/2013

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 37 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu

Appendix F

Institutional Review Board Approval – Host Site

March 20, 2012

Kerri Smith
University Housing
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am pleased to inform you that the College's Human Subjects Committee has approved your proposed research project, *Perceptions of Developing Skills for Life-Long Learning by Students and Faculty Involved in a Living-Learning First Year Experience Program*. This approval is effective immediately and continues for 12 months (until March 19, 2013). If this project will continue beyond March 19, 2013, you should inform the Human Subjects Committee so that we can review it for renewal of approval.

I wish you good success with this research. Please contact me if any questions or concerns develop during the course of this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mark Hallahan', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Hallahan
Chair, Human Subjects Committee