

InSight

A Journal of Scholarly Teaching

Volume 19

Article 4

Fostering Social Connectedness in First Year Seminar Students: A Pilot Study

Rebecca Kudrna, PhD
Park University

Suzanne Tiemann, EdD
Park University

Michael Swoboda, DHSc
Park University

Timothy Hanrahan, PhD
Hitachi Energy

Follow this and additional works at <https://insightjournal.net/>

Recommended Citation

Kudrna, R., Tiemann, S., Swoboda, M., & Hanrahan, T. (2024). Fostering social connectedness in first year seminar students: A pilot study. *InSight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, 19. Article 4. doi: 10.46504/19202404ku



Fostering Social Connectedness in First Year Seminar Students: A Pilot Study

Rebecca Kudrna, PhD

Associate Professor & Chair of Sport & Exercise Science
Park University

Suzanne Tiemann, EdD

Associate Professor & Chair of Undergraduate Education
Park University

Michael Swoboda, DHS

Assistant Teaching Professor of Sport & Exercise Science
Park University

Timothy Hanrahan, PhD

Customer Service Representative
Hitachi Energy

Abstract. University First Year Seminar (FYS) programs are diverse in their content and pedagogy. Yet all seek to assist first-year students in the difficult college transition. The purpose of this pilot study was to evaluate if grouping similar academic majors into the existing First Year Seminar (FYS) courses would improve social connectedness, use of academic resources, and engagement on campus. A subset of first year students were assigned to either the control group (CON) of normal mixed major sections, or to the experimental course (EXP) with only related majors. Thirteen EXP and 36 CON students completed the data collection, including an 18-question social support survey administered at the beginning and end of the course. Additionally, two open-ended qualitative analysis questions were asked related to student expectations and perceived course outcomes. Lastly, the three instructors of the EXP and CON courses studied were interviewed using phenomenological methods approximately one week after the end of the semester. Between-groups analysis of the 18 quantitative survey questions identified that the CON group reported more personal conversations with peers and attendance of campus activities while the EXP group reported more faculty interactions. At the beginning of the course, 77% of the EXP group expected to create social connections as a primary course outcome, while only 19% of the CON group did. Academic skills were a higher expectation among the CON group than the EXP group. When asked more directly, both groups expected to make social connections in the class (86%). However, by the end of the study, the reported outcomes were equivocal. Interviews with FYS professors uncovered their own valuable perceptions of connectedness to the university and recommendations for instructor support were made.

First Year Seminars (FYS) in colleges are used to support the academic success of new and first-year students. While universities vary their approach to FYS courses, many combine orientation to student services, academic writing instruction, information literacy, and group discussions within smaller classes. In addition to academic curriculum, universities often work to address social connectedness and student belonging. Other FYS curriculum topics may specifically target specific at-risk populations such as undeclared students (Pickenpaugh et al., 2022), first generation students (Sudbrock, 2019), or international students (Andrade, 2009). The overarching goal of FYS courses is to help students successfully transition from high school to college and increase student retention (Forrester et al., 2012). Over 74% of post-secondary institutions currently offer a FYS for first-year students and incoming transfer students (Young, 2018).

Literature Review

Determining which practices and topics are of greatest benefit to students in a FYS is not an easy task. A survey of first-year students found that, in addition to traditional academic skillsets (i.e., notetaking, studying, and time management) students perceived interpersonal skill development as the most-needed area of skill development during the first year of college (Reed & Jones, 2021). Reed and Jones additionally point out the evidence that student success in FYS classes and beyond is from both the development of applicable academic and social skills rather than individual motivation and self-discipline as is often perceived. To this end, many FYS curricula express the importance

of social-emotional development and self-care to indirectly promote self-actualization. Dyar (2022) reported that incorporating a comprehensive approach to the FYS curriculum by including such topics as self-care, learning how to learn (metacognition), and caring for others improved student retention, academic performance, and social connectedness among the class cohort. The importance of social connectedness and interpersonal relationships are further argued by Xiao et al. (2020) who note that student involvement on campus was a greater predictor for student retention rates than strictly academic related criteria.

Strong personal relationships and feelings of connectedness play a significant role in student retention in college. For example, students who report more interactions with academic advisors and course faculty have greater retention (Fares, 2020). Similarly, retention rates for first-year students improved when students were grouped into cohorts according to their academic major for FYS (Primary Research Group, 2016). Academic cohorts can help students develop a supportive peer group more quickly. However, Primary Research Group (2016) noted the best practice in student retention interventions including FYS is to have a diverse set of approaches including peer mentoring, academic remediation programs, regular success coaching, and specific bridge programs for identified at-risk students. Howard and Sharpe (2019) found that first year STEM majors voluntarily enrolled in a summer bridge program before their first semester at college had an average yearly retention rate of 92%, as opposed to 66.3% of students who did not complete the bridge program. There is likely a need to have better interdisciplinary cohesiveness for the overall success of a FYS program. This integration between the classroom and the community is a potential key indicator of the future overall success and retention of students enrolling in a FYS course. It may also take longer than one course or semester for students to fully develop and master a new or developing skillset.

The transition to college is multifactorial for first-year students. Forming social connectedness is one part, but students must also adjust to new academic expectations, manage the increased independence, and take on new responsibilities. Reed and Jones (2021) also indicated that first-year students may not gain a full understanding of the time commitment required for academic work in their first semester even with a FYS experience. Thus, many FYS programs include information and activities related to study skills and time management. Other FYS programs may have follow-up activities beyond the first semester.

Overall, student academic performance and outcome performance gaps between students have improved when they feel in an inclusive and active classroom (Dewsbury et al., 2022). Establishing a student-centered pedagogical approach to learning using active, inclusive classrooms may be a key to understanding how student social connectedness, academic performance, and student retention all play a role in the larger umbrella of overall student success. Although pedagogical approaches may vary, a shift from traditional, didactic teaching to a more active, inclusive environment has consistently been shown to improve student academic performance and retention. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has been a suggested framework for instructors of FYS to engage students in a system of academic support and development while still supporting social interaction and connectivity between students (Wilkerson et al., 2021). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has only been shown to be effective when instructors commit to the curriculum and promote community in the classroom.

Although pedagogical approaches may vary, a shift from traditional, didactic teaching to a more active, inclusive environment has consistently been shown to improve student academic performance and retention.

Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) noted several additional High Impact Practices (HIPs) in pedagogy that had an overall positive benefit on student engagement and retention. These included high performance expectations, student time and effort, more interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters, experiences with diversity, frequent and constructive feedback from faculty, opportunities to reflect on learning, real world application of the material, and public demonstrations of competence (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). When HIPs were paired with engaging pedagogical practices, student retention rates and academic performance increased substantially (Young, 2020). Of particular interest to this study was the HIP of establishing learning communities in the FYS classroom. By establishing a learning community within the FYS classroom, students are more likely to integrate across the curriculum, as well as improve inclusion and socialization among FYS students (Johnson et al., 2018).

University FYS programs are remarkably diverse in their content, pedagogy, and intended outcomes. Yet, they all share the intended purpose of assisting first-year students transition personally, socially, and academically. This pilot study evaluated the impact of strategic grouping of students of similar majors into an existing FYS program. It was hypothesized that grouping like students would increase student connectedness to peers, the utilization of academic resources at the university, and campus activity engagement. Additionally, qualitative analysis of student

and faculty expectations before and perceived outcomes in the courses was used to identify areas for further research and improvement in the FYS program.

Methods

Research Design

To answer the research questions proposed, a mixed methods research design was undertaken. The control group (CON) consisted of two sections of the normal FYS course for first-time and transfer students at a small private midwestern university. These sections were composed of students from a wide variety of academic majors and were enrolled into the course in the normal way. The experimental group (EXP) course was strategically composed of health and human service-related majors (nursing, exercise science, social work, or education) or undeclared students considering such majors. This research was approved by the university's institutional review board.

The curriculum and all graded assignments for both the CON and EXP courses were identical. The instructor for the EXP course was a faculty member from the health and human services college with significant knowledge of the related academic areas. Students in the EXP course were aware that they were in a uniquely homogenous class. The homogeneity of academic interest in the EXP condition likely created organic differences in class discussions and interpersonal interactions between CON and EXP.

Subjects

The students of the EXP and CON courses were invited by their respective instructors to complete the pre- and post-course survey. The pre-course survey was administered at the beginning of the second course meeting period. The post-course survey was distributed during the penultimate week of the semester. Fifty-six students (see Table 1) were identified for potential inclusion in the study based upon their enrollment in the 3 identified course sections. Forty-nine students completed the pre-course survey (13 EXP & 36 CON), resulting in an initial response rate of 87.5%. Twenty-nine students completed the post-course survey (12 EXP & 17 CON) for a response rate of 59.2%. The post-course responses were higher in EXP than the CON group (92.3% EXP vs. 47.2% CON). Survey data were anonymized so there is no way to determine the percentage of unique vs. paired responses. Lastly, qualitative interviews with the three course instructors were performed approximately one week after the end of the semester.

Table 1

Subject Demographics

Variable	EXP	CON
N	13	36
Gender	6 Male, 7 Female	22 Male, 16 Female

Student Survey Instrument

The pre- and post-course student survey instrument was composed of two parts. The first portion was an 18-question Likert scale assessment (see Figure 1 on p. 4). These 18 questions were based loosely on the Rand Corporation Medical Outcomes Study Social Support Scale (Hays et al., 1995; Rand Corporation, 2022). For this study, the survey questions were modified to narrow the scope of the question to their student experience and the social connectedness related to the college transition. Phrases like "in this class" and "at the university" were included in the questions to achieve this end. Secondly, to further direct student thoughts towards the collegiate experience, specific forms of social and academic support at the university were included in the questions prompts. For example, terms including "advisor," "instructor," "student services," and "classmates" were used within the revised survey questions. Since social connectedness in the university setting takes multiple forms, the 18-question survey was developed with three subscales of six questions each. The three subscales are academically oriented peer interactions, academically oriented faculty, staff, and student service interactions, and lastly, interactions occurring in student life related settings.

Figure 1

University Social Connectedness Survey

How often do you participate in each of the activities listed below?

1 =Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Always

Peer Connectedness to classmates

1. Study with classmates outside of class time
2. Ask a classmate for academic advice
3. Discuss notes or an assignment with classmates
4. Become good friends with someone you have met in a class
5. Gather socially with people you met in a class
6. Discuss a personal interest with someone you met in a class

Academic Connectedness

1. Attend an instructor's office hours
2. Attend a tutoring session at the Academic Success Center
3. Get writing help at the Writing Center
4. Received academic support from an advisor or faculty member
5. Discuss my career plans with an advisor or faculty member
6. Talk to instructors about a personal interest outside of class

Campus-Life Connectedness

1. Participate in a university Club or athletics team
2. Attend student life events
3. Use the gym or take a group fitness class
4. Gather socially with people you met in a club or activity
5. Become good friends with someone you have met in a club or activity
6. Discuss a personal interest with someone you met in a club or activity

Note. This 18-question Likert scale survey contains three subscales as identified above.

In addition to the Likert scale questionnaire, students were asked two open ended qualitative questions at the beginning and end of the course. Student responses for these questions were analyzed using relational qualitative content analysis. In both the pre-course and post-course survey two question pairs were assessed. The first question pair asked "What do you view as the top things you are hoping to get out of this course? Why?" at the beginning of the course and followed up with "What do you view as the top things you got out of this course? Why do you think that?" at the end of the course. The second question pair for analysis included "As a student, do you anticipate that you will make connections/friendships with those in your class? Why do you believe this?" at the beginning of the course and "As a student, did you make connections/friendships with those in class? If so, how were the connections/friendships made?" at the end.

Instructor Interviews

After the course ended and after an initial review of the student data, the researchers interviewed each instructor. The interview consisted of three open-ended questions to gather qualitative information related to the course and its outcomes. The three questions were:

1. What is your perception of the FYS course's ability to create social connectedness, including peer-to-peer interactions during the class?
2. What is your perception of the FYS course's ability to create academic connectiveness including access to faculty during class?
3. What is your perception of the FYS ability to encourage campus life connectiveness including university engagement during class?

Each interview lasted around thirty minutes. The researchers did not add any comments but actively listened and asked for clarifications and expansions of their ideas. The professors reported their thoughts regarding the three questions and additionally they made recommendations for course improvement. The instructor's responses were recorded, coded, and classified into shared themes. Instructor responses from the interviews were shared and confirmed with the instructors to verify accuracy.

Statistical and Analytical Methods

Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to determine the internal consistency of the 18-question Likert scale. Because the student surveys were anonymous, the pretest surveys could not be paired with their posttest survey. Therefore, independent t-tests between EXP and CON surveys were conducted for each of the 18 questions and for both the pre- and post-course timepoints. The three survey subscale values were calculated by summing the scores of the six subscale questions then independent t-tests were performed to compare EXP and CON differences in subscale scores. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated using R. All other statistics were performed using IBM SPSS version 22. The priori alpha value for acceptance of the alternate hypothesis is $p < 0.05$.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

The survey instrument contained 18 Likert scale items. The internal consistency of the instrument was verified by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha for 50 cases, which was determined to be acceptable (0.82). The 50 scores are normally distributed whereby a linear relationship was found between the observed and expected normal values.

There were no initial group differences identified between the CON and EXP groups for any of the survey questions at the pretest timepoint ($p > 0.05$ for all). Thus, the two groups were similar at the start of the study. Independent sample t-tests were performed for each of the survey questions between groups for the post-course survey as well as pre-post course comparisons within each group. Figure 2 (on p. 6) displays the comparisons graphically. The first statistical difference identified is that the CON group only reported higher rates of discussing personal interests with classmates at the end of the course compared to the beginning of the course ($t_{(51)} = -2.41$, $p = 0.02$) whereas the EXP group did not change. Secondly, the EXP group only reported statistical increases in "academic support from advisors and faculty members" at the completion of the study as compared to the beginning ($t_{(24)} = -2.98$, $p = 0.001$), whereas the CON group did not increase ($t_{(48)} = 0.08$, $p > 0.05$). For this same survey item, the EXP group reported significantly more advisor and faculty interactions as compared to the CON group at the end of the study ($t_{(27)} = -2.77$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, the CON group only has a significant increase in student club and activity participation at the end of the course compared to the beginning ($t_{(51)} = -2.56$, $p = 0.013$).

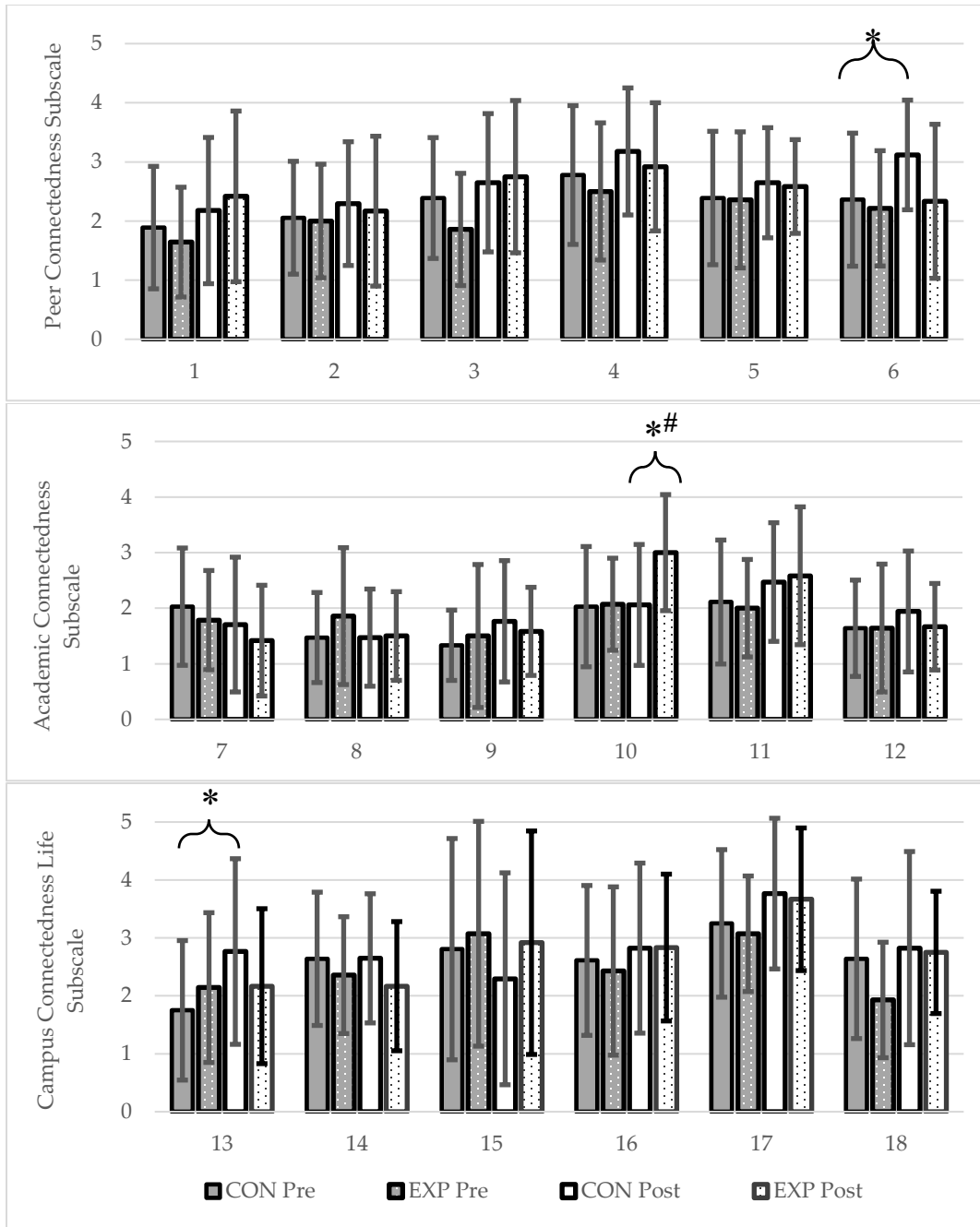
Qualitative Content Analysis

In addition to the quantitative survey analysis, two open ended question pairs were administered at the beginning and end of the course to gain insight into student perspectives of the FYS course. The first question pair was: "What do you view as the top things you are hoping to get out of this course? Why?" and at the conclusion of the course a similar open-ended query: "What do you view as the top things you got out of this course? Why do you think that?" Similarly, the second question focused on student social interactions, asking "As a student, do you anticipate that you will make connections/friendships with those in class? Why do you believe this?" at the beginning and "As a student, did you make connections/friendships with those in class? If so, how were the connections/friendships made?" at the completion of the course.

For question pair 1 which asked about the student's desired outcomes for the course, at the beginning of the course, 73% of students hoped that the FYS course would support their academic success and college transition (see Table 2 on p. 7). Statements coded into this category included learning study skills for better grades, improving language and writing skills, and understanding academic degree requirements. A desire to create social connections and engage in non-academic campus activities was cited by 37% of students. However, the EXP group was twice as likely to mention social interaction or skill as a course goal than the CON students (77% vs. 37%). Both making connections and friendships as well as building social skills were included (see Table 2). For this first question, 10% of students included multiple different hopes for the course that were counted into more than one category.

Figure 2

Group by Timepoint Comparison of University Social Connectedness Scores



Note. *Indicates significant difference pre to post, # indicates significant difference between groups (p < 0.05).

At the conclusion of the FYS course, the first question “What do you view as the top things you got out of this course? Why do you think that?” produced a much more varied set of responses than the matching question at the beginning of the study. There were also no observed differences between the responses in the CON and EXP groups. The highest number of responses were related to specific academic skills or assignments (see Table 2). Other categories included accessing campus resources, general communication skills, and changes in attitudes or dealing with difficulties. Social connections were only mentioned by 10% of students.

Table 2*Content Analysis Summary & Example Quotes for Question Pair 1*

Category	% of Responses	Exemplar Qualitative Comments
Pre Timepoint Question 1	What do you view as the top things you are hoping to get out of this course? Why?	
Academic Success & College Transition	CON 80% EXP 54% Combined 73%	"To learn my way around the school and get more familiar with college life as a freshman." (CON) & "I hope to better understand the college workload and adapt to an unfamiliar learning environment." (CON)
Social Connection	CON 19% EXP 77% Combined 37%	"... more open, find good relationships with people ... The reason why is so I become a more social person and become more successful in life." (CON) & "Friendship" (EXP)
Other	CON 14% EXP 8% Combined 12%	"... courage, and to experience enjoyment and satisfaction from what we learn; to inspire others." (CON)
Post Timepoint Question 1	What do you view as the top things you got out of this course? Why?	
Academic Skills	Combined 28%	"I have learned more about my study habits and academic goals." (EXP)
Asking for help & Accessing Resources	Combined 24%	"Learning about what stuff the university provides students for them to be successful." (CON) & "a lot of different things that the university provided that might be difficult on my own." (CON)
Communication Skills	Combined 20%	"The communication strategies because it was helpful for me to develop better communication skills." (CON) & "Effective communication skills ..." (EXP)
Sharing Diverse Ideas	Combined 17%	"when everyone share's their own ideas, because that ... [is what we] all need to do in class." (CON)
Group Collaboration	Combined 14%	"How to work in groups" (CON) & "Teamwork" (EXP)
Friends & Social Interactions	Combined 10%	"I've learned that college is a lot easier when you come out of your shell and meet others ..." (CON) & "Meeting new Friends." (EXP)
Attitudes & Dealing with Failure	Combined 10%	"... and that a growth mindset is the most important thing in academics" (CON) & "In this course I learned that it's okay to fail. failing is a way to success ..." (EXP)

Note. For post-timepoint question 1, no group related patterns were observed. Some student responses included multiple categories.

For question pair 2, which asked specifically about making connections and friendships in the course, at the beginning, 86% of the students believed that they would make connections/friendships in the FYS course (see Table 3 on p. 8). However, at the end of the study, only 69% reported that they had in fact made meaningful connections. The reasons given for not making more meaningful connections included shyness and lack of shared interests. The reasons

identified at the end were very similar to the reasons given at the beginning of the study (see Table 3). Interestingly, the EXP group, which started with a higher expectation of making connections, reported fewer connections than the CON group at the end of the study (18% vs. 33%).

Table 3

Content Analysis Summary & Example Quotes for Question Pair 2

Category	% of Responses	Exemplar Comments & Identified Themes
Pre Timepoint Question 2	As a student, do you anticipate that you will make connections/friendships with those in class? Why?	
Yes	CON 83% EXP 92% Combined 86%	“Yes, because everyone seems to be in the same boat as me in terms ... a first-time college experience, etc.” & “Yes, I do think I will because we do a lot of talking activities ...”
	Reasons Given	Inherent social & outgoing attitudes (29%), Social classroom environment (26%), Shared interests (19%), College transition (19%)
No	CON 5% EXP 0% Combined 3%	“No because I stay to myself” & “most of these people don't seem interesting”
	Reasons Given	Shy or introverted (8%), Unsure of shared interests or compatibility (8%)
Yes & No	CON 11% EXP 15% Combined 12%	“Maybe. A lot of it depends on interests, similarities, etc.”
Post Timepoint Question 2	As a student did you make connection/friendships with those in this class? If so, how were these made?	
Yes	CON 76% EXP 66% Combined 69%	“Yes, because I made a friend who I hang out with a lot and study with.” & “I did, I make a few friends and we have a group chat where we talk about the class and other things.”
	Reasons Given	Shared interests or schedule overlaps (28%), Inherently rewarding / Good experiences (24%), Class environment facilitated socialization (14%), Study partners (10%)
No	CON 18% EXP 33% Combined 24%	“I try my best to make connections but ... I am an introvert person ...” & “Not really but it is mainly because I commute to school and don't ... interact after class”
	Reasons Given	Shyness (10%), Commuter student / Rarely on campus (10%), Superficial interactions (10%)
Yes & No	CON 12% EXP 8% Combined 10%	“Kind of because we can relate to this class, but not much else,” & “I kind of made connections with people from this class. They're shallow, but they're there.”

Note. For mixed responses (Yes & No), the reasons given were analyzed with the other responses.

Instructor Interviews

Lastly, the three course instructors for the FYS course sections were asked three open-ended questions as well. For the first question: "What is your perception of the FYS course's ability to create social connectedness, including peer-to-peer interactions during the class?" All three professors felt the students had a good opportunity to integrate and connect within the FYS course. Similarly, all three instructors indicated that the overarching objectives of the FYS were being accomplished. One of the professors specifically shared, "The first activity I presented was to create a Venn diagram so the students could see how they are alike. This creates connections from the beginning because the students are in the same environment." This shows that the instructors for the course are aware of and actively work to promote social connectedness in their courses regardless of the student majors involved. The professors also expressed beliefs that the students were more likely to stay in the program if students have connections. Another theme that emerged common to all the instructors was that peer-to-peer connections are complicated. One professor expressed that some students instantly connect, but a small number of students were secluded and did not engage even though the classes had many team-building activities and cooperative learning tasks.

The next question asked of the FYS instructors was, "What is your perception of the FYS course's ability to create academic connectiveness including access to faculty during class?" All three instructors believed that the social connections and communication between the professor and students were positive. One even suggested that the students enjoy the opportunity to connect with the professors and not be afraid of conflict. This demonstrates connectiveness with the professor. One instructor provided an example:

A student came into my class wanting to be a nurse but discovered that it was not what she wanted to do." The instructor put her in contact with the Chair of Exercise Science. She realized there are other ways to help people than just nursing. The professor believes that that student would have left [the university] had she not found

In several ways, the instructors indicated that that making connections in FYS was their primary goal. One activity in the FYS class was to make them come to office hours within the first two weeks. Similarly, one professor discovered that having the student's journal led to discussions on how to utilize the tutoring center. The students started using resources that are available at the university.

The final question asked of the instructors was: "What is your perception of the FYS's ability to encourage campus life connectiveness including university engagement during class?" All three professors see this connectivity of university engagement as a missed opportunity in the current curriculum. The professors vocalized that the classes and the FYS program seemed to be operating in silos and that there were many missed opportunities to connect students to campus activities and events. They all agree that campus culture is a barrier. The instructors admitted that they themselves struggle with the siloed culture and that it is not conducive to connectiveness. Related recommendations suggested by the instructors included a Greek system or something to attract students beyond the classroom that could help with retention and recruiting. They stated that even when events were offered in the past, few to no students came. The professors believe the lack of connectedness perceived on campus resulted in self-fulfilling prophecy discouraging students from attempting to make connections. The underlying belief was that the university's culture overall did not support connectiveness irrespective of the FYS course.

All three professors discussed how to make FYS even better. The team's idea was to create a PLC to discover what works right and how to improve. One professor stated, "Let's rework the class so there is no 'busy' work and make sure the class is engaging." Another professor stated, "The new class FYS should be fun and link the new students to a professor at [the university] that the freshman can go to." Additionally, the professors believed that tailoring the class to disciplines/colleges could be beneficial. They believed that creating a competitive project that cross-pollinates classes within the university would be an improvement so they would get to know more professors and programs. The final suggestion was to schedule the students in several classes together so they could build a network with inherent connectivity.

Discussion

The study's main goal was to evaluate if grouping similar academic majors into the existing FYS courses would improve social connectedness, use of academic resources, and engagement on campus. The second goal was to

understand the student's experience in the FYS course's role in social connectedness at the university from a phenomenological perspective. The findings of this pilot study show that the CON and EXP groups were equivocal in most selected outcome measures. Among the 18-item Likert scale survey, only three significant differences were found. Firstly, the CON group, composed of a mixture of majors, reported much more personal interest discussions with class peers and greater engagement in clubs and university activities. However, the EXP group reported significantly more interactions with advisors and faculty. The apparent divergence between the EXP and CON groups may have been the result of the implicit emphasis in the classes. By grouping like-majors into the EXP class, it may have raised awareness and given emphasis to the importance of the academics, whereas the CON group, lacking a shared academic focus, may instead have found common ground in personal interests and university wide engagement. Both groups established connectedness, but in divergent ways.

Analysis of the open-ended questions also showed that incoming freshmen are concerned with both making a successful academic transition as well as making new social connections. The EXP group, which included psychology, education, and social work majors desired social interaction and social skills. This desire and emphasis on social interactions may be inherently greater in students who are drawn to these helping professions. However, the analysis indicated that the EXP students were somewhat less satisfied with their social connections at the end of the course. The grouping of like majors in the FYS course did not appear to have any significant impact on the student reported outcomes nor enhance social connectedness significantly.

Limitations and Recommendations Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. As this was a pilot study, many new and unexpected questions arose during testing and post hoc analysis and dissemination of the material. The student baseline characteristics were limited to traditional, in-person, daytime course sections. This doesn't address non-traditional students or other course delivery systems, such as being online (either synchronous or asynchronous). Although all of the course content was identical for each section of the FYS course, we were unable to have each section taught by the same instructor due to practicality and availability of teachers. While having multiple instructors did provide us with insight into the varying qualitative practices and experiences within the classroom, it also opens the possibility of different pedagogical delivery practices that could impact each student's individual experiences from each section of the class. Additionally, the total number of students available to participate in the study was limited, and random sampling was unable to be used due to low participant count. This could be mitigated in the future by potentially using a longitudinal study design or opening the participant pool to online and distance learning individuals at other campuses. This can create additional confounding variables by incorporating a course delivery that is not consistent with our initial study design and would also require additional instructors to facilitate the additional courses.

Recommendations for Future Research

Our findings suggest that changing the focus of an FYS course has a small impact on the student experience. However, given the totality of the outcomes measured in the study, it is concluded that the groups were far more alike in their FYS experience than they were different. Merely grouping FYS students by major may not be as impactful to the outcome as previously hypothesized. Changes to the curriculum and assignments within the course may be more impactful than changing the way enrolled students are grouped into classes in this FYS program. Future research should also focus on establishing a connection between connectedness and belonging. Recent publications have suggested an indirect link between social connectedness and belonging among students at the same university, without respect to individual class groupings (Avci, 2023). Still, others report that social connectedness and belonging only have a weak correlation to student classroom performance (Pym et al., 2011) which further suggests this as an area to explore in more detail.

The qualitative content analysis from open ended questions asked of the students at the beginning and end of the courses demonstrated that while the EXP group had higher expectations of building social connections at the start of the class, the primary concern among the students was successful college transition (86% vs. 75%). Similarly, both groups included communication skills and social interactions among the most valuable things taken from the course.

Based upon the specific findings of this study and especially upon the anecdotal responses from the instructors within it, future efforts to increase student connectedness and university engagement should be focused on

updating the assignments within the course to facilitate and encourage increased student connection and engagement. This could be accomplished via in class discussions, small group activities and assignments, or by making assignments related to academic support service utilization and participation in student events on campus.

Finally, the role of the instructor of the FYS course as an agent for helping students make needed connections across university was identified. One overlooked area for improvement in the FYS is ensuring that the course instructors feel connected and involved at the University. Instructors having a powerful sense of connectedness may contribute importantly in the inculturation of new students into the larger university community via the FYS course.

References

- Andrade, M.S. (2009). The value of a first-year seminar: International student's insights in retrospect. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 10(4) 483-506. <https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.10.4.e>
- Avci, M. (2023). Belongingness, social connectedness, and life satisfaction in college students after COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Happiness and Health*, 3(2), 23-36. <http://doi.org/10.47602/johah.v3i2.43>
- Dewsbury, B. M., Swanson, H. J., Moseman-Valtierra, S., & Caulkins, J. (2022). Inclusive and active pedagogies reduce academic outcome gaps and improve long-term performance. *PLoS One*, 17(6), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0268620>
- Dyar, K. L. (2022). Caring for self and others: A first-year seminar. *International Journal for Human Caring*, 26(2), 75-82. <https://www.doi.org/10.20467/HumanCaring-D-21-00009>
- Fares, M. N. (2020). *The relationship between academic advising and student motivation on the persistence of freshman exploratory studies students* [Doctoral dissertation, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania]. Education Doctorate Dissertations. <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/edddissertations/8>
- Forrester, R., Hutson, K., & To, T. (2012). Improving the quality of the assignment of students to first-year seminars. *OR Insight*, 26(2), 120-139. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ori.2012.11>
- Hays, R., Sherbourne, C., & Mazel, R. (1995). *User's manual for the medical outcomes study (MOS) core measures of health-related quality of life*. Rand Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR162.html
- Howard, B. L., & Sharpe, L. (2019). The summer bridge program: An effective agent in college students' retention. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, 7(2), 20-30. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jise.v7i2.1207>
- Johnson, K. E., Powell, A. A., & Baker, S. S. (2018). Learning communities. In Linder, K. E., & Hayes, C. M. (Eds.), *High-impact practices in online education: Research and best practices* (pp. 41-54). Stylus Publishing.
- Kuh, G. D., & O'Donnell, K. (2013). *Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Pickenpugh, E. N., Yoast, S. R., Baker, A., & Vaughan, A. L. (2022). The role of first-year seminars and first-year college achievement for undeclared students. *Higher Education*, 83(5), 1063-1077. <https://doi.org/10.7/s10734-021-00729-0>
- Primary Research Group. (2016). *Survey of best practices in student retention* (2017 ed.).
- Pym, J., Goodman, S., & Patsika, N. (2011). Does belonging matter? Exploring the role of social connectedness as a critical factor in students' transition to higher education. *Psychology in Society*, 42, 35-50. <https://www.scielo.org/za/pdf/pins/n42/04.pdf>
- Rand Corporation. (2022). Social support survey instrument. https://www.rand.org/health-care/surveys_tools/mos/social-support/survey-instrument.html
- Reed, D. E., & Jones, G. Z. (2021). The importance of first semester seminars for at-risk first-year students: Analysis of student skills and time spent on class preparation. *Education Sciences*, 11(9), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090510>
- Sudbrock, C. (2019). *Generating social capital in first-generation students through a first-year seminar at a Midwest university* (Publication No. 13881013) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia]. ProQuest.
- Wilkerson, A., Stanislaus, E. P., & Hodge, L. (2021). Teaching first-year seminar: The hidden curriculum of culture, history, and heritage at historically Black colleges and universities. *Race and Pedagogy Journal*, 5(2), 1-21. <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/rpj/vol5/iss2/5>
- Xiao, M., Bradley, K. D., & Jungmin, L. (2020). Exploring the relationship between student involvement and first-to-second year retention at four-year postsecondary institutions. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 32(3), 191-205. <https://www.mwera.org/MWER/volumes/v32/issue3/V32n3-Xiao-DISTINGUISHED-PAPER.pdf>

- Young, D. G. (2018). *Presenting data from the 2017 survey of first-year experiences* [Conference session.]. American College Personnel Association Conference, Houston, TX, United States.
https://sc.edu/nrc/system/pub_files/1538845727_0.pdf
- Young, D. G. (2020). Is first-year seminar type predictive of institutional retention rates? *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(3), 379-390. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0035>

Rebecca Kudrna is Associate Professor and Department Chair of Sport & Exercise Science at Park University in Parkville, MO. She received her Doctoral training in Education and Applied Physiology at the University of Kansas. Rebecca has over a decade of teaching experience in higher education and has a particular passion for introducing students to their future careers through undergraduate research, professional organizations, and internships. Rebecca is a member of the American College of Sports Medicine, The National Strength & Conditioning Association, and Phi Epsilon Kappa, and Holds both CSCS, TSAC-F, and EP-C certifications.

Suzanne Tiemann has worked in the field of teaching and learning her entire career. She has had the opportunity to work with teachers, leaders, students, and the community in Texas, Missouri, Delaware, and Québec, Canada. She has served in the role of teacher, K-12 administration, leader of the Center of Educational Excellence, and is currently Chair of the Undergraduate Education Program and Assistant Professor at Park University. As Chair of the School of Education, she is always looking for new opportunities to provide preservice teachers with innovative and current educational methodologies.

Dr. Mike Swoboda is Assistant Teaching Professor of Sport & Exercise Science at Park University in Gilbert, AZ. He completed his Doctor of Health Sciences (DHSc) degree in Organizational Behavior and Leadership at A.T. Still University of Health Sciences. He also holds an MS in Exercise Physiology from Kent State University, and a BS in Biology and Chemistry from the University of Tennessee Southern. Dr. Swoboda is a certified exercise physiologist residing in Phoenix, AZ specializing in low back pain treatment, weight management, sports performance, and exercise prescription. His professional credentials are through ACSM (EP-C, EIM), NSCA (CSCS, CPSS), and ACE (FNS).

Dr. Tim Hanrahan completed his bachelor's degree at Truman State University in Physical Education, a Master of Arts in Curriculum & Instruction at University of Central Missouri, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership & Administration from Walden University. After a successful decade in higher education & administration, Tim currently works outside of higher education with the high-tech multinational Hitachi Energy Corporation.