EXPLORING SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSE AND HOW SENSE OF COMMUNITY IMPACTS STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSITION AND PERSISTENCE IN COLLEGE

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EXPLORING SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSE AND HOW SENSE OF COMMUNITY IMPACTS STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSITION AND PERSISTENCE IN COLLEGE

DISSERATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky

By
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2015

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

EXPLORING SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSE AND HOW SENSE OF COMMUNITY IMPACTS STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSITION AND PERSISTENCE IN COLLEGE

This study examines how community was created in a community college FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success course and the impact of classroom community on students’ perceptions of transition and persistence. Community colleges increasingly are focusing on student success as measured by persistence and goal completion such as transfer or attainment of credentials. The classroom learning environment is critical to student success but is a neglected area in retention research. Therefore, it is important to expand the research on initiatives that support students in their quest for success and educational goal completion.

This research focused on one course section of FYE 105 taught at a community college; the students and the professor of the class are the participants for the study. New insight and understanding into classroom sense of community was gained through classroom participant-observations throughout the duration of a semester (16 weeks), faculty and student interviews, and review of materials related to the course. The data generated from the study were analyzed using thematic analysis. In order to explore how community is constructed and the role it plays for students, McMillan and Chavis’s sense of community theory and the academic communities component of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities were used as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study.

Study results reveal that the professor concentrated efforts during the first class sessions on communicating the classroom rules, engaging in active learning, establishing emotional safety and belonging, and facilitating student interdependence, which were critical elements in establishing a sense of community in the classroom. Additionally, the findings show that students perceive the professor, classmates, classroom environment, active learning, and course content as components that contribute to a sense of community that impact their transition. Students were less clear of the role that sense of community played in their college persistence. Findings suggest that faculty would benefit from professional development to enhance their pedagogical skills. Suggestions for future research include a focus on students’ external and campus support systems,
electronic technology, classroom diversity, and longitudinal and departure data collection.

KEYWORDS: Community College, Sense of Community, First-Year Experience Course, College Transition, College Persistence
TO MY HUSBAND

DR. LIONEL PREVOST MAYO
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Finally, my study would not have been possible without the participants of the FYE 105 class. The students and professor welcomed me into their classroom
community, which provided me a first-hand view of their experiences. I am grateful for the opportunity to have journeyed with the students as they began their educational quest. The lessons I learned from the professor and students have changed the way I view the classroom, and for that I am deeply grateful.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Adjusting to the college environment often is overwhelming for new students, especially the diverse student population typically enrolled at a community college. Mellow and Heelan (2008) describe typical community college students as “older, poorer, more likely to be part time and working, and more likely to be the first member of their family in college than students at four-year universities” (p. xv). Therefore, community college administrators, faculty, and staff must continuously examine ways to provide support for this diverse group of students transitioning into postsecondary education. Predictably, the attention given to first-year students continues to expand as colleges engage in efforts to improve student success, learning, retention, and completion. The key to college persistence, according to Tinto (1993), “requires individuals to adjust, both socially and intellectually, to the new and sometimes quite strange world of the college” (p. 45) from the start of the collegiate experience.

Especially noteworthy is the first-year experience (FYE) approach, which is designed to assist students’ transition into and membership in the campus environment and involves a commitment from all levels of the campus community. Typical FYE support and learning strategies include but are not limited to advising, first-year experience courses, learning communities, transitional (developmental) courses, supplemental instruction, mentoring, orientation, welcome week activities, common reading programs, service learning, tutoring, and early alert programs. According to Tinto (1993) the first-year of college is critical to persistence, and the majority of students who leave do so in the first-year. Consequently, colleges must provide students
the support necessary to increase their ability to transition to and persist in the postsecondary environment.

One approach, the first-year experience course, is the most common academic initiative used to assist student transition into the college environment, facilitate student learning, and improve student persistence after the first year of college (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Keup & Petschauer, 2011). Ideally the FYE course provides the built-in support to facilitate students’ membership and interconnection within the new environment of higher education, and is particularly important for the typical community college student who arrives on campus with the most diverse needs in higher education.

It is important to expand the research on initiatives that support students in their quest toward success, educational goal completion, and connection to the campus environment. Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994) report, “Some community colleges are succeeding in increasing both student learning and retention by structuring their educational programs in new ways that stress the importance of academic and social community in students’ lives” (p. 27). Building on the importance of community, this study enhances the understanding of how community is created within a community college first-year experience course and how student perceptions of community impact transition and persistence in college.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The focus of higher education discussion and reform has shifted from an access agenda to one of accountability. Community colleges have done exceptionally well with providing access, but degree completion has been incredibly low (Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). At the forefront of the push for accountability is a demand for student success in the form of degree completion (Kelly &
Schneider, 2012). As Tinto (2012) explains, for some students “success in college is measured one course or even one class at a time” (pp. 114-115).

President Obama, through the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), also known as the Completion Agenda, encouraged institutions of higher education to shift focus from access to student success and completion. The Completion Agenda is President Obama’s initiative for America to “have the highest portion of college graduates in the world” (Kelly & Schneider, 2012, p. 1) by 2020. The Obama administration expects postsecondary institutions in the United States to produce eight million degrees with “five million community college graduates by 2020” (Crisp & Mina, 2012, p. 151). According to Terry O’Banion (2013), a national community college leader,

The purpose of the Completion Agenda, which has become the overarching mission of the community college, is to double, in the next decade, the number of students who complete one-year certificates or associate degrees, or who transfer and complete their credential at another college or university. (p. 5)

Among the many supporters of President Obama’s Completion Agenda are two private foundations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation. The Gates Foundation is working to assist low-income youth, before they turn age 26, in earning a postsecondary degree that has “value in the workplace” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2008, para. 1). The initiative is designed to double the numbers of college graduates with the main focus on low-income and first-generation students attending community colleges. Another ambitious goal, initiated by the Lumina Foundation (n.d.), is “to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025” (para. 1).
The zealous higher education goals of the Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation “Have placed newfound emphasis on the idea that institutions of higher education must play a prominent role in promoting student success and institutional productivity, and the federal and state policies should emphasize student retention and completion” (Kelly & Schneider, 2012, p. 1). As such, the National Governors Association (NGA) embraced the Completion Agenda by making recommendations to improve data collection and the use of data in an effort to “increase college completion and improve higher education efficiency” (Reyna, 2010, p. 7).

How can community colleges make an impact on the success and graduation rate of students? The goal of increased degree completion cannot be accomplished without institutions evaluating their efforts and initiating programs for student success (Melguizo, Kienzl, & Kosiewick, 2013). To reiterate a point made earlier, many institutions concentrate the majority of student success efforts on interventions and strategies to assist the first year student, because large portions of students leave an institution during the first year (Tinto, 1993). The focus on retaining students at the start of their academic careers entails looking at programs that support students in their academic and social transition into the college environment. Predictably, the study of student persistence at a community college is complex due to the diversity of the students served by these institutions.

Tinto (2012) advocates, “If institutions are to significantly increase the retention and graduation of their students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, their actions must be centered on the classroom” (p. 6). For the community college student, the classroom becomes one of the primary ways of engaging in the social and academic life of the college. Tinto (1993) reminds us that colleges are made up of communities
that are interactive, and for students to persist they must integrate socially and academically by forming a membership within a college community.


Typically the first-year experience course focuses on the academic and social integration of students into the college environment through the traditional approach of a structured class. Thus, the FYE course is the most widely utilized way for colleges to increase student retention (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Keup & Petschauer, 2011), which is a positive step toward educational goal completion.

In order for community colleges to have an impact on the goal of five million new community college graduates by 2020, success strategies within the community college need to be studied in-depth. Zeidenberg et al., (2007) point out that little research has been conducted on the success of FYE courses at community colleges. In addition, Brown and Burdsal (2012) note the absence of research relating student success to sense of community. The majority of research on the FYE course is dedicated to quantitative studies on retention or persistence (Davig & Spain, 2004; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Offenstien et al., 2010; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Williford et al., 2000-2001), academic performance (Keup & Barefoot, 2005;
Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Williford et al., 2000-2001),
graduation rate (Williford et al., 2000-2001) and other student learning factors (Hunter &
Linder, 2005; Keup & Barefoot, 2005) that primarily relate to traditional aged students
attending four-year institutions. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) emphasize that the majority
of research on the success of higher education programs conducted at four-year colleges
do not necessarily translate to the community college population. Furthermore, there is a
shortage of documented community college research distributed and debated within the
provide further testimony to the complexity that is involved in studying community
colleges due to the “characteristics and enrollment patterns of the students they serve”
(para. 17).

There are community college based studies that provide empirical evidence that
FYE courses increase student success (Cho & Karp, 2012; Florida Department of
Education, 2006; Glass & Garrett, 1995; Karp et al., 2012; O’Gara et al., 2009;
Zeidenberg et al., 2007). By any measure, research in the community college is limited,
and since community colleges enroll almost half of the undergraduates in American
higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 1982; Kim, 2002; Mellow & Heelan, 2008;
Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Vaughan, 1995) it is important to conduct research in the
community college setting in order to understand the needs of this sizeable group of
undergraduate students.

Tinto (1997) emphasizes, “The college classroom lies at the center of the
educational activity structure of institutions of higher education; the educational
encounters that occur therein are a major feature of student educational experience” (p.
599). Therefore, the classroom is the primary source of social and academic integration
into the college environment especially for the community college student who typically works and attends college part-time. To reiterate a point made earlier, there is little research on creating community in the higher education (face-to-face) classroom. Thus, studying what goes on in the classroom is important in advancing knowledge in higher education and in improving the student experience in an effort to increase degree completion. In research related to FYE courses, one of the most underutilized resources is studying the lived experiences of the student. If college administrators, faculty, and staff are committed to improving the experience of first-year students and increasing persistence they must learn from the source – the students.

Research Overview

This study addresses the deficit in the research on FYE courses at community colleges. First, the study explores how community is established in the FYE classroom by observing students living within that experience at one community college and from the point of view of the professor. Second, the study gleans insight from the students’ perspectives on how community impacts transition and persistence in college. Tinto (1993) states,

Classrooms often serve as gateways for further involvement in the intellectual life of the campus. In nonresidential settings generally and for commuting students in particular, they may be the primary if not the only place where students and faculty meet. (p. 57)

This qualitative study utilizes an ethnographic approach, which allowed me (as the researcher) to gain a deeper understanding of how community is created in a FYE course and how sense of community impacts students’ perceptions of their transition and persistence in college. The research design is a classroom ethnography of one FYE 105
Achieving Academic Success community college course, studied throughout the duration of a semester (16 weeks), which allowed for in-depth exploration. Extended time in the field supports a key characteristic of ethnography wherein the researcher spends prolonged time in the natural setting of the research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants within that natural environment (Brewer, 2000; Fetterman, 1989; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999b; Wolcott, 2005).

Patton (2002) states, “Ethnographic inquiry takes as its central and guiding assumption that any human group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture” (p. 81). LeCompte and Schensul (1999b) explain ethnography as “writing about the culture of groups of people” (p. 21). Fetterman (1989) defines ethnography as both an “art and science of describing a group or culture” (p. 11). A concise description of ethnography is “telling it like it is from the inside” (Brewer, 2000, p. 17). In addition, the qualitative design allows me to interpret the participants’ perspectives in order for experiential understanding, verstehen, to emerge in a way that gives meaning to their experiences (Stake, 2010).

The FYE 105 section utilized in the study was selected based on purposive sampling. Accordingly, the students enrolled in the course section along with the professor were the participants for the study. A deeper understanding of how community is created in the FYE course and the impact of community on transition and persistence was gained through classroom participant-observations, faculty and student interviews, and review of materials related to the course. The data generated from the study were analyzed using thematic analysis. McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory and the academic communities component of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s
(2004) conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities were used as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study.

Research Questions

Through this research, I gained a deeper understanding of how a sense of community is created within a FYE course and the impact of community on students’ transition and persistence in the college community. The main research questions are:

1. How is a sense of community constructed in a first-year experience course?
2. How does a sense of community impact the students’ transition and persistence in college?

The following are the guiding research questions:

1. What techniques are utilized in creating a sense of community among the members (professor and students) in a first-year experience course, and how are these techniques important?
2. How do the instructor-student and student-student interactions influence the development of the classroom community?
3. How does a sense of community influence the students’ transition and persistence in college?

Context

The study was conducted in the Spring 2015 semester in one section of FYE 105 at Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC) on the Cooper Campus in Lexington, Kentucky. BCTC is one of sixteen public, open access community colleges in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). BCTC has an enrollment of approximately 11,000 students with classes offered on six campuses and
several auxiliary sites throughout Central Kentucky. BCTC’s mission, with a focus on students, is stated as follows:

Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC) transforms the Bluegrass Region - one student at a time, one employer at a time, one community at a time. With students at the heart of our mission, BCTC supports access, success, and completion of educational goals through comprehensive and responsive programs and services at campuses across the region and through distance learning. With strong partnerships and excellence in teaching and learning, BCTC:

• Provides a skilled workforce, through high-quality career and technical programs, workforce training, and continuing education. Prepares students to transfer for baccalaureate degrees, through general education and literacy and life skills development.

• BCTC promotes regional economic vitality and quality of life through diversity and inclusion, cultural and global awareness, critical thinking, civic responsibility, professional competence, and sustainability.

BCTC is a member college of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System and awards associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates. (Bluegrass Community and Technical College, 2014)

Sergiovanni (1999), known as an advocate for community in which leadership is shared, discusses in his book Building Community in Schools how the core values of a school “affect the way people think and feel and behave” (p. 72). As such, it is important to note the core values that guide BCTC. According to the BCTC “Our Mission and Vision” (2014) webpage, the institution’s core values are building respect, communicating, transforming, and creating community. Thus, the core value of creating
community through a positive environment and collaboration represents an institutional commitment to establishing a community of learners, which is central to this research.

The FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success course was first taught as a pilot at Jefferson Community and Technical College (Louisville, KY) during the Spring 2013 semester. Following the pilot, the KCTCS Senate and KCTCS administration supported the implementation of the new FYE 105 course as an elective for students and endorsed the course for full implementation across all KCTCS colleges for Fall 2013. Subsequently, BCTC first taught the course in Fall 2013.

I selected BCTC as my research site due to the strong display of administrative commitment to and support for the new FYE 105 course. BCTC has strong administrative approval for offering the FYE 105 course, and faculty support is high. In Fall 2013, the semester of the initial offering of the course, there were only three KCTCS colleges offering the new FYE 105 course, and BCTC was one of the three. A year later, Fall 2014, a little over half of the KCTCS colleges offer the FYE 105 course. Two years later, Fall 2015, the number of KCTCS colleges offering the course remains consistent with the previous year.

In 2012-2013, BCTC embarked on a yearlong institutional study led by the John Gardner Institution of Excellence. BCTC conducted the Foundation of Excellence study with a focus on the first-year experience by participating in a systematic study (self-audit). The goal of the study was to assess the institution’s status in regard to transitioning and supporting first-year students into the college environment. The study concluded with the institution making a commitment to improve the first-year experience for new students.
Phase one of the plan centered on implementation of the new FYE 105 course. The institution developed a FYE mission statement, appointed a coordinator for planning, development, and instruction, mandated training for all FYE 105 instructors, and designed strategies to “strongly” encourage the FYE course for all new students. Another demonstration of administrative support for the FYE 105 course ties to the “15 to Finish” initiative sponsored by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE). BCTC expanded on the “15 to Finish” pledge campaign, and created the BCTC Scholars program offering Fall 2014 students who maintained a 2.8 or higher grade point average on 15 credit hours (including FYE 105), a free class (three credit hours) the next semester (spring 2015). In Spring 2015, students enrolled in the BCTC Scholars program that maintained a 3.0 or higher grade point average and completed 15 credit hours received three credit hours of tuition free for the next semester (fall 2015). Requiring students to enroll in FYE 105 to qualify for the BCTC Scholars program sent a message that the administration supports the course and new students.

In perhaps the best illustration of BCTC’s commitment, in September 2014 BCTC was awarded a five year, 2.3 million dollar U.S. Department of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions grant to improve the first-year experience for students. The submission and subsequent awarding of a Title III grant signifies a national level of support for the ongoing efforts to enhance the students’ first-year at BCTC. Therefore, BCTC’s ongoing administrative commitment to first-year students led to my selection of BCTC, which provided a rich environment for my research.
Course Description

Central to the study is the FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success three credit hour (45 contact hours) elective course taught throughout KCTCS. As such, the course description from the KCTCS Catalog (2014-2015) is documented below.

Introduces new students to strategies that promote academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal success in the college environment. Aims to foster a sense of belonging, promote engagement in the curricular and co-curricular life of the college, and provide opportunities for students to develop academic plans that align with career and life goals. (KCTCS Catalog, 2014-2015, p. 291)

Researcher

The researcher serves as the main tool in qualitative research (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2011). However, as Merriam (1998) cautioned, when the researcher is a human instrument, “mistakes are made, opportunities missed, personal biases interfere” (p. 37). Hence, it is important to address how my background influenced the direction of the study.

I am a faculty member in the Humanities Division at Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC), and the Humanities Division manages the FYE 105 courses. In the past, I taught college success courses at BCTC and Eastern Kentucky University. My work experiences include counseling, teaching, and administrative responsibilities in the postsecondary educational setting and predominately at the community college. These experiences impact how I generate, interpret, and report the data.

I conducted the fieldwork for this research during the Spring 2015 semester, and was on educational leave (without pay) from my full-time role as an Associate Professor at BCTC. This leave allowed me to immerse myself fully in the classroom ethnography.
Additionally, it allowed me to be removed from all responsibilities as an employee of the college. I had no supervisory role with either the students or the faculty member outside of my interactions with them during the study.

I have worked at BCTC for 18 years, so I am knowledgeable about the campus environment and the qualities, characteristics, and traits of the institution, which gives me unique qualifications to conduct research in the institution’s classrooms. In fact, Hill (1996) suggests, “In order to investigate psychological sense of community in any giving setting, the researcher must have some prior knowledge of the characteristics of that setting” (p. 435). In addition, my prior knowledge assisted in my efforts to build rapport and gain entry to conduct this research in a FYE classroom. Patton (2002) explains, “Rapport is built on the ability to convey empathy and understanding without judgment” (p. 366). My ability to create rapport with the students assisted in establishing a mutual working relationship, as I took on the role of the learner and the students assumed the role of teacher.

My passion for working with undergraduates led to my interest in exploring the first-year experience course and the role of community within the course. I am an advocate of the open-access mission of the community college. However, open-door access presents the challenge of providing appropriate support that will enable all students the opportunity to succeed. The first-year experience course is an initiative that has proven successful in providing students with a greater chance of a successful transition, integration, and persistence into the complex world of higher education.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One consists of a brief introduction of the study, discussion of the significance of the study, overview of the study, summary of the research questions,
description of context, and an introduction of myself as the researcher. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive scholarly overview of the historical background and research associated with the first-year experience course. In addition, concepts of the college classroom, community, learning community, retention, involvement, and sense of community are reviewed to provide perspective on community in the classroom. Also, relevant theories and frameworks related to student departure, student success, student involvement, and a sense of community are explored. Chapter Three details the methodology of the study by first describing the pilot study, followed by describing the theoretical framework, methods, and analysis. Subsequently, I explain data organization, principles of privacy, ethics, and trustworthiness, limitations of the study and generalizability of the study, and conclude with a summary of the study design. Chapter Four introduces the participants of the study and analyzes and describes the first days of the FYE course as providing the foundation for establishing a sense of community. Additionally, the themes that originate during the introductory days of the course are explored to discover how the themes develop and expand over the semester. Chapter Five focuses on the students’ perceptions of a sense of community in relation to how sense of community effects transition and persistence in college. Chapter Six concludes with a review of the research followed by implications and recommendations for administrators and faculty related to my research findings.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter I present a review of the literature that provides a foundational frame for this study. A community college first-year experience (FYE) course is the context for examining how community is created in a classroom and how students perceive that a sense of community influences their transition and persistence. Therefore, a historical overview of the FYE course is provided to highlight the significance of the course to the study. In addition, literature pertinent to the classroom, retention, community, learning community, and the community college is examined. Relevant theories and frameworks related to student departure, student success, student involvement, and a sense of community are explored.

Historical Overview: Orientation Courses and First-Year Experience Courses

Orientation Courses

The first-year experience course (originally called “orientation course”) serves as the setting for this study. A brief history is necessary in order to illuminate how the orientation course evolved over the years. Orientation courses (now called “first-year experience courses,” “student success courses,” and “first-year seminars,” etc.) have been around for over 100 years and have developed into vital components of the freshman curriculum at both four-year and two-year postsecondary institutions. Through the years, the content and focus of these courses have evolved to accommodate the needs of the ever-changing college student and the changing institution. Consistently, the typical overarching objective has been to provide students an introduction into the intellectual and social environment of higher education while focusing on the individual development of the student.
Two early examples of colleges that recognized the need to provide guidance to freshmen were Johns Hopkins in 1877, by implementing a structure of faculty advisors, and Harvard in 1889, with a group of freshman advisors (Rudolph, 1962/1990). From 1888 to 1926, orientation courses expanded and developed, and this period became known as the orientation movement (Fitts & Swift, 1928). Keup and Petschauer (2001) explain, “These courses were used as an extended orientation to the institution, to fulfill the institution’s responsibility to act in loco parentis, and to aid in the students’ social adjustment and academic development” (p. 3). The most significant reason for offering orientation courses was the need for students to understand the objective of education. Sanford (1967) claims, “Rarely are students told what the purpose of their education is, or even that they should seek a purpose” (p. 75). Therefore, orientation courses appeared to be a good way to educate students on the purpose, mission, and goals of higher education.

Reed College taught the first recognized college credit orientation course in 1911 (Fitts & Swift, 1928). The goal of this first freshman-focused credit course at Reed College was to orient students to the college and what were necessary to succeed (Fitts & Swift, 1928; Gardner, 1986; Gordon, 1989; Mueller, 1961). After the first credit-bearing orientation course in 1911, popularity continued to grow, and institutions began experimenting with credit and non-credit versions that fit the needs of the individual students. There is limited research on the orientation movement from the 1930s to the 1970s. By the 1960s, the courses become practically nonexistent as the in loco parentis era ended (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). In the 1970s, orientation courses started to regain the attention of colleges and universities to transition the diverse group of students arriving on campus into the college environment.
First-Year Experience Courses

The most widely known and successful freshman seminar course is University 101 (UN 101), taught at the University of South Carolina (USC) (Jewler, 1989). The course was created as a pilot and was first taught in 1972 to provide an avenue to connect students with USC after the 1970 student riots and to facilitate the student-centered approach to teaching (Gardner, 1986; Watts, 1999). Jewler (1989) describes the ideology of UN 101 as “the belief that learning should be exciting, that it should be fun, and that it should provide learning for the instructor as well as for the students” (p. 200).

The UN 101 course provides a holistic approach to engaging the mind, body, and spirit of the student in an effort to support the total development of the person. Not surprisingly, the UN 101 course has a proven track record of increasing student retention that is evidenced by the longitudinal data USC has collected from the onset of the course (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). The return rate of freshmen who participate in UN 101 compared to nonparticipants has been higher for fourteen consecutive years (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). However, when academic performance (measured by GPA) has been compared, the participant and nonparticipant grades are similar (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). The longitudinal data on UN 101 provides support that the course does have a positive effect on student retention. Due to the documented success of UN 101, the course serves as a model that hundreds of institutions have duplicated (Jewler, 1989). The success of UN 101 at USC is nationally and internationally known and perhaps may explain the renewed energy the FYE courses received during the 1970s.

One important but subtle change occurred in the early 1990s: the focus and terminology shifted from freshman orientation course to the terms first-year seminar or new student seminar (Hunter & Linder, 2005). The newer title that included the word
*seminar* reflects the increased focus on academic content, and elimination of the word *freshman* was “a shift to a more gender-inclusive and respectful terminology” (Hunter & Linder, 2005, p. 279). The shift of terminology and the increased focus on academic content helped to elevate (to some degree) the status and acceptance of the course (Hunter & Linder, 2005).

According to a review of the literature, and as stated previously, the vast majority of studies have evidence to suggest first-year seminar courses have a positive effect on student persistence and retention (Davig & Spain, 2004; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Florida Department of Education, 2006; Glass & Garrett, 1995; Offenstien et al., 2010; Porter & Swing, 2006; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Williford et al., 2000-2001; Zeidenberg et al., 2007), academic performance (Glass & Garrett, 1995; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Williford et al., 2000-2001), graduation rate (Florida Department of Education, 2006; Williford et al., 2000-2001; Zeidenberg et al., 2007) and other student learning factors (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Karp et al., 2012; Karp & Bork, 2012; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; O’Gara et al., 2009). In addition, evidence to support the course is noted by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) in *How College Affects Students*:

The weight of evidence indicates that FYS [first-year seminar] participation has statistically significant and substantial, positive effects on a student’s successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year as well as on academic performance while in college. (p. 403)

Hunter and Linder (2005) add additional support for the first-year experience course:

The popularity of first-year seminars as a programmatic and curricular approach to address student transition and retention issues is based on the fact that an
academic course offers a time-honored structure through which orientation efforts can be continued beyond the first week and student development and retention theories can be put into practice. (p. 276)

According to Cuseo (1997) orientation courses have a unique and distinguishing feature from other college level courses due to the course being “the most frequently researched and empirically well-documented course in the history of American higher education because its novelty and non-traditional content has made it repeatedly necessary for the course to ‘prove’ its value” (p. 5).

The popularity of the first-year experience course is more evident at four-year institutions than at two-year institutions. As evidence, Keup and Petschauer (2011) report, “As many as 94% of accredited four-year colleges and universities in the United States offer a first-year seminar to at least some students, and more than half offer a first-year seminar to 90% or more of their first-year students” (p. 3). According to the electronically disseminated 2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars sent to 3,753 institutions, 804 out of 896 institutions that returned the survey (24% response rate) offered a first-year seminar and of those, 25.6% were two-year institutions compared to 74.4% of four-year institutions (National Resource Center First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2012-2013).

Since two-year institutions appear to offer the first-year seminar at a lesser rate than four-year institutions, it is important for two-year colleges to evaluate the benefits of offering this course. Historically and currently community colleges are a gateway of access into postsecondary education for many students, and now community colleges are being urged to concentrate more effort on increasing degree completion. In an effort to increase student success, and most notably degree completion, the first-year experience
course is one strategy that deserves the full attention of community college leaders.

Non-Supporters of the FYE Course

Not everyone is convinced that the first-year experience course is in the best interest of the student. For example, Moreno (1997-1998) warns, “Rather than helping students make a transition from high school to college, the FYE instead extends high school, using the same sort of content-free, self-esteem boosting, game-playing that renders so many American eighteen-year-olds unprepared for college” (p. 56). There are, of course, a small number of studies that demonstrate little to no positive findings related to the student success course. For example, Cavote and Kopera-Frye (2006-2007) found in their non-controlled study of non-traditional students at a four-year institution that a first-year experience course had no positive effect on student retention. The researchers recommend that institutions look at the possibility of personalized instruction to the degree that it is possible. They note lack of personalized instruction as a potential reason the course demonstrates no impact in relation to student retention.

Another study, focusing on developmental students, found a limited positive effect related to the student success course. In the controlled mixed methods study conducted at Guilford Technical Community College by Rutschow, Cullinan, and Welbeck (2012) they found the student success course for developmental students had a positive effect on psychosocial outcomes but no significant effect on academic achievement. The study defines developmental students as academically underprepared for college and needing remedial education. The researchers note that the first cohort group did show substantial academic improvement, and this may be attributed to the higher quality of the course during the first semester it was taught. Higher quality was
defined as more enthusiastic instructors who received training and support in relation to
the course.

The studies conducted by Cavote and Kopera-Frye (2006-2007) and Rutschow et
al. (2012) have in common a dynamic that merits further exploration. Both studies point
to what was going on in the classroom in regard to instruction and content delivery as
possibly playing a significant role in student outcomes. This issue merits further
investigation and is central to the study of exploring how community is created in the
FYE classroom and the impact community has on students’ transition and persistence in
college.

Community College

It is important that scholars studying first-year student success and degree
completion take a careful look at the sector of higher education that serves the most
vulnerable students – the community college. Mellow and Heelan (2008) advocate,

No other element of higher education provides more access to more students,
embeds its activities and initiatives more deeply in the social and economic fabric
of the community where it is located, nor advances the lives of low-income adults
more fully than community colleges. (p. 17)

Community colleges serve the most diverse group of students in higher education. The
American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (2014) reports the following
characteristics of community college students: the average age is 28; 60% are enrolled
part time; 57% are women; 51% White; 19% Hispanic, and 14% Black; 36% are first
generation; and 72% who apply receive some form of financial aid. It would be fair to
say that community college students tend to have commitments and responsibilities
outside of their educational interest and goals. Predictably, attending college part-time
while working full-time is a common characteristic of community college students. Vaughan (1995) uses the term *citizen-as-student* to explain how the community college student differs from the typical four-year college student. To further explain, Vaughan summarizes, “The citizen-as-student is concerned with paying taxes, working full time, supporting a family, paying a mortgage, and with other responsibilities associated with the everyday role of a full-time citizen” (p. 17).

Community college leaders and scholars ask, what can be done to accommodate the community college student from the point of access to completion? Levitz and Noel (1989) recommend,

Institutions must devise programs and services that will help the students (1) connect to the environment, (2) make the transition to college, (3) work toward their goals in terms of academic major, degree, and career, and (4) succeed in the classroom. (p. 71)

Bailey (2012) explains how most programs that have shown success only serve a small number of the total college population. Taking a program or strategy and applying it to all students enrolled at an institution may enhance the college-wide effect by permeating the entire population, not just a select few students. For example, making a student success course mandatory for all new students may be an intrusive but necessary way to facilitate student success and persistence through a structured classroom experience.

In *Campus Life: In Search of Community. A Special Report* the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) recommends that higher education build communities that “focus not on the length of time students spend on campus, but on the quality of the encounter, and relates not only to social activities, but to the classroom,
too” (p. 20). The report reveals that for a commuter student the classroom is the most common place for academic and social connections to transpire.

Community college students have many obstacles to overcome as they face their first year of college and transition into a new environment. Exploring how the FYE course contributes to the students’ connection to the college environment through the creation of classroom community advances the understanding of classroom dynamics. Above all, the findings allow institutions to gain insight into how the classroom environment impacts student persistence.

Student Success and Learning: The Classroom

In the community college, due to the large student commuter population, the center of learning is the classroom, and the majority of the college experiences take place in the classroom. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) claim, “Designing the classroom experience to promote more meaningful interaction among students and teachers is one promising strategy for community colleges” (p. 14). Tinto (1993) recognizes, “Many students come to campus for very limited periods of time solely for the purpose of meeting their classes and attending to the formal requirements of degree completion” (p. 78). Thus, the FYE course is one way to provide the needed content and support within the classroom experience, which is vital for commuting students since the classroom serves as the main venue for academic and social experiences. Jewler (1989) emphasizes the impact of the classroom by stating, “Once we make the classroom as a place where students want to be, we open the door wide for learning and growth to take place” (p. 202).

Since the classroom plays a fundamental role in the student’s college experience, the classroom learning environment must be constructed in a way that encourages students to become active participants in taking responsibility for their learning. Kezar
(2000) notes, “Research on active learning advocates the benefits and illustrates the positive outcomes of one-minute papers, debates, dialogues, and other methods of engaging students in the learning process” (p. 4). It would be fair to say that the active learning strategies identified by Kezar facilitate an engaging learning environment while fostering a community of learners. Equally important, research shows that smaller, more engaging classes are beneficial for first-year student success (Gordon & Grites, 1984; Keup, 2006). As a general rule, most student success courses have a lower course enrollment cap than other first year courses, and this distinguishing feature of limiting the course enrollment allows the instructor an opportunity to create a more interactive and engaging learning environment.

Perhaps the best illustration of how to facilitate a caring classroom environment that increases student learning and personal development is Andersen’s (1995) seven sequential but separate stages.

These seven stages are caring, building community and a sense of belonging; sharing, cultivating active verbal participation; awareness, being attentive in the “here and now”; respect, for self and others; faith, developing confidence and a sense of optimism; responsibility, requiring the ability to take appropriate action; and purposefulness, finding meaning, making connections, and engaging in meaningful relationships. (Andersen, 1995, p. 16)

Conceivably practitioners in education would incorporate Andersen’s (1995) framework into the classroom by selecting and utilizing activities which build and foster a caring classroom. Thus, using these strategies to further enhance a collaborative learning environment would potentially enable students to achieve their full personal and academic potential.
Retention

The following brief historical overview provides the context for a deeper understanding of retention theories and related research. Undergraduate retention has been studied in the United States for over 75 years. One of the pioneering retention publications is *College Student Mortality* written by John Mc Nelley and published in 1938 (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Following that influential publication in the 1930s and continuing into the 1960s, enrollments in higher education expanded, and students in turn became more diverse in their needs. Subsequently, the issue of retention gained momentum as a distinct area of research in higher education. It was not until the 1970s that theories of retention started to emerge, initiated by William Spady’s (1970) article “Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis.” Based on Spady’s work, Tinto (1975) introduced his interactionalist theory in the article “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research.” During the 1980s, higher education experienced a decline in enrollment, and as a way to manage the downturn, a new retention approach known as enrollment management emerged (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Retention research in the 1990s focused on underrepresented, disadvantaged, and minority students (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). From the early 2000s to the present research focused on the holistic involvement of the campus community and upon approaches and programs designed to support student success (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

Throughout the history of retention research student attrition and persistence are issues consistently identified as key areas of concern for institutions of higher education. Consequently, college retention is one of the most studied areas in higher education (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Tierney, 2000). According to the ACT national rates for
collegiate retention and persistence to degree, approximately 45 percent of students leave college prior to the end of their first year at two-year public institutions; and at four-year public institutions, approximately 35 percent of students leave the institution prior to the end of their first year (American College Testing, 2013a). ACT has tracked freshman to sophomore retention rates since 1983, and retention rates have not changed considerably since the start of their reporting to the current data available for 2013 (American College Testing, 2013b).

Kezar (2004) points out, “Retention is an issue of importance for individuals (future opportunities), for institutions (financial success, accountability, and moral commitment to a supportive environment), and for the nation that strives to develop a workforce and citizenry to support the future” (p. xi). The two most widely used models in studying student retention are Vincent Tinto’s model of academic and social integration and Alexander Astin’s involvement model (Crawford, 1999; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). My study, focusing on the community college, utilizes the conceptual model of student departure that is specific to commuter colleges and universities developed by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), and concentrates on the academic communities element of the model.

Conceptual Model of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities

According to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), “No formal economic, organizational, psychological, or sociological theory that accounts for student departure in commuter colleges and universities currently exists” (p. 35). Therefore, Braxton et al. propose “a foundation for a theory or conceptual model” (p. 35) of student departure for commuter colleges and universities that encompasses “economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological” (p. 35) theoretical perspectives.
The model consists of student-entry characteristics, external environment, campus environment, and academic communities within the institution; all of these factors influence student decisions regarding attrition and retention (Braxton et al., 2004). The characteristics that students bring with them to an institution affect their level of commitment to the institution. As Braxton et al. (2004) point out, complicating the set of entry characteristics is the student’s external environment, including obligations outside of academia and financial costs of attending, factors in a student’s decision to persist. Additionally, the college environment plays a role, since the student’s external environment often limits his or her ability to be on campus, and if the individual has a high need for social connections, this may present as a problem due to the lack of socialization opportunities typically on a commuter campus (Braxton et al., 2004). Also, the commitment that the institution exhibits to students plays a key role in their persistence. Finally, the academic communities are the primary opportunity for students to participate in both the social and academic life of the college. Therefore, the classroom becomes the main avenue for developing academic communities in commuter colleges through active learning facilitated by the instructor.

Based on the conceptual model of student departure for commuter colleges and universities developed by Braxton et al. (2004), the two primary influences on student retention are (a) support from significant others and (b) communities of learning. Support from significant others exists for some students but must be provided by the institution for many students. For example, Braxton et al. recommend that institutions provide support services, flexible course scheduling, on-campus employment opportunities, child-care services, adequate financial aid, and include significant others in college orientation programs. Braxton et al. also strongly recommend that commuter
colleges establish communities of learning that focus on interactive, cooperative learning strategies in the classroom. Through my research in a community college FYE class, the academic communities element of this conceptual model is explored to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions related to how participation in a classroom community affects student transition and persistence in a community college.

Tinto’s Student Success Framework

Tinto (2012) outlines a framework that focuses on the classroom that institutions can utilize in an effort to improve student success. This framework is consistent with the academic communities element proposed by Braxton et al. (2004) in the conceptual model of student departure for commuter colleges and universities, Astin’s (1970, 1975) involvement theory, and McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory. Tinto describes the conditions for student success as expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Expectations refer to clearly articulated standards the institution and faculty expect from the student, and for success, expectations must be maintained at a high level. When expectations are high the necessary support (academic and social) is critical, and evaluating progress along with continuous feedback is necessary for improvement. The final condition, involvement, is engagement within the college community on both an academic and social level.

Summarizing the framework,

Students are more likely to succeed in settings that establish clear and high expectations for their success, provide academic and social support, frequently assess and provide feedback about their performance, and actively involve them with others on campus, especially in the classroom. (Tinto, 2012, p. 8)

Tinto’s (2012) framework for academic success ties neatly into the type of classroom
environment that the model FYE course strives to create with the ultimate goal of improved learning, which (hopefully) leads to persistence and completing college. In addition, Tinto’s framework supports the importance of active learning and involvement in the classroom.

Similar to Tinto’s framework and based on decades of research, Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson developed a guide for improving the undergraduate experience in the classroom that focuses on interactive learning through the use of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (as cited in Gamson, 1995). The principles for effective teaching and learning are “(1) encourages student-faculty contact, (2) encourages cooperation among students, (3) encourages active learning, (4) gives prompt feedback, (5) emphasizes time on tasks, (6) communicates high expectations, and (7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning” (Gamson, 1991, p. 5). The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education provides a guide for instructors to increase engagement in the classroom, with the ultimate goal of improved student success.

Astin’s Involvement Theory

Astin (1975) engaged in years of research on the phenomenon of students dropping out of college and developed the theory of student involvement based on that research. Astin’s (1970) model of involvement comprises three elements: student input, college environment, and student outputs (I-E-O). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) cite Astin’s model below:

College outcomes are viewed as functions of three sets of elements: inputs, the demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and academic and social experiences that students bring to college; environment, the full range of people,
programs, policies, cultures, and experiences that students encounter in college, whether on or off campus; and outcomes, students’ characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors as they exist after college. (p. 53)

Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement is based on the simple principle that involvement is the total physical and mental effort students dedicate to their educational pursuits and emphasizes active learning and involvement in the classroom with peers and the instructor. Central to the theory is the work of the student with less attention on the role of the instructor (Astin, 1999). Therefore, Astin’s (1970, 1975, 1985, 1999) theory of student involvement supports enhancing student participation in the classroom environment in an effort to increase student success in the form of learning and development. In short, involvement with peers “is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, p. 398), and for community college students peer involvement generally happens in the classroom.

The students typically enrolled at a community college have competing outside non-academic obligations that conflict with their ability to spend time on campus and engage fully in educational pursuits outside the classroom. Astin (1985) recommended the student success/orientation course as one way to apply his theory of student involvement. Astin suggests:

Institutions should consider offering a first-term orientation course, which would give students an in-depth picture of the facilities and curricular opportunities on the campus and would also allow them to explore, under controlled conditions, the possible connections between their college experiences and their long-term life plans. Such an exploration would serve not only to increase involvement in
college life by demonstrating its relevance to their later lives but also to open up new career possibilities and other life options. (p. 166)

Active participation and involvement as demonstrated in a typical orientation course or student success course supports the teaching approach that “students learn by becoming involved” (Astin, 1985, p. 133).

Community

Defining Community

The ability to adequately define community is challenging. Gardner (1989) asserts, “We know that where community exists it confers upon its members identity, a sense of belonging, and a measure of security” (p. 73). To better understand community Gardner identifies characteristics or traits of community: wholeness incorporating diversity, shared culture, good internal communication, caring, trust, teamwork, group maintenance and government, participation and sharing of leadership task, development of young people, and links with the outside world. Gardner goes on to say when people embrace concern for the entire community instead of their individual section, everyone benefits, and “humans as social creatures are nourished” (p. 73).

Peck (1987) uses the analogy of a gem to explain community:

A group becomes a community in somewhat the same way that a stone becomes a gem – through a process of cutting and polishing. Once cut and polished, it is something beautiful. But to describe its beauty, the best we can do is to describe its facets. Community, like a gem, is multifaceted, each facet a mere aspect of a whole that defies description. (p. 60)

Viewing community from a sociological perspective, Gunsfield (1975) describes two primary ways to think about community, territorial and relational. A community
may be viewed as territorial or a geographic place (neighborhood, town, or city) or relational that is formed based on common interest and human relationships (Gusfield, 1975). McMillan and Chavis provide a framework for thinking about the relational community “that is characterized by the social cohesion that develops with close interpersonal ties” (Heller, 1989, p. 6). However, McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose that their definition and theory of a sense of community apply equally to all types of communities, but the four key elements may vary in significance based on the type of community.

Learning Communities

The term learning communities has been used in education for almost a century (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). Learning communities “are conscious intellectual structures that teachers create, and students participate in, to share a high-quality and enduring educational experience” (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, “Types of Student Learning Communities,” para. 7). Astin (1985) views learning communities, made up of small groups of students, as beneficial in multiple campus settings. As a case in point, learning communities “can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel” (Astin, 1985, p. 161). Shapiro and Levine (1999) describe learning communities as sharing the following basic traits:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging integration of the curriculum
- Helping students establish academic and social support networks
• Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
• Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways
• Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes
• Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs [and]
• Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience. (p. 3)

The overarching similarity across the definitions of learning communities is the intent to enhance the educational experience through quality interactions.

Tinto’s (1997) multimethod, quantitative, qualitative study at Seattle Central Community College shows the effect of community on student experiences and learning. The study examines learning communities made up of several cohort classes designed to facilitate student connections and provide support. The classroom community also supports interactive learning by providing a connection between students and faculty. The research demonstrates how an urban community college successfully incorporated learning communities within the classroom structure to enhance learning and the student's educational experiences.

Central to promoting community in student success courses is the use of engaging pedagogy as identified in the studies of Swing (2002) and Berns and Erickson (2001). Swing utilizes the First Year Initiative (FYI) Benchmarking national survey data from 30,000 students and 62 institutions to learn about the classroom environment and structure of first-year seminar courses. The findings reveal that increasing student success requires the use of engaging pedagogy in first year seminars (Swing, 2002). Berns and Erickson describe another instructional method, contextual learning, as a process that utilizes real world experiences tied to the content of the course. Berns and
Erickson found strong support for creating an active and social learning experience in the classroom using contextual learning.

In another variation of a learning community Senge (2006) describes how the success of an organization depends upon the ability of the organization to continuously learn and grow in order to thrive. This is illustrated through the idea of a learning organization, and the concept is easily applied to the area of higher education where colleges and universities, and more specifically classrooms, operate as learning organizations. Senge explains,

Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we reperceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. There is within each of us a deep hunger for this type of learning. (pp. 13-14)

Building on Senge’s learning organization concept, when an educational institution engages in creating a learning community culture it provides the foundation for supporting the primary mission of higher education - educating citizens to be productive members of society.

Research suggests that there are two distinct types of classroom learning communities: total-classroom and within-classroom (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Saville, Lawrence, & Jakobsen, 2012). According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999) the objective of the total-classroom community is to “develop a sense of family, or community, across the classroom, [resulting in] all the students in the class view[ing] themselves as members of a distinctive learning community” (“Total-Classroom Learning Communities,” para. 1).
The within-classroom community involves small groups within one class working together to enhance learning. To increase the effectiveness of learning communities, collaborative and cooperative learning techniques are employed, and less emphasis is placed on the traditional lecture approach typically utilized in higher education (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

Higher education, and especially community colleges, face enormous challenges in creating a learning environment that supports the needs of a diverse student population. As stated in Chapter One, Mellow and Heelan (2008) report, “On average, community college students are older, poorer, more likely to be part time and working, and more likely to be the first member of their family in college than students at four-year universities” (p. xv). In addition, the community college is known for serving academically underprepared students who must complete transitional (remedial) courses prior to enrolling in college level courses. Therefore, addressing the diverse needs of the typical community college student population is complicated and continues to be an ongoing challenge. The message is clear, in order to promote the goal of students achieving their full academic potential, creating classroom communities that increase learning, facilitate student success, and increase persistence are essential in higher education.

A review of the literature reveals that, the majority of FYE courses have a proven record for assisting with student success in college. To emphasize this point, Hunter and Linder (2005) explain, “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” (p. 276). However, there is a deficit in the literature on what happens in the classroom and
specifically the community college classroom. This research explores the important questions of how a sense of community is created in a FYE course, and student perceptions of how sense of community translates to the larger community of the college with the ultimate goal of student success and persistence.

Community on Campus

Ernest Boyer (1987) reports on the status of undergraduate education with a focus on how the operations of the college impact the students. The findings are based on research from four-year institutions, but Boyer points out that the information is also applicable to two-year institutions. Boyer’s research examines the problems of undergraduate education and highlights ways to improve the student experience. Specifically, Boyer highlighted the idea of building strong learning communities in order to improve the undergraduate experience. Boyer defines community as

An undergraduate experience that helps students go beyond their own private interests, learn about the world around them, develop a sense of civic and social responsibility, and discover how they, as individuals, can contribute to the larger society of which they are a part. (pp. 67-68)

In 1990 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, under the direction of Boyer, published a report with six guiding principles for defining community on college campuses.

First, a college or university is an educationally purposeful community, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus. Second, a college or university is an open community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed. Third, a college or university is a just
community, a place where the sacredness of the person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued. Fourth, a college or university is a *disciplined* community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good. Fifth, a college or university is a *caring* community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged. Sixth, a college or university is a *celebrative* community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared. (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990, pp. 7-8)

The six guiding principles of community presented by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) are intended to provide a framework for policy and decision-making in higher education. In addition, the framework for community may serve to “strengthen the spirit of community on campus, but also provide, perhaps, a model for the nation” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990, p. 8). Above all, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching advocates for the guiding principles to “define the kind of community every college and university should strive to be” (p. 7).

Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992) conducted research on student life and community on college campuses, which resulted in the identification of four principles necessary for guiding campus community. The four principles are commitment to learning, commitment to justice, respecting differences, and protecting freedom of thought and expression (Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992). Spitzberg and Thorndike
strongly advocate, “that the health of community on campus is essential to the mission of American higher education” (p. 8).

Similar themes emerge from the guiding principles for defining community on college campus (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990) and the four principles of campus community provided by Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992). The connections and relationships align with McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory, which defines community through four elements consisting of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The similarities and connections of principles and elements of community proposed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990), Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992), and McMillan and Chavis (1986) are evident in the recurring themes of educational commitment, justice, caring, openness to diversity, and disciplined environments.

*Sense of Community (SOC)*

Creating a sense of community within the community college classroom is one way to provide the necessary support for students entering the new environment of college. Turning to the field of psychology, Seymour Sarason (1974) first introduced the psychological sense of community as a way to study communities. Sarason defines the psychological sense of community as follows:

The sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully a part of a larger collectivity; the sense that although there may be conflict between the needs of the individual and the collectivity, or among groups in the collectivity, these conflicts must be resolved in a way that does not destroy the psychological sense of community; the
sense that there is a network of and structure to relationships that strengthens rather than dilutes feelings of loneliness. (p. 41)

Sense of Community Theory

Building on the work of Sarason (1974), McMillan and Chavis (1986) advanced a theory of sense of community that is the basis for most of the recent research on the psychological sense of community. McMillan and Chavis shortened the name of the concept to sense of community. McMillan (1976) explains, “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, of members’ mattering to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (pp. 11-12).

The four elements that define sense of community are membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The first element, membership, is comprised of “five attributes: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 11). To be a member of a group signifies that there are people who are not members, and this establishes the boundaries of membership. The attribute of boundaries provides a level of security and emotional safety for the members and facilitates a sense of belonging and group identification. The use of common symbols is the final attribute of membership and provides a way for members to identify and signify who belongs to the group. McMillan and Chavis (1986) note, “Groups often use language, dress, and ritual to create boundaries” (p. 9). Young (1999) explains how educational “Rituals can bond and transform individuals and entire institutions. They can honor the past, but they must be used more effectively now to develop learning communities for the future” (p. 16).
The second element of community, influence, refers to members influencing the community and in turn the community influencing the members. To rephrase, influence is a sense of mattering, where members make a difference to the community and the community matters to the members. To further explain, Schlossberg (1989) defines mattering as a “belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (p. 9).

Integration and fulfillment of needs, also referred to as reinforcement, marks the third element of community. For a group to form a community “the individual group association must be rewarding for its members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). More precisely, McMillan and Chavis (1986) maintain, “Groups with a sense of community work to find a way to fit people together so that people meet the needs of others while meeting their own needs” (p. 13). The importance of fulfilling needs is also described by Sarason (1974) as “an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them” (p. 157).

The final element of community is a shared emotional connection. The important characteristics of shared emotional connection are contact with others, quality of contact, shared importance of interaction, sense of closure on activities, personal investment, ability to be authentic, and spiritual bond (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Contact with others and the quality of contact represents the two essential characteristics of shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) postulate that shared emotional connection “seems to be the definitive element for true community” (p. 14).
In 1996, McMillan expanded on the original principles of the sense of community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). In revisiting the principles, the elements were not changed but reorganized and renamed. In his revisions, McMillan (1996) states,

I view Sense of Community as a spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade, and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art. (p. 315)

In McMillan’s revisions the first element, membership, was renamed spirit with greater prominence placed on friendship. Influence was renamed trust with importance placed on order, decision-making, authority, and group norms (McMillan, 1996). The element of integration and fulfillment of needs was viewed as a social exchange and relabeled as trade. The final element, shared emotional connection, was retitled art. The element of art expands the idea of “the basic foundation of art is experience” (McMillan, 1996, p. 322) and for experience to occur there must be contact. Table 1 below presents the four elements proposed by McMillan and Chavis and revisions proposed by McMillan.

Table 1: McMillan and Chavis and McMillan

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<td>Membership</td>
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<td>Integration and Fulfillment of Needs</td>
<td>Trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Emotional Connection</td>
<td>Art</td>
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McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that sense of community is not static; one can be involved in different communities, and the four elements have an active influence on each other. The ability to describe how the four elements are interconnected and work
collectively to create a sense of community is illustrated through the following example used by McMillan and Chavis:

Someone puts an announcement on the dormitory bulletin board about the formation of an intramural dormitory basketball team. People attend the organizational meeting as strangers out of their individual needs (integration and fulfillment of needs). The team is bound by place of residence (membership boundaries are set) and spends time together in practice (the contact hypothesis). They play a game and win (successful shared valent event). While playing, members exert energy on behalf of the team (personal investment in the group). As the team continues to win, team members become recognized and congratulated (gaining honor and status for being members). Someone suggests that they all buy matching shirts and shoes (common symbols) and they do so (influence). (p. 16)

To summarize, McMillan and Chavis claim,

Strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members. (p. 14)

Sense of Community: Postsecondary Research

The vast majority of research on the sense of community in the education field focuses on K-12 level of instruction. There is limited research related to sense of community conducted on the higher education classroom, and the majority of the research is quantitative and focuses on four-year institutions. Existing research recommends that future research emphasize qualitative methods in order to gain a better
Berger (1997) conducted a quantitative study to assess first-year students’ sense of community in the residence halls at a highly selective private residential four-year institution with a homogenous population. Berger’s study reveals, “A positive sense of community at the local level is important for successful socialization into the broader social system” (p. 450). The ability to apply the findings of sense of community from this study to the community college is limited due to the significant differences between the community college and a private selective residential four-year institution. In addition, the research was conducted in a residence hall, and the majority of community colleges do not offer campus-housing options for students.

Another study at a large research institution focuses on the campus community found in the classroom. This quantitative study conducted by Booker (2008) utilized a modified version of the College and University Community Inventory to explore student perceptions of the sense of community in the undergraduate classroom. The focus is on “student perceptions of their classroom community via interactions with faculty and peers” (Booker, 2008, p. 15). In addition, the study examines the sense of community in relation to students’ favorite and less favorite classes. Booker’s findings reveal, in their favorite classes “students attributed positive experiences and a sense of connection to their faculty instructor” (p. 15), and in their least favorite classes the experiences were slightly more positive toward classmates. Booker recommends that future studies use “formal observations of what occurs within college classrooms and to decipher the techniques and strategies faculty use to help students connect to one another” (p. 16). In addition, Booker recommends conducting student and instructor interviews in order to delve deeper into the experience of community within the classroom.
McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, and Schweitzer (2006) conducted a study using the Sense of Community Questionnaire to measure sense of community within a university psychology class of 40 undergraduates. The results reveal that students with the highest sense of community score show the greatest gains from the first to last exam in the course (McKinney et al., 2006). Thus, this study demonstrated the link between establishing a sense of community in a classroom and one measure of student success, exam grades.

Cheng (2004) conducted research on students’ perceptions of sense of community related to various aspects and experiences in their college life at a four-year predominately residential campus. The study reveals that “students’ feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as an individual, and accepted as a part of community contribute directly to their sense of belonging” (Cheng, 2004, p. 227). Cheng identifies the most noteworthy component of community as faculty and students sharing a commitment to the same goal of teaching and learning. Cheng recommends including student focus groups and interviews in future research to gain a more in-depth understanding of sense of community of a particular campus.

Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) conducted a quantitative study at a large public university to examine freshmen students’ “sense of class belonging and their academic motivation in that class, their sense of class belonging and perceptions of their instructor’s characteristics, and their class and campus-level sense of belonging” (p. 203). The questionnaire was completed by 238 freshmen, and the findings suggest that belonging contributes to academic motivation in college freshmen as similarly reported in studies of students in grades K-12. The study suggests that future research use observational methods to capture involvement in college classes and to explore the
relationship between class and university belonging. Freeman et al. state, “Individual classes provide a regular context in which students interact with both academic content and other members of the university community; thus, understanding the dynamics of that context is particularly important” (p. 218).

There is limited research on the connection between sense of community and persistence and retention in college. The following examples from Tucker (1999), Harris (2006-2007), and Jacobs and Archie (2008) are illustrative of the related research. Tucker conducted a study looking at college student transition, which compared Tinto’s (1993) model for academic and social integration to the concepts of sense of community and vision. Tucker advocates that vision and sense of community “contain more useful theoretical considerations” (p. 163) and tells a more complete story than Tinto’s model in the study of student retention on college campuses. Additional support for sense of community in college retention is found in a study conducted by Harris with 39 adult cohort participants. The research showed support for the establishment of community as a strong factor in the adult students’ ability to complete their degree (Harris, 2006-2007). In a larger university study of approximately 4,000 first-year students, an adapted version of the Sense of Community Index was utilized, and the findings indicated that sense of community “had a significant positive influence on intent to return” (Jacobs & Archie, 2008, p. 284). The studies of Harris (2006-2007), Jacobs and Archie (2008), and Tucker (1999) show promise for the positive effect of sense of community on college student persistence and retention.

Researchers Booker (2008), Cheng (2004), and Freeman et al. (2007) recommend future research on sense of community and belonging in higher education focus on qualitative data. By following up on the recommendation from these researchers, I am
providing insight into how community is created in a community college FYE classroom. Furthermore, the research contributes to a greater understanding of student perceptions on the impact that sense of community has on transition and persistence within a community college environment.

Summary

Research in the community college is limited, and it is important to look beyond the numbers and delve deeper into the experiences of the students. In the community college, the majority of a student’s educational experiences take place in the classroom. Not surprisingly, exploring the classroom learning environment is foundational to establishing effective practices to ensure students successfully transition to and persist in college. This study contributes to filling the gap in the literature and deepens the understanding of how a sense of community is constructed within a FYE course and how students’ perceptions of community affect their transition into and persistence in college.

When freshmen step into the complex world of the community college, the institution must be ready to provide the support necessary to transition them into the academic and social fabric of higher education. Building a sense of community within the FYE course is one way to facilitate a community of learners within the community college environment in an effort to increase learning. Boyer (1987) states it best by saying, “As new students learn about the college, the spirit of community grows, loyalties build, and the quality of the educational experience is strengthened” (p. 47).

Chapter Summary

Chapter Two provides a comprehensive scholarly overview of the historical background and research associated with the first-year experience course. In addition, a
review of literature relating to the classroom, community, learning community, retention, and the community college are explored. Finally, relevant theories and frameworks associated with student departure, student success, student involvement, and sense of community are examined.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Study Design

In Chapter Three, I restate the purpose and importance of the study, and I summarize the pilot study that serves as the starting point of the research. I continue by providing an overview of the methodology, which includes the theoretical framework, methods, and analysis. Next, I explain data organization, principles of privacy, ethics, and trustworthiness, limitations of the study, and generalizability of the study. I conclude with a summary of the study design.

This qualitative study is designed to gain understanding in how a sense of community is created within a first-year experience course at a community college, and how a sense of community impacts students’ perceptions of their transition to and persistence in college. Community colleges have moved from an access agenda to goals for completion by concentrating more effort on student success. As such, it is important to expand the research on initiatives that support students in their quest toward success and educational goal completion. If a student becomes involved in a community on campus that involves peers, faculty, or staff, such involvement increases the likelihood that they will exert more effort and energy into learning, which in turn will increase persistence (Tinto, 1993).

The study of one semester-long FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success community college course will permit an in-depth examination and yield deeper insight into the creation and value of sense of community. The class was selected based on purposive sampling, which allowed me to select an “information-rich case” (Patton, 2002, p. 46) for studying and learning about building community and about how students perceive community impacts transition and persistence. Thus, the students enrolled in the
one course section along with the professor were the population for the study. A deeper understanding of how community is created in the FYE course and student perceptions of how community impacts transition and persistence were gained through classroom participant-observations, faculty and student interviews, and review of materials related to the course. The data generated from the study were analyzed using thematic analysis.

In order to explore how community was constructed and the role it plays for students, the theoretical frameworks for the study were McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory and the academic communities component of the conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities set forth by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004).

Pilot Study

In Fall 2013 and Spring 2014, I conducted a pilot study at Bluegrass Community and Technical College. The pilot study provided an opportunity to explore the FYE 105 course and to gain a deeper understanding of how a sense of community develops within the classroom. During the pilot study, I observed ten individual FYE 105 class sessions taught by six instructors. The participant-observations allowed me to gain insight into how different faculty facilitate active learning and belonging in the classroom. However, it did not allow me to see the “full picture” of how community is created, because I was observing only single isolated class sessions. From the information gathered in the pilot study, I was able to modify my study to allow focus on one class section of FYE 105. This narrowed gaze enabled me to explore how community is created throughout the semester, from beginning to end, in one section of FYE 105, and also to learn about students’ perceptions of how community impacts transition to and persistence in college.
In addition to classroom observations, other data collected during the pilot phase of the project consist of participant observation of two FYE instructor meetings, interviews with five FYE faculty members, one student interview, and documents and materials relevant to the observed classes. During the interviews, faculty consistently expressed their goals of establishing a community of learners in the FYE 105 course. The FYE 105 course description states the course “aims to foster a sense of belonging” (KCTCS Catalog, 2014-2015, p. 291), which is a key concept in the first element of membership in McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory. In addition, a faculty community of teachers-as-learners emerged through a dialogue of sharing and support that transpired through an email listserve, meetings, and an eCommunity platform. The pilot study resulted in providing the necessary foundation for the research study.

Theoretical Framework

In order to explore how community is constructed in a FYE classroom, I utilized the sense of community theory developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). McMillan (1976) proposes the following definition for a sense of community “A feeling that members have of belonging, of members’ mattering to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (pp. 10-11). In addition, to gain a deeper understanding of the role that classroom community plays in students’ perceptions of persistence and commitment to college, I utilized the academic communities element of the student departure conceptual model in commuter colleges and universities developed by Braxton et al. (2004). Chapter Two provides a detailed overview of the sense of community theory developed by McMillan and Chavis and the student departure conceptual model developed by Braxton et al.
Methods of Data Generation

Selecting the Unit of Analysis: The Class

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how community is created, I selected one class section of FYE 105 to explore in depth. I modeled my class selection process after the faculty recruiting and selection process for instructors of University 101 at the University of South Carolina. Gardner (1989) states that faculty selected to teach a freshman seminar course “must be ‘the cream’ – those most likely to do the kind of teaching that will enhance the success of the seminar” (p. 242). Cuseo (1991) supports Gardner’s philosophy and advocates, “have the college’s best teaching and student-oriented faculty” (p. 7) teach first-year experience courses.

Prior to the pilot study I was aware that a particular full-time professor had a reputation for outstanding teaching and for creating a rich community environment in her classes. During my observations in the pilot study I was able to confirm the quality of her instruction for myself, and based upon this knowledge I sought to base my study in her class. I obtained permission from the professor (see Appendix A for instructor consent form), and notified the FYE administrators of the class I selected for the study. This one class section of FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success was observed from the first class meeting to the final day of class during the Spring 2015 semester.

Participant-Observations

Immersing oneself in the setting of the research is a hallmark of ethnography. Therefore, I attended each class session as a participant-observer to experience from the first to the last day of class how community develops in one section of FYE 105 over the course of an academic semester. In addition, I arrived 30 minutes prior to the start of each class and remained in the class until the professor and all students left the classroom.
While in the field, I recorded field notes on my laptop computer. Immediately after class, I read over my notes and attempted to fill in any missing information. Reading, rereading, thinking, and writing about the observations of the class session, followed the note taking activity, which assisted in informing my thought process and was part of the recursive function of data collection. Also, I wrote summaries each day to chronicle the details of the classroom community observations. As a general rule, my role in the class was essentially to observe and to participate minimally. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) state, “Participant observation refers to a process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting” (p. 91).

At the beginning of the class, I explained my study and obtained students’ consents to participate (see Appendix B for student consent form). One student was 16 years old and did not meet the age criteria (18 years of age or older) of my study. Therefore, this one student was eliminated as a participant of the research. However, the fact that the 16 year old student was a member of the class and therefore part of the classroom community is a point that should not be overlooked because the student’s presences contributed to the sense of community constructed within the classroom. However, no data were collected from this individual. Through the participant-observations, I gained insight into how community is constructed in a FYE 105 course, the techniques used to create community, and the influence of interactions and relationships among the class members (instructor and students) within the course.

Interviews

The informants for this research include the professor and the students enrolled in the selected section of FYE 105. In order to gather information directly from the
informant, I conducted four semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C for sample questions) with the professor. These interviews were conducted monthly (January-April, 2015) to allow for systematic generation of interview data throughout the progression of the course in order to explore the chronological flow of the process of development of community. The interviews with the faculty member allowed me to gain understanding of how the faculty member constructs the classroom environment and the techniques used to support the approaches. I also had informal conversations with the professor in person and via email throughout the course of the semester. This allowed me to obtain immediate feedback and clarify my classroom observations.

I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D for sample questions) with the students in the course who agreed to participate in this portion of the study. I was able to interview all 14 students that were still attending the course as of mid-term. As a token of appreciation for their time, I provided the students who participated in the semi-structured interview portion of the study a $10.00 gift card from a local merchant. I started conducting student interviews around mid-term (March) and continued until the end of the semester (April). Conducting student interviews after half of the class had transpired allowed the students to experience the majority of the semester before they were asked to reflect upon the classroom environment. At the time of mid-term (March) students had spent an adequate amount of time in the classroom and were able to talk about sense of community and the effect of community on their transition and persistence. Therefore, the semi-structured interview with the students explored the classroom environment with a concentration on their perceptions of the value of sense of community within the course and how it related to their transition to and persistence in college. In addition, informal student interactions took place throughout the semester.
prior to, during, and after class in the form of casual conversations and discussions. Sarason (1974), who first introduced the psychological sense of community explains, “you know when you have it [psychological sense of community] and when you don’t” (p. 157) and merely asking someone is the simplest way to identify if sense of community exists.

The semi-structured format for the faculty and student interviews involved a list of questions to guide the interview, while also allowing flexibility to follow up and expand as topics emerged. The faculty interviews were audiotaped and conducted in the faculty member’s office on the Cooper Campus. The student interviews also were audiotaped and conducted in the Tutoring Center on the Cooper Campus. Following each interview, I listened to the interview multiple times, transcribed the interview (verbatim), and followed up by reading and rereading the transcript. The same day or in some cases the next day, I prepared a summary of each student interview to gain clarity of the salient information. Within two to three days of the interview, the student received an email containing a summary of the interview. The member checks for each semi-structured student interview involved “taking data and interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible” (Merriam, 1988, p. 169).

Artifacts

The documents I reviewed include the FYE textbook, class syllabus, the Instructor’s eCommunity site, the FYE website, email correspondence, class tests, and class handouts. Documents are valuable sources of information that provide a source of data that are not available through interviews and observations (Patton, 2002). I reviewed the FYE textbook, Instructor’s eCommunity site, and the FYE website prior to
starting the participant-observations. The information gained from the documents was invaluable in preparing me for the fieldwork experience.

Analysis

Qualitative research is a non-linear process that requires engaging in multiple tasks simultaneously throughout the study. Yin (2011) describes a general five-phase cycle in the process of qualitative analysis: “(1) compiling, (2) disassembling, (3) reassembling (and arraying), (4) interpreting, and (5) concluding” (p. 177). I applied these procedures described by Yin as I analyzed the data.

Approach for Analysis: Artifacts, Participant-Observations, and Interviews

My process of analysis started with reviewing and coding the artifacts obtained in the field prior to the start of the Spring 2015 semester. The documents include the FYE textbook, Instructor’s eCommunity, and the FYE website. In addition, classroom materials and handouts were collected and reviewed throughout the study. My initial document analysis assisted in my preparation for participant-observations and interviews.

Using a deductive approach, my prior knowledge of students’ first-year experiences and community in the classroom, my literature review, and my research questions informed the creation of a preliminary set of codes (see Appendix E) for emergent concepts. I used the codes to analyze each set of data for the concepts therein. I documented the concepts on notecards, which allowed me to arrange and rearrange the concepts to form a visual map of my thought process as my analysis evolved. Over time, through the ongoing process of reading and thinking about the data, concepts were discarded, new concepts emerged, and other concepts were revised, which led to refinements of my codes (see Appendix F). The concepts and their codes resulted in a bottom-up level of analysis. Conceptualization and coding were the tools for analyzing
data and fostered my understanding of the data. Expanding, adding, breaking into sub-codes, and revising the codes as necessary resulted in an ongoing recursive process of analysis.

Moving to a higher-level analytic process, I looked for relationships and patterns in the codes. According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999a) patterns can emerge in the following ways: “declaration, frequency, omission, similarity, co-occurrence, corroboration, sequence, and a priori hypothesizing” (p. 98). Yin (2011) refers to this reassembling phase as one where you are “playing with the data” (p. 191) to look for patterns. During this process, I followed Yin’s recommendations by engaging in three different processes: making constant comparisons, looking for negative cases, and looking for alternate explanations.

As I began interpreting the data across the data sets, themes and patterns emerged. During this analytic process, I recorded my reflections and generated meaning of the data. Yin (2011) describes completeness, fairness, empirical accuracy, value-added, and credibility as the criteria for quality interpretations, and I strived to meet this standard. I concentrated on using “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) in my interpretations. The detailed description added to the emic perspective of the study, giving meaning to the participants’ experiences. To assist in generating meaning, I utilized the strategies of making contrasts/comparisons, creating metaphors, and looking for relationships. Finally, I utilized the process of journaling to explore further my research and the discoveries, questions, and experiences of the process.

Additional Data Analysis

In addition to the analytical approaches described above, I also used time-ordered display for the participant-observations. This form of analysis enabled me to gain a
deeper understanding of how community was created in this one FYE course from beginning to end. The time-ordered display identified and briefly described the aspects of community observed in the classroom and included a brief explanatory narrative. This process assisted in “preserving the historical chronological flow and permitting a good look at what led to what, and when” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 110).

Data Organization

During the collection of data, I charted (logged) all data collected, copied and stored data in multiple secure places (electronically and/or hard copies), checked for completeness, continuously organized, and read and reviewed the data. I created a codebook that served as a repository for defining the concepts in order to apply the codes consistently across each data set. LeCompte and Schensul (1999a) describe a codebook as “a list of all of the codes used for the analysis of a particular collection of data, the names of the variables that the codes represent, and a list of the kinds of items that are to be coded for each variable” (p. 85). The codebook was updated and revised throughout the course of data collection and analysis.

Privacy and Ethics

Prior to conducting research, I secured approval through the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board (see Appendix G for exemption certification) and the Kentucky Community and Technical College Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix H for exemption certification). My study qualified as exempt under both reviews. To ensure security and confidentiality, all notes, audio recordings, and course handouts are secured in a locked file cabinet at my personal residence or on my personal computer, which is password protected. In addition, to protect the participants, all names were changed in the final reporting of this study. Following
through with a financial token of appreciation as stated in the student consent letter, all students participating in the interview portion of the study received a $10.00 gift card.

Trustworthiness

To strengthen the rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness of this study, multiple data collection methods (participant-observations, interviews, and collection of artifacts) were built into the design. The process of seeking out multiple sources of data to verify what is described or reported in the study is known as triangulation (Glesne, 2011; Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2011). Also, the decision to be a participant-observer for each class session allowed for prolonged contact with the participants and assisted in the in-depth study of the classroom community.

Other practices built into the design of the research, such as reflexivity, examining for discrepant cases, and member checking, added to the trustworthiness of the study design. I practiced reflexivity by continually asking questions about my study and my influence on the study as the researcher. I recorded my thoughts and reflections in a field journal by writing memos and short notes. In order to foster a complete, in-depth understanding of the classroom community being studied, I reviewed the data to identify discrepant cases (exceptions to the rule or outliers). I also used member checks with the informants to ensure my interpretations were reasonable. These strategies assisted in establishing the trustworthiness, credibility, and rigor of the research.

Limitations and Generalizability

Glesne (2011) notes the importance of documenting the limitations of your research since it “helps readers know how they should read and interpret your work” (p. 214). This classroom ethnography was designed to study the experiences of the students and professor in this one FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success class at Bluegrass
Community and Technical College. The study allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how community is created and how students’ perceive that community affects their transition to and persistence in college.

This study views persistence as intent to return the following semester. The intent to return is based on the students’ perceptions and their individual assessment of how likely they are to return in order to continue their educational pursuits. The findings of the research are based on one FYE 105 class and are not intended to be generalizable to all community college academic success courses or to all community college students taking a student success course. According to Hill (1996), “The research strongly suggests that psychological sense of community is, to a significant extent, setting specific” (p. 433). However, I think educators at other community colleges will find similarities between the experiences of students in the FYE 105 class at Bluegrass Community and Technical College and the experiences of students enrolled in similar student success courses at their institution.

In addition, I explored community in a first-year class in which students were not members of a cohort. If I had studied a group of students enrolled in a particular program, such as nursing, who matriculate through the program as a cohort enrolled in common classes, I would have a completely different community study. This study involves a single class, FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success, which was not linked or paired with other classes or courses or programs.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three reiterates the purpose and importance of the study and provides an overview of the pilot study, reviews the methodology, theoretical framework, methods,
analysis, data organization of the study, addresses issues of privacy and ethics and
trustworthiness, and discusses the limitations and generalizability of the study.
Chapter Four: Establishing a Sense of Community: The FYE Classroom

Introduction - Overview

Chapter Four of this qualitative study provides the data and analysis that permits the reader to acquire insight and understanding into how a sense of community is created in a first-year experience course at a community college. The chapter starts by introducing the participants of the study, which consists of one professor (coach) and 22 students (players), who, through a team approach, set out to learn in FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success how to play the game of college. The FYE 105 professor intentionally structures the class so that the students function as a team with the professor serving as the coach. Next, central to the study, the first days of the class are revealed as critical to the professor’s intentional creation of a sense of community in the FYE class. Subsequently, the themes designed to create a sense of community, which originate during the introductory days of the class are class rules, emotional safety, belonging, interdependence, and active learning. The themes that originate during the introductory days of the class evolve over the semester and, therefore, are further explored. The data are based on participant observations of 27 class sessions of the one section of FYE 105, before and after class interactions, four semi-structured interviews with the professor, a semi-structured interview with 14 students, informal conversations with the professor and students, and review of artifacts.

Participant Introductions

Professor: The FYE 105 Coach

Ms. Nora Lawrence (pseudonym) is an expert educator with 30 years of community college teaching experience. During an interview, Ms. Lawrence describes herself as an “older white professor with a really traditional background.” Each class
session she arrives, like clockwork, 20 to 25 minutes before class, rolling her black briefcase with the books, papers, and supplies she needs for class. She has high expectations for her students and challenges and supports them as they work to achieve her expectations. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) assert, “When faculty members expect students to perform at high levels and support their efforts to meet their high standards, students generally strive to rise to the occasion” (p. 178). Ms. Lawrence is a model of organization and through her pleasant and calming demeanor she is always in control as she expertly manages the classroom. The organized structure that exists in the classroom is not surprising since Ms. Lawrence describes herself as someone who “likes order in the classroom.”

On the first day of class, Ms. Lawrence provides the students several options on how to address her; she said, “You can call me Professor Lawrence, Ms. Lawrence, Nora, or Ms. Nora, whatever you like.” In addition, she refers to herself as a coach. Several class sessions into the FYE course, Ms. Lawrence uses a metaphor in class that opens my eyes to the experience she is creating for the students. I was watching a savvy, experienced coach train a group of rookies on how to play the game of college. Ms. Lawrence reminds the students that she is their coach. She goes on to say, “This semester I will be coaching you on how to play the game of college, and it only works if you decide to play the game.” She gives an example of how Coach Calipari, University of Kentucky men’s basketball coach, works with his players on how to play the game of basketball, but each player must put that information into practice. She further explains how players must form habits that serve them self and their team. Ms. Lawrence emphasizes that each student has a choice on how and if they decide to use the information she provides as the coach.
**Students: The Players**

Table 2: FYE 105 – Summary of Research Participants - Spring 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>1st Semester in College</th>
<th>2nd Semester in College</th>
<th>Multiple Semesters in College (beyond the first year)</th>
<th>Enrolled Full Time (12 credit hours or more)</th>
<th>Enrolled Part Time (fewer than 12 credit hours)</th>
<th>FYE 105 Course Grade <em>(P, F, W)</em></th>
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</table>

*Students earned grades of A, B, C, D, or E for the FYE 105 course. However, for the purpose of this study, I recorded only passing grades (P), failing grades (F), or course withdrawal (W). A grade of A, B, C, or D is considered a passing (P) grade.

Twenty-three students are enrolled in the one section of FYE 105 that I studied during the Spring 2015 semester. Because one student was not eligible to participate in the study due to not meeting the participant criterion of being 18 years of age or older, the study consisted of 22 student participants. Of the 22 student participants in the study, 20 were enrolled full-time (12 credit hours or more) and two were enrolled part-time (fewer than 12 credit hours). There were 13 first-semester college students enrolled, seven
second-semester college students, and two students enrolled beyond their first year of
college.

Sense of Community: Initial Class Meeting of FYE 105

According to Noel (1985) for first-year students the initial class meetings “are
probably the most important class sessions students will encounter during their college
days” (p. 21). Agreeing with Noel, Tinto (2012) advocates when students experience
early success in the first few days of class, they are more likely to experience future
educational success. As such, the first days of the class play a significant role in setting
the tone and direction for the students’ academic semester and possibly their academic
careers. Unfortunately, students often leave college within the first few weeks, not
allowing themselves adequate time to adjust to the new environment (Tinto, 1993).
Hence, exploring in depth the type of environment created during the first-class sessions
is critical to understanding how community develops in a semester-long (16 weeks) FYE
105 class.

In order to establish a community of learners, the first class sessions of the FYE
class are essential to the development of an environment that can foster a sense of
community that, in turn, can increase student success and persistence. One of the best
explanations of how to create the ideal classroom environment is summarized in the
following statement by Rendon (1994):

The key to transforming students is to remove obstacles to learning, to instill in
students a sense of trust in their ability to learn, to liberate students to express
themselves openly even in the face of uncertainty, and to know that the way they
construct knowledge is as valid as the way others construct knowledge. The
validating classroom empowers students, connects faculty with students, and creates an atmosphere of trust, respect, and freedom to learn. (p. 47)

Looking at classroom community from the viewpoint of the FYE 105 professor, Ms. Lawrence during an interview explains when there is community students “help each other,” “show respect,” “rely on each other for support,” and “work together.” In addition, Ms. Lawrence goes on to say in her classroom “students will be interacting with each other pretty much from the time they arrive” since her goal is to build classroom community.

Ritschel (1995) advocates, “the ‘community’ in ‘community college’ cannot effectively be applied to the institution as a whole, but may only be found in each individual classroom” (p. 16). Ms. Lawrence agrees and suggests, based on her experiences, that students at Bluegrass Community and Technical College typically don’t feel connected to the institution as a whole. In viewing the classroom as a community Ms. Lawrence explains,

I think where we build that sense of ‘we’re in this together,’ ‘we belong together,’ ‘we work as a team,’ that better happens within the classroom, because class size is more akin to family size than an entire campus of individuals.

**First Day of Class**

From my location in the hall, I observe several students pacing back and forth outside the classroom. I look at my cell phone and it is thirty minutes before the first FYE class session of the semester. A few of the students waiting for class take a seat on the hallway floor, others review their course schedule, and the remainder of the students keep their heads down as they intently type on their mobile devices. Peering through the open door, I can see the current class and hear the professor and students engaging in a
discussion about the arrangement of names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As soon as the class occupying the room dismisses, the FYE students start making their way into the room to select a seat. As the students settle into their seats, silence overtakes the room, and the only sound heard is the heating system buzzing softly overhead. The students wait in silence for the first day of class in FYE 105. However, in a few minutes the silence will change when the professor, Ms. Lawrence, arrives to the classroom.

First Day of Class: Belonging and the Importance of Names

Ms. Lawrence arrives 20 minutes prior to class starting and greets each student individually. She asks the student his or her name as she hands out a copy of the syllabus. As soon as the students enter the room, prior to the class starting, Ms. Lawrence is working on creating a sense of membership and belonging by immediately starting to learn each student’s name. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define membership as a “feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness” (p. 9).

A popular expression that applies to the first day of class is that you only have one opportunity to make a first impression. Therefore, the first interaction in the FYE class involves the professor welcoming the students individually in order to establish a friendly, approachable, and safe atmosphere. Ms. Lawrence explains her logic for immediately learning the names of the students: “I try to get a head start on learning those names because if I can start calling them by name that is affirmation that, yes, you belong in class because I know your name.” By the end of the first class, she is calling several students by name. Ms. Lawrence explains, “After a couple of weeks I will know everyone’s name and will be able to take roll without using a sign in sheet.” The practice of learning the name of each student and requiring each student to learn the names of the other members of the class aids in establishing a comfortable, caring, safe, and supportive
environment that helps to facilitate student interaction within the classroom and ultimately builds a sense of community.

First Day of Class: The Syllabus

For new college students, the first day of class often invokes a mixture of feelings including excitement, fear, and apprehension due to the many unknowns. Students will have different questions and concerns, but many of these initial questions are answered on the first day of class through the long-standing college ritual of the professor reviewing the course syllabus. The course syllabus is a document used to convey the rules, regulations, policies, norms, and expectations of the course and classroom while also establishing the boundaries of membership for the learning community. In addition, as explained in the KCTCS Code of Student Conduct, one of the academic rights of a student is to be informed in writing within the first class sessions of the expectations of the course (KCTCS, 2009).

Young (1999) explains that rituals are “a learning activity that is grounded in the spirit of community” (p. 11). In addition, Young goes on to suggest rituals express values and typically “affect behavior, for better or for worse” (p. 11). McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe rituals as one way to establish boundaries of membership. Therefore, the students who decide to continue in the course, after participating in the ritual of reviewing the syllabus, have ultimately (even if temporarily) accepted their role as a member of the class.

Predictably, the entire first meeting of FYE 105 is consumed by reviewing the course syllabus. Knowing the rules of the environment is key to setting the expectations for interactions between the professor and the student and among students. When people come together to embark on a quality learning experience, structure is necessary for
creating an environment that encourages and supports active learning, which results (hopefully) in establishing a community of learners. To educators it should come as no surprise that the expectations defined in the syllabus and also highlighted through the first lecture included forgoing cell phone use during class, demonstrating professional behavior, turning in work by the deadline, attending all class sessions, and arriving to class on time and not leaving early.

**First Day of Class: Introducing Active Learning**

To further emphasize the importance of the syllabus, Ms. Lawrence uses the syllabus to engage students in the first interactive learning activity of the class. Students individually read the syllabus and annotate the important points. Afterward, the students work with a classmate sitting next to them to compare and discuss their annotations. This activity introduces group work and requires students to become actively involved with their classmates while working with the class material.

**First Day of Class: Interdependence**

A clear message of the importance of community was threaded throughout the syllabus with the noted goals of advancing interpersonal strategies, creating a sense of belonging, and operating as a team. For example, Ms. Lawrence’s (2015) FYE 105 syllabus states, “I expect students to get to know each other and to work as a team” (p. 2). An activity introduced on the first day of class that supports the expectations of community outlined in the syllabus is the activity of students exchanging names and contact information with at least six classmates. In an interview, Ms. Lawrence points out that the activity has purpose and meaning in relation to the expected student interdependence, which is achieved by students obtaining contact information from their classmates. Ms. Lawrence further explains, “These are the people you contact if you are
absent. So that plants the seed these are the people that will help you, and you are committing to help these people when they have your name.”

The activity of students securing other students’ contact information supports the integration and fulfillment of needs element of McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory in which group membership must be rewarding for the members. More importantly, serving as a contact if a classmate is absent allows for reciprocity between students. Sarason (1974) viewed the integration and fulfillment of needs element as “an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving or doing for others what one expects from them” (p. 157). Obtaining classmates’ contact information on the first day provides the opportunity for students to establish membership and belonging by connecting with others, and also assists with creating an environment that permits students’ needs to be met through reciprocal interactions inside and outside the class.

First Day of Class: Creating Emotional Safety

On the first day of class, in order to create a welcoming and safe environment, Ms. Lawrence encourages the students to follow her after class to the Tutoring Center, email her, or call her (she indicates, though, that the phone probably is an outdated way to communicate). As such, starting on that first day of class students initiated interactions with Ms. Lawrence after class, and these actions illustrated that students were developing emotional safety and security with the professor. Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992) point out that “the heart of campus community” (p. 165) centers on the connections between faculty and students in relation to academics. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify emotional safety as one of the attributes of membership, which assists in establishing a sense of community.
After the first class session, approximately five to six students wait to speak individually to Ms. Lawrence. Students for the next class are starting to file into the room and take a seat. However, Ms. Lawrence continues to give each student as much time as needed and does not appear to be in a hurry. When the last student finishes her questions, Ms. Lawrence asks the student to repeat her name. The student slowly pronounces her name, and Ms. Lawrence attempts to spell her name since it was an unusual name. The student smiles and says, “Yes, that is correct.”

Taking the time to have meaningful interactions is one way for the professor to show care and concern for the students. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) advocate that faculty must “make time for students” (p. 80). Kuh et al. continue to reiterate this point by stating, “There is no substitute for spending time interacting with students, whether face to face or electronically” (p. 80). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) recommends that to achieve community in higher education the focus should be on the quality of student interactions not on the amount of time the students spend on campus. The interaction described above between Ms. Lawrence and the student with the unusual first name lasted less than two minutes; however, judging by the expression on the student’s face the quality of the interaction was invaluable. Creating a sense of emotional safety is an important initial step in creating a sense of community in the classroom.

First Day of Class: Emerging Themes

The first day of the class serves as the impetus for developing a classroom sense of community. The significance of the first day is highlighted by a number of important emerging themes, which include belonging, class rules (conveyed through the syllabus), active learning, interdependence, and emotional safety. The thread tying these themes
together is *belonging*. The objective of belonging is supported by the FYE 105 course description, which states the course “aims to foster a sense of belonging” (*KCTCS Catalog*, 2014-1015, p. 291). As stated previously, the first element of McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory is membership, and the key to membership is belonging.

A notable point observed during the first class session is the major role the professor plays in establishing the classroom community. Ms. Lawrence, through her soft spoken but authoritative demeanor, conveys a welcoming, emotionally safe, fair, and caring environment. Ms. Lawrence provides the foundation for creating the classroom atmosphere by greeting the students as they arrive to class, providing encouragement and support while interacting with the students, explaining the responsibilities and rules listed in the course syllabus, and immediately learning the name of each student. The collective impact of a welcoming, emotionally safe, fair, and caring environment promotes the students’ feeling of belonging to the classroom community.

**Sense of Community: First Weeks of FYE 105 – Exploring the Themes**

The first weeks of the FYE class prove to be meaningful in building upon the sense of community that Ms. Lawrence begins to establish on the first day of class. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) advocate that “Community must be built” (p. 54). As such, Ms. Lawrence intentionally structures the first class sessions in a way that transforms a classroom of individual students into a community that works together through a team approach. The themes identified during the first class session (emotional safety, belonging, interdependence, active learning, and class rules) are explored to gain understanding of how the first few class sessions were central to the development of a sense of community in the FYE 105 class.
Creating Emotional Safety

Creating an environment that facilitates emotional safety is a critical element observed in the first few class sessions. Emotional safety is an attribute of membership identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) that contributes to a sense of community. Emotional safety is especially important for new college students in their quest to transition and persist in college. A beneficial way to explore the transition students experience when entering the college environment is to view the experience through the lens of psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow (1970) explains human motivation as hierarchical in that humans are motivated to satisfy urgent physiological needs before acting to satisfy less pressing psychological needs.

Figure 1: Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow (1970), human needs are physiological (hunger, thirst), safety (security, comfort), belongingness (affiliation), esteem (self-esteem, confidence), and self-actualization (achievement of potential). In light of Maslow’s theory, if students
are to fulfill their need for self-actualization, they must first satisfy their basic physiological and psychological needs.

Within the college environment at Bluegrass Community and Technical College, students are able to satisfy their physiological needs of hunger and thirst through access to a café, vending machines, and water fountains. In further support of students’ needs, the College places an emphasis on safety by maintaining a crisis management plan and an emergency procedures guide, by employing security guards to monitor the campus, and by sending safety notifications through text alerts. The overall goal is to ensure a safe campus environment. Brookman (1989) proposes that faculty should work to meet the safety needs of students in order for them to continue to move up Maslow’s hierarchy.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) point out that emotional safety must be established in order for a community member to feel secure and develop a sense of belonging. Creating a safe classroom environment provides an emotional safety for students to express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, which can produce the expected consequences of promoting the intellectual life and community of the classroom. In light of Maslow’s hierarchy, the safe classroom environment also gives students the foundation they need to act to fulfill their needs for belonging.

At the start of the semester, one of the challenges for a professor is to create an emotionally safe classroom environment that allows students to feel like they belong in the class and in college. One technique Ms. Lawrence uses to validate the voice of her students is to acknowledge and praise (when appropriate) student comments, questions, and answers. This technique starts during the first week of class and is demonstrated by Ms. Lawrence thanking the students for asking questions, complimenting them for their effort, and encouraging them when they participate. It was common to hear Ms.
Lawrence say to the student’s during class, “great question,” “thank you for asking that question,” “congratulations on (fill-in-the-blank),” “good job,” “excellent,” and other similar words of encouragement and validation. Typically, for students to answer and ask questions in class involves feeling a sense of security that their voice will be heard, respected, and supported. Tinto (1993) also refers to the importance of the student’s voice in the classroom by describing the student’s voice “as the linchpin around which education is built” (p. 148).

One specific example of creating an emotionally safe environment occurs on the second day of class; as Ms. Lawrence is discussing the Associate of Science degree worksheet. A student with a doubting tone in her voice comments that she has written in all the courses she intends to take to complete the degree. Ms. Lawrence comments with energy and excitement that she (the student) was “learning how to work the sheet, and she would be advising herself in no time.” The student performed additional work on the assignment and received public affirmation, recognition, and praise for her work. McMillan (1976) suggests, “People rewarded in the presence of others tend to feel close to those who witnessed the event” (p. 76), and thus the experience likely contributed to the student’s sense of emotional safety, belonging, and membership to the classroom community.

Another example occurs on the same day when the class was discussing the Cornell note-taking system, and Jack had a related question. Ms. Lawrence calls on the student by his name, and Jack asks, “What type of questions will be on the exam?” Ms. Lawrence says with enthusiasm, “Great question; it will be fill-in-the-blank.” She then went on to explain the importance of Jack’s question due to the difference in studying for a test with fill-in-the-blank questions versus a test with other types of questions.
The preceding examples illustrate the type of interactions Ms. Lawrence engages in during class to help students feel safe and supported in the classroom. In a classroom environment, it is important for students to feel safe in order to explore and participate in the learning process. The validating interactions by the professor at the beginning of the semester assist in promoting a safe, caring, supportive, and encouraging atmosphere. Ms. Lawrence models the behaviors and sets the tone for establishing and supporting a safe learning environment in FYE 105.

Creating Emotional Safety: Professor and Student Interactions – Before and After Class

While reflecting on professor and student interactions, Ms. Lawrence points out during an interview, “One important aspect of student success is the student’s need to feel comfortable going to a professor or instructor and making that connection.” Therefore, it was not altogether surprising on the first day of class and continuing each class session throughout the semester that students initiated interaction with Ms. Lawrence both before and after class. For example, one day after class, I was in the Tutoring Center and observed a student tracking Ms. Lawrence down to talk to her about an assignment. As I expected, Ms. Lawrence greeted the student enthusiastically and followed the student to a computer to assist her with an assignment.

The comfort level and personal connection the students demonstrate with the professor through the before and after class interactions is cultivated by Ms. Lawrence. For example, she arrives early (20-25 minutes) to each class and makes a point to interact with as many students as possible on a personal level. It is not usual to hear Ms. Lawrence asking the students, “Did you have a good weekend?” or “How are your classes going?” or “Do you have any tests this week?” or “Did you shovel snow this past week?” Another example of a potential reason for the high level of contact students
pursued before and after class is the active learning facilitated in the classroom by Ms. Lawrence. Tinto (1993) claims when professors engage the class in active learning “additional contact with faculty outside of class arises in part because engaged students will seek out that contact” (p. 119).

What stood out as the most striking potential explanation for this type of early connection and sense of safety and comfort by the students is Ms. Lawrence’s statement, “If I reach out first, then that plants the seed that I reach out so I am reachable to the student.” During an interview, Ms. Lawrence further explains her philosophy of interacting with students:

The parameters of exactly when this class begins and exactly when this class ends are flexible. We can keep this going. We can talk before class and even better we can talk after class, you can even walk with me down the hall and take the elevator with me.

At the beginning of the semester, Ms. Lawrence intentionally dedicates the time, energy, and attention needed to create an emotionally safe environment that promotes a sense of community among the members (professor and students) of the class. As previously stated, McMillan (1976) proposed that a “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, of members’ mattering to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (pp. 10-11). Starting the first week of class Ms. Lawrence strives to make the students feel like they matter and belong in the FYE class and in college. McMillan and Chavis (1986) explain that a sense of community should “represent the warmth and intimacy implicit in the term” (p. 9). Ms. Lawrence facilitates the class in a way that brings the qualities of
warmth and intimacy to life through the experience of belonging, participating, and interacting with the members of the class, which facilitates emotional safety.

**Belonging**

If a sense of belonging is to occur it most likely will occur in the classroom since the typical community college student has many competing responsibilities outside of academics, and usually are on campus only to attend class. Once a student feels safe in the class they are more likely to continue coming back to that environment, which allows for a sense of belonging in the classroom to develop. After all, Roueche and Roueche (1985) explain when students “feel comfortable and satisfied” (p. 285) they are more likely to be retained.

As stated previously, for some students “success in college is measured one course or even one class at a time” (Tinto, 2012, pp. 114-115). For this reason, creating a safe environment followed by fostering a sense of belonging is essential to building community with the ultimate goal of student success and persistence. Sarason (1974) explains it best: “Psychological sense of community is an important human need the absence or weakness of which can have debilitating consequences” (p. 214).

**Belonging: Importance of Addressing Students by Name**

Throughout the first two class meetings the professor places a major emphasis on learning the name of each student, she works diligently to call students by name when they raise his or her hand. She also draws students into the discussion by using their name or seeking their assistance to illustrate points relating to the course content. To illustrate, on the day of the second class meeting, Ms. Lawrence arrives 25 minutes before class starts. Just like the first day of class, she immediately starts practicing the students’ names.
The importance of a name is highlighted in the following example, which occurred on the second day of class. A student raises his hand to ask a question. Ms. Lawrence, with a questioning tone in her voice, called him by name, and the student smiled and with a chuckle said “Yeah, you pronounced it right.” He adjusts his posture and sits up a little straighter as he proceeds to ask his question, which suggests that he feels a greater level of confidence after the professor calls him by name.

On the third day of class, the professor demonstrates that she knows the name of each student. As students arrive to class, Ms. Lawrence greets them individually by saying “Good morning, Bethany.” “Good to see you, Elaine.” “Austin, how are you doing today?” Each student smiles and replies back with a greeting of “hello” or “hi” to the professor, who continues these individual greetings until time for class to start. The interactions described above support Roueche and Roueche’s (1985) claim that students “enjoy being called by their own names and being recognized as individuals” (p. 286).

At the start of class on the third day, the focus shifts from the professor, Ms. Lawrence announces, “Today the highlight of the class is learning everyone’s name.” The homework assignment for today involves students bringing an object that starts with the first letter of their first name or sounds like their name. Ms. Lawrence reviews how the activity is designed to accomplish two tasks. First, the activity serves as a way to introduce students to each other. Secondly, the activity illustrates a memorization technique using as many of the senses as possible. On the first day of class, Ms. Lawrence promises to learn everyone’s name and the students would know all the names of their classmates. During the activity, students document in their learning notebook (a notebook used to organize and record class notes, assignments, and supplemental materials) the name and representational object of each classmate. Students take turns
recalling the name of each student by using the objects presented as clues. Ms. Lawrence also reminds the students, “Don’t forget you can tag a friend if you need help.” The activity produces lots of laughter, joking, and smiles as the students learn one by one the names of their classmates.

For multiple reasons, the activity of bringing an object to facilitate learning the names of each classmate proves to be a game changer for the class. The first significant outcome from the activity is the demonstrated desire by the students to rescue their classmates. As the activity starts, Ms. Lawrence states, “If you didn’t bring an object, say pass when we get to you, and next class period bring an object.” However, when the students practice the name and object of each student they also include the students who didn’t bring an object. Ms. Lawrence later describes this as “They already had the impulse to rescue, and I want to nurture that. That was wonderful. I have to say that doesn’t always happen, but it does sometimes happen, and it happened beautifully in this class.” One example of rescuing that stood out was when Dillon suggested an object for Tiffany to bring for the next class. It involved the student’s tattoo and was a creative suggestion.

The act of the students wanting to include all the students was a sign that belonging and identification were starting to develop. McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe belonging and identification as “The feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group” (p. 10). The activity of learning the names of each classmate unfolds in a way that illustrates the presence of all the criteria for belonging and identification recognized by McMillan and Chavis. After the activity Ms. Lawrence comments,
I thought it [the activity] worked wonderfully, [but] it’s not always a miracle. I do use that activity every single semester with FYE, and it always does some good; the amount of good it does is not always predictable [but] things are always better no matter what.

Roueche and Roueche (1985) support the approach of dedicating class time to learn the name of each student, which establishes an environment of “caring and concern” (p. 286). Roueche and Roueche go on to say instructors who utilize class time “introducing themselves and introducing students to each other do not lose valuable time that might be spent covering content; rather they lay important groundwork whereby the students sense some tie to the class and to the teacher” (p. 286). Once again, personal connections reinforcing the first element of membership and the feeling of belonging that McMillan and Chavis (1986) view as necessary to establishing a sense of community.

The outcome of the activity that was most surprising was the change in the class environment that I began to notice while watching this activity unfold. I observed the class shift from being a group of individuals to becoming a team. Ms. Lawrence confirmed during an interview that she noticed the same shift occur after the students learned the names of their classmates.

At the end of the activity, the professor transitions to the first chapter of the textbook. As the class session progresses, students start raising their hand more often to ask and answer questions, offer more comments, and express their thoughts and ideas a little more freely. Also, the student responses became a little more personal but appropriate due to the content being covered. For example, Brandon shares how he documents assignments in the global positioning system (GPS) on his phone and a signal goes off when he arrives at home as a reminder of his assignments. Brandon’s comment
receives a surprising, spontaneous round of applause from the class, which shows support and validation from his classmates. Natalia shares with the class that she already spent over $400 on books for one anthropology class, and several other students nod in agreement at the expense of books. A brief conversation on the general high cost of college follows. Therefore, the quality of the interactions and the personal sharing serves as a starting point for students to experience the shared emotional connection identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as one of the elements for a sense of community.

Learning the names of the students who make up the class community was a distinguishing feature of the developing sense of community. In addition to learning the names, the activity associated with learning the names places the responsibility on all community members to participate in creating the environment and highlights the idea that to belong you have responsibilities to the other members.

*Interdependence: Peer Support*

The collective impact of students helping students has multiple implications for establishing a sense of community. During the first weeks of the course, Ms. Lawrence makes considerable effort to facilitate students learning to support each other in order to create a team environment that provides security, belonging, and social and academic support. Ms. Lawrence emphasizes that she expects students to “rely on each other for support” and “tag a friend for assistance.” In addition, Ms. Lawrence points out that she wants students to feel they “are not alone in this [class] room.”

An example of Ms. Lawrence facilitating students helping students takes place prior to the start of the second class meeting. A new student enters the classroom for the first time due to registering late for the course. Instead of Ms. Lawrence explaining the
A second example occurs during the first week of class when Dillon is caught off guard when Ms. Lawrence asks him the directions to navigate to a certain web page. Instead of moving on to someone who knows the answer, Ms. Lawrence recommends that he “tag a friend” for help. The students offer assistance, and Dillon successfully navigates to the requested web page. Ms. Lawrence uses the concept of ‘tag a friend’ throughout the semester to facilitate a team approach to learning, reinforce interdependence, and to enhance the sense of community.

At the end of class during the first week another example occurs when a student needs directions to the bookstore. Ms. Lawrence asks another student waiting to talk to her “what direction are you heading after class.” The student, understanding the intent of the question, offers to take her classmate to the bookstore on her way to her next class.

Thus, the above examples demonstrate how the professor facilitates student-to-student interaction for multiple purposes. First, the students are meeting the needs of a classmate, which connects to the integration and fulfillment of needs element in a sense of community. Secondly, the students are establishing a sense of belonging and are creating a sense of caring and security, which are attributes of the membership element of sense of community. In addition, students are exposed early in the semester to the importance of peer connections in the social process of learning.

Active Learning

One approach that has proven successful in increasing student learning and persistence is the utilization of active learning strategies (Astin, 1985; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, &
Hartley, 2008; Chickering, 2000; Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Braxton et al. (2004) state, “Active learning is a basic requirement for the formation of the community of the classroom” (p. 48). As stated previously, active learning starts on the first day of the FYE 105 class when, after individually annotating the course syllabus, the students work in pairs to review and discuss their annotations.

On the second day of class, Ms. Lawrence reintroduced active learning by providing an opportunity for the students to work with their classmates to complete a worksheet. The majority of the students worked in pairs while others worked independently on the worksheet. After some time passes, the professor encourages the students to collaborate with others on the questions they aren’t able to answer. Some of the students begin working with others at their table while other students elect to continue to work in isolation. Ms. Lawrence continues to encourage partnering with others to complete the exercise. The professor makes one last attempt to encourage collaboration when she directs the students to “send a spy to another group” to inquiry about questions they were uncertain of the answer. However, despite the continued encouragement from the professor, not one group sent a spy to another table. Ms. Lawrence explains later in a private conversation that she did not view this as a problem since this is the start of group work, and it takes time for students to feel comfortable.

The dynamic of the interactive group learning process looked very different several class sessions later, after the class participated in an activity designed to learn the names of their classmates. The following is an activity that transpires on the fourth day of class, the class session after the students learn the names of their classmates. It is the fourth class session of FYE 105, and it is approaching the end of the class. Ms. Lawrence announces, “There is time to do one last activity.” Ms. Lawrence proceeds by directing
the students to take out a piece of paper and to work independently to make a list of what they perceive will be challenging for them in college. Natalia says, “like our goals” and Ms. Lawrence replies, “No, your challenges.” Cathy chimes in, “like financial” and Ms. Lawrence says, “yes.” Ms. Lawrence proceeds with a few examples of other possible challenges as a way to provide more direction. Then Brandon asks in a questioning voice, “Are we just making a list?” Ms. Lawrence replies, “Yes, a list of your challenges.” The student sitting next to Brandon returns to her seat after briefly leaving the room, so Brandon explains quietly to the student the details of the assignment. Brandon exhibits his commitment to the team philosophy by helping (without prompting) a classmate catch up so she can participate fully in the activity. The professor goes on to explain, once you finish, then work with everyone at your table to see what similar challenges you all share. Ms. Lawrence continues, “You might not want to share all your challenges with others. Pick a challenge on your list that you think is probably shared with someone on your row.” The students do not appear to be in any rush as they start the assignment, and I am surprised since there are only 15 minutes of class time remaining. It is not unusual in a college class for students to start fidgeting, closing their books, and losing interest toward the end of class, but this does not happen today.

The students finish with their individual list and start engaging in a lively discussion with the classmates at their table. The students do not appear to hesitate or hold back from discussing personal issues with their classmates. In contrast, as previously described during the first couple of class sessions group work proved to be more challenging for the students. The students were hesitant to share, worked independently, and were guarded in their collaborations even when prodded by the professor multiple times. However, during this activity on the fourth day of class,
discussion is energetic and active as the students talk about their work schedules, family obligations, finances, and other challenges. Chickering (2000) explains when classroom activities “address shared personal or social concerns, they take on an affective dimension that helps build trust and support” (p. 30).

Finally, the groups are directed to select one person to serve as the reporter to share with the class the similar challenges each table of students identified. Brandon informs the professor that he is the reporter and will need the whiteboard marker microphone. Several students laugh at Brandon’s comment. As a technique to encourage student participation, Ms. Lawrence introduced the whiteboard marker serving as a microphone on the second day of class. After identifying the reporter for each group, Ms. Lawrence hands the marker to the first student and requests that the marker (serving as a microphone) be passed to the next reporter when finished. The students take the role of reporting the shared group challenges seriously, but also incorporate some fun. Angela starts out with “hello, everyone” and gives her very official report and then ends with “over to you, Brandon.” The students are having fun with the activity, and each other, but they also are respecting the rules and professional environment of the class.

To summarize, the groups report similar challenges: transportation, parking, financial issues, deciding on a major, lack of sleep, English not their first language, and homework. The activity wraps up, and Ms. Lawrence dismisses the class. However, the students continue to discuss with their classmates the challenges they are facing, and that ongoing dialog relating to class content was a new development contributing to the creation of trust and concern in the classroom that had not happened previously.

I observed significant differences in how the students interacted during the two classroom activities described above. First, to be clear, the activities were different. The
first activity described, occurring on the second day of class, involved reading a worksheet and answering questions, while the second activity required the students to open up and self-disclose their personal challenges. One would expect the first activity to be a safer activity because it did not involve the act of sharing personal information. The second activity occurs the day after the students learn the names of each of their classmates, thus the dynamics of the class appeared to be substantially different. In discussing this observation with Ms. Lawrence, she agrees the environment of the class changes after the students learn the names of their classmates.

On the fourth day of class, after students have learned each other’s names, they are more receptive to interacting with their classmates. The increased interaction demonstrates that a sense of trust, safety, and security are starting to form among the classmates and professor, which is necessary for a sense of community as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Students freely shared details of the struggles they face with full-time employment, class attendance, transportation issues, lack of financial support, bills, and the general stress and pressure of the college experience. Andersen (1995) explains, “When people experience caring (being deeply understood and appreciated), their defensiveness begins to fade and a willingness to self-disclose emerges” (p. 6). Thus, the students identify that their struggles and challenges are similar to their classmates and, as a result, a deeper connection starts to form.

A shared emotional connection is one of the four elements of a sense of community as described by McMillan and Chavis (1986). When members have quality interactions and can identify and connect with the experiences of others, it has the real potential to strengthen the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The discussion of
shared challenges provides insight into ways that similar experiences foster emotional connections among students.

Another important feature of active learning is Ms. Lawrence’s strategy of facilitating active learning by gradually progressing to higher levels of engagement. Ms. Lawrence explains that preparing students for higher levels of interaction is an intentional technique. The process starts on the first day of class with students working with one person sitting beside them. Thus, working with one person provides an easy first step and does not require a student to leave the comfort of his or her seat. The next level of participation occurs on the second day of class and involves students working in groups at their table. Moving to this point incorporates more people but doesn’t require a student to leave his or her area or table. On the third class session the active learning process entails working on an activity that involves the entire class, so everyone was introduced to everyone in the class. Throughout the semester, Ms. Lawrence continues to increase the level of engagement and types of interactive learning. Ms. Lawrence explains that she tries “to give them [the students] different kinds of activities – try things in different ways so that they do feel that they belong.”

To reiterate a point made earlier, Braxton et al. (2004) assert that active learning is foundational to building community in the classroom. However, engaging students in active learning is necessary but not sufficient for developing classroom community. Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004) suggest the professor must also utilize “skills of collaboration, respect, and trust” (p. 75) in the classroom.

William James (1899/2001) and Nevitt Sanford (1967) both advocate that teaching is an art. If teaching is viewed as an art, one would expect each professor to bring to the classroom a different level of originality, imagination, and talent when
instructing, leading class discussion, and engaging students in active learning.

Chickering (2000) adds to the discussion by defining teaching simply as “arranging the conditions for learning” (p. 25), which is one of the challenging aspects of the art of teaching. Sizer (1984) explains that learning “involves the interaction of three actors: the student, the teacher, and the subject of their mutual attention” (p. 151). Sizer emphasizes the relationship between the student, teacher, and subject matter as the most important in the learning process. Agreeing with Sizer, Palmer (2002) suggests the collective impact of learning is fully realized “when there is a dynamic community of connections between teacher and student and subject” (p. 185). Thus, at the beginning of the semester, it is the professor’s responsibility to establish relationships and set the tone and direction of the classroom learning experience. Therefore, to achieve the objective of creating a community, the art of skillful teaching must include fostering active learning while also creating relationships, and establishing an environment of collaboration, respect, and trust.

**Rules: According to the Syllabus**

During the first few weeks of the FYE 105 class students were “learning the laws of how things work” (McMillan, 1996, p. 319). My observations reveal that for the most part students appeared to be compliant with the classroom rules as defined in the FYE 105 syllabus. One notable exception was Ms. Lawrence’s daily reminder to the students to “put your cell phones out of reach.” The first few weeks of the FYE class could be viewed as a honeymoon phase when the professor and students are learning about each other and beginning to create group norms, conformity, and order, which are attributes identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) in the sense of community element of influence.
Summary of Themes: First Weeks of FYE

As stated previously, the first weeks of a course are critical to the success and persistence of college students. However, Brown and Burdsal (2012) maintain, “There is a lack of literature relating sense of community specifically to student success” (p. 434). As such, exploring how community develops in the classroom during the initial class meetings is important to understanding and studying student transition and persistence. The themes emerging during the first weeks of FYE 105 create a foundation for the community building that occurs in the classroom. The development of a sense of community is dynamic, and according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) involves four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. During the first few weeks of FYE 105, membership was the most significant element observed. However, the other three elements (influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection) were all present in varying degrees.

The identified themes that develop during the first few weeks of the course are emotional safety, belonging, active learning, interdependence, and class rules, all of which strongly support the first element of a sense of community - membership. Establishing membership for each class member by creating an emotionally supportive atmosphere that encourages belonging emerged as a starting point for facilitating a classroom community of learners. McMillan and Chavis (1986) state that the element of membership shares five qualities, which include “boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system” (p. 11). Emotional safety, belonging, active learning, interdependence, and following class rules do not develop in a sequential order but emerge in parallel and simultaneous fashion.
over the course of the first few class sessions and continue to develop, evolve, and advance over the semester.

Establishing membership and specifically fostering the key element of belonging are essential for creating a community of learners within a diverse classroom environment. Ms. Lawrence skillfully employs intentional and concentrated efforts to create a community atmosphere in the classroom. She facilitates interactions with each class member and among class members in ways that establish membership and ultimately a feeling of belonging within FYE 105, which assists with transition and hopefully translates to college persistence. Tinto (1985) maintains, “The process of persistence in college is very much like that of establishing competent membership, that is, becoming integrated in the communities of the college” (p. 35). For community college students, the most likely place for a sense of community to occur is the classroom.

The development of a sense of community is dynamic, and according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) involves four elements (membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection). The four elements of sense of community are described by McMillan (1996) to be connected in a “self-reinforcing circle” (p. 323). Therefore, one element does not emerge independently of the others. However, the elements will have different levels of significance depending on the individual members and the type of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis also point out that the degree of importance of each element has the potential to ebb and flow over time based on the specific qualities of the community and the membership.
Sense of Community: Beyond the First Weeks of FYE 105 – Themes Evolve and Expand

The first few weeks of the FYE 105 course prove to create the foundation for the remainder of the semester. However, as the students and professor move beyond the first weeks the evolving sense of community in the FYE course serves to enhance the classroom experience in ways that support the students’ transition and persistence. What unfolds is a greater understanding of how the identified themes (active learning, class rules, emotional safety and belonging, and interdependence) continue to evolve, develop, and advance over the semester.

As the sense of community grows in the FYE 105 classroom, the progressing and expanding themes align with the validation activities identified by Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008):

Validation activities in the teaching and learning context include calling students by name, working one-on-one with students, praising students, providing encouragement and support, encouraging students to see themselves as capable of learning, and providing vehicles for students to support and praise each other. (p. 33)

Active Learning: Creating a Social Learning Environment

Ultimately, the intent of a community of learners in the classroom is to facilitate the social process associated with learning (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). As such, the environment emerges as a central feature in the ability to create a sense of community in a FYE 105 course at a community college. A feature within the identified themes is establishing an environment by which a community can develop in order for social learning to emerge.
John Dewey (1966) advocates, “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment” (p. 19). As such, the classroom environment is critical to the educational process. In this study, Ms. Lawrence plays the key role in the intentional creation of the environment. Starting on the first day and continuing until the last class session, Ms. Lawrence exerts tireless effort into creating a classroom environment that embodies the following characteristics: caring, respectful, emotionally safe, fair, professional, structured, organized, and team centered. Similarly, Raywid (1993) identifies respect, caring, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment, and commitment as important qualities in fostering community in the classroom.

Two giants in the history of education addressed the social aspect of education. Dewey (1966) viewed education as a social process and states,

The social environment consists of all the activities of fellow beings that are bound up in the carrying on of the activities of any one of its members. It is truly educative in its effect in the degree in which an individual shares or participates in some conjoint activity. (p. 22)

Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) also recognized learning as a social process and explains,

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between human individuals. (p. 57)
The section of FYE 105 explored through this research serves as an example to illustrate how the professor develops an environment that supports and nurtures the social aspect of learning in a way that helps establish a sense of community among the class members.

*The Importance of Active Learning on the Classroom Community*

Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, and Hartley (2008) observed that using active learning strategies in the classroom “plays a significant role in the retention of first-year college students” (p. 81). With few exceptions, Ms. Lawrence’s FYE course utilizes active learning strategies during each class session. Throughout the semester students were assigned to work with different classmates on in-class assignments. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) advocate that faculty must facilitate active learning in the classroom in order for “small communities [to] develop around the college classroom, a community for each course” (p. 48). Therefore, to illustrate how active learning facilitated through group work contributes to a sense of community, I will analyze an in-class activity the students worked on in mid-March to highlight the dynamics of the four elements of sense of community (membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection).

In an activity called “lock down” students are not allowed to leave class until their group has successfully answered all the questions on the handout (integration and fulfillment of needs). Each student has a handout containing questions and the student must complete his or her individual handout in collaboration with the other members of the group (membership boundaries for this activity). One of the handouts will represent the group effort (integration and fulfillment of needs) for individual credit for each team member. The activity encourages the students to work as a team in order to achieve the common goals of completing the handout successfully (integration and fulfillment of
needs), learning from each other (influence), receiving full credit for the assignment (integration and fulfillment of needs – community success), and the reward of leaving class early after completing the assignment (shared emotional connection – shared reward).

A common approach Ms. Lawrence uses to arrange students in groups is to write their name on the white board as they arrive to class (membership is established for the activity). In order to prepare for the in-class activity, the students read and annotate several articles as a homework assignment prior to class. The students have an opportunity to show a level of responsibility to their classmates (influence and personal investment of effort due to membership in the group) by preparing prior to class. I observe a group that begins by discussing how they will work together (integration and fulfillment of needs). Austin recommends that each team member “take a question and then discuss at the end” (influence). Angela explains that she was not present at the previous class, so she did not know to read the articles. Austin offers his reading handout to Angela (benefit of membership). The students start working individually and then they collaborate on the final answers (integration and fulfillment of needs). The students support each other and share where they found the answers within the article (integration and fulfillment of needs and influence). Once the students in the group finish the assignment, they take one paper to Ms. Lawrence for review. After making a few corrections they have all the answers correct, and turn the one paper in for individual credit (integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection – positive shared grade and the ability to leave class a few minutes early).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) view contact and quality of contact as central to helping people connect. Therefore, student interactions during group activities provide
means to strengthen the relationships of the students within the class. First, students experienced prolonged periods of contact because group activities occurred almost every class session. Second, students supported each other during class by collaborating on group projects or tagging a friend if they needed assistance. Third, the quality of the contact appeared positive as students worked together to achieve a common goal in activities that usually involved earning credit toward their individual course grade. Therefore, the shared experience of engaging in active learning assisted in establishing a learning environment that focused on rules, interdependence, emotional safety, and belonging. These qualities of the learning environment fostered connections among the classmates and with the professor that supports the student’s sense of community and benefits their persistence to educational goal completion.

The Syllabus: Maintaining the Community Rules

Schlossberg (1989) explains,

Every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises. The larger the distance between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new role. (p. 7)

In the FYE 105 classroom, the syllabus clearly articulates the rules of the course and the classroom and serves as a guide for the norms of student behavior and expectations. Throughout the semester, students were reminded of the rules established on the first day of class and often were directed to refer to the syllabus to review the rules. For example, when students were late with an assignment Ms. Lawrence would refer them back to the deadline policy in the syllabus.
The syllabus was introduced on the first day of class and provided the foundation and direction for the course and also served as Ms. Lawrence’s rules for how to play the game. The syllabus not only covered the objectives of the course but also clearly articulated the behavior required for success in college and established the norms for the student’s new role as a member of the college community. Ms. Lawrence explains during the first weeks and repeats throughout the semester, “We all have the same contract.” If you are part of the classroom community, you comply with the syllabus, and the rules are the same for everyone. Finally, the syllabus serves as the community’s written code of rules, which describe how to maintain a consistent, disciplined, and fair environment within the classroom. McMillan (1996) notes that the members of a community must understand the expectations and norms of the community. As such, the rules become critical to maintaining the order of the classroom environment.

However, when a group of diverse learners enroll in the same course and attempt to create a community of learners, there is always the possibility of unexpected situations. On several occasions during the semester, the members of the community challenged the rules of the classroom. The first example occurs in early February. It is a normal start to class as Ms. Lawrence reviews with the students what they should expect for the upcoming class sessions. Specifically, Ms. Lawrence is discussing the upcoming test on Tuesday, and suddenly she stops, looks at Brandon and Sarabi, and silence quickly fills the room. When the two students stop talking, she continues without saying a word about the disruption. Shortly after this disruption three other students sitting next to Sarabi and Brandon join in on the whispering and chatting. Ms. Lawrence stops her lecture several times to regain the attention of the chatting students in an attempt to force them to refocus on the objectives of the class.
Next, the students are given an individual assignment and immediately Sarabi turns and starts talking to Brandon. Ms. Lawrence explains to Sarabi the intention of an individual assignment, and Sarabi begins to work independently on the assignment. Ms. Lawrence walks to the back of the class and stands between the rows with Sarabi on her right and Brandon on her left. She explains that cell phones need to be put away (out of reach) during class. In his typical funny and friendly way, Brandon attempts to persuade Ms. Lawrence that he should be allowed to use his cell phone. Ms. Lawrence stands firm in upholding her cell phone policy as she communicates to everyone in the class to make sure their cell phone is out of reach so they will not be distracted. Ms. Lawrence takes the continuous disruptions in stride as she moves forward with class discussion.

The scenario described above illustrates the second element of sense of community, influence, which involves members exerting influence on the community and each other simultaneously. Brandon appears to be testing his influence on the class by challenging the rules (classroom norms) that were clearly articulated on the first day of class and written in the syllabus. For influence to occur a level of order and conformity to the community norms needs to exist (McMillan, 1996). In addition, a structure that clearly defines who is in charge is necessary to maintain order in a community (McMillan, 1996). A classroom is a special type of community that has a predetermined authority figure, the professor, who is ultimately in charge of the classroom. Structure at some level must exist in a classroom community in order for the group to achieve the objectives of the course and satisfy the needs of each member of the class.

This example highlights the importance of influence in establishing and maintaining an orderly classroom environment. If the classroom does not have a leader (professor) whose influence is steadily and firmly in alignment with the norms for a
consistent, disciplined environment the individual students may override the required level of order that is needed for a classroom environment to facilitate the process of learning through the social role of the student. This incident turned out to be isolated, and the classroom returned to order after this single disruptive class session. Ms. Lawrence later commented that she felt the students, on this particular day, probably had some unfinished business outside of class that they couldn’t seem to put aside in order to focus on the class.

The following illustrates a second occurrence of a student challenging the rules, which occurred in late April toward the end of the semester. Natalia texted Bethany prior to class so that Bethany could alert Ms. Lawrence that Natalia would be late to class. Therefore, Natalia was following the guidelines of the syllabus in regard to contacting a classmate if you are going to be absent from the class. In Natalia’s case, she was only going to be absent for the first part of the class. Texting a student prior to class about being late had become a routine occurrence with Natalia over the last few weeks of the semester. Due to Natalia’s late arrival to class she missed the opportunity to turn in her homework for deadline points. Ms. Lawrence’s (2015) FYE 105 syllabus states,

Students are expected to turn in all work on time, and all students have exactly the same deadline – the moment when the work is collected in class. Arrive on time in class so that your work will be accepted. Work that arrives late to class cannot be turned in for credit. (p. 4)

After class Natalia discusses the deadline policy with the professor. Natalia did not understand why the policy applied to her since she alerted Ms. Lawrence that she would be late. Referring again to the policy stated in the syllabus, Ms. Lawrence explains in her calm and authoritative voice, “If I let you turn in the assignment late, I
would have to let everyone turn in the assignment late. Everyone has the same deadline - the exact time in class that the work is collected.” Natalia’s face displayed a look of shock and then she started to raise her voice. Suddenly she turns around and collects her books, stomps to the back of the class, swings the door open, and shouts an expletive as she leaves the room. As I was exiting the building for the day, I noticed Natalia outside the building crying, screaming, and talking loudly on her phone about the situation that had just transpired in the FYE class.

The previous example illustrates a situation where a student challenged the rules, policies, and classroom norms as described in the syllabus. McMillan (1996) explains, “The relationship between knowledge and behavior extends to almost every human endeavor” (p. 319). Thus, when Natalia challenged the policy relating to the deadline and credit for assignments, as described in the syllabus, she reacted in a way that was disruptive to the established order and expected behavior of student conduct. A student must understand and adhere to the expected rules and norms of the class in order to “develop a sense of personal mastery” (McMillan, 1996, p. 319), and success in the FYE course requires students to comply with the community rules and meet established deadlines.

During the next FYE class session Natalia, once again prior to the beginning of class sends a text to a classmate that she will be late for class. Approximately 10 minutes into the class session there is a knock on the door; Natalia has arrived. The students fell silent, and focused their attention on Natalia, as she entered the class through the center aisle making her way to her typical seat in the front of the room. Once there, she removes her backpack, puts down several other bags, shuffles through her backpack and remains standing in front of the class as she organizes her books, pencils, papers, and
other class supplies. After a few minutes, Ms. Lawrence asks Natalia to have a seat. Before sitting down, Natalia excuses herself and states she needs to go to the restroom. I felt an awkward tension in the room due to the disruption. Thus, Natalia continued to exert a negative influence on the classroom community by not following the established guidelines and norms identified in the syllabus in regard to arriving to class on time.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) acknowledge that people who “push to influence, try to dominate others, and ignore the wishes and opinions of others are often the least powerful members” (p. 11) of a community. Throughout the semester, I observed that Natalia’s behavior did appear to have a negative influence on other students’ willingness to fully engage with her during group activities and discussions. Therefore, Natalia’s noncompliance with the rules of the class, as described above, proved to be counterproductive to the community environment. However, due to the steady, consistent, and fair influence of the authority figure (the professor) the disruption to the classroom community proved to be minimal.

Overall, one particular syllabus rule created an ongoing challenge for the students throughout the semester: the professionalism statement regarding cell phone use during class. Ms. Lawrence’s (2015) FYE 105 syllabus describes behaviors that distract learning, and in reference to cell phones the syllabus states,

Cell phones should be set to silent and placed out of reach in class. Using them during test-taking counts as cheating, an academic offense. Use of a phone during class can be counted as an absence. Text between classes, not during class. If you repeatedly violate this policy about professionalism, you will be asked to leave class. (pp. 2-3)
Throughout the semester Ms. Lawrence repeatedly reminded students about the cell phone policy. The following example highlights an interaction that shows a student participating in policing the compliance of the community rules. In early March during Ms. Lawrence’s lecture, she slowly starts to work her way to the back of the room while she is talking. When she approaches the back of the room, Brandon says, “Dillon you have to keep your phone out of reach, it’s in your syllabus.” Ms. Lawrence replies, “Thank you, Brandon. I think several people needed that reminder.” In this example, Brandon is holding another student accountable to the rules of the classroom community. He is also exerting his influence on Dillon since they sit close to each other and appear to be friends.

In an interesting twist, Brandon, who was policing Dillon, is also the student who in the first example was exerting his influence in a negative way in regard to not adhering to the class rules. After the one incident described in the first example in which Brandon was a negative influence on the class, he transitioned and became the positive influence in the class. On several occasions throughout the semester, Brandon pointed out the rules to his classmates in a positive and funny way that only he could pull off. It was not unusual to hear Brandon say to a classmate, “Remember, that was in your syllabus.”

According to Sizer (1984), “A successful class is one in which students and teachers agree on what they are about and on the rules of their academic game” (p. 154).

Emotional Safety and Belonging: Key Attributes for Community Membership

Emotional safety and belonging are both key features in McMillan and Chavis (1986) sense of community element of membership. Therefore, in this section I combine two elements to highlight how classroom membership was established through the emotional safety and belonging that developed in the FYE class. Knowing the name of
each person in a class is a logical first step for a professor in facilitating a classroom sense of community belonging. However, in the FYE class the key was not only the professor learning the names of everyone in the class but each person in the classroom community learning the names of all the other members. According to McMillan (1976), when individuals feel known and understood a closer bond is created amongst the members of the community.

Through a simple memorization technique that required about 30 minutes of class time, Ms. Lawrence was able to facilitate a bonding activity of everyone in the class learning the names of their classmates. This exercise was extremely valuable as it served to support student interactions, emotional safety, belonging, and interdependence, not only during the first weeks of the course but throughout the semester. As such, learning the names of everyone in the classroom community was a critical first step in the community building process that served as beneficial to the students over the course of the semester.

After the first few weeks of class, students demonstrate a high level of emotional safety and belonging in the class through their lively discussions and active involvement. Of course, some students contribute and interact more frequently than others, but overall everyone in the class appears engaged in the learning process as they interact with the other students and the professor. McMillan and Chavis (1986) state, “Feelings of belonging and emotional safety lead to self-investment in the community” (p. 15). Self-investment, as identified by McMillan and Chavis, is illustrated in the following brief overview of a typical class session.

A day in the FYE class begins prior to the official start time with students seeking out the professor with questions or the professor interacting with the students on a
personal level. Once the class commences, the students participate by asking and answering questions, helping classmates with questions, and actively participating in group work, which illustrates students investing in the classroom community. Students regularly stay after class ends to interact with the professor by asking questions and seeking additional clarification about classroom assignments. The students consistently demonstrate a high level of class interactions, revealing the comfort, safety, and belonging they feel in the FYE class and resulting in continued self-investing in the community of the classroom.

The following example provides an illustration of the type of interactions Ms. Lawrence facilitated throughout the semester to promote the class as a safe environment for belonging and sharing. It is typical of Ms. Lawrence’s teaching style to provide examples that actively involve the students in the class. Ms. Lawrence asks Hope to help demonstrate the difference between active and passive listening. To begin, Ms. Lawrence explains you must be in the right position or stance to be able to listen effectively and actively. Next, Hope is called to the front of the room to explain her personal background and the stance she takes when she is preparing to run a race. Hope reports that she was an Olympic athlete from Cameroon and that she competed in the South Korea 1988 Olympics in the 400 and 800 meters in track and field. Hope says in her second language of English, “You must have confidence in yourself – no fears.” She goes on to briefly explain the exact way you align your legs in the starting position and then demonstrates the stance to assume prior to starting a race. As she leans down and assumes the runner stance she says with enthusiasm, “Then you go!” The students in the class spontaneously start applauding. Hope makes her way back to her seat, and she is smiling broadly. Judging by her facial expression she is elated to share this information.
with the class. Ms. Lawrence follows up by discussing how the running example, provided by Hope, aligns with active listening since both require a student to have an engaging stance or position.

After class, several students initiate a conversation with Hope. Specifically, Jack starts talking to Hope through his interpreter, and at the end of the conversation they appear to have made a connection. On his way out of class, Kirk raises his hand in a wave to Hope and says, “Thanks for sharing your story.”

The preceding example shows how Ms. Lawrence provides an opportunity for a student, Hope, to share her personal knowledge and accomplishments with the class in a way that creates a connection to course content and to other students and reinforces the classroom as a safe environment for sharing. McMillan (1996) points out “When one is accepted by the community one is more strongly attracted to that community” (p. 317). The members of the class demonstrate their support and acceptance of Hope as a valued member of the classroom community by applauding her demonstration and interacting with her after class. The example above is one of many that occurred during the semester that provided the opportunity for a student to feel validated, safe, supported, accepted, and connected to his or her classmates. These positive interactions resulted in the students investing of themselves in the community of the classroom.

In addition, another potential reason for the demonstrated safety and belonging by the students is that multiple students were also in at least one other class with someone from the FYE class. Therefore, the increased contact may have elevated the sense of safety and belonging this particular group had with each other. It was not unusual before or after class to hear students talking about their math homework, English paper, or an upcoming test in another class they shared outside of FYE 105.
Interdependence: Students Helping Students

Ms. Lawrence emphasizes the team philosophy in FYE and, as a result, I observed students helping their classmates in various ways throughout the semester. Sarason (1974) identifies interdependence as one of the basic characteristics of psychological sense of community and asserts that when people accept the role of interdependence within a community they agree to the trade-off of “giving to or doing for others what one expects from them” (p. 157). During each class session there were instances of interdependence, as illustrated by the following examples of students helping students.

In late January, the class made its first visit to the Tutoring Center located on the BCTC campus. The students work on the computer to complete individual career assessments, and there is a high level of support and assistance among the students. For example, throughout the entire class period Cathy supports Hope by helping her navigate the assessments and by clarifying the meaning of different words and phrases. Cathy finishes the assignment early and has the option to leave class, but continues providing assistance to Hope until the end of class. This interaction demonstrates emotional safety and comfort between the two students. It also highlights Cathy’s willingness to assist a member of her community and sacrifice her personal time. At one point, Cathy says to Hope, “You can do anything you put your mind to.” This interaction shows encouragement, caring, responsibility to a classmate, social and intellectual bonding, and a willingness to share knowledge.

Another illustration of interdependence occurs in early February, the day the students’ learning notebooks are due. Prior to class starting, Brandon assists a student with organizing her notebook. He takes the table of contents and helps the student locate and organize each of the assignments in the correct order. The student did not ask for
Brandon’s assistance, but Brandon noticed the student struggling and offered to help. The learning notebook is equivalent to a test grade, and therefore was an important assignment.

Another powerful example occurred during the first class session after the week-long closure due to snow. Prior to class, Ms. Lawrence expresses concern that the week away from class may have an impact on class retention. Indeed, the class is small, with 15 students present out of the 22 student participants. At the beginning of the session Ms. Lawrence states, “If you have friends that aren’t in class today, and you have their contact information, you may want to contact them to tell them we want them back in class.” Approximately 15 minutes after Ms. Lawrence makes the statement about reaching out to classmates Sarabi blurts out, “Tiffany said her car got towed that is why she is not in class.” Obviously, Sarabi contacted (most likely texted) Tiffany to find out why she wasn’t in class. In this example, Sarabi shows a level of concern, care, and responsibility to her classmate.

In addition, one day in late April, the class met to work on an individual assignment in the Tutoring Center, and I observed Natalia assisting a student not in the FYE class navigate the computer. She spent time working with the student and also provided him with additional resources to assist in developing his computer skills. Thus, in this example, the practice of helping students was transferred to the larger community of the institution.

There are multiple examples, similar to the ones listed above, that occurred among different students daily in the FYE course. One distinguishing feature of the interactions is that during the semester, each student at one point or another provided support to another student. Of course, there were some students that provided more
assistance than others due to personality, academic ability, and experience. However, all students provided support to someone at some level over the duration of the semester. Therefore, the students in the FYE community were meeting their own needs as well as meeting the needs of their classmates, which McMillan and Chavis (1986) refer to as the integration and fulfillment of needs element of a sense of community.

Integration of Themes: The Professor

Ms. Lawrence was key to establishing a sense of community within the FYE course, and the examples provided in Chapter Four illustrate the importance of the interactions between the professor and students. The identified themes of active learning, class rules, emotional safety and belonging, and interdependence, as previously described, all depend, to a significant degree, on the interactions of the FYE professor with the students. Ms. Lawrence facilitated a learning environment that fostered the social learning that is key to establishing a sense of community in a classroom.

The key elements of a sense of community are membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which worked together to create, influence, and maintain a sense of community among the members in this section of FYE 105. The feelings (belonging, mattering, meeting needs, and sharing a connection) that were created in order for students to experience a sense of community required careful and intentional design by the professor. Perhaps a sense of community could develop without intentional facilitation by a professor, but typically concentrated effort is necessary. Therefore, to establish a sense of community the professor needs to incorporate McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) key elements intentionally into the class.
Summary: Establishing a Sense of Community in the FYE Classroom

Establishing a sense of community in the FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success community college course began on the first day of class, continued over the first weeks of the class, and advanced and evolved over the course of the semester. The themes of establishing emotional safety and belonging, facilitating active learning, creating an environment of interdependence, and establishing and maintaining the rules of the course were foundational to building and sustaining the social learning environment and a sense of community in this section of FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success.
Chapter Five: Sense of Community and Impact on Transition and Persistence:

Students’ Perceptions

Introduction

Shapiro and Levine (1999) state, “Perhaps the best way to understand the essence of the learning community is to listen to the voices of those participants” (p. 6). As such, the ideas, views, and thoughts of the students in FYE 105 provide valuable insight into understanding community and how community impacts transition and persistence based on the students’ perceptions. Chapter Five answers the question of how students’ perceptions of a sense of community impact their transition and persistence in college based on their experiences in the one section of FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success. This chapter begins by briefly reintroducing Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities, which serves as the framework for exploring how a sense of community impacts students’ ability to transition and persist in college. Next, the students define a sense of community, and then I introduce a discrepant case. Subsequently, I illuminate the key themes related to how a sense of community affects transition and persistence in college, according to the students’ perceptions. The themes identified through the student participant interviews are the importance of 1) the professor, 2) the classroom environment, 3) classmate support, 4) course content, and 5) active learning.

Students reported that a sense of community had an impact on their transition, but they seldom made a direct connection to a sense of community impacting their persistence in college. On the whole, students noted intrinsic motivation and external support as important to their continued persistence in college. In summary, according to the students the key elements of the professor, the classroom environment, classmate
support, course content, and active learning do not operate independently of each other, but support, enhance, and reinforce the importance of community in a way that facilitates transition and to some degree assists in promoting persistence.

Conceptual Model: Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) explain, “Student departure in commuter colleges and universities presents an ill-structured problem” (p. 35). Therefore, Braxton et al. suggest a conceptual model of student departure that includes elements from “various theoretical orientations: economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological” (p. 35). The basic elements within the proposed student departure model are “student entry characteristics, the external environment, the campus environment, and the academic communities of the institution” (Braxton et al., 2004, pp. 42-43). This study of sense of community in an FYE classroom concentrates on the academic community element of Braxton et al.’s conceptual model of student departure. Braxton et al. viewed two-year colleges and four-year commuter colleges and universities as comparable and used data from these forms of post-secondary institutions in their conceptual model.

According to Braxton et al. (2004) the optimum approach to developing classroom community involves students enrolling together in more than one course through a block scheduling approach often referred to as a learning community. The feasibility of offering courses through a block scheduling format is often challenging in the community college due to the diversity and complexity of students’ academic, personal, and (often) employment needs and schedules they are trying to negotiate. However, Braxton et al. also describe how “Small communities develop around the college classroom, a community for each course. Such communities develop, however,
only if faculty members actively involve students in the process of learning” (p. 48). A detailed overview of the conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities developed by Braxton et al. is described in Chapter Two.

Students Define a Sense of Community

It became evident during the student participant interviews that a sense of community had developed in the FYE class, according to the 14 students who were interviewed. It is important to note that all of the 14 student participants who were still attending the class as of midterm participated in the interview portion of the study. Throughout the interviews, students expressed how a sense of community within the FYE class had a positive impact on their transition. However, when students explored issues related to their persistence in college, a sense of community within the FYE class appeared to be less influential from their perspective.

When asked to define a sense of community, students expressed similar ideas, and the most frequently discussed theme was establishing interdependence with their classmates. Natalia describes classroom community as “being able to work with your peers…being able to relay information…having each other’s backs.” Bethany suggests that community is about “joining in,” “doing things together,” and “helping each other.” Brandon adds to the interdependence theme in his explanation of classroom community as “a group of people that have come together in a common place for a common goal that work together to achieve that goal and kind of work as a team - as a unit.” Muriah summarizes her perception of classroom community as follows: “You don’t just think about yourself, you also think about other students around you, and not just about you but about the community.”
The consensus among the 14 students interviewed revealed that a sense of community in the FYE class did exist at some level for each student. The students revealed that they felt comfortable in the FYE class and had established a sense of belonging to the FYE classroom community. Brown and Burdsal (2012) note, “In order for the community to impact an individual student, the student must perceive him - or herself as part of that community” (p. 433).

Students described the FYE classroom environment as “friendly,” “welcoming,” “comfortable,” “safe,” and “calming.” Many students emphasized that you have to “know each other,” in order for a true community to exist, and Ms. Lawrence made knowing each other a goal during the first class sessions. Angela explains that classroom community is determined by, “The people in the classroom and how they work together and how they cooperate.”

Two students further describe the FYE classroom community by using the metaphor of family. Hope describes her classmates as a family and explains the FYE community as follows: “We are grouped together, and we learn, we make friends, we become family members because a family member doesn’t just mean coming from the same dad and same mom, we become neighbors.” Elaine also uses the family metaphor and explains the sense of community in FYE as “working in groups like as a family.”

The participants in this study clearly formed a sense of community in the FYE class, and they benefited from various elements of the community as evidenced by their comments during the interviews. The students viewed the FYE community as working together in ways that served themselves and others by assisting in their transition and meeting their academic needs through the social process of learning. Embodied in this student definition of community is the sharing of responsibilities in the learning process.
To further highlight the importance of community, Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994) report that community colleges are experiencing success by creating academic and social communities that result in “increasing both student learning and retention” (p 27).

Discrepant Case

However, one student, Jack, expressed his indifference to the concept of a classroom community. Therefore, I have identified his experience in connection to classroom community as a discrepant case. Jack is unlike the other 13 student participants who all mentioned how the classroom community was to some degree beneficial to their transition. Collectively those same students were less certain of the impact community had on their persistence, but did mention some connections. When referring to the classroom community, Jack said, “I’m kind of ignoring that kind of thing.” However, he did agree with his classmates that a community environment was established in FYE 105, but he did not see a connection between classroom community and his transition or persistence in college. He explained how the classroom community was not something he was concerned about and he preferred to focus his energy and effort on learning the material in the class, which in Jack’s opinion was not connected to community.

Jack has a hearing impairment, and, therefore all verbal communication occurs through the assistance of interpreters. As such, based on my observations, Jack did not participate in the classroom community to the same extent as the other students. Jack’s communication was limited, and usually nonexistent, with the students and professor until the interpreters arrived to class. Typically, the interpreters arrived to the class about 5-10 minutes before the class started. Jack admits that sometimes communicating through an interpreter is a barrier to his ability to interact with others not only in class but
also throughout the college community. When Jack seeks support and assistance (e.g., academic tutors, financial aid office, etc.), he must make arrangements with an interpreter to accompany him to these offices, which creates an extra layer of work to receive the services and support he needs to negotiate the college environment.

According to Jack, due to his easygoing personality, when he enters a room he immediately feels comfortable, so he does not have any trouble interacting with his classmates during assigned group work in class. Jack reveals that he does not interact with his classmates or professor outside of class, but he would feel comfortable if he needed to interact with the professor outside of class. For Jack to interact face-to-face with his classmates or professor outside of class involves making arrangements with disability support to have an interpreter available. Thus, it is easy to see why spontaneous and casual interactions do not occur, and if they do occur it is most likely going to take place in the classroom.

Even though I identify Jack as the discrepant case in the study, he does mention two features of the FYE 105 experience that appear to have benefited his transition and persistence. However, he doesn’t seem to connect those elements to the classroom community. Jack mentions how the professor is supportive of him as an individual student and that support has been beneficial to his integration into college. The professor is a vital part of the classroom community, and Jack acknowledged that a classroom community did exist. In addition, Jack expresses how the structure of the classroom is important, and he prefers the interactive environment of FYE compared to his other classes that are predominately lecture. Jack further alludes to the classroom community when he describes the benefits of active learning: “I like when people have different perspectives, that really helps me to understand different views.” Therefore, the
experience of learning from classmates is one benefit realized from a classroom community of learners. These glimpses of the possible role that classroom community played are noteworthy, but Jack did not link a sense of community to his transition and persistence, and that is the distinguishing feature.

Jack’s membership in the classroom community influenced at least one member of the class even if Jack did not see the community of the classroom as a significant benefit or influence to his transition and persistence. To explain, during an interview Sarabi discusses how Jack was a motivating factor to her persistence in college. Sarabi comments, “There’s a guy in our class that’s deaf, and he is not letting anything stop him, so I shouldn’t either. There’s no excuse. There’s no excuse at all.” This example illustrates the influence that students have on one another when the professor facilitates the classroom environment in a way that forms a sense of community. Through discussions and group activities, Sarabi got to know Jack and through that connection was inspired to work harder toward her college goals. Jack appeared to be an influence on the classroom community, even though, he, himself, did not view the community as important to his transition or persistence in college.

Key Themes: The Impact of a Sense of Community on Transition and Persistence

Importance of the Professor

Based upon the perceptions of the student participants, it was evident that the professor played a critical role in creating a comfortable environment that facilitated belonging in the FYE classroom, which was one factor that assisted in a sense of community being established among the members of the class. Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992) assert, “Faculty are the key facilitators of the learning community” (p. 176). Ms. Lawrence’s ongoing support and her intentional management and negotiation of the
classroom provide a model for how to establish a sense of community in a college classroom. The collective impact of membership in a community resulted in students interacting with the professor, their classmates, and the course content and assisted with the students’ transition to the college environment. Palmer (2002) explains, “The fastest and deepest learning happens when there is a dynamic community of connections between teacher and student and subject” (p. 185).

Tinto (1993) advocates that for institutions to be successful in educating students they must gain “a deeper understanding of the importance of educational community to the goals of higher education” (p. 212). As such, Ms. Lawrence focuses on a community building approach to help facilitate the student’s introduction into the new environment of higher education with the ultimate goal of increasing student success. This study shows how the FYE community, facilitated and led by the professor, contributed to the students’ abilities to learn how to negotiate the often complicated college setting in order for a successful transition to occur. A successful transition refers to the social and academic adjustments that students need to make from their previous role(s) to their current role as a college student.

In my interview with Sarabi it became clear that she placed a high level of importance on having a relationship with the professor. At the time of the interview, Sarabi was concurrently enrolled at Bluegrass Community and Technical College and the University of Kentucky (UK), and she talked about her experience in a lecture hall class at UK with 150 other students. Sarabi recounts, “I went up to one of my teachers to ask a question after class. He didn’t even know who I was, so I didn’t like that at all. Ms. Lawrence knows my name, and she knows who I am.” She goes on to say, “I don’t like feeling like a statistic.” Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) report,
“Students are more likely to flourish in small settings where they are known and valued as individuals than in settings in which they feel anonymous” (p. 106).

A common theme, central to the students’ connections to the classroom and beneficial to their transitions to college, was the professor’s instructional style. In a study conducted by Braxton, Bray, and Berger (2000) student perceptions of faculty teaching skills – organization, preparation, and clarity were measured. The findings indicate that these instructional skills had a direct effect on the student’s social integration, institutional commitment, and persistence to the next semester (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000). The findings of a study by Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) suggest that “when instruction is well designed and implemented” (p. 217) students feel a greater sense of belonging. Similar to the preceding studies the following comments from the student participants of FYE 105 add to our understanding of the importance of the professor’s instructional style and skills in creating a classroom community that facilitates transition and persistence.

Natalia explains that the professor’s instructional style was key to her feeling a sense of belonging and comfort in the FYE class. She points out that Ms. Lawrence created a caring environment by the “interest” she exhibited in presenting course content in a way that everyone understands. Natalia states,

So, she will always ask like, ‘Do you have any questions?’ and she will answer questions and she kind of explains things in a really simple way. It’s not like overcomplicated, but it’s not like too general, either; it’s not too like broad.

Brandon also talks about the importance of Ms. Lawrence’s instructional style. He explains that the professor breaks the content down in a way that makes sense, shows the applicability to life, and how the content will benefit students. In a similar vein
Angela states, “The [FYE] instructor, she breaks it down and lets you know what’s going on and what you should know. Whenever you leave the classroom you’re not empty-handed.” Muriah also acknowledges that the comfort level and sense of classroom belonging were due to the professor’s clear and precise explanations and also her willingness to help outside of class. John simply states, “She tells me in a way that I understand it.” To summarize, the students sense of belonging and comfort in the class were supported by the instructional style and teaching techniques of the professor in making the content understandable and meaningful.

Tinto (2012) states, “For a great majority of students, success in college is most directly shaped by their experiences in the classroom” (p. 114). Therefore, the connections among the students, their perceived feelings of belonging and comfort with each other, facilitated by the professor, were important to establishing membership in the community of the classroom, which students contributed to their successful transition. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) claim, “Meaningful interactions between students and their teachers are essential to high-quality learning experiences” (p. 207) and the learning experiences take place in and out of the classroom. The students consistently commented on how they were comfortable interacting with the professor. The majority of students indicated that if they had an individual question or concern they preferred to interact with the professor before or after class instead of asking their questions during class. Thus, meaningful interactions occurred regularly between the professor and students outside of the classroom.

The following statements from the students provide a glimpse of their interactions outside of class with Ms. Lawrence. John reveals that the professor has been very helpful because she “will sit down and talk to me about it [a problem], and we can solve the
problem and work something out.” He also notes that he is shy but feels very comfortable interacting with the professor outside of class and goes to her if he needs help or doesn’t understand an assignment. Similar to John, Austin says that he is shy talking in front of the entire class. However he states, “If I feel like I had a question for the professor even though I am shy, I wouldn’t have no problem asking her.” Muriah, similar to Austin and John, prefers to interact with the professor outside of class, in order to avoid talking in front of the entire class. She comments, “I feel more comfortable talking to the teacher after class, privately or by emails.” In addition, Angela comments, “If I’m confused about something, then I will ask her before or after class.” John, Austin, Muriah, and Angela all share in the preference of interacting with the professor outside of class.

On the first day of class, Ms. Lawrence informed students of her schedule for teaching and other college responsibilities including her work in the Tutoring Center immediately following the FYE class. Therefore, students took advantage of Ms. Lawrence’s accessibility and frequently tracked her down in the Tutoring Center after class. Hope interacted more frequently with Ms. Lawrence outside of class than did other students. Consequently, Hope viewed Ms. Lawrence as a big contributor to her support system. Hope explains,

After class I always meet her sometimes in the Tutoring Center. I present her with my difficulties with my homework or when she says something in class that I did not understand. I write it down, and when I meet her in the Tutoring Center I will ask my question, and she will answer and explain to me, and I always get out of here very happy.
Hope provided examples of professors that did not take the time after class to adequately explain, clarify, or answer her questions, which resulted in Hope feeling dissatisfied with those professors and those classes. Sarah, like Hope, also meets the professor in the Tutoring Center to receive extra help with assignments, and according to Sarah that out-of-class contact with the professor has been helpful. Each student participant I interviewed expressed that they were comfortable interacting with the professor both in and out of class, but the majority noted if they had an individual question they preferred to meet privately with the professor.

Bogue (2002) notes, “Relationship is central to community” (p. 5). As such, the positive, comfortable relationships that the student participants described as having with Ms. Lawrence were critical to the overall sense of community in the FYE class. It was evident from the students’ comments that they enjoyed and benefited by having Ms. Lawrence as a professor and felt a connection with her that was helpful to their transition to college. Additional student interactions with the professor outside of class support the student in meeting multiple needs. The students can develop a personal relationship with the professor while also meeting their needs for academic support. Hope reports that when she sees Ms. Lawrence in the Tutoring Center, outside of class, “I can run and hug her,” “I can talk loudly,” and “we can laugh.” Angela talks about how the professor contributes to her college support system because she “cares about your future.” She summarizes her view of Ms. Lawrence as a professor by saying, “She only wants the best for us students, and that is why she is teaching us.” Marina adds to the discussion by stating, “She [Ms. Lawrence] creates a much more personal like relationship with the students than my other professors.” Marina expresses how Ms. Lawrence is an important contact person for her at the college. She states, “I do feel like if I needed something, I
could definitely go to the instructor. I feel like she’s someone that would be willing to help, and she would be the person to go to.”

Brandon makes a powerful statement about the professor in relation to the mood of the class. He states, “Our teacher has a sense of humor that can kind of make the classroom come alive.” Further testimony by Hope points out, “When your instructor is jovial, and she smiles, and she is willing to answer your questions, and she’s willing to give you help where you need it; you are very confident.” In addition to the relationship with the professor assisting with the transition, Mackenzie links the importance of the professor to her persistence in college. Mackenzie states, “If you don’t like your teachers, you’re not going to come back.”

Sarabi identifies the patient manner that Ms. Lawrence shows with the students as being extremely beneficial to her transition. Sarabi comments that “Ms. Lawrence is personable with the students [and] how she takes her job serious, and she’s patient.” The patience of the professor played a critical role in Sarabi’s successful transition into the college environment. The spring semester was Sarabi’s second semester in college. During her first semester, she dropped all of her classes due to outside obligations conflicting with her academic obligations. In addition, Sarabi reports she received limited support and assistance from her professors during her first semester. Sarabi emphasizes the patience of the professor and explains, “I like how she lets us know that it is okay to be stressed, it is okay to take our time, it’s okay not to rush.” Thus, Ms. Lawrence fosters an environment that relieves some of the stress and calms the fears associated with college.
Based on the students’ comments, Tinto’s (2012) framework for academic success represents the type of experiences that Ms. Lawrence facilitates in the FYE 105 class. Tinto explains,

Students are more likely to succeed in settings that establish clear and high expectations for their success, provide academic and social support, frequently assess and provide feedback about their performance, and actively involve them with others on campus, especially in the classroom. (p. 8)

The supportive and personal relationships that Ms. Lawrence established with the students are balanced by high standards and expectations that are accompanied by consistent feedback.

Brandon explains that the professor holds everyone accountable. He emphasizes, “You cannot go into her classroom and be invisible.” He further explains,

If you’re texting, she’s going to ask you a question. If you haven’t paid attention, she’s going to ask you a question, and if you have paid attention, and you’re not texting she’s still going to ask you a question. She makes sure that people are not left out. She makes sure that she covers everybody and everybody gets the information across the board.

Astin (1985) advocates, “Frequent interaction with faculty members is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic” (p. 149). Mackenzie comments on the impact of the professor and “how she interacts with her students” as one of the reasons for the positive classroom environment. To illustrate, Mackenzie talks about the midterm conference the professor conducted individually with each student. Mackenzie reports, “She talked to us, each student about their grade and how they’re doing.” In an interview
with Ms. Lawrence she comments on the midterm conference: “They like the one-on-one, I think, and I feel closer to them when I do that one-on-one.” Ms. Lawrence further explains that the midterm conference is “always hopeful because at midterm it’s still possible for anybody to do well; it’s always upbeat, kind of a little pep talk.”

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) assert, “Showing new students what they can and must do to succeed in college is necessary but not sufficient to ensure success. Also important is an infrastructure of support, including safety nets, reward systems, and ongoing assessment” (p. 123). Ms. Lawrence’s instructional style combines all the components mentioned by Kuh et al. in order to optimize the success of the students in FYE 105. Ms. Lawrence provides the support and security necessary for students to learn how to negotiate college, which is important in order to persist toward degree completion. In addition, her use of the midterm conference, focusing on progress and suggestions for moving forward, is a means of providing ongoing assessment, reward, and a safety net.

In summary, the student’s comments illustrate that when a professor creates a caring, comfortable, safe, encouraging, and personal relationship with the students they are more likely to interact and participate with the professor and their classmates. Thus, creating a community that supports students in their transition to college is the first step in facilitating students’ persistence. Chickering (2000) advocates, “Teaching in ways that build relationships and a sense of community among students is especially important for commuter students” (p. 23). Sizer (1984) remarks, “We all work best for people we respect; we study well in school for teachers we admire; we admire and respect those teachers who know us as individual, worthwhile people” (p. 66). This statement by Sizer
further emphasizes the importance of the professor in establishing relationships that lead to integration and persistence in college.

*Importance of the Classroom Environment*

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) advocates, “The classroom should be the place where community begins” (p. 12). According to this study, establishing a sense of community in the classroom starts with creating an environment that fosters a level of comfort, safety, and belonging in the classroom. The results are more interactions and relationships that assist students in successfully integrating into the college environment. One FYE student, Austin, summarized classroom belonging in the following statement:

> When you’re at home with your family you feel a sense of belonging because you’re surrounded with people that care about you, [and] same thing goes for college. If students and professors interact with you, it gives you a sense of belonging because you’re being noticed, which makes you feel cared about.

The result, hopefully, is that the positive environment is satisfying to the students and aids in transition and, ultimately, in college persistence. Jewler (1989) emphasizes the impact of the classroom by stating, “Once we make the classroom as a place where students want to be, we open the door wide for learning and growth to take place” (p. 202).

It is important to listen to the students’ perspectives on how the community environment developed in the FYE class and how that sense of community affected their transition and persistence. McDonald (2002) states, “If higher education values community, then students must become participants in the dialogue” (p. 147). Hope’s comments summarize the thoughts of other students in the class when she points out that
the “comfort level was established during our first three days of class.” During my interviews with the students, they routinely talked about the first couple of days of class and the impact the initial class meetings had on establishing their comfort level and sense of belonging to the class. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) report, “Feelings of belonging help students connect with their peers and the institution, relationships that, in turn, are associated with persistence and satisfaction” (p. 119). The student participants identified two specific activities that were important to starting their connection to classmates and to building a community environment that supported their transition to college.

The first activity occurred on the first day of class when the students were asked to write down the contact information of their classmates in order to create a support system outside of class. Natalia recalls the first day of class and how the professor had the students “write down phone numbers and stuff so that we made sure we had access to someone like if we needed help or if we missed something.” Marina identified the same activity as helping to create the comfort level necessary to establishing a community. Marina points out,

I think it [the comfort level] just has a lot to do with her [Ms. Lawrence] and how she made us feel on the first day and how she forced us to kind of do icebreakers and like get each other’s personal information to communicate with each other when we need to.

Mackenzie also recognizes the class activity where students “exchanged numbers in case you needed an emergency contact” as an important part of establishing community. Students used the contact information they secured on the first day throughout the semester to contact their classmates if they were absent from class, to contact classmates
in order to catch up on missed assignments, to notify the class through their student contacts if they were running late or caught in traffic, and to ask general questions about assignments and due dates. This activity serves as the basis for creating the classroom environment and supports the interdependence associated with classroom community. In addition, obtaining peer contact information provides students with a built-in support system as they transition to college.

The second activity identified by the students as important to establishing community occurred on the third day of class and involved students learning each other’s name. A dominant point that emerged from the student interviews involved the importance students placed on learning the names of their classmates. Bethany explains how the activity that transpired on the third day of class where the students brought an item that related to their name “got everybody to get to know who everybody is” and was an important part of establishing a comfortable and positive classroom environment. Austin agreed that the activity of learning everyone’s name established a comfort level within the class. Hope discusses the outcome of that activity as, “I was able to know the names of all my classmates.” Hope talks about the importance of knowing the names of everyone in class and remarks, “It helps me a lot to know you and to know your name.” Brandon comments, “From the beginning of the class she’s [Ms. Lawrence] always made sure that we knew who each other were.” Based on that activity Brandon claims, “In my FYE class I am familiar with everybody. I know everybody. I’ve went to students that I don’t talk to on a regular basis in that class [FYE] and asked them for help and vice versa.” Brandon draws a connection between the activity and the importance of creating an environment that facilitates peer support. Over time, the supportive environment fosters the academic and social integration necessary for students to increase their success.
and transition. Brandon further demonstrates the importance of knowing the names of his classmates when he states,

I can walk in, and if you point to a person I can give you their name, and when you know a person’s name, you kind of feel like I can speak to you. I can say, ‘Hi, how are you doing?’ and this is in and outside of class.

Another example mentioned as important to the classroom environment was the way Ms. Lawrence encouraged students to ‘tag a friend’ if they needed help during class. According to Bethany, the ‘tag a friend’ concept helps to create an environment where everyone “work[s] together.” Mackenzie also contributed “working in groups with everyone” as another important way she got to know and feel comfortable with her classmates.

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) claim, “Designing the classroom experience to promote more meaningful interaction among students and teachers is one promising strategy for community colleges” (p. 14). Ms. Lawrence’s intentional design of the classroom activities during the first class sessions was critical to creating an environment that developed into a community of learners. According to the students, membership in this community supported their transition into college.

Importance of Active Learning

Braxton and Hirschy (2005) report, “Faculty who intentionally involve class members in the learning process and engage critical thinking about course materials contribute to student persistence” (p. 78). Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) also point out when students engage in active learning they experience greater integration into the college environment, which results in retention. Braxton et al. point out, “Active learning is a basic requirement for the formation of the community of the classroom” (p.
48). In addition, Braxton et al. claim, “Cooperative learning methods should be the primary method of instruction” (p. 75) in courses designed as learning communities.

The student participants described active learning techniques as a major influence in the development of their sense of community in the classroom. The active learning techniques utilized in FYE 105 primarily were group work and discussion. In comparing the FYE class to other classes, Mackenzie reports that in most of her classes, “I just sit and take notes; you don’t like hear from the students you just hear from the instructor, but in this [FYE] class you get opinions and voices heard from everyone.” Jack explains how he prefers the interactive environment of FYE compared to his other classes that are primarily lecture. Bethany describes the interactive nature of the class, as “asking questions and getting people involved” versus other classes that consist of “a lecture and we leave.” Mackenzie notes that in her other classes “it’s just like you’re on your own” and “there’s not much hands-on or group activities.” She goes on to comment in FYE there are “fun activities,” “essays to look forward to,” and “interact[ions] with other people so you’re not just alone on things.” Mackenzie notes, “I look forward to FYE just because it’s more hands-on” as compared to her other classes.

Stovall (2000) suggests, “It is the students’ daily interactions in the campus environment that have the greatest impact on their decision to stay in or leave college” (p. 45). With few exceptions the typical FYE class session usually involved class discussion and at least one group activity, which provided a high level of interaction among the students and the students and professor. Brandon emphasizes that he likes the way the professor “groups us together with different people.” He connects the importance of group work with learning by stating, “I’m able to interact with others and see how they work. See what they think about a particular subject.” He further explains,
That way you kind of get familiar [with] who you’re with and [that] helps build that community and helps build that relationship with each other. Even to the point to when I see them outside of class I feel comfortable talking to them, and I feel comfortable asking them questions.

Thus, according to Brandon, the active learning environment provides an effective way to learn the course material and also helps students connect outside of class. The result is positive interactions that facilitate integration into the college community.

Sarabi points out other positive aspects of active learning. She explains when she works on group assignments she feels a responsibility to her classmates, and she emphasizes, “I don’t want to let my group down,” which illustrates her interdependence with her peers. She also reveals that when she is doing group work she works harder than when she is working independently on an assignment.

Central to promoting community in a student success course is the use of engaging pedagogy as identified in the studies of Swing (2002) and Berns and Erickson (2001). The studies by Swing and Berns and Erickson found strong support for creating active and social learning experiences that resulted in increased student success in the classroom. Active learning through group work and discussions fostered the developing sense of community in the FYE 105 classroom. As a result students experienced a sense of belonging that translated into an easier transition into college. Once a student has successfully transitioned, the expected consequences would be persistence toward educational goal completion.
Active Learning: It’s Not Always Easy

For several students, active learning was a new experience that they were not exposed to in high school. John explains his struggles with the active learning environment in FYE:

Talk[ing] out in front of everybody, and in other classes I don’t really have to talk or nothing, I can just sit and listen, but this class [FYE] I have got to interact with people and like talk to people, and I’m not really used to talking to people.

The interactive learning environment is particularly difficult for John because he was in small classes with six or fewer people during his high school career. Thus, the transition to classes of 25 plus students at the community college required a big adjustment. Elaine identifies with John and admits how group work and active learning are also new ways of learning for her. Her previous classroom experiences in high school and college have predominately been classroom lecture, so group learning activities are a new experience. John explains in further detail his limited comfort level with group work:

Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t [feel comfortable] because I just have a hard time interacting with people because I’m a little shy around people I don’t really know or people that I’m not really friends with, I just get nervous. I don’t know what kind of person they are.

Ultimately, John prefers not to talk and interact during class, but if it is a small group he is more likely to try since it would not involve speaking in front of the entire class.

John is not alone, Austin and Angela also explained that they are shy and prefer not to interact and talk in front of the entire class. In addition, Sarah and Muriah reported that they are not comfortable speaking in front of the entire class since they are still learning English, which is not their native language. John, Elaine, Austin, Angela, Sarah,
and Muriah preferred group work and felt group work was more comfortable than interacting and speaking in front of the entire class.

During an interview, Ms. Lawrence acknowledged that John, Elaine, Austin, Angela, Sarah, and Muriah feared speaking in front of the entire class. As a result, she attempted to facilitate the majority of interactions around small group activities. Ms. Lawrence stated, “I’m really just after getting them to work in groups with each other. I will be happy if they’re working as a group toward a common goal.”

Another FYE student, Natalia, describes herself as an introvert who likes to “keep to myself at school.” This was surprising because she is one of the more vocal students in the class. She acknowledges, “I have a harder time like kind of like talking to people and like establishing new relationships.” Natalia prefers to work independently instead of in a group. However she makes the following insightful observation, “I don’t think that everyone benefits from working by them self either because other people do need to communicate more to do well.”

Natalia explains that her comfort level of working with others is affected by the attitudes and shared goals of her classmates. A true community requires that the members have a shared purpose, but Natalia explains that some of the students in FYE do not have the same focus and high expectations that she has for academic achievement. On one hand, Natalia is comfortable working with “the ones that actually seem to care.” On the other hand, when Natalia works with “people that don’t seem as invested, it’s kind of frustrating.” She provides the following example to illustrate her point, “We were doing groups today, and there were five people in our group, and there was only me and one other person that were actually actively working trying to get the worksheet done.”
Therefore, Natalia explains that her classmates’ disengagement creates a level of frustration for her when she is supposed to be engaging in interactive learning activities.

Angela weighs in on the importance of working together for a shared purpose as previously illustrated by Natalia. Angela notes that sometimes during group activities there are people that know each other and want to work as a “clique” instead of as a group. She explains in these situations how she has to be the “bigger person” and make sure the group is working toward the group goals. Angela further explains her views on group work, “We should all work together to find a solution because you know we’re a team, so it doesn’t make sense to leave people out.” She goes on to say, “It’s important that everybody works together to make progress in the classroom.”

The majority of the student participants acknowledged the importance and benefits of working collaboratively. Even the students who preferred not to participate in front of the entire class felt more comfortable in small groups and realized the benefits of group work. In summary, Bethany explains that FYE 105 is a “really, really comfortable class.” As such, the comfort level helps establish the working relationships within the class that contributes to the overall sense of community. Bethany adds, “everybody in the FYE class - we all get involved, and we talk.” Mackenzie agrees and comments, “I speak up, I ask questions, I’m involved, I’m active” in the FYE class. Austin, agreeing with Bethany and Mackenzie, points out “how well the classroom interacts” and how that “makes it a lot easier to learn when the class works well together.” Ultimately the interaction creates the type of classroom community that Mackenzie describes as, “working together in groups, getting everyone’s opinion and [hearing everyone’s] voice.”
Importance of FYE 105 Course Content

The student participants reported that the course content was beneficial to their integration into college, and according to the students the most useful FYE 105 content areas were career exploration, time management, goal setting, study skills, organizational skills, online resources, and educational planning. In addition, Ms. Lawrence’s (2015) FYE 105 syllabus identifies campus information, academic success strategies, life skills, and academic and career planning as the four broad content areas covered in the course. The student participants of the study noted that “learning their way around college” and learning “how to do college” were important to their integration into the college environment. John acknowledged that “seeing and knowing where everything is” was one of the most beneficial aspects of the course. He went on to say, “Yeah, it [FYE] has helped me a lot” in the transition to college. Muriah’s comments are similar to John’s as she suggests that the course content helps you feel comfortable in college because “you know where everything is [and] that really helps.” Elaine adds the “FYE class actually helps you with like the rest of the classes” and has been an important part in her transition to college. She further explains, “If I didn’t have the FYE class, I wouldn’t know where to go” for help and support in college. The content of the FYE class connects the students to the entire campus community. The students in FYE 105 have a safe and supportive classroom that they are comfortable interacting within and feel a sense of belonging, which allows them to explore with their peers the larger college community within a supportive environment.

The content of the FYE course along with the support and guidance from Ms. Lawrence and the FYE classmates proved beneficial in assisting with transition and
encouraging persistence. The following examples related to the course content provide a glimpse into the experiences of Sarah, Bethany, Angela, Muriah, and Austin.

Sarah arrived in the United States about four months before she started classes at Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC). As an international student, Sarah reports, “When I came here [BCTC] I didn’t understand anything,” which is true for the majority of first semester freshmen. However, Sarah also was learning how to negotiate both a new country and the college environment. Sarah acknowledges that the FYE class was beneficial to her transition into college. She explains, “I understand everything about BCTC” due to the FYE course. The FYE 105 content, which included campus information, academic success strategies, life skills, and career and academic planning, provided Sarah the foundational skills that she needed to successfully transition into college.

Bethany is in her second semester of college, and she explains that during her first semester, “I had no clue.” The FYE class has “given me a lot more knowledge about things” and the class “is really, really beneficial.” She reflects on her transition into college and the challenges she faced during her first semester since she didn’t know how anything worked. Bethany points out how this class teaches, “everything I need to know about college.” She confesses that at first she thought the FYE 105 class was “going to be stupid” and therefore she was “not going to learn anything.” However, she soon realized that the class provided support by introducing academic success skills, campus information, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and academic and career planning, which she identified as critical for her successful transition into college.

Angela, like Bethany, was enrolled in her second semester of college. Angela recounts that during her first semester “I really didn’t know what was going on.” Angela
emphasizes how important FYE has been to her transition to college. She states, “Oh my goodness, I wish I had took [sic] it my first semester, I really do.” Angela admits transitioning from high school to college was a bigger adjustment than she originally expected. Fortunately, Angela survived her first semester in college and she thrived in her second semester. What was the difference between Angela’s first and second semester in college? A notable difference was the content of the FYE class, which introduced campus information, academic success strategies, life skills, and academic and career planning. In addition, the support of the professor and her classmates assisted in acclimating Angela to the new environment of the college.

Muriah has been enrolled at Bluegrass Community and Technical College since Fall 2012 and is working to finish her associate degree. She originally registered for the FYE course because she needed an additional elective course. Ironically, Muriah was pleasantly surprised by the quality learning experience the course provided. She reiterates throughout the interview “You have to take this [FYE] class.” She qualifies her statement by adding, “If you take that class [FYE] early before you start; it’s going to help you; it’s going to guide you.” By taking the FYE course, Muriah gained a higher level of independence. She maintains she has learned a lot about the school and this knowledge has allowed her to be more self-sufficient in negotiating the college process. As such, Muriah states, “I wish I had took [sic] that FYE class before [now].” Based on Muriah’s comments, I conclude that the independence she gained from the FYE 105 course content allowed Muriah to have control over her educational experience and empowered her to move forward with her educational plans.

Austin summarizes the major benefit of FYE when he states, “Having a class like FYE 105 makes a student more comfortable in the college atmosphere, which would
make a student more likely to succeed in their college courses and continue taking
classes.” Austin clearly links the experience of the FYE course to persistence. The other
students readily connected the experience gained from the course to their transition but
were not as clear with connecting the experience gained through the community of the
course to the bigger picture of persistence.

Noel (1985) states, “Students reenroll when they are having an exciting,
substantive learning and personal growth experience that they can relate to their future
development and success” (p. 2). According to Ms. Lawrence’s (2015) FYE 105
syllabus, one of the main outcomes of the course is “for students to develop academic
plans that align with career and life goals” (p. 1). As such, students were introduced to
the various academic options and educational pathways offered at Bluegrass Community
and Technical College and spent a significant amount of time researching and discussing
their career options within the supportive environment of the class. The student
participants reported that the FYE class provided a comfortable environment to explore
career options and related majors with classmates who were facing the same struggles to
decide upon a college major and a career.

Students also recounted that the career research component was one of the most
beneficial aspects of the FYE course. The course objective of developing academic plans
is designed to help the students make connections between their career goals and higher
education opportunities. Developing academic plans also helps the students form
connections between each other through a shared goal or purpose related to their future.

The following example illustrates a discrepant case of a student who was not
interested in identifying a career goal or major, which is one of the key objectives of the
FYE 105 course. On the first day of class, students shared their dreams, goals, and
reasons for attending college. Kirk stated he was “forced to come to college,” and that statement signaled a potential problem for Kirk’s college enrollment. Therefore, it was not surprising that he was one of the first students who stopped attending the FYE class. Kirk did not share his classmate’s vision in relation to the importance of a college education. Thus, Kirk’s disengagement after the first few weeks of class might have been explained by his lack of a goal related to higher education.

Mackenzie identifies the “career research essay” in the FYE class as the number one factor contributing to her persistence in college. Mackenzie describes her relief in deciding on a career path, “I don’t feel as lost like I actually have a purpose in college now and have a goal that I’m headed for.” Feeling a part of the bigger purpose of education is important to persistence, and being able to struggle with the career/college major decision-making process in the supportive environment of the FYE classroom community proved to be beneficial to many of the student participants.

Similar to Mackenzie, Sarabi points out, “I actually found out what I want to do because of this class.” Sarabi identified that it was valuable to have a supportive professor guiding the exploration process and moving through that journey with peers simultaneously exploring the same process. Mackenzie notes that FYE is “like a calming class because it’s helped me with my career.” By deciding on a major Mackenzie finally felt “like it’s going to work out,” and that increased her confidence as a student and also played a factor in her intentions to return for the fall semester.

In addition to the career research component of the course, the student participants noted that the academic skills they learned in the FYE course helped contribute to their transition to college. Specifically the students noted time management and organizational skills, study strategies, learning how to use online resources, and the
textbook information as helpful. The academic skills connect to the sense of community through the active learning environment utilized in learning and practicing the skills. During class discussion and group work, students shared the ideas, knowledge, and personal strategies that worked for them individually, which further highlighted the importance of the classroom community environment on learning, transition, and persistence. Furthermore, the students viewed the academic skills as beneficial to their future college success, which provided further evidence that FYE 105 benefited persistence. As Angela points out, the content of the course helps with the transition and persistence in college since it teaches “different strategies to make you better in college.” The students learned skills necessary to help negotiate and assist in their continuation in college.

According to Marina the FYE class teaches students “how to do college.” The academic skills were taught in a supportive environment as classmates learned from each other through an active learning approach. The environment and the approach provided the foundational skills necessary for students to transition successfully into college and to persist to completion of their educational goals. Marina explains how the academic skills are all “really important when it comes to college.” Marina adds, “you don’t come to college knowing how to do that [referring to the academic skills].” Angela points out “by knowing all these tips and different strategies - what you should be doing in college - it really opens your mind.” The content covered in FYE helps students acclimate to the academic community of the college. Confidence in negotiating the academic environment opens the door for continued persistence toward educational goals.

Further testimony to the importance of the FYE content is the impact Angela and Brandon note the class had on their motivation. Angela and Brandon both commented on
how the FYE course was motivating and contributed to their persistence in college. To illustrate, Angela commented that the FYE class “motivates me to do better and to realize this [college education] is really important.” Angela mentions that the professor covers “why you should stay in college and the benefits of it [college].” Thus, learning about the benefits of a college education in a classroom filled with students that have a shared goal of education were motivating factors in Angela’s commitment and persistence in college. In addition, she explains FYE makes you want to “do better throughout your college years, it pushes you.” The motivational push that Angela describes is the net result of the FYE course and is a critical factor in her persistence in college.

Brandon identifies how the content of FYE “really contributes to my push and my drive as far as my college career goes.” Brandon connects FYE with his future as he reflectively states, “What are you going to do with the knowledge that you’re gaining, and I think that’s what FYE is for me. It [FYE] has opened up my eyes to say what else is out here after college.” Brandon is confident in his ability to persevere toward his educational goals. As such, he had the following advice for new students in regard to negotiating college, “If you just keep focused, and keep organized, and stay on track, it’s kind of like a smooth sailing boat.”

Based on the students’ comments, the content identified in the FYE course is comparable to a life preserver that one would find in Brandon’s “smooth sailing boat.” The FYE content provides the necessary information to support a student’s ability to navigate college similar to the support a life preserver provides to someone in the water. The life preserver enables one to stay afloat and prevents drowning. In a similar way the FYE content serves as the educational information needed to prevent students from drowning in the overwhelming complexity of the college environment. Also, several
students noted the consequences of utilizing the FYE content to navigate college and to stay afloat was a motivating factor in their efforts to move forward with their educational goals.

Importance of Classmate Support

Brown and Burdsal (2012) note, “Completing a higher education degree is an achievement not done in isolation; rather, it is a joint effort of those teaching, learning, advising, and administrating: a community of scholars” (p. 433). Brown and Burdsal point to the need for students to have a community of support in their quests to transition and persist in college with the ultimate goal of completion. The student participants were very specific in identifying people they perceived as supportive and influential to their college efforts. The students acknowledged multiple support systems from sources both internal and external to the college. Students revealed that they received support from professors, classmates, tutoring center staff, advisors, a wide range of family members (grandmother, aunt, cousins, mother, father, etc.), community members (pastor), and college friends enrolled at neighboring colleges and universities. Thus, the students’ comments validated the need for a community approach that goes beyond the confines of the community explored in the one section of the FYE course in this study.

Astin (1993) states, “The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Therefore, the importance of classmates is a critical aspect to explore in relation to assisting students in their quests toward college success. To illustrate, Austin discusses how the professor and students in the FYE course provided a support system because, he says, “for the most part, I am on my own” in college. When talking about the members of FYE and the role they played in helping him transition Austin admits, “oh yeah,
definitely” his FYE classmates assisted in his transition by providing the needed social support. Austin reveals, “I don’t really make too many friends, so FYE makes it easier to communicate with people outside [of class].” Elaine also acknowledges how the students in FYE have been helpful in her transition. She states, “If I miss the [FYE] class or something I have to ask the students, my classmates, and ask them what did I miss and they actually help me, and I catch up.” Sarabi explains that Brandon, one of her classmates, “plays like a big brother role in my life.” She discloses that when she is “freaking out” about school related work, she calls Brandon, and he helps and supports her in developing a plan to get her back on track.

With few exceptions Bethany’s schedule is similar to most of her classmates in FYE. She is on campus only two days a week and arranged her schedule so that her classes meet continuously on those two days. Therefore, she has little time to interact with her classmates outside of class, and relationships must be cultivated during class time. Bethany explains that her FYE classmates are “all really helpful” and she feels she can “always ask a classmate” if she needs help. She further describes her classmates in FYE as “accepting” and “not being judgmental.” Whereas she describes the classmates in her other classes as not “very accepting” and not “very welcoming.” Bethany’s comments describing the differences between her classmates in FYE versus her classmates from her other classes bring up the following questions that warrant further research. What accounts for the attitudinal differences between the classmates in Bethany’s FYE 105 class and her other classes? Does the professor play the primary role in establishing the environment, which can be positive or negative? What factors may account for the discrepancy between the actions of Bethany’s classmates in FYE 105 compared to the classmates in her other classes?
Marina expresses that “it’s important to make friends” in class because that helps create a sense of belonging. She expresses her desire to connect with her classmates as she states, “I really wanted to come to school to make friends.” The Spring 2015 semester is Marina’s first semester in college, and she enjoys interacting with her classmates but hasn’t established any relationships with her FYE classmates that extend beyond the classroom. Due to the transitory nature of the community college Marina poses the following question in the form of a statement: “How often do people really make friends in a community college.” This view may stem from her desire to attend a four-year residential college, but due to last minute circumstances Marina had to alter her plans and enroll in the community college. Marina’s desire and need to establish friendships that extend beyond the classroom did not materialize in the FYE 105 class, but Marina’s comments illustrate the importance she places on establishing relationships with her classmates. Nonetheless, despite the lack of developing meaningful relationships that extended beyond the FYE class, Marina admits, “I really do like this school here, and I like the campus, and [I] like my teachers, and to me the thought of leaving school is like not in the realm of possibilities.”

Each day when Hope enters the classroom she is smiling and greets everyone with “good morning” or “hello.” Therefore, it is not surprising that she confirms, “I feel very, very comfortable” interacting with my classmates. During class Hope has a high level of interaction with her classmates and recounts, “Yes, they [classmates] are helpful, they are helpful and they are always happy and ready to give me the answer if they themselves know.” Hope is not hesitant about participating in class. The following explains Hope’s philosophy on classroom participation,
During class, when I have difficulties, and I don’t understand something, I always raise up my hand. If I want the classroom to benefit from my question I ask her [the professor] the question, and she will explain to the class and maybe my other classmates have the same difficulties and they will just profit from my question and then know exactly what to do.

When a true sense of community emerges in a classroom, there will exist a sense of responsibility to others as demonstrated in the previous comments by Hope. Thus, in Hope’s situation that sense of responsibility translated to a greater commitment to the class.

Brandon also discusses the responsibility he feels toward his peers and the importance of peers to his support system in college. When Brandon misses class, he usually hears from his classmates. They might send him a tweet (a message sent using Twitter) or question him in class when he returns. However, this type of interdependence and accountability is a two-way street. Brandon explains, “I try to hold my peers accountable and vice versa.” He also reminds his classmates about assignments and due dates so that success in college is not an individual effort, but a group effort. Since this is Brandon’s second attempt at college, he notes that he doesn’t want to “make the same mistakes twice.”

Karp and Stacey (2013) describe student success courses, like FYE 105, as optimal opportunities for “relationship building” (p. 1). It was obvious from the information shared by the student participants that the FYE classroom experience proved to be valuable in establishing relationships, which assisted in their transition to the college environment. The benefit of those relationships will play out as the students move forward with their efforts to achieve their educational goals.
Experiences of International Students

There were three international students in the FYE class, and two of the students admitted that connecting with their classmates was a greater challenge due to English being their second language. All three of the international students agreed that their classmates in FYE 105 were supportive and beneficial to their college success. However, the cultural differences and language barriers seemed to play a role in the ability of two of the international students to engage and develop a sense of community. Below, I provide an overview of the classmates’ support in FYE as experienced by the three international students, Hope, Sarah, and Muriah.

Hope has been in the United States for almost four years and brings a diverse set of worldly experiences including competing as an Olympic athlete and meeting Pope John Paul II. She has a magnetic personality, which allows her to build relationships easily with others. As such, she explains that developing relationships “has not really been difficult.” She maintains that being an international student “has made me have more friends” instead of being a barrier to establishing friendships and connections in the college community.

Hope enjoyed sharing with her classmates about her experiences in the United States as well as information about her country. The willingness of Hope to share her experiences appeared to enhance the community of the class and enrich the learning experiences. For example, when the class discussed diversity, Hope shared her first impressions of Americans. She recounts when she got off the plane and entered the United States for the first time she observed a lot of people smoking outside the airport. Hope explains in her country the only people that smoke are prostitutes, so she immediately thought “there are a lot of prostitutes in this country.” Hope’s classmates
laughed and the dialogue continued on the topic of cultural diversity. Hope freely shared her experiences with the class throughout the semester. In return, she also heavily relied on the support of her classmates, which proved to assist with her further integration into the college environment.

Sarah, like Hope, was an international student in the FYE class. Sarah arrived to the United States only four months prior to starting college classes in the Spring 2015 semester. Sarah describes her classmates as helpful to her transition. She explains, “If I have any questions, I can’t find the answers, or if I don’t understand anything some students can help me and explain to me.” She talks about how the FYE class is a “friendly” community made up of “people to help us.” Sarah preferred not to talk in class because she was self-conscious about her perceived limited mastery of the English language. Surprisingly, Sarah’s English speaking skills were exceptional based on her limited time in the United States. However, Sarah had multiple barriers to overcome such as, negotiating a new country and the new experience of college, which proved to be overwhelming. As such, after consulting with Ms. Lawrence, Sarah dropped the FYE class on the last day of the semester.

Muriah has been in the United States for two years and describes her experiences with the other students as different from Hope’s and Sarah’s experiences. On one hand, Muriah claims that most of the students in FYE “are very supportive.” On the other hand, Muriah speculates the reason for the support experienced in FYE is that most of the students are in their first year of college, so they are “trying to be friendly to everybody.” Otherwise, Muriah feels that in her other classes when “everybody knows what they’re doing” in college, the students act differently. Muriah bases her observations on her experiences in classes like physics and biology, which are typically populated by students
who have completed their first semester and possibly their first year of college. She felt more comfortable in the ESL (English as a Second Language) classes that she took when she first started college. Muriah states, “I use to participate more when I was taking like classes with international students.” Specifically Muriah notes that the student support she receives is mainly from international students. However, Muriah adds, “When I’m working in groups with the [FYE] students, I like participating. I just don’t like participating in [front of the whole] class.” She further explains how the comfort level with her peers increases based on the way students interact with her during group work. For example, Muriah notes based on “their facial expressions” such as a smile or inclusion in the conversation “makes you feel comfortable.” Muriah was comfortable interacting with her FYE classmates, but her other classes did not prove as supportive.

Hope did not experience any challenges integrating and contributing to the community of the FYE class. In fact, she relied heavily on her classmates for support and assistance with multiple aspects of the class as well as negotiating college. However, both Sarah and Muriah expressed concern about their perceived limited ability to speak the English language, which according to their views affected their ability (on some level) to interact with their classmates. Therefore, Sarah and Muriah were hesitant to speak with others and reserved in their interactions, due to the lack of confidence they possessed in their oral language skills. Despite these limitations, both Sarah and Muriah claimed they developed a sense of community, but at different levels than Hope.

Transition and Persistence

According to the student participants the sense of community established by the professor, the classroom environment, the FYE course content, active learning, and their classmates contributed to their transition into college. In contrast, for the most part, the
students did not connect the sense of community established in FYE as a significant factor in their college persistence. The majority of students noted their personal motivation and supportive people external to the college as contributing factors in their decision to continue in college.

If students can successfully transition to college and receive the necessary support (academic and social), a framework to support persistence has been established. Transitioning to college is the first step in order to persist, and the first year is critical to a successful transition. For community college students, the classroom is essential to their college experience since the majority of their time on campus is spent in the classroom. Therefore, Tinto (2002) advocates for additional research to be conducted in order to explore further the relationship between how “the experience of the classroom comes to shape student learning and persistence” (p. 92). The research presented in this study of one section of FYE adds to the understanding of how a sense of classroom community is established and to the understanding of how students’ perceptions of a sense of community related to their transition and persistence.

Finally, looking at how the students persisted in the FYE course provides further insight into their transition and ultimately their continuation in college. By the end of the Spring 2015 semester, four students had withdrawn from the FYE course. A total of 18 students out of the 22 students originally participating in this study received a grade in the course. Of the 18 students receiving a grade in the course 12 passed (grade of C or better) and six failed (grade of E). However, the six students that failed the course stopped attending and did not follow college procedures to terminate their enrollment (withdraw from the course). Prior to the end of the semester, Ms. Lawrence attempted to call the students who had stopped attending the class. She reached out to encourage the
students to withdraw from the course in order to avoid a failing grade. This strategy had limited success due to incorrect phone numbers in the student information system and a general non-responsiveness from the students.

Summary

Karp and Stacey (2013) note, “Most literature on student success courses posits that these courses increase students’ attachment to college by helping them develop relationships and institutional knowledge, and that this process helps students to become integrated into the institution, and ultimately, to persist” (p. 1). Chapter Five provides a greater understanding regarding the students’ perspectives of the impact of their sense of community on transition and persistence. The student participants acknowledged that a sense of community developed in the FYE 105 course and the professor, classroom environment, FYE content, active learning, and classmates were all key in creating the sense of community that assisted in their transition. According to the students who successfully transitioned and persisted through the course a sense of community was a factor in their success. However, with a few exceptions, students did not clearly link a sense of community with their decision to persist in college.
Chapter Six: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study presented the story of how a sense of community was created in a community college FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success course, and students’ perceptions of how classroom community impacts transition and persistence in college. A sense of community was developed through the FYE 105 class by establishing safety and belonging, creating interdependence, facilitating active learning, and maintaining the rules of the course and the classroom. According to the students’ perceptions, the professor, the classroom environment, classmate support, course content, and active learning were the key factors that contributed to a classroom sense of community, which assisted in the students’ transition to college, but these factors had less perceived effect on their college persistence. To conclude, Chapter Six provides a brief review of the research study with a concentration on summarizing, discussing, and drawing conclusions based on the findings. Additionally, I provide recommendations for future research and identify implications for practice.

Review of Research

This study began with a discussion of how community colleges have transitioned from an access agenda to one that includes accountability, specifically in the form of degree completion as presented in Chapter One. One element of the focus on retaining students at the start of their academic careers entails looking at programs that support students in their academic and social transition to the college environment. The classroom provides the primary source of social and academic integration into college, especially for community college students who typically have obligations external to the
college that compete with their academic responsibilities. Therefore, the time community college students spend in the classroom is essential to their ability to establish and experience a sense of community within the college setting.

There is a deficit in community college research, especially with regard to qualitative designs that focus on the lived experiences of the students. Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007) point out that little research has been conducted on the success of FYE courses at community colleges. Brown and Burdsal (2012) note the absence of research relating student success to sense of community. Also, research on how a sense of community is created in face-to-face (FTF) classrooms in postsecondary education is limited. This study, utilizing a qualitative design, advances the understanding of what transpires in the classroom to create a sense of community and the importance of community in transition and persistence as perceived by students.

The first-year experience is a popular college-wide initiative that encompasses an array of services to assist and support first-year students in their college transitions. To reiterate a point made in Chapter One, a first-year experience course has proven to be the most common academic initiative used to assist student transition into the college environment, facilitate student learning, and improve student persistence after the first year of college (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Keup & Petschauer, 2011). Therefore, this study was conducted in a FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success course at Bluegrass Community and Technical College. The FYE 105 course description states that one of the goals for the course is “to foster a sense of belonging” (KCTCS Catalog, 2014-2015, p. 291). As such, this was the ideal course for a study exploring questions related to community, transition, and persistence.
In Chapter Two, I provided a scholarly overview of the first-year experience course along with the key concepts related to the college classroom, community, learning communities, retention, and involvement. McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities were the main theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed this study. The scholarly research presented in Chapter Two provided the foundation of my study, which addressed the following two questions. First, the study explored how community was created in the FYE 105 classroom by observing students living within that experience at one community college and taking into account the point of view of the professor. Second, the study gleaned insight from the students’ perspectives on how community impacted their transition and persistence in college. A deeper understanding into these two research questions was gained through classroom participant observations throughout the duration of a semester (16 weeks), faculty and student interviews, and materials related to the course. The data generated from the study were analyzed using thematic analysis, and Chapter Three provides a detailed overview of the data analysis process.

In Chapter Four, I answered the question of how a sense of community was created in the one section of FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success. The data revealed that the professor was the key element in establishing and maintaining a sense of community in the one class section observed for this study. I identified a number of themes that emerged during the first class sessions - themes that continued to develop and evolve throughout the semester. The research uncovers how the professor established safety and belonging, created interdependence, facilitated active learning, and maintained
the rules of the course and the classroom, which contributes to a new understanding of how a classroom sense of community was established in one classroom. Quantitative research (Booker 2008; Cheng 2004; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007) has been conducted at four-year institutions to study the impact of a sense of community and belonging, but is void of the qualitative data that shows how community develops in the classroom. Thus, my research adds new insight and fills a deficit in research associated with the community college sector of higher education, the classroom, and the lived experiences of the students and professor in relation to establishing a classroom sense of community. In addition to adding new insight, the research findings of how active learning contributes to the creation of classroom community reinforces the existing research from Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) who maintain, “Active learning is a basic requirement for the formation of the community of the classroom” (p. 48).

Additionally, in Chapter Four, I link the community college classroom sense of community to the elements of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection as described by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Therefore, I show the connection and influence of the findings from the FYE sense of community study to McMillan and Chavis’s sense of community theory, which further reinforces this existing theory. The findings suggest that a sense of community does not automatically develop. As such, activities and interactions must be intentionally designed by the professor in order to create a sense of classroom community.

In reflecting on the activities and interactions that fostered a sense of community, described in Chapter Four, I draw two conclusions. First, the activities and interactions initiated by the professor, such as, learning student names, praising and validating student
questions and comments, facilitating group work and discussion, and carrying out consistent and fair course rules, were not time-consuming or difficult for the professor to incorporate. Thus, the activities and interactions described in Chapter Four can easily be transferred to any class regardless of the academic discipline. The data presented in Chapter Four illustrate how community was created in the one section of FYE 105 and emphasize the pedagogical role that a sense of community played in this one community college classroom.

The second conclusion is that the essence of a sense of community is “warmth and intimacy” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9) and how a sense of community manifests in the classroom is based on the professor’s individual personality and teaching style. Therefore, the sense of community that exists in each classroom is unique to that group of students and professor and cannot be exactly replicated because the dynamics of their interactions will vary from class to class. For two classes to create the same sense of community would be like catching lightning in a bottle – an impossible task. As such, there is not a manual or step-by-step instructional guide for directing faculty on how to create a sense of community in the classroom.

The explanation of how community develops in the one section of FYE 105 provides new insight and expands the knowledge regarding the importance of the classroom, the central role of the faculty member, and the essential elements of a sense of community, which can be used to inform pedagogical practices. The community college classroom often represents the main connection the student has to the institution. Hence, the learning environment that is created within the four walls of the classroom has the
potential to impact student success in a positive or negative way, depending upon the qualities of the experience.

Chapter Five delves into the students’ perspectives and answers the question of how a sense of community impacts the students’ transition and persistence in college. The study included 22 student participants. I started conducting interviews with the 14 students who were still attending class in March at the course midterm point.

Tinto (2012) advocates, “If institutions are to significantly increase the retention and graduation of their students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, their actions must be centered on the classroom” (p. 6). As such, by studying the student perceptions related to classroom sense of community, I am advancing the understanding of the student experience in the classroom in an effort to increase student success and degree completion.

Based on the students’ perceptions, Chapter Five reveals that a sense of community did develop in the FYE class and establishes that a sense of community assisted the students in their transition to college. The importance of the professor, classroom environment, active learning, FYE course content, and classmates were identified by the students as the elements that contributed to a sense of community, which aided in their transition and to some degree their intentions of persisting. However, students were less clear on the role that the sense of community played in their persistence. The students cited intrinsic motivation and supportive individuals external to the college as key factors in their persistence.

The student participants’ expressed that a sense of community in the FYE 105 classroom was relevant to their transition, which reinforces the existing findings of
Tucker’s (1999) research, which identified student vision and sense of community as important to student transition. However, the students were not clear regarding how a sense of community impacted their persistence. Looking to previous research for further insight in regard to persistence, the findings in the studies by Harris (2006-2007) and Tinto (1997) illustrate the significance of the classroom sense of community on student persistence when utilizing a cohort model. The study conducted by Harris establishes that the role of community was a strong factor in the adult students’ ability to complete their degree. The significance of Harris’s study was that the student participants were in a closed cohort at a four-year institution. Therefore, the amount of time the students spent together was extensive, in contrast to the one semester (16 weeks) the FYE 105 students shared together in the one course.

Tinto’s (1997) multimethod, qualitative and quantitative research study at Seattle Central Community College demonstrates how learning communities (made up of several cohort classes) enhanced learning and student persistence at a community college. The contributing features to the success of the program of cohort classes were student connections, the network of support, and collaborative learning. Thus, Tinto’s study shows a link to the importance of the cohort model, classroom structure, and pedagogy in student persistence.

Connecting my research, from the one section of FYE 105, to the persistence and sense of community research from Harris (2006-2007) and Tinto (1997), I draw the conclusion that a cohort approach appears to have a greater effect on creating a sense of community that leads to increased persistence than does a single course. However, the benefits for college students’ transition and persistence mean that the impact of creating a
sense of community in a single course should not be overlooked or dismissed. After all, the majority of college courses are not linked or paired, even though previous research shows that a cohort model of paired or multiple courses is more conducive to creating the type of community that produces a greater impact on persistence. The benefits of the cohort model would allow the students to maintain longer sustained periods of contact, which should result in a greater connectedness among the classroom community. A striking obstacle in operationalizing the cohort model for community college students is working around the diversity and complexity of students’ academic, personal, and (often) employment needs and schedules in order to schedule paired courses.

A significant finding of this study, based on the students’ perceptions, is the importance the students placed on their relationship with the faculty member and the faculty member’s role in creating a sense of community that supports the student’s college transition and to some degree their persistence. Long-standing research, starting with the notable 1960s Coleman Report, identifies the importance of peer relationships as one of the essential factors in student success or lack of success. Therefore, within the community college sector of higher education are peer-to-peer relationships or faculty-to-peer relationships more important in establishing a sense of community with the intended outcome of increased student success?

Tinto (1993) states, “interactions between the individual and other members of the college, student, staff, and faculty, are centrally related to further continuance in that institution” (p. 116). Student-to-student interactions related to a social dimension are identified as dominant in residential colleges and universities (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). For example, studies by Harris (2006-2007) and Jacobs and Archie
reinforce the influence of fellow students through involvement in club memberships, fraternity and sorority membership, and campus residence, which results in increased persistence.

Additionally, the theories of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1993) advocate that integration and involvement are central to student success. However, for most community college students if integration and involvement are to occur it will most likely occur in the classroom due to the limited time community college students spend on campus. Hence, the academic elements of involvement and integration become critical to persistence for students enrolled at commuter institutions (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Chickering (2000) advocates, “Teaching in ways that build relationships and a sense of community among students is especially important for commuter students” (p. 23). Thus, the importance of the faculty member in contributing to and facilitating interactions to create social and academic integration through the community of the classroom is a significant finding worth noting. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) state, “Designing the classroom experience to promote more meaningful interaction among students and teachers is one promising strategy for community colleges” (p. 14).

The data presented in this study supports Spitzberg and Thorndike’s (1992) statement, “Faculty are the key facilitators of the learning community” (p. 176). In addition, Astin (1999) reports, “Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student characteristic” (p. 525). Tinto (2012) has gained an understanding of the importance of faculty and states, “I have come to appreciate the centrality of the
classroom to student success and the critical role that faculty play in retaining students” (p. viii). The data presented in this study illustrate the integral role that community college faculty play in establishing, maintaining, and participating in the classroom sense of community; whereas peers appear to play a secondary role in the classroom community, especially in a single course not connected or paired to other courses. The importance of student-faculty interaction is well documented (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2012) and, therefore, to increase student success in the community college, the role of faculty related to the classroom sense of community warrants continued exploration. The research finding highlighting the importance of faculty to a sense of community for community college students does not negate the importance of student-to-student interactions but presents a heightened awareness of faculty influence on student success.

By capturing the experiences of the students in the one section of FYE 105, I have attempted to offer further understanding and new insight into how a sense of community influences students’ transition and persistence. According to the FYE 105 students, the academic community that developed did influence their commitment to the institution as identified in Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities. However, the impact on persistence in relation to sense of community was not as prominent in the one course section of FYE 105 as the cohort learning communities identified in the studies of Harris (2006-2007) and Tinto (1991). Exploring the lived experiences of the professor and students in this one FYE class section provides valuable insight into what community looked and felt like in this one class and the importance the students placed on the role of the professor in
relationship to community. This research adds to the limited research on community colleges and the connections among a sense of community, transition, and persistence in college.

Recommendations for Future Research

Tinto (2012) acknowledges that the classroom and faculty are critical in the effort to retain students in college, and the classroom often is an overlooked area in retention studies. The purpose of the FYE 105 sense of community research was to initiate and open up a dialogue regarding what occurs in the classroom, specifically how to create a sense of community and how a sense of community factors into students’ transition and persistence. Taking into account my research findings, the following are recommendations for future research.

External Support: Beyond the Classroom

One area identified through the study that warrants further investigation is the community of external support outside of the classroom that the students acknowledged as a factor in their persistence in college. The community of support identified by the students in this study extended beyond the classroom to the institution and to the community where the students live and work. Students acknowledged receiving institutional support, beyond the classroom, through their academic advisors and the tutoring center staff, and external support from a wide range of family members (grandmother, aunt, dad, mom, cousins, etc.), community members (pastor), and college friends enrolled at neighboring institutions. This study was designed to look specifically at classroom community in one section of FYE 105 in relation to transition and persistence and did not explore community beyond the classroom. However, students
consistently referred to external supports (family, friends, and neighbors) and internal supports (faculty, academic advisors, and tutoring center staff) as important to their college persistence.

The emphasis that students placed on the larger community of institutional and external supports suggests that future research should examine how these elements of community impact students’ persistence. In Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) formulation of a theory for student departure in commuter colleges and universities the four basic elements include “student entry characteristics, the external environment, the campus environment, and the academic communities of the institution” (pp. 42-43). A distinguishing feature of the conceptual model of Braxton et al. is that three (external environment, campus environment, and academic communities) of the four elements highlight and emphasize the importance of community. Therefore, sense of community research appears essential to the study of community college persistence. Recognizing the role of community in a student’s transition and persistence is not isolated to the classroom, but extends to a broader group of people who provide support. Based on the data collected, future research should consider exploring the entire community, both internal and external to the college, which provides support for community college students.

Electronic Technology

Kruger (2000) advocates,

Information technology has the potential to change the very nature of the commuter student experience by providing opportunities for more meaningful
relationships with faculty and fellow students and by engaging commuter students in communities of learners unbound by the barriers of time and place. (p. 59)

In addition, Gardner, Upcraft, and Barefoot (2005) note, “Technology pervades almost every aspect of first-year students’ lives and must be recognized as a powerful influence, for good or for ill, on first-year student success” (p. 521). One shared characteristic of the FYE 105 students was the attachment they possessed to their phones. Based on my class observations each student and the professor carried a cell phone to class each day. As such, it was a struggle at the beginning of each class session for the professor to lure students’ attention away from their mobile devices. This observation brings up important questions. On the one hand, technology can be a distraction to learning and community building in a face-to-face (FTF) class. On the other hand, how can technology be incorporated to engage students and enhance a sense of community through the use of electronic media devices in FTF classes? The idea of incorporating various types of technology into the class in order to continuously build community is an aspect that warrants further exploration. If faculty are not incorporating electronic technology into the traditional FTF classes is this a missed opportunity to enhance learning and community building both inside and outside of class utilizing a technological component? Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) emphasize, “Electronic technologies and instructional technologies can be effective vehicles for promoting student-faculty interactions, as well as important means to enrich learning” (p. 216).

The class section of FYE 105 studied in this research did not incorporate technology to any notable degree either inside or outside of class, which may have limited opportunities for support and communication beyond the classroom. However,
the professor used email to communicate individually with students outside of class, and on several occasions she sent an email message to the entire class.

Future research should explore how using technology (Blackboard, Twitter, Google Hangouts, Facebook, Snapchat, Blogs, etc.) may support and reinforce the effort to build a sense of community within a classroom. Expanding the community beyond four walls and into the virtual world may be beneficial for students in sustaining engagement, interactions, and discussions outside of class in an effort to enhance connections. Additionally technology may be an alternative way to engage in the learning community experience of the class for students who are absent or who are shy or have reservations about communicating FTF in class. Another benefit of social media technology is the possibility of sustaining the classroom connections beyond the semester.

Classroom Diversity

As quoted in a previous chapter, Mellow and Heelan (2008) explain, “The greatest challenge for community colleges is embracing and supporting the most diverse classroom of learners ever to sit side by side in American higher education” (p. 257). In this study of one section of FYE 105 the student diversity included, but was not limited to, students receiving disability support, students speaking English as a second language, students enrolled in multiple sections of remedial courses, students who were first generation college-goers, and students who worked and had various outside commitments beyond their academic studies. The class members were also diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Mellow and Heelan (2008) state, “The student body of community colleges strongly reflects the population demographics of the nation” (p. 259).
Additionally, Mellow and Heelan (2008) reveal that the diversity found in community colleges “brings with it immensely different expectations and needs on the part of the students, as well as richness that creates powerful learning environments” (p. 261). The diverse student populations enrolled in community colleges present both challenges and opportunities in establishing a sense of community. Future research needs to delve deeper into the importance of community by exploring specific subpopulations (e.g. first-generation students, veterans, women, international students, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, etc.) to assist with the understanding of how a sense of community affects these groups with regard to transition and persistence in the community college. Also, research should attempt to identify which elements of McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of community theory (membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection) are the most critical to the various subpopulations. This information would assist faculty in designing the pedagogical approaches that would support fostering a sense of community in the classroom.

*Longitudinal Data Collection and Departure Data Collection*

I began interviewing student participants at the academic mid-term (March) and continued until the end of the semester (April). Conducting the interviews while the students were still enrolled in the course enabled an exploration of the question of how a sense of community impacts transition. However, the students did not routinely connect or relate the sense of community developed within the FYE 105 class to their persistence in college. Perhaps future research should interview students at the end of their academic career (prior to graduation) to see if a classroom sense of community factored into their
persistence, and to what degree. Alternatively, students may reveal that a sense of community is unconnected to their persistence. Having students reflect on their experiences after successful completion of their academic goals would add to the study of persistence as it relates to the potential long-term benefit of a sense of community.

In addition, many students did not persevere beyond the first few weeks of the semester, which suggest that the first few weeks of the semester are critical for student persistence. Noel (1985) further supports this point and states, “Those first sessions taught in freshman courses are probably the most important class sessions students will encounter during their college days” (p. 21). Future community college retention efforts could benefit from research that identifies specific factors that influence students during the early weeks of the academic term. Assessing what happens during those critical first weeks would add to the study of a sense of community in relation to transition and persistence.

Implications for Practice

Professional Development

According to Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004), “Faculty development is the road map to help teachers navigate the shift from the traditional ways of teaching to the more active and collaborative modes of pedagogy characteristic of learning communities” (p. 77). Hence, students would benefit from faculty exploring professional development opportunities that would enhance and improve the classroom experience. Mellow and Heelan (2008) advocate that for students in the community college to be academically successful it is dependent upon the faculties “expertise in teaching and learning” (p. 199).
Tinto (2012) states, “Since student success is primarily a function of success in the classroom and the ability of the faculty to promote that success, it follows that any long-term strategy to enhance student retention must involve long-term investment in faculty development” (p. 87). Embracing Tinto’s recommendation would necessitate colleges initiating comprehensive professional development plans to assist faculty (both full-time and part-time) with the skills necessary to enrich the classroom in a way that promotes retention. As identified in this study, the professor plays a key role in creating a classroom environment that promotes a sense of community with the intended outcome of student persistence and academic goal achievement. As such, institutions should provide support, guidance, and professional development as a way to enhance the pedagogical skills of faculty.

Community college faculty are expected to develop their pedagogy, and it would appear reasonable to dedicate institutional resources to instruction in teaching methods that foster creation of a sense of classroom community. During an interview, Ms. Lawrence, the FYE 105 professor, acknowledged a need for increased professional faculty development. She explained that community college faculty are educated in their specific discipline, and typically do not receive training or education in theory or pedagogy. It is little wonder, then, that faculty usually facilitate classroom instruction in a manner similar to the way they were taught, which typically is through the classroom lecture. Professional development about active learning approaches should provide models and illustrations that convey how to apply the elements of active learning to engage students and create a sense of classroom community.
It is important to note that faculty need support in their efforts to restructure the classroom environment. In addition to sponsoring institutional-based professional development opportunities, higher education administrators should commit resources, such as stipends and funds for pedagogy education. These incentives would demonstrate institutional support for faculty to incorporate engaging pedagogy and techniques that would assist them in creating a sense of community in the classroom. Nicholas (1997) advocates, “We need to help educators develop the understanding and skills used in facilitating the community-making process and building strong healthy relationships” (Discussion section, para. 9).

Faculty

The importance of the professor in creating a sense of community in the classroom is highlighted throughout the study. Therefore, a recommendation based on the results of the study is for institutions to intentionally focus on hiring new faculty and adjunct (part-time) faculty who are committed to developing the kind of classroom environment that promotes student success through the creation of community. Therefore, hiring faculty who create community in the classroom is an important attribute for administrators to consider when establishing faculty hiring criteria and evaluating candidates for faculty positions. However, this recommendation would only apply to institutions that give primacy to teaching.

In addition, academic administrators should make careful and deliberate decisions in regard to who teaches first-year students in order to provide the best classroom learning experience for new students. As such, Levitz and Noel (1989) recommend that institutions consider, “regularly assigning its best teachers to freshman courses” (p. 75).
Ultimately, assigning faculty who have a proven record of effective teaching strategies in first-year courses provides a greater level of support for students during the critical first-year of college. Accordingly, students who successfully complete their first-year of college significantly increase their chances of continued success and persistence (Levitz & Noel, 1989).

Another important implication for practice is to link faculty tenure and promotion decisions more closely to instruction that promotes student success in the classroom, which results in successful student transitions and increased persistence. Thereby increasing the importance placed on teaching and rewarding faculty who excel in the area of instruction. A tighter connection between faculty progress and student success would increase the importance placed on teaching and would reward faculty who excel in the area of instruction. Again, this recommendation would have a place primarily in institutions that prioritize teaching. The research findings support focusing careful attention on faculty and the critical role of faculty in student development and persistence, especially in first-year courses.

What Happened to John?

We can't save them all, but we can gain a better understanding of students' needs and can provide support as part of our obligation to the students once they are admitted. As a case in point, John, a community college student in FYE 105, discloses:

I don't want to be like everybody else, like all the people that live on my street. [I don't want to] be one of the kids that like gets out of [high] school and just runs the streets. I just want to come to school [college] and do something better with my life.
For John and for many students “American community colleges have served as the people’s colleges and the Ellis Island of American higher education” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012, p. 1). However, access and opportunity do not necessarily lead to success, and college completion is an ongoing concern for higher education institutions, especially community colleges. Continued research in areas of community support, efficacious strategies, and persistence is needed.

I have identified through this study that research often results in more questions than answers. However, each study helps put additional pieces of the retention puzzle together in order to present a clearer picture of how to assist students toward completion. In the FYE 105 class, there were ten students out of 22 student participants that did not successfully finish the FYE class, and these students represent the large number of students who leave college before completing their educational goals. As students stopped attending, I did not have an opportunity to interact with them to learn more about their departure decisions. However, Ms. Lawrence attempted to call each student, which had limited success for various reasons. I interviewed John before he stopped attending, and his story also adds to the questions for future research.

During our interview, a few days prior to the college’s spring break, John expressed his shock in regard to fitting into the college environment. He explained,

As a kid, I had a hard time fitting in. So, I think that like it was like a surprise for me to fit into college, because I really never fit in anywhere like in high school or middle school.

John’s perception was that he finally found a place where he fit, and he felt he had successfully transitioned into college. Therefore, I was surprised when John did not
return to class after spring break. Thus, John’s story illustrates how persistence in college is a complex issue with many factors that can be identified and possibly addressed, but with many factors that may remain unknown and unquantifiable. Transitioning, fitting in, feeling a sense of belonging, feeling a sense of community are only part of the conundrum of student persistence.

The big question remains, what happened to John? Like many other students, John became a statistic of the large number of college students who do not persist. According to the American College Testing (ACT) national rates for collegiate retention and persistence to degree, approximately 45 percent of students leave college prior to the end of their first year at two-year public institutions; and at four-year public institutions, approximately 35 percent of students leave the institution prior to the end of their first year (American College Testing, 2013a). Therefore, it is critical to continue research in the retention area of higher education in order to better understand those who do not continue, like John.

Unfortunately, John’s story of departure from the community college is not unusual. Fike and Fike (2008) remind us, “As educators, we need to be concerned about students leaving college. For every student lost, an educational dream goes unfulfilled” (p. 85). Community colleges have excelled in providing access, but access historically has not translated to persistence with the ultimate goal of completion (Roksa, 2012).

John represents one example of the many students who do not persist in college. What happened to John? Why did John not return to class after spring break? John, through his admission, felt he had transitioned, and he was excited to be a part of a community of learners. However, it would appear that at this time his desire for an
education that would afford him a different lifestyle is not to be realized. Research to illuminate student persistence in the community college sector should be ongoing so that community college leaders can engage in research-based decision making and implement programs and policies to increase student success.

Summary

In conclusion, this study identified that a sense of community existed for the students in the one course section of FYE 105 Achieving Academic Success at Bluegrass Community and Technical College. A sense of community was carefully facilitated by the professor and was created through the interrelated themes of establishing emotional safety and belonging, facilitating active learning, creating an environment of interdependence, and establishing and maintaining the rules of the course. In addition, the students’ identified the importance of the professor, classroom environment, active learning, course content, and classmates as the key elements that contributed to a sense of community, which supported their transition and to some extent their intentions of persisting.

Based on the findings of this research, future research should focus on students’ external and campus support systems, electronic technology, classroom diversity, and longitudinal and departure data collection. The major implication for practice, identified through this study, is the need for professional development. Another implication for practice is the focus on hiring and supporting faculty who utilize classroom pedagogy that facilitates active learning and a sense of community. While being mindful of the continuous budget constraints faced by institutions of higher education it would appear
beneficial for community colleges to focus resources on the college’s human resources –
the faculty.

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) emphasize the institutions responsibility to the first-
year student:

Institutions have an obligation to support and enhance the freshman year, not only
because retention may be increased, but because it is our moral and educational
obligation to create a collegiate environment with the maximum opportunity for
student success. (p. 4)

Scholars and practitioners must continue to explore the impact of a classroom sense of
community on the first year of college by engaging in research that can provide a
foundation for institutional policies and practices that enable student success.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Instructor IRB Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

TITLE OF STUDY
Exploring Sense of Community in a First-Year Experience Course

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about creating a sense of community in a first-year experience course (FYE 105). You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a FYE instructor. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be the one instructor to do so.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is Karen Mayo, graduate student at the University of Kentucky Department of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation. She is being guided in this research by Dr. John Thelin.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

By doing this study, we hope to learn how a sense of community is created in a FYE 105 (Achieving Academic Success) course, and how a sense of community impacts students’ perceptions of membership and persistence in the college community.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The research (interviews) will be conducted on the BCTC Cooper campus in Lexington. Arrangements will be made to conduct the interviews in a conference room or office at a time that works with your schedule. The study will consist of at least three interviews with the possibility of follow up emails and/or phone calls if further questions arise. In addition, I will be a participant-observer in your FYE 105 class. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for the interview portion of the study is approximately three hours. The classroom time will be the total time that your FYE 105 class meets during the semester. Your participation in the study will take place during the spring 2015 semester.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to participate in interviews to discuss your experiences with first year college students and creating community within the FYE 105 course. During the interviews, I will ask questions about your classroom techniques and experiences in creating a sense of community in a FYE 105. I will take notes and audio record the interview. If you do not want to be audio recorded you will not be able to participate in the interview. In addition, I will be a participant-observer in your FYE 105 class during the semester. I will take notes during the classroom observations.
WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole better understand this research topic.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

This study is confidential. That means that no one outside of the research team will know that the information you give came from you.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

There is a possibility that the data collected from you may be shared with other investigators in the future. If that is the case the data will not contain information that can identify you unless you give your consent or the UK Institutional Review Board (IRB) approves the research. The IRB is a committee that reviews ethical issues, according to federal, state and local regulations on research with human subjects, to make sure the study complies with these before approval of a research study is issued.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Karen Mayo at 859-806-2412 or Dr. John Thelin (Advisor) at 859-257-4996. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

_________________________________________   ____________
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study           Date

_________________________________________
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study
Signature of (authorized) person obtaining informed consent   Date

Printed name of (authorized) person obtaining informed consent
Appendix B: Student IRB Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

**TITLE OF STUDY**
Exploring Sense of Community in a First-Year Experience Course

**WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**
You are being invited to take part in a research study about how community is created in a first-year experience course (FYE 105). You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a community college student that is 18 years of age or older and enrolled in FYE 105. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 25 people to do so.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?**
The person in charge of this study is Karen Mayo, graduate student at the University of Kentucky Department of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation. She is being guided in this research by Dr. John Thelin.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**
By doing this study, we hope to learn about how community is created in a FYE 105 (Achieving Academic Success) course, and how a sense of community impacts students’ perceptions of membership and persistence in the college community.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**
The research (interview) will be conducted on the campus you attend at BCTC. Arrangements will be made to conduct the interview in a conference room or office at a time that works around your schedule. The study will consist of classroom observations and at least one interview with the possibility of follow up emails or phone calls if further questions arise. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately one hour. The study will be conducted during the spring 2015 semester.

**WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**
You will be asked to participate in an interview to discuss your experiences in the FYE 105 course. During the interview, I will ask questions about your perceptions of how community is created in the FYE 105 and how that has affected your transition and persistence in the college environment. I will take notes and audio record the interview. If you do not want to be audio recorded you will not be able to participate in the interview. I will be requesting to review copies of your course assignments (journals, papers, projects etc.) you have completed for your FYE course. You may voluntarily share this material, but selecting not to share course work will not interfere with your participation in the study or have any consequences for you academically. I will be observing your FYE 105 course throughout the semester. The classroom observations, course work, and interview will be linked together during data analysis.
WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole better understand this research topic.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study. As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status or grades.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will receive a $10.00 gift card for taking part in the interview portion of the study. Once the interview is completed (approximately one hour) you will receive a gift card. Once we start the interview, if for any reason you decide not to complete the interview you will still receive the $10.00 gift card. The gift card will be from a local Lexington business (e.g. Meijer, Wal-Mart, Kroger, Starbucks).

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

This study is confidential. That means that no one outside of the research team will know that the information you give came from you.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

There is a possibility that the data collected from you may be shared with other investigators in the future. If that is the case the data will not contain information that can identify you unless you give your consent or the UK Institutional Review Board (IRB) approves the research. The IRB is a committee that reviews ethical issues, according to federal, state and local regulations on research with human subjects, to make sure the study complies with these before approval of a research study is issued.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Karen Mayo at 859-806-2412 or Dr. John Thelin (Advisor) at 859-257-4996. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Signature of (authorized) person obtaining informed consent

Date

Printed name of (authorized) person obtaining informed consent
Appendix C: Sample Faculty Interview Questions

1. Describe a typical day in your FYE 105 class.
2. Describe the type of environment you attempt to create in class.
3. What techniques do you utilize to create the classroom environment?
4. How do you define classroom community?
5. How is classroom community beneficial to learning?
6. What is important about creating a classroom community?
7. The course description states the class will “aim to foster a sense of belonging” – explain what that means to you.
8. What is an instructor’s role in creating community?
9. How does an instructor influence the classroom community?
10. How does the course content factor into creating community?
11. What activities do you employ to create community?
12. Explain how you interact with students during class.
13. Explain how you interact with students after class (or outside of class).
14. What type of support do you offer students (inside and outside of class)?
15. Explain the importance of social relationships (student to student and faculty to student).
Appendix D: Sample Student Interview Questions

1. Explain a typical day in your FYE 105 class.
2. Compare your FYE 105 class to one of your other classes.
3. How has your participation in FYE 105 affected your 1st year in college?
4. Explain how you participate/interact with your instructor and peers during class.
5. Explain how you participate/interact with your instructor and peers after class (or outside of class).
6. Discuss your college support system.
7. How do the members of the class (instructor and peers) contribute to your support system?
8. Discuss your relationship with the FYE instructor and the students in the class.
9. What contributes to a sense of belonging in class and college?
10. When I say “classroom community” what does that mean to you?
11. Explain your academic plans for next semester.
### Appendix E: Pre-Set List of Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Active Learning – meaningful interactions (participation) that involves doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC</td>
<td>Socialization- learning from others (peers/instructor) about the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON</td>
<td>Connection – making an association; relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTA</td>
<td>Interaction – the direct effect that two or more people have on each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB</td>
<td>Social Bonding – the attachment, commitment, and involvement one experiences with other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>Intellectual Bonding- sharing of ideas and concepts with others that results in attachment, commitment, and involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASUP</td>
<td>Academic Support – services that provide help in relation to educational work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSUP</td>
<td>Social Support – relationships with others both internal and external to campus that provide assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Belonging (membership) – sharing a sense of personal relatedness (being part of the group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES</td>
<td>Emotional Safety- state achieved in relationships that allows an individual to be open and honest by expressing needs and feelings (security)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td>Shared Language – communicating through a common set of words and meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Influence (mattering) – effect or power on the group and the groups effect on each individual (acknowledging the needs, values, and opinions of others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Trust – confidence placed in another person or group (to rely on someone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV</td>
<td>Shared Values - common preferences in regard to what one perceives as appropriate action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SE  Shared Experiences – the common events/actions that occur and are encountered among a group of people

FE  Freedom of Expression – communicating ideas, expressions, and thoughts with others without reservation

CS  Common Symbol – an object or idea that represents a shared collective meaning to the group

SEC Shared Emotional Connection – commitment and belief that members have shared and will share common places, time together, and similar experiences

SAG  Shared Academic Goals- common objective (end result) for education

P  Persistence – progress toward educational goals
Appendix F: Revised List of Codes

**AL**  
Active Learning – meaningful interactions (participation) that involves doing

**SOC**  
Socialization- learning from others (peers/instructor) about the environment

**CON**  
Connection – making an association; relationship

**SB**  
Social Bonding – the attachment, commitment, and involvement one experiences with other people

**IB**  
Intellectual Bonding- sharing of ideas and concepts with others that results in attachment, commitment, and involvement

**ASUP**  
Academic Support – services that provide help in relation to educational work

**SSUP**  
Social Support – relationships with others both internal and external to campus that provide assistance

**B**  
Belonging (membership) – sharing a sense of personal relatedness (being part of the group)

**ES**  
Emotional Safety- state achieved in relationships that allows an individual to be open and honest by expressing needs and feelings (security)

**SL**  
Shared Language – communicating through a common set of words and meanings

**I**  
Influence (mattering) – effect or power on the group and the groups effect on each individual (acknowledging the needs, values, and opinions of others)

**T**  
Trust – confidence placed in another person or group (to rely on someone)

**FE**  
Freedom of Expression – communicating ideas, expressions, and thoughts with others without reservation

**SEC**  
Shared Emotional Connection – commitment and belief that members have shared and will share common places, time together, and similar experiences
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Caring – displaying kindness or concern for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Encouragement – act of giving support to enable confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Rules – operating procedures for the class, course, or institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>Shared Knowledge (peer to peer) – Exchanging knowledge from student to student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Acknowledgement and Praise – expression of recognition and approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM</td>
<td>Comfort/Security – feeling protected, free of harm, and free of distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Personal Sharing – disclosing information about oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RES</td>
<td>Responsibility to Classmates – being accountable to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPT</td>
<td>Respect – treating people in an appropriate way (valued, important)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Campus Connection – making an association with the larger campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OB</td>
<td>Obstacle – prevents or hinders progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND</td>
<td>Independence – autonomy from outside control or support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On October 9, 2014, it was determined that your project entitled, *Exploring Sense of Community in a First-Year Experience Course*, meets federal criteria to qualify as an exempt study.

Because the study has been certified as exempt, you will not be required to complete continuation or final review reports. However, it is your responsibility to notify the IRB prior to making any changes to the study. Please note that changes made to an exempt protocol may disqualify it from exempt status and may require an expedited or full review.

The Office of Research Integrity will hold your exemption application for six years. Before the end of the sixth year, you will be notified that your file will be closed and the application destroyed. If your project is still ongoing, you will need to contact the Office of Research Integrity upon receipt of that letter and follow the instructions for completing a new exemption application. It is, therefore, important that you keep your address current with the Office of Research Integrity.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records, and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's IRB Survival Handbook web page [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/IRB-Survival-Handbook.html#researchpi]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI’s web site [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.
Appendix H: KCTCS – HSRB Exemption Certification

300 North Main Street
Versailles, KY 40383
Telephone: (859) 356-3100
Website: kctcs.edu

10/22/2014

Ms. Karen Mayo
200 Betsey Lane
Richmond, KY 40475

RE: Exploring Sense of Community in a First Year Experience Course

Dear Ms. Mayo:

After careful consideration of your application to the KCTCS Human Subjects Review Board, I have determined that you are eligible for exemption from federal regulations regarding the protection of human subjects based on your research using a procedure that meets the exempt review criteria section 7 (2).

Thank you for your cooperation in meeting the federal requirements for conducting research that utilizes human subjects. We appreciate your notification to this board and we will keep your information on file.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Jay K. Box, Ed.D.
Chancellor
Chair, KCTCS Human Subjects Review Board

cc: Christina Whitfield, Ph.D.
    System Director of Research and Policy Analysis

KENTUCKY COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

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EDUCATION

2000   Master of Arts, Student Personnel Services in Higher Education
       Emphasis: Counseling
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1990   Bachelor of Arts, Public Relations
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PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

2013 – Present   Associate Professor, Humanities Division
                  Bluegrass Community and Technical College, Lexington, KY

2009 – 2013      Assistant Dean of Nursing, Nursing Division
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2009           Associate Professor

2006 – 2009      Assistant Professor

2003 – 2006      Instructor
                  Behavioral Sciences Division
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1997 – 2003      Associate Registrar
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1990 – 1995      Admissions Counselor, Eastern Kentucky University
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