

**Transforming First-Year Students into Life-Long Learners
Through First-Year Seminar Practices**

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Abstract

This mixed-method study assessed the effectiveness of a First-Year Seminar (FYS) course on students' successful accomplishment of learning outcomes that can be used beyond graduation: motivation, time-management, and decision-making. Students' quantitative responses indicated that the course had the highest impact on their motivation ($M = 4.43$, $SD = .74$), followed by the impact on effective decision making ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .83$), and the effect on time-management skills ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .90$). These findings were further expanded by students' qualitative responses identifying the biggest barriers to successful development and implementation of these three competences. Limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Life-long Learning, First-year Seminar

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Historically, educational research assessed students' learning and academic success mainly in terms of their grade point average, retention, and graduation rates. Twenty-first century metrics of student success, however, require a different approach. Consequently, modern educators are becoming increasingly committed to not only ensuring that students earn a degree, but that those graduates are equipped with skills, competences, knowledge, and personal qualities needed in diverse, complex, and demanding globalized world (Kuh, 2008).

Among the efforts directed toward helping students acquire the skills and competences to be used beyond graduation, High Impact Practices (HIPs) have been identified as the most effective tools leading to positive educational outcomes for students from many backgrounds. Consequently, many higher education institutions are redesigning their educational strategies toward incorporating at least some of the HIPs in their course curricula, with First-Year Seminar (FYS) courses remaining one of the most widely used intervention tools. The significance of FYS courses in modern higher education is best evidenced by the data that 89.7% of colleges and universities reported offering a seminar of this kind in the academic year 2012-2013 (NRCFYEST, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact that an academic FYS course has on participants' development of the following three competences: understanding the connection between academic success and motivation, understanding the elements pertaining to good decision-making, and analyzing the use of time in relation to one's goals.

We specifically investigated the following three research questions:

1. What are the biggest motivational challenges that first-year students encounter, and how effective are FYS courses in alleviating those challenges?
2. What are the biggest decision-making challenges that first-year students encounter, and how effective are FYS courses in alleviating those challenges?
3. What are the biggest time-management challenges that first-year students face, and how effective are FYS courses in alleviating those challenges?

Literature Review

The positive impacts of FYS courses have been well-documented in the literature but are mainly limited to students' academic performance (GPA), second semester or second year retention rates and four-, five-, or six-year graduation rates (IES, 2016). The scarcity of research, however, is reflected in measuring the effects that these courses have on the development of skills and competences that students can utilize beyond their academic setting. The need for additional scholarly efforts in this field is supported by the fact that the few studies that addressed the effectiveness of FYS on lifelong skills revealed overwhelmingly positive findings.

For example, FYS courses were documented to have a positive impact on increasing students' self-efficacy and transforming them into self-regulated learners (Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas, & Bernard, 2013), as well as on increasing their motivation to learn (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Similarly, the enrollment in FYS can lead to students becoming more intellectually curious (Kolb, Longest, & Barnett, 2014).

Additionally, there is a strong correlation between engagement in this HIP and students' personal and social development. For example, intentional assignments in FYS courses can lead to participants' increased development of grit, tenacity, and perseverance (Olson, 2017), while reflective journaling can improve the overall quality of their undergraduate experience, well-being, self-discovery, and social engagement (Everett, 2013).

In terms of FYS long-lasting effects, the most pronounced impacts were reflected in students' changing perception of the value of college education (Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, & Plumb, 2016), the establishment of long-lasting relationships with faculty and peers (Enke, 2011; Keup & Barefoot, 2005), and the formation of life-long learning orientations (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). Building on all these findings, this study sought to provide a unique contribution to the research on both FYS courses and the development of students' lifelong skills and competences by exploring the three less frequently assessed course outcomes: students' motivation, time-management, and decision-making.

Method

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of an academic FYS course on students' life-long learning and competences. To measure this outcome, the study utilized a mixed-method research design. The quantitative data measured students' self-reported competencies in regards to the three identified learning outcomes, while the qualitative data explored the main challenges to the course participants' successful accomplishment of these outcomes.

Our study took place at a large, public university in the southeast United States with a total enrollment of 66,000 students. At the time of our study, approximately 46% of students came from populations underrepresented in higher education and the university was awaiting a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) classification. Our first-year student population approximated 6,900 at the time this study was conducted (see Table 1).

Table 1
Site Characteristics

<u>Total enrollment</u>	<u>Minority students</u>	<u>Freshman enrollment</u>	<u>Average high school GPA</u>	<u>Average SAT score</u>	<u>Second year retention</u>
66,183	45.8%	6,964	4.06	1316	86.6%

Note. All data are from Fall 2017.

The FYS course offered at our institution is a three-credit hour seminar meeting the classification of an academic-themed course with uniform content across all sections. For all first-time in college (FTIC) students, the course is offered as an elective, while all special student populations are required to enroll (summer bridge program, international students, teacher pre-professionals, student-athletes, and out-of-state students). In a small classroom setting of 25-30 students, course participants learn and apply critical thinking skills toward diversity and social justice issues, career-readiness, undergraduate research, and other topics that promote student success and persistence through the first year and beyond.

Our study included all students enrolled in the FYS course during spring, summer, and fall 2017 (N = 1,572). This study utilized the survey data collected as a part of an ongoing end-of-semester FYS course evaluation and was distributed to all students enrolled in the FYS course during spring, summer, and fall 2017. The survey was completed by 1,284 students, a response rate of 81.7%.

The survey was distributed to all students during their last class asking them to evaluate the skills and competences they perceived as having gained in the course (Appendix 1). The self-reported questionnaire involved seven Likert-type scale questions measuring different course learning outcomes. The responses ranged from 1 = *not at all confident* to 5 = *mastery level of confidence*. The survey also included open-ended questions focusing on students' challenges during their first year and their experience with FYS peer mentors. This study, however, utilized only the responses pertaining to the impact of our FYS course on the skills and competences (course learning outcomes) identified in our three research questions.

All instructors teaching FYS courses in spring, summer, and fall 2017 terms distributed hard copies of end-of-semester survey to their students along with the final exam. Missing data or data from students who did not answer any of the four survey questions used for this study were not included in the data analysis. Included in the survey packet was the informed consent form. Prior to implementation, the study was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

We analyzed our quantitative data using the statistical software package SPSS and ran descriptive statistics for each of the questions pertaining to students' evaluation of course outcomes. Next, we determined numeric means and standard deviations for each of the four Likert scale questions. We analyzed our open-ended questions and qualitative data using thematic coding and developed a set of codes to assign to each open-ended response. Upon assigning codes to all qualitative data, we grouped the codes into six major themes and ensured the coding validity by having both researchers code the dataset individually.

Findings

The four Likert scale questions allowed the students to report the extent to which FYS course improved their skills and competences in the areas of motivation, time-managing, and decision-making. Even though students' responses showed some variations, the course participants were overall fairly satisfied with the impact that the FYS course had on the development of these competences (see Table 2). Students generally reported feeling more knowledgeable in these three areas after completing the FYS course.

Table 2
Students' Evaluation of Course Outcomes

<u>Learning Outcome</u>	<u>Mean</u> (N = 1,284)	<u>SD</u>
Understanding the connection between academic success and motivation	4.43	.74
Understanding the elements pertaining to good decision-making.	4.18	.83
Analyzing the use of time in relation to one's goals.	4.08	.90

Note. N = number of participants, SD = standard deviation

As presented in Table 2, the highest-rated learning outcome was understanding the connection between academic success and motivation (M = 4.43, SD = .74), followed by the impact that the FYS course had on students' effective decision-making (M = 4.18, SD = .83), and the perceived course effectiveness on students' development of time-management skills (M = 4.08, SD = .90).

In regards to our first research question, student responses to open-ended questions revealed that their motivation was predominantly affected by six main factors: decline or absence of motivation, lack of resilience, anxiety and depression, lack of confidence, stress, and sleep and nutrition. Table 3 provides a detailed overview of the leading challenges affecting students' motivation to learn and succeed academically.

Table 3
Main Barriers to Students' Motivation

<u>Challenge Category</u>	<u>Students' Responses</u>
Motivation (general)	Disinterest in school, not having motivation to go to class, initial joy passing away, having no motivation to do anything, being lazy academically.
Resilience	Getting back on track after a low grade; recovering from failing a course, overcoming negative setbacks, not dropping a class after getting bad grades.

Anxiety and depression	Having panic attacks due to anxiety, depression made it hard to focus on academics, dealing with latent mental health issues and learning disabilities.
Confidence	Thinking I was not cut out for college, feeling confident in myself that I have the skills to do well, self-doubt and misidentifying pessimism for realism
Stress	Stress management, being stressed because of the relationships with my friends.
Sleep and nutrition	Knowing what I will be eating each day and making food accommodations, change from eating regularly to barely eating, oversleeping and missing exam, not getting enough sleep, finding time to sleep.

In terms of our second research question pertaining to the barriers that prevented incoming students from making good decisions, our findings revealed that course participants faced most challenges in the following four areas: financial decisions, intended major, choosing friends, and making “real life” or adult decisions. Specific students’ responses illustrating each of these categories are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Main Barriers to Students’ Decision-Making

<u>Challenge Category</u>	<u>Students’ Responses</u>
Finances	Navigating budgeting and financial decisions, handling my finances by myself, having to deal with things my parents used to take care of like financial aid and money.
Major	Better aligning my career choice with what I am as a person, choosing my major, realizing my major classes were not going well and exploring other options.
Friends	Making good relationship choices, trying to understand others' values, not knowing anyone and having to make friends, finding a good group of friends I fit into, learning to choose who to spend time with that wasn't going to endanger my future.
Adulthood	Juggling academics and real-life adult issues, learning how to be on my own, learning how to be responsible for the first time, adjusting to changing my normal routine that I had back home, dealing with such a tremendous change and doing that by myself.

The thematic analysis of students’ responses to open-ended questions displayed a very strong prevalence of barriers related to our third research question. Approximately 31% of survey respondents (400 students) indicated that managing their time was the biggest obstacle they faced during their first year of college. These obstacles were categorized into five areas in order of their frequency: general time-management issues, balancing school and work, procrastination, balancing school and social life, and planning or scheduling. Table 5 displays the most prevalent instances of students’ challenges in each of these five areas.

Table 5

Main Barriers to Students' Time-Management

<u>Challenge Category</u>	<u>Students' Responses</u>
Managing time	Learning how to manage my time wisely, not knowing how I actually spend my free time, realizing that time-management is completely different from high school, inefficient use of my time led me to feeling lack of purpose and worth.
Balancing school and social life	Balancing the need to experience the world without giving up my success, learning to balance partying and school, choosing between friends and studying, saying no to peer pressure to go out, balancing my academics with Greek life and pledging.
Procrastination	Learning that I cannot procrastinate as much as I did in high school, finishing the tasks on time, losing my chance of getting an A because I procrastinated, my work not being presentable due to being completed at the last minute, realizing that my procrastination is actually a very big problem.
Balancing school and work	Missing classes because of my work schedule, working and commuting, being too tired to study after a full-time working day, studying and work - sacrificing one or the other.
Planning/ scheduling	Creating a timetable and following it because I was not used to it in high school, planning my schedule and sticking to it, not having an organized plan to complete my assignments in a timely manner, developing a good study schedule.

Discussion and Implications

In addition to the student self-reported learning outcomes pertaining to motivation, time management, and decision making, our study identified the main barriers to first-year students' development of lifelong skills in these three areas. Even though our qualitative data illustrated that participants faced numerous and multifold challenges, especially regarding effective use of time, our quantitative findings revealed that students perceived that enrollment in the FYS alleviated these difficulties to a relatively high and consistent extent across all three areas. Students' perceptions that the FYS had the highest impact on better understanding and increasing motivation does not constitute a new finding. Our findings corroborated some prior studies documenting that first-year students face significant motivational barriers at the beginning of their college journey that can be successfully overcome by effective pedagogical strategies in FYS courses (Jessup-Anger, 2011). In addressing the students' specific motivational challenges listed in this study, we can draw a direct parallel with the research that documented positive impacts of FYS courses in all these direct areas, primarily students' feelings of personal success (Keup & Barefoot, 2005) and the development of grit, tenacity, and perseverance (Olson, 2017).

We attribute our findings in this area to several practices. First, our FYS curriculum and instructional materials include in-class discussions of motivational theories, resilience, self-efficacy, stress management, and health and well-being. Additionally, the FYS program serves a liaison with institutional support services, primarily Counseling and Psychological Services, the Wellness and Health Promotion Center, and the Recreation and Wellness Center. Through the long-standing and ongoing collaboration between the FYS program and campus services, course participants become more familiarized with available resources that can support them in overcoming many of the motivational challenges identified in this study.

Our findings pertaining to the second-rated learning outcome—effective time management—substantiated the existing research evidencing the positive effect of FYS on transforming the participants into more self-regulated learners (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013). As almost one third of our incoming students experience difficulties in managing their time effectively, our FYS curriculum places substantial emphasis on this learning outcome. Over the course of the entire semester, our students are presented with a number of effective time-management strategies, with particular focus on fighting procrastination, prioritizing tasks, identifying time traps, organizing and scheduling one's time, balancing school and work, and balancing school and social life. Our program also promotes additional support services available to students at the institutional level, such as time-management workshops facilitated by the Student Success Resource Center as well as Student Development and Enrollment Services.

Lastly, students' ratings of the FYS course as a fairly useful intervention for making informed and good decisions corroborated the rich literature on the positive effects of seminars on students overall well-being, personal and social development, and adjustment to college (Andrade, 2006, 2009; Dunn, Hains & Epps, 2013; Everett, 2013; Fidler & Gowin, 1994). As the greatest proportion of our students reported struggling with making good financial decisions, our course curriculum includes extensive discussion on financial literacy and making good financial decisions, while all students are encouraged to visit one of our campus partners (e.g., financial aid office) or to attend one of the campus literacy workshops.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study is that the measured outcomes of our FYS course were self-reported. Therefore, the obtained data pose a number of validity and reliability issues that can be resolved by future research including objective measurements of the three competences assessed in this study. Second, the sample population was limited to one institution only and cannot be generalizable to all institutions offering FYS courses. Future studies could remedy this limitation by assessing the effectiveness of FYS in different institutional settings (e.g., teaching-intensive institutions or two-year institutions). The third limitation is reflected in the short duration of this study (one semester per group of participants). Given that sampled students will be demonstrating the evaluated skills years later, the obtained results should be viewed as preliminary only. Revisiting our research questions and course outcomes prior to participants' graduation or beyond may lead to different findings. The fourth limitation is that we assessed the impact of an academic-themed FYS with a uniform curriculum across all sections. The assessment of other types of FYS, such as pre-professional, discipline related, or transitional, may reveal more pronounced effects on some of the measured learning outcomes. Lastly, our

research was mainly descriptive and exploratory. As such, it needs to be supported by employing a more rigorous quantitative approach that would allow for the between-group comparison of different student populations enrolled in FYS courses, as well as the overall comparison between course takers and non-takers.

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Appendix 1: Survey Instrument

Survey: 2 extra points

Please choose from the rating system below and check () the one you feel best describes your confidence level to complete the 6 course goals as outlined in your SLS 1501 syllabus (1 being the lowest level of confidence and 5 being the highest level of confidence).

	Not at all confident (1)	Somewhat confident (2)	Moderate confidence (3)	High level of confidence (4)	Mastery level of confidence (5)
Be able to describe research-proven student success strategies and skills and how to apply them to your daily practices as a college student.					
Have an increased sense of confidence and skills in performing college-level tasks.					
Understand the connection between academic success and your motivation.					
Set effective goals contributing to academic and/or personal success and make concrete plans for achieving your goals.					
Understand the elements pertaining to good decisions with the focus on academic, financial, and career related decisions, along with the importance of managing stress in effective ways.					

	Not at all confident (1)	Somewhat confident (2)	Moderate confidence (3)	High level of confidence (4)	Mastery level of confidence (5)
Analyze your use of time in relation to your goals and success strategies and either: i) develop a plan to align your use of time more closely with your goals; or ii) defend your use of time as appropriate for achieving your goals.					

1. How well did SLS 1501 prepare you to learn more about your career/career interests? 1 2 3 4 5 (1 being the lowest level and 5 being the highest)
2. As you self-reflect upon this academic year: List one word that describes your freshman year:
3. What was the most challenging event/problem that you encountered this academic year (only share what you feel comfortable)?
4. How well did your SLS 1501 Peer Mentor support you in your academic, professional, social and/or personal development? 1 2 3 4 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest)
5. As a student, are there any suggestions for how the SLS 1501 Peer Mentor can better support you?

If you choose not to complete the survey, you can earn 2 extra points by answering the following question:

What campus event, service, or resource has marked your first semester and transition to UCF and why?

Dr. Jamil D. Johnson serves as an Academic Coordinator in the First-Year Experience and an adjunct faculty in the College of Education and Human Performance at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Johnson earned his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 2015. His research interests include the access and participation of underrepresented students in higher education programs and the broader first year experience with the expertise on first-year seminars. In his current position, he oversees a First Year Seminar of more than 1,500 students annually.

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