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Understanding the Student Perspective of Teacher-Student Engagement in First-Year Studies Courses

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Anton R. Reece entitled "Understanding the Student Perspective of Teacher-Student Engagement in First-Year Studies Courses." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

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**Understanding the Student Perspective of Teacher-Student Engagement in First-Year
Studies Courses**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Anton R. Reece
December 2013

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions continue to seek high impact retention methods to address student attrition, particularly during the first year of college. First-year studies courses represent a major institutional intervention and retention resource designed to help higher education institutions meet the unique academic and social needs of students transitioning from high school to college. Teacher-student engagement is considered to be an essential part of student retention efforts. However, most of the research on teacher-student engagement has focused on pedagogical strategies and the teachers' perspectives of engagement. What is lacking in the literature are studies of students' perspectives of classroom engagement. This study sought to discover what students find most meaningful during teacher-student engagement in the first-year studies course.

I employed one-on-one semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data. Interviews were held with eight students enrolled in first year studies courses taught by five instructors ranked in the top 10% of all first year studies courses offered by a Research One university. (Rankings were determined by overall course scores on a university-wide faculty evaluation instrument.) Results revealed three themes in what students reported as meaningful in their first year studies experiences: (1) teacher-student rapport, (2) course facilitation, and (3) student-to-student interaction inside and outside of the classroom.

Implications include the need for multi-site studies and replications of this single-site study on other campuses. Recommendations for practice focused on institutional policy making, teaching strategies, and decision making by higher education administrators concerned to improve student retention at their respective higher education institutions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

College students travel locally, nationally, and in some cases, internationally to pursue dreams of achieving a college education. The educational, cultural, health and economic benefits of a college education have been consistently touted as beneficial to individuals, their families, and the community at large (Baum & Payea, 2005; Perna, 2003). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), an increasing number of students are seizing the opportunities and advantages of a college education and are enrolling in record numbers across the United States (Noel-Levitz, 2010). However, the potential gains in student enrollment in higher education have been tempered by an unsettling number of students who do not persist and leave college before degree completion, particularly during the first year of college (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Freeman, Hall, & Bresciani, 2007). In response, higher education administrators are continuously assessing institutional resources geared at first-year students and seeking high impact interventions to significantly reduce student attrition.

Over the past two decades higher education researchers have identified first-year studies courses as a major high impact retention resource (Barefoot, 2004; Gardner, 1986; Hunter & Linder, 2005). The courses have been the focus of several studies by researchers interested in the factors related to student success and institutional retention rates. A number of these studies have singled out student engagement inside and outside of the classroom as a critical component of student success and retention (Gardner, 1986; Upcraft & Barefoot, 2005; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Porter & Swing, 2006; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). However, most research on student engagement in the classroom has focused on the teacher's perspective and their use of pedagogical options. What is lacking in the literature are studies of the students' perspective of teacher performance and course-related factors that may contribute to retention of

undergraduate students. My study focuses on teacher-student engagement from the students' perspective and what they identify as most meaningful in their interactions with teachers of first-year courses. It assumes that the more meaningful the first year experience is for students, the more likely they are to persist beyond their first year of college. The results of the study may shed the additional light on the dynamics of first-year studies courses and especially the role of teacher-student engagement in the student's classroom experience.

First-year Studies Course

Institutions use various labels to describe the organized teaching and learning experience for first-year students, including first-year seminar, freshman seminar, introduction to college course, and first-year studies course, among others (Barefoot, 2004; Gardner, 1986; Hunter & Linder, 2005; Schnell, Seashore & Doetkot, 2002). The term "first-year studies course" is used in the following sections of this dissertation. Whatever their specific name, what the various forms of classroom activities have in common is their intent to provide an opportunity for students to interact closely with teachers and review and discuss an array of academic and social support resources necessary for adjusting, transitioning and succeeding in college (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Researchers have identified characteristics such as teacher-student interaction in small classes (Barefoot, 2005; Hunter & Linder, 2005) and discussion of institutional academic and social support resources in particular, as pivotal for student persistence and success in college (Jamelske, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Various studies have been conducted on the effects of first-year studies courses on students' academic success, social adjustment, and retention in college (Jamelske, 2009; Porter & Swing, 2006; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). For example, Jamelske (2009) conducted a study of the impact of first-year studies courses on retention and grade point

averages. Jamelske (2009) found that students enrolled in first-year studies courses earned higher grade point averages than their peers who were not enrolled in the courses. Potts and Schultz (2008) examined the outcomes of students' participation in freshmen learning communities concurrent with their enrollment in a first-year studies course. Their study identified two benefits of the combined experience: (1) increased overall academic performance; and (2) significant academic gains from the more at-risk students in the course. The latter finding points to an additional benefit of including first-year studies courses to institutional first-year retention efforts.

Sidele and McReynolds's (2009) conducted a longitudinal study of the impact of a first-year studies course on student retention. They found that students enrolled in the first-year studies courses were more likely to continue into their second year than students who were not enrolled in the courses. First-year studies students also earned more course credits than their peers.

This line of research consistently shows that first year study experiences result in higher retention gains and student success, particularly in terms of retention rates and overall grade point averages. However, what such studies fail to address is what accounts for the effects that first year studies experiences have on students' later success in college. This gap in research has led to research on teacher-student engagement in first-year studies classroom as a factor in the success of first-year studies courses (Gardner, 1986; Upcraft & Barefoot, 2005; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Porter & Swing, 2006; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Porter and Swing (2006), for example, used an instrument called the First-Year Initiative Survey to conduct a national study of the impact of first-year studies courses on student retention. They identified positive academic engagement inside of the classroom as one of the factors that influenced a

student's decision to persist in college. Teacher-student engagement in particular has been shown to contribute to learning, persistence, student satisfaction and student-institutional fit, which are all critical factors that contribute to higher retention rates (Astin, 1984; Bain, 2004; Barkley, 2010; Bean, 1985; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Clarke & Jopling, 2009).

Handelsman, Briggs and Towler's (2005) review of literature on teacher-student engagement revealed that, "engaged students are good learners and that effective teaching stimulates and sustains student engagement" (p.184). In turn, teacher-student engagement enhances student efforts to achieve their educational goals as well as their connections to the institution, thereby contributing to students' persistence and successful integration into college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1997) underscored this point, stating that "the frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence" (p. 3). As Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, Dipietro and Norman (2010) also noted, "...the complex dynamics of the classroom, its tone, the interpersonal forces at play, and the nature and structure of communication patterns, all combine to either support or inhibit the students' motivation to pursue a goal" (p. 79). In addition, teacher-student engagement can serve as an indication of student perception of the institutional climate and the degree to which it supports their involvement inside the classroom (Clark & Jopling, 2009; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

The increased interest in understanding and assessing student engagement in educational activities can be attributed in part to the development and dissemination of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which has provided institutions and researchers with knowledge of factors that affect student success, including teacher-student engagement (Kuh, 2001). The NSSE built upon Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seminal work on the seven principles of

effective undergraduate experience and identified five nationally recognized benchmarks for assessing institutional measures of student engagement (Kuh, 2001; Payne, Kleine, Purcell & Carter, 2005). The five benchmarks are: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment, and student engagement with faculty members. The NSSE provided researchers with 42 related questions focused on student perspectives of their time and involvement in educational activities and student-teacher engagement inside the classroom.

Ullah and Wilson (2007) used NSSE benchmarks and questions in their longitudinal study of student engagement and its impact on academic achievement. These researchers identified student responses to three particular questions used in the NSSE survey as predictors of student academic achievement: (a) how often students asked questions/contributed to class discussion, (b) how they would rate the quality of students' relationship with peers, and (c) how they would rate the quality of student relationship with faculty. Ullah and Wilson (2007) concluded that student involvement in class and their relationship with faculty were two significant factors in students' success.

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2007) also used the NSSE survey in a national longitudinal study of institutional factors and student behaviors that fostered student engagement and student success. The survey was administered to first-year students and seniors at 18 higher education institutions. Students responded to 19 institutional assessment measures of engagement questions that included the following: (a) how often did you receive prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral)? (b) Have you worked harder than you thought you could to meet the instructor's standards or expectations? (c) Have you discussed grades or assignments with faculty member? Kuh et al, (2007) concluded that the

degree of student engagement correlated to overall student grades; however, what they failed to address were specific factors that contributed to the increased student engagement at the course level.

These studies have identified teacher-student engagement as an important component of effective retention strategies and the role that effective teaching plays in fostering classroom engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). However, most studies have focused on broad statistical measures of the first-year experience (Kuh et al, 2008; Ullah & Wilson, 2007) or on the teacher perspective of engagement and ways in which the teacher can sustain or enhance engagement (Ambrose et al., 2010; Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006). What is less well understood is the student's perspective of engagement in the classroom.

A limited number of qualitative studies provide some additional insight into the student perspective of teacher-student engagement (Aspland, 2009; Heller, Beil, Dam & Haerum, 2010). Aspland (2009) for example, used semi-structured interviews in an institutional assessment of overall teaching strategies that foster teacher-student engagement in various courses taken during the first year of college. Aspland (2009) found that students identified two strategies that stood out for students: (1) teacher responsiveness to their questions in class and recapping main points as beneficial to their success; and (2) scaffolding of efforts inside the classroom, described as offering student assistance and clarifying concepts discussed in class as factors contributing to good teaching practice. Heller et al. (2010) found first-year students differed from second-year students in terms of their expectations of their engagement with faculty in engineering courses. The study identified broad factors of student expectations of engagement, which included faculty enthusiasm for teaching the course and interaction with students.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown that first-year study course experiences contribute to student persistence and academic performance, and there is a growing body of literature on the nature of the first-year experience. This is especially evident in studies of teacher-student engagement inside the classroom. Such studies place particular emphasis on the importance of students making connections with faculty who serve in multiple roles as institutional representatives (Astin, 1984; Bain, 2004; Barkley, 2010; Tinto, 1996; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Researchers are motivated by the belief that understanding teacher-student engagement is important to minimizing first-year student dropout, as well as the assumption that enhancing persistence in college will help enable institutions to enhance students' quality of life and educational experience (Pascarella & Terenzini (1991).

However, studies of teacher-student engagement have focused primarily on the teacher's perspective or on broad institutional measures for assessing the first year experience. While the pivotal NSSE-based studies of student-teacher engagement have increased understanding of this special relationship in the classroom, most results have been based on broad statistical measures and not on more finely grained, contextualized information about how students perceive their experience inside the first-year studies course classroom. A limited number of qualitative studies (Aspland, 2009; Heller et al., 2010) did focus on the student perspective of teacher-student engagement in various courses offered during the first year of college. However, these studies tended to focus on a student's overall assessment of their institutional experience or students' expectation of teachers and classroom pedagogy. What remains to be understood is the students' perspective of the nature of teacher-student engagement inside the first-year studies course classroom and what they perceive as most meaningful to their educational experience.

Purpose and Research Question of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year study courses. The research question guiding the study was: What do students find most meaningful during their engagement with their teachers in the first-year studies courses?

Significance of Study

Understanding how students experience engagement in the first-year studies course is significant for several reasons. From a research perspective, it adds to the literature that addresses the nature and outcomes of first-year studies courses and in particular the research on student engagement. In addition, it has the potential to provide teachers with an understanding of how students are relating to the classroom experience, which in turn could provide an opportunity for teachers to make any necessary adjustments in their pedagogies. Finally, in terms of guiding policy, understanding the student perspective can provide institutions with an opportunity to assess and invest in retention strategies that can both foster and maximize student persistence and success in college.

Limitations and Assumptions of the Study

The limitations of the study include the following, (a) the research site is at a single institution, which limits the applicability of findings; (b) The curriculum and design of the first-year studies course reflects the unique needs of a research one institution; (c) the primary source of data is limited to interviews, which limit the number of sources and triangulation of data and could have an impact on the application of the findings; and (e) the small sample size, which limits generalizability. A larger sample could enhance the significance and generalizability of the findings.

The assumptions of the study include the following: (a) top ten rated instructors rated by the Student Assessment of Instruction Survey (SAIS) are assumed to have fostered engagement more frequently than their peers; (b) the AYG 100 course is better suited for examining teacher-student engagement compared to other university general education introductory courses; (c) Extroverted and introverted students value and demonstrate engagement.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 has provided an introduction and overview of the importance of first-year studies course as a major retention strategy in higher education, the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on first-year student retention and related factors such as student dropout, and a comprehensive review of empirical studies of the first-year studies course and teacher-student engagement factors. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology of the study. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the findings. Chapter 5 includes a summary and implications for further research and practice.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter presents an overview of research and theory related to student dropout and retention, first-year studies courses, and teacher-student engagement. The review resulted from use of a strategy that addressed a broad range of topics related to the focus of the proposed study.

Search Methods

The search strategy for this literature review consisted of three phases: First, a meta-search of studies in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, and Educational Full Text databases. This search used keywords such as *college attrition, college dropout, college pedagogy, college retention, college student success, college teaching, college-student fit, college student values, faculty-student engagement, first-year dropout, first-year student dropout, first-year student interaction, first-year persistence, first-year retention, first year seminars, first year studies courses, first-year student, freshmen, student attrition, teacher-student engagement* and *teacher-student interaction*.

Second, I conducted a more focused search of literature that addressed factors contributing to first-year student dropout and retention and first-year studies. Lastly, I focused on research and theory related to faculty-student engagement. The search revealed several articles on faculty-student engagement in such peer-reviewed journals as the *Journal of Higher Education, New Directions for Higher Education, Research in Higher Education, About Campus, Journal of Experiential Education, Research in Higher Education, Journal of College Student Personnel*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*. Additional sources included reports and other documents distributed by organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel, National First-Year Experience Center, National Student Survey of Engagement, and National Center of Education Statistics.

Theories of Student Dropout

Student dropout has been studied extensively for over four decades (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001), yet a question that remains unanswered is why some students choose to drop out disproportionately during the first year of college. Tinto's (1975) student departure theory, also referred to as student interaction theory (Tinto, 1993), is still considered the seminal work on student attrition, and he identified factors that contribute to a student's decision to stay or leave the institution (Astin, 1984; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Cabrera, Castaneda, & Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1975) identified three interrelated factors that contribute to student persistence and integration into campus life. The three factors include academic integration, social integration in college, and successful persistence - particularly during the first year of college.

Academic integration includes pre-college academic preparation and the time and effort students devote to educational activities in college. Pre-college indices include high school grade point average, national test scores such as ACT/SAT, and the rigor of the high school curriculum (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) posits that a student's pre-college indices serve as an indicator of their preparation and commitment to college. Academic integration also includes student-teacher interaction in the classroom, completion of academic course credit, and meeting the requirements for academic progress in college (Tinto, 1996).

Social integration includes active student involvement in various aspects of campus life, such as participation in campus organizations and cultural and athletic events. Tinto (1975) noted that students who are not successfully integrated into college are more likely to be isolated and drop out of college. Tinto (1975) views academic and social integration as central to the third factor, successful persistence. He attributes successful persistence to institutional experiences

that contribute to a student's decision to persist in college. In turn, successful student persistence therefore becomes central to an institution's overall student retention efforts.

Bean's (1985) student attrition model resonates with Tinto's (1975) theory of student dropout, particularly in terms of the significance of students' values and the ways in which they align with or conflict with their academic and social integration in college. Bean's (1985) theory reflects a view that students come to college with a set of values and experiences that guide them and influence the degree to which they integrate academically and socially with faculty and/or their peers. Student values and experiences play a critical role in the congruence between the students' values and the overall sense of college climate, mission, and focus that may or may not be consistent with the institution.

Beekhoven, De Jong, and Van Hout (2004) further support the significance and impact of student-institutional fit, because "Student departure can be seen as a lack of agreement between the standards and values of the student and the environment and, therefore, as unsuccessful integration" (p. 277). This is relevant to the proposed study because teachers are among the first institutional representatives that students interact with on a regular basis. However, teachers may or may not share the same academic expectations and values as their students. The potential impact that teachers have on student choices and actions is one factor that motivates research on institutional-student fit and its relationship to student persistence and integration into college life (Bean, 1985; Choy, 2001; Tinto, 1975).

A review of the literature on student dropout reveals the multifaceted issues and challenges involved in institutional attempts to retain students, particularly following the first year of college (Elkins et al, 2000). In order to maximize effective institutional support for first-

year student success, higher education administrators have taken specific steps to incorporate various academic and social support resources to meet the various and unique needs of students.

Best Practices in First-Year Student Retention

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), institutions have different ways in which they appropriate resources and personnel in their efforts to enhance first-year retention, including reporting structures, offices, personnel, and programs. A growing number of institutions have focused considerable effort on primary retention initiatives that are considered national “best practices” (Barefoot, 2000). Two national organizations have been recognized as providing a forum for the exchange of best practices in first-year student retention. One is the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience (2011), which conducts research on the first-year student experience and sponsors annual national conferences on first-year retention resources and programs and the Noel and Levitz Annual National Conference on Higher Education Retention Assessment and Trends.

These efforts have consistently identified three recurring best practices of retention in higher education: supplemental instruction, learning communities, and first-year studies courses (Barefoot, 2004). The popularity and interest in these best practices initiatives are two-fold. First, they all incorporate academic and social integration approaches, consistent with the seminal work of Tinto (1975). Second, they all include student contributions to learning such as peer-to-peer interaction and teaching, which Astin (1984) points out is one of the strongest influences on student decision making and success in college. However, it is the addition of first-year studies courses to institutional curricula that have especially attracted the interest of higher education researchers (Barefoot, 2004; Gardner, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

First-Year Studies Course

First-year programs are among the key resources that colleges and universities offer to build upon and extend additional support resources beyond summer orientation for students when they begin college in the ensuing fall term. According to the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience (2011), over 94% of colleges and universities offer a first-year studies course. The interest in first-year studies courses is often attributed to Gardner's (1986) longitudinal study on the impact of the courses. Gardner reported that, "Students (enrolled in first-year studies courses) with a lower predicted potential survived at a higher rate than students who did not take the University 101 course" (1986, p. 271). Gardner's findings are consistent with results of more recent studies that identified higher grade point averages (Jamelske, 2009), retention rates (Porter & Swing, 2006; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009), and increased student engagement during the first year of college (Kuh et al., 2008). Researchers place significant emphasis on teacher-student engagement, particularly noting that students who have greater degrees of engagement with faculty persist, enrich their learning, and achieve success in college at a higher rate than students with lower rates of engagement (Kuh, 2001; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler, 2005; Ullah & Wilson, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

Jamelske (2009) conducted a one-year study of 1997 first-year students enrolled in newly instituted first-year studies courses. A major goal of the first-year studies course was to provide an opportunity for students to make connections to the university. The course design allowed students to interact with their peers and "work closely with an individual faculty member including both in-class and out of class activities" (p. 378). Using institutional data, Jamelske

(2009) found that students who were enrolled in first-year studies courses had higher grade point averages as compared to those who were not enrolled in a first year studies course.

Sidle and McReynolds (2009), in their longitudinal study of 862 first-year students, compared students enrolled in a first-year studies course to students who were not enrolled in the course. They reviewed institutional student transcripts to assess academic achievement and persistence to graduation. Sidle and McReynolds found that students enrolled in first-year studies courses had statistically significant higher retention rates (63 percent vs. 56 percent) and grade point average rates and also earned more overall credits in their coursework. Students enrolled in the first-year course had a course completion of 68% of the attempted course hours compared to a 62% for students not enrolled in the first-year course.

Potts and Schultz (2008) studied 1126 first-year students examined the impact of freshmen learning communities in the college of business when combined with a first-year studies course. Sixty-nine of the first-year students were dually enrolled in first-year studies and a business course. Potts and Schultz (2008) found that students benefited from their dual course enrollment, in terms of increased academic performance. Significant gains were also made by at-risk students in the course. The retention rates for students dually enrolled in a first-year studies course was 68.12% versus 64.65% for all students in the seminar.

Teacher-Student Engagement Inside of the Classroom

Several researchers have investigated the role of the faculty and ways in which their engagement with students contribute to the students' overall college experience (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). For example, Astin (1984) noted that faculty-student interaction is critical and "has a direct positive relationship to learning, academic

performance and degree attainment” (p. 5). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) further underscored the urgency of institutional focus on ways to enhance student engagement inside the classroom:

If, as it appears, individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college, then it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage *student engagement*. (p. 602)

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on student engagement, largely due to extensive research by Kuh (2001), who, along with other researchers, developed the NSSE survey at Indiana University, Bloomington. The NSSE survey instrument is one the most widely used student engagement measures, with national estimates of over a thousand colleges and universities participating in institutional and peer comparisons of student satisfaction with their college experience (Kuh, 2001). The NSSE survey is often referred to for benchmarking and comparing and contrasting students’ satisfaction based on a common set of institutional factors represented by the type of institution (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, 2001). Higher education institutions also use the NSSE survey instrument as a measure of students’ time on task in educational activities and satisfaction with their experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Kuh, 2001).

The NSSE survey consists of 42 questions based on a five point Likert scale and administered during a student’s freshman and senior years. It focuses on the following five benchmarks: (1) Level of academic challenge (2) Enriching educational experiences; (3) Student-faculty interaction; (4) Active and collaborative learning; and (5) Supportive campus environment. According to Payne, Kleine, Purcell, and Carter (2005), the national NSSE survey instrument provides a dual benefit for higher education institutions: It provides administrators

with a measure of the quality of an institution's undergraduate educational experience and also compares the scores to peer national institutional averages.

Kuh's (2001) recognition of and focus on faculty-student engagement inside the classroom is directly relevant to this study. Kuh (2003) views student engagement as essential for student success because it takes into consideration the effort students place in preparation for academic life. Specifically, teacher and student engagement is seen as an indicator of students' perspectives of an institution's commitment to providing necessary academic support services and resources for students.

Ullah and Wilson (2007) used the NSSE survey in their longitudinal study of student engagement of 2160 first-year and senior students. They identified the frequency of questions students asked in class, student contributions to class discussions, and frequency of engagements with teachers inside the classroom as measures of engagement. Based on a regression analysis, their results showed a significant positive correlation ($r=0.13$) between student teacher engagement inside the classroom and students' academic achievement in the course.

The findings of a national NSSE study of 11,000 first-year students and seniors from 18 colleges and universities (Kuh et al. (2008) showed that first-year studies courses were associated with increased grades and persistence levels. Their study incorporated Chickering and Gamson's (1987) framework and identified three measures representing engagement: (1) time spent studying; (2) time spent in co-curricular activities, and (3) a global measure of engagement in educational practices. More specifically, the 19 NSSE based questions used in the study solicited students' rating of engagement in educational activities and included how often they asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, received prompt feedback from the teacher on academic performance, and how hard the students worked to meet the instructor's

standards or expectations. Controlling for students' pre-college characteristics, Kuh et al. (2008) used regression analysis for the first-year course and the first-year grade point average, and found that a one standard deviation increase in engagement resulted in an increase grade-point-average of about .04 points.

NSSE data and other empirical studies tend to provide broad statistical measures of features of institutional engagement; however, they do not provide more finely grained, contextualized information about how students perceive their engagement with their teachers inside the classroom, specifically the first-year studies classroom.

Related Qualitative Studies

A few qualitative research studies have examined teacher-student engagement inside the classroom (Aspland, 2009; Heller et al., 2010) in order to identify the nature of the interaction between students and teachers. Heller et al. (2010) undertook an exploratory study by conducting a survey of 500 first-and-second year undergraduate students, of which 135 were first-year engineering students. The researchers examined student and teacher definitions of engagement and their expectations of one another in the classroom. Student participants responded to two open questions on the survey. First, they were asked, "What do you mean by engagement?" The students' responses indicated that students viewed engagement as faculty interest in the topic and interaction with students. The second question was, "What makes a course engaging to you?" Students' cited the interaction of the entire class and faculty enthusiasm and willingness to help students as indicators of teacher-student engagement. Heller, et al. (2010) also found that faculty defined engagement as students being prepared to fully interact in class.

Heller et al. (2010) concluded that engagement is multi-faceted and is both a process and an outcome. Responses to the two open ended questions used in the study provide a broad picture of how student engagement was defined by students and teachers. However, the study did not provide enough details of how those factors became meaningful to students during their engagement with their teachers. In addition, the study was based on teacher-student engagement in engineering courses, leaving open the question of how students and teachers perceive engagement in other areas of study and in first-year studies courses across a university curriculum.

Aspland (2009) conducted a qualitative study of 600 first-year students to assess teaching strategies that foster teacher-student engagement in a variety of first-year courses. Using semi-structured interviews, Aspland (2009) asked students to respond to questions that included the following: (1) “In what learning environment do you prefer to engage in learning?” Students identified a preference for a learning environment with teacher responsiveness, which was described as the teacher simplifying, clarifying and reiterating key points throughout the lecture; and (2) “Under what conditions is learning engagement most successful?” Students responded with an overall theme of the scaffolding of efforts among students inside the classroom, which was described as teachers offering assistance, demonstrating respect to students, and providing student access inside and outside of the class. The study focused on a broad institutional assessment of pedagogy in several courses offered during the first year of college, but did not provide specific details of the students’ perspective of teacher-student engagement, particularly in first-year studies courses.

Conclusion

This brief review of the literature provides a context for further study of the first-year studies course experience and particularly the role of teacher-student engagement. Prior to the present study, what students find particularly meaningful in their interaction with teachers in first-year studies courses has been unclear. Previous studies have focused on the teacher's perspective (Jamelske, 2009), on teacher pedagogy (Aspland, 2009), or on broad institutional measures of student engagement (Kuh, 2008; Ullah & Wilson, 2011). The present study adds to this literature by identifying and describing what is meaningful in teacher-student engagement from the student's perspective.

Chapter 3: Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year study courses. Specifically, it examined what students found most meaningful during their engagements with teachers inside the first-year studies classroom. The research question guiding the study was: What do students find most meaningful during their engagement with their teachers in the first-year studies courses?

In this chapter the method and procedures used in the study are discussed, including the rationale for the choice of method, the research design, the site and population, data collection and analysis, and the steps taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Epistemic Assumptions

According to Hatch (2002), researchers should “unpack their ontological and epistemological beliefs” (p. 2), in order to determine the methodology for a study. Ontological beliefs identify how one views reality and epistemic beliefs focus on how meaning is determined within that defined reality. My ontology views the world as complex, interactive, and layered with multiple truths. My epistemic assumptions are best described by and aligned with what Gergen (2003) describes as socially constructed, where “meanings are born of coordinations among persons - agreements, negotiations, affirmations” (p. 48). It is through interaction with the world and those in it that we create opportunities to learn and understand ourselves and others. Thus, what we learn and understand about ourselves and others provide an important context and insight into the fluid nature of socially constructed reality.

Research Design

Consonant with these beliefs and with the nature of the study, a qualitative approach was chosen as best suited for the methodology of this study. Creswell (1998) suggested that a qualitative approach is best suited when seeking to gain participants' perspectives of what is occurring in their natural setting. Two additional reasons help to further explain my choice of a qualitative approach. First, Merriam (2009) pointed out that a qualitative approach encompasses a social constructionist view and provides the researcher with a broader understanding of a phenomenon by focusing on "understanding the meaning people have constructed" (p. 13) about the phenomenon. This study sought to understand the student's perspective of their experience, which a qualitative approach will provide.

Second, I was interested in the emerging nature of what students are experiencing as opposed to imposing a priori fixed hypothesis associated with a positivist orientation (Merriam, 2009). For the purpose of this study, therefore, I used a qualitative design to conduct a descriptive, exploratory study, using interviews as the primary data collection source. This aligns with the purpose of the study and my epistemic assumptions.

Site and Population

Sage University (pseudonym) (SU) is a large research extensive university in the southeastern United States that attracts 20,000 undergraduate and 7000 graduate students from local, national, and international regions. The average age of first-year undergraduate students is 17-19 years of age, and SU averages around 4200 incoming first-year students every fall term. SU has nine academic colleges, offering 170 undergraduate majors, concentrations and specialties and confers over 4000 undergraduate degrees annually. The undergraduate academic entrance requirements are based on a holistic review of admission data, which includes a high school

diploma, high school grade point average, and the ACT/SAT score. Because it uses a holistic admissions review process, SU does not require a minimum high school gpa or ACT admission score; however, the competitiveness of the admission process is reflected in the 2012 first-year cohort, which had an average high school grade point average of 3.85 on a 4.0 scale and an average ACT score of 26.7 out of 36 (SU Director of Institutional Research, personal communication, May, 30 2012).

First year-studies courses were established in 1990. Approximately 75% of all first-year students are enrolled in one of the five first-year course options at SU. The five options include: (a) the College of Business course; (b) the College of Agriculture, Resources and Natural Sciences course; (c) an Honors section course for high achieving academic scholarship students who average a 3.9 high school gpa and 30 on the ACT; (d) a special topics course taught by tenure or tenure-track faculty based on their research interest or area of expertise; and (e) an introduction to college course (AYG 100), which served as the site and focus of this study.

The AYG 100 course is a graded one-credit course that meets the elective component of students' general education requirements. The common curriculum for the AYG 100 course includes an overview of the following SU academic and social resources: academic preparation skills including study techniques; time management; note taking; SU's contact information for academic support resources; career exploration; advising; and major course options and requirements.

The AYG 100 course is offered with two scheduling options: a once-a-week meeting for the full 16-week term of the semester or twice a week for the first session, which lasts eight weeks. AYG 100 courses begin in the third week of August and end in mid-October, consistent

with the finding that the first four to six weeks of the fall semester are times when the dropout rates for freshmen tend to be at their highest (Elkins et al., 2000).

SU offers a total of 54 sections of AYG 100 that serve the approximately 1100 first-year students who voluntarily register and enroll at the beginning of their incoming fall term. The AYG 100 courses are intentionally designed with small class enrollments to promote interaction and community between teacher and students, and average a maximum of 22 students per course. For the purpose of this study I focused on the 220 students enrolled in the top 10 instructor rated AYG 100 course sections using the SAIS as the basis for the selection of sessions. The SAIS survey poses 33 questions about the nature and perceived value of a course, and uses a five point Likert-type scale for responses, with 1 being “poor” and 5 being “excellent.” I focused on the top 10 rated instructors because higher teacher-student engagement correlates with student satisfaction and higher instructor ratings are suggestive of greater teacher-student engagement, although this relationship is not conclusive. Thus, the population for this study consisted of students from the top 10 rated instructors of AYG 100 course sections, all of whom earned a minimum of a 4.2 overall course rating on the SAIS.

The student participants in the study were selected using a purposeful sampling method, which Merriam (2009) noted is best suited when “the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.77). Therefore, I selected a purposeful convenience sample because potential student participants could speak to the intent of the study (see Appendix A). In addition, my access to AYG 100 course students made it convenient to access this sample. I interviewed eight students enrolled in courses taught by five of the 10 highest-rated instructors of AYG 100 courses.

Student Participants

The participants in this study were all first year students at SU during the fall 2012 semester. The eight students participating in the study were enrolled in five of the top ten rated instructors' sections of the AYG 100 course. Table 1 shows a gender and major area of study profile of the participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Major
Katrice	female	Psychology
Trace	female	Undecided
Tim	male	Undecided
Crystal	female	Public Administration
Sam	male	Accounting
Bruce	male	Plant Sciences
Terry	female	Kinesiology
Kate	female	Undecided

Procedure

The procedures used for participant selection, data collection and analysis are described below. I was cognizant of my dual role as the researcher and coordinator of the AYG 100 courses. I was, therefore, very intentional in the methods used for recruiting and selecting participants for the study by identifying specific steps to maximize participants' confidentiality

and anonymity. After SU's Institutional Review Board approved the study, I sent an email to the students in the top ten 10 rated instructor sections of AYG 100 in September 2012, inviting them to participate in the study. The email described the purpose of the study and how data was to be used and reported and explained that their name and the identity of the institution will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were assured that their participation would be strictly voluntary and they had the right to withdraw without penalty at any point in the study. Further, the e-mail explained they must be 18 years or older to participate in the study, and that their grade for the AYG 100 course would not be affected in any way by their participation in the study.

After student participants responded to me by email and confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, I followed up with each student. Each student participant received an e-mail response, which included acknowledgement and thanks for their agreement to participate in the study, and an array of interview dates/times available from which student participants chose and responded by email for their one to one interview with me. I contacted students who agreed to be interviewed at least one week before their scheduled interviews to confirm the meeting and remind them of their interview time with me at the conference room in the University Center. Lastly, I requested student contact information such as preferred telephone number and email (all contact information was destroyed after the study was completed) for follow up with me as the researcher.

I reviewed the Informed Consent Form with each student prior to the one-to-one interview (See Appendix C). During the review I emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation and the right to withdraw at anytime with no penalty, described the purpose of the study and how it will be conducted, discussed specific steps that were taken to protect their

identity and that of the institution, discussed how the information will be handled and discarded, requested their permission to audiotape the interview, and provided my contact information. I then answered any questions they had before requesting their signature and providing them with a copy of the consent form.

Participants in this study were eligible for a drawing for three gift certificates valued at \$30.00, \$20.00 and \$10.00. I randomly drew the names of winners and notified them by email to pick up their prize under the assigned pseudonym.

Data Collection

Interviews served as the primary data source for the study. I began interviews with participants after the first-session AYG 100 courses, when student participants' experiences were still recent. The first-session AYG 100 courses meet bi-weekly from August 22, 2012 until October 5, 2012, which provided me with multiple opportunities to schedule interviews prior to the end of the fall semester in December 2012.

I used one-to-one, in depth, semi-structured interviews with first-year students enrolled in five of the ten highest rated instructors' sections of AYG 100. I selected interviews as the primary source of data, since, as Seidman (2006) states, "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Interviews, therefore, aligned with the intent of this study, which was to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year studies courses. Individual student participant interviews took place in a University Center meeting room on an agreed upon day and time.

All of the interviews were audio recorded with permission of the participants and lasted for approximately one hour. I used a semi-structured interview protocol for the study, which,

Hatch (2006) notes, provides the researcher with “some guiding questions that are open to following the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions” (p. 94). The interview protocol for this study utilized 10 open ended questions or requests (The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix B). For example; “Describe an interaction with your teacher that stood out to you?” The interview questions were derived from existing studies on teacher-student engagement (Aspland, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Added insights were gained through follow up probes to the questions when needed to clarify or encourage respondents to expand upon their responses to the interview questions.

I kept written notes of my impressions after the interview Merriam (2009) states that interview notes are particularly helpful and encourages the researcher “to record his or her reaction to something the informant says” (p. 109). These interview notes provided me with a record of my response to a particular student participant response or emphasis on a particular perspective of their experience. In addition, my notes assisted me in staying aware of my own biases, assumptions and decision making when reviewing and analyzing the interview data transcript (Appendix D). I kept an accurate electronic audit trail of data collection (Appendix E), including levels of coding and decision making from the data analysis in terms of relationship to the research question in a word document, and related participants’ responses (Appendix F).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a three phase coding process which included open coding of the individual participants’ transcripts, identification of groupings within the first phase, and the derivation of themes from those categories that answered the research question guiding the study. After completing the interviews with each of the student participants, I personally transcribed each interview. I transcribed the data from the digital audio recording of the one-to-

one interviews using Sound Organizer software. I then imported the transcribed data into ATLAS.ti software to assist with coding, specifically identifying words, phrases, concepts, categories and overarching themes.

The data analysis was guided by students' responses about the nature of their experience. As Merriam (2009) noted, "Data analysis is done in conjunction with data collection" (p. 178). I reviewed my field notes of each interview, thoroughly read each transcript, identified words, topics and phrases, associated with each interview question as an initial open coding of the data. Following Merriam's (2009) criterion for choosing topics ("potentially relevant, or important to (a) study") (p.178), I used a line-by-line analysis of the individual interview transcript and identified topics that related to the research question, I was guided by the participants' own words that spoke to the nature of their meaningful experiences, and by the field notes that I recorded after the one-one-interviews.

The open coding phase of data analysis was followed by the second step (Merriam, 2009). This step involved comparing and contrasting the data, and identifying groupings in the individual student transcript by "notes and comments that seem to go together" (Merriam, 2009), p.179). I compared and analyzed the groupings in the individual transcript by interview question. The identified categories were derived from the summary of findings across the semi-structured interview questions. In addition, where applicable, I was also guided by research-based categories of engagement from the review of literature as described in chapter 2. Research studies on teacher-student engagement identified teacher feedback, teacher interest in course, classroom participation and teacher-student interaction (Aspland, 2009; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Heil et al, 2010; Kuh, 2003; Ullah & Wilson, 2007) as key factors in student-teacher engagement.

In the last phase of my data analysis, I identified overarching themes derived from categories of collapsed similar or common responses to what students found most meaningful across the interview questions of the study, and examined how they aligned and answered the research question of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Trustworthiness

According to Merriam (2009), trustworthiness begins with “careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented” (p. 210). I also maintained an audit trail of all that I had done and included my interview notes and reflections of the participants’ perspectives (Appendix D) to enhance trustworthiness and generalizability. In addition, I further enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by providing a coding map (Appendix E) and participants’ comments and themes (Appendix F), and clearly stating my epistemic assumptions, and acknowledgement of the steps undertaken to minimize student coercion.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year studies courses. The findings of the study are presented in this chapter in terms of three overarching themes that I identified and created from the data that describe what the students found most meaningful. The three themes were: (1) Teacher-Student Rapport; (2) Course Facilitation; and (3) Student-Student Interactions Inside and Outside of the Classroom.

Theme 1: Teacher-Student Rapport

The theme of teacher-student rapport referred to the strong positive emotional connection and personal support teachers established and extended to students in the AYG 100 first-year studies course. I identified four categories of students' experiences. These are expressed below in terms of the acronym "C.A.R.E.", which I believe reflects the essence of the overall theme of teacher-student rapport.

- **Connection** – how are you doing? Opening up and sharing personal experiences related to first-year student transition
- **Affirmation** – timely feedback on assignments and students being on the “right track”
- **Recognition** – calling upon them and recognizing students in front of their peers, and talking with students inside and outside of the classroom
- **Encouragement** – how they were doing, believe in yourself

Students repeatedly spoke about the many things the teachers did to connect with them and build a relationship, including opening up and sharing personal experiences that related to the transition to college, offering personal encouragement, asking how they were doing, calling upon them and recognizing them in front of their peers, and talking to them inside and outside of the classroom. Students reported the rapport was meaningful to them because they came to feel they

had someone they related to, could count on or go to for support, and who created a safe place if needed during their college transition.

Prior to the teacher-rapport being established, some respondents expressed anxiety about interacting with their teacher and reported having had some level of nervousness or shyness, particularly on the first day of class. For example, Kate recalled having “the butterflies” when going to AYG class: “I had no clue of what to expect really. At first everyone was a little bit shy, and no one wanted to open up, because in other classes, no one talked.” But over time, students said they opened up because of the rapport that was established in the AYG 100 classroom. For example, Crystal recalled an interaction with her teacher that boosted her confidence, something no other teachers had ever said to her before. Crystal said, “She told me I was a great student and I could go a long way and to always believe in myself.” Students reported that they were encouraged by teachers who recognized their uniqueness and proactively sought to reach out to them and assist them in the classroom.

Student participants spoke at length about how their teachers reached out and fostered a climate of acceptance that made them feel welcome. They believed that their teachers created a safe place in which to share concerns and to discuss the complexities of high school to college transition in front of their peers. Further, they mentioned that they appreciated that their teachers made an obvious effort to learn and use all of their names, inside and outside of the classroom; that it made them feel special and as if the teachers was sincerely interested in them. They saw this as the teachers taking an “extra step,” something not all of their teachers did, to establish a connection with them.

Students stated that it was particularly meaningful when AYG 100 teachers opened up and shared personal experiences that related to the college transition, because they felt the teachers

empathized with their unique needs and concerns in this new environment. For example, Terry shared the impact of her teacher opening up in the class, indicating it empowered students to do the same. Terry said, “By her opening up other people felt more comfortable and it was an example of what she was looking for.” Students suggested that teachers who opened up reassured them that the class was a forum where they could share their own struggles and experiences, which the teacher welcomed and encouraged students to continue to do throughout the course. Students also noted that the small class size made it easier to speak out in AYG 100, in contrast to the anxiety they felt about speaking up and engaging in the larger lecture courses they were also enrolled in at SU.

Students reported one of the things that was particularly meaningful to them was the fact that their teachers acknowledged them and their efforts in class. Most of them indicated that this recognition led them to feel more confident they were meeting the teachers’ expectations and they were doing as well as other people in the course. They also indicated that when teachers called upon them to respond to a question and affirmed their answers, which they frequently did, they felt they gained respect from their peers, which also added to their comfort in the class and with their peers. Similarly, they felt “recognized” when they were assigned a leadership role in a class group project, because it validated their contribution to the course among their peers.

Students spoke fondly of being recognized by the teachers outside of the classroom, when they were alone and when they were with peers. For example, Sam captured how meaningful this was to him. He said he saw his teacher outside of class and the teacher stopped, called him by name, and asked about how he was doing. Since this was still early in the semester, he said it suggested he was more than a face in the class and the teacher really knew who he was beyond

the course. Sam continued, “I have seen him twice out of class and we talked a little bit. I like him a lot and he is definitely someone I would like to talk to.”

Students responded to the teachers’ efforts to establish rapport by taking advantage of opportunities to follow up with their teachers for one-on-one meetings beyond the classroom. Students reported that the rapport that began in the classroom extended beyond it, but because it had been established in the classroom first, they were more comfortable with following up with their teachers during office hours where they were able to go deeper into conversations about their personal concerns and adjustment issues, such as homesickness and making connections on a large campus. Trace recalled a personal conversation with her teacher that stood out to her. In response to her concerns she reported that her teacher told her, “no one tells you that college is difficult, and it is difficult, and it is difficult to be away from home in a place with lots of new people in a totally different environment.” Trace appreciated her teacher’s empathy and ability to relate to her college transition concerns, and followed up on one of her recommendations, which was to write down her feelings in a journal and reflect upon them.

Overall, as a result of the teachers working at establishing a connection with them, which is what they perceived the teachers to have done, students reported they had a high level of confidence in their ability to engage with their teachers throughout the course, and did so. They also felt comfortable sharing their views in class and one on one, and believed they would not be made to look foolish. And they also spoke about feeling much better about trying to successfully navigate a large campus.

Theme 2: Course Facilitation

The theme of course facilitation referred to how teachers ran and organized their AYG 100 course to assist and support students during their college transition, and how their use of a

collaborative approach fostered student excitement, interest, and interaction with the teachers and with student peers in the AYG 100 classroom. With regard to how teachers ran the AYG 100 course, this referred to their use of group-oriented class activities, class discussions, and small group assignments to address college transition and to orient and introduce students to key campus support resources. Students reported that their teachers paired students together for class assignments, or randomly assigned students to complete small group projects in order for them to learn more about each other. Students frequently compared their AYG 100 course to other non-AYG 100 general education courses they were in, and stated how they were struck by how differently the AYG 100 course was run; particularly the extent to which the teachers encouraged class participation. For example, Kate pointed out how the AYG 100 teacher used the course to foster student-student peer involvement in the classroom.

My teacher would have intros like, how was your day? It was very relaxed and very casual.

She normally had us to put our desk in a circle so it felt more like a group setting. We would just talk and discuss different things.

Students also stressed the importance of the teachers' enthusiasm that was evident in the way they ran the AYG100 class, particularly when they introduced various course topics related to college transition. They said it made the class more interesting and showed that their teachers enjoyed what they were teaching. Tim provided insight into how teacher enthusiasm mattered in the AYG 100 course. "If the professor acts like they don't want to be there, it kind of perpetuates the students' perception of not wanting to be there." Kate added, "because most of my other professors were very much like (they) would walk in, teach us and walk out." Kate cherished the distinctly positive impression her AYG 100 teacher's enthusiasm had on her because she had not encountered it in other classes.

When respondents were asked about what kind of AYG 100 class discussions stood out to them, they identified class sessions teachers ran that were focused on adjusting to college life, campus support resources, and college major or career related sessions as most interesting and relevant to them. Respondents spoke at length about teachers who encouraged them to be open and discuss concerns and challenges they faced in their new environment, which included high school to college adjustment. For example, in speaking about a particular class, Trace recalled a discussion and follow-up activity on college transition struggles.

A lot of people coming to college and they get told all the time before you go to college that it is going to be the best time of your life and you are going to have such a great time, but no one tells you that college is difficult, and it is difficult, and it is difficult to be away from home in a place with lots of new people in a totally different environment. And I think first year studies was good about that and helped with being aware of that and understanding that, and the journals really helped being able to write down how I was actually feeling.

Students also noted how strikingly different it was that their AYG 100 teachers did not use lectures, which many of their other course teachers did. Katrice described why her AYG 100 teacher's style stood out to her. "My teacher walked around and interacted with students, ... she was not one of those professors who would just stand around at the podium and lecture you." Sam recalled that his teacher's approach stood out for him because it was "unusual" and different from what he was experiencing in other courses.

It was like a Jeopardy game on the board and the teacher would divide the class into teams and on this question you can get so many points. He would play the game instead of a lecture so you just can't answer it alone, but also the next question and you had to discuss it

after. We would ask questions and he would just be further detailed and discuss kind of the important things...we did discuss plenty of things.

Students found the different teaching style from their other teachers in combination with the extent to which AYG 100 teachers went to include them in the class particularly meaningful in fostering their interaction in the classroom.

Students spoke about how much they liked the fact that their AYG 100 teachers engaged them in hands-on activities. They indicated they learned by actually doing and got more out of the class because it was practical. Katrice recalled a particular class session, a time management activity. "She had us to sit down and map out actually one day what we did. Our study time, when we did our assignments, and times when we did nothing, and that really helped me out."

Students also indicated they liked such hands-on activities as icebreakers and scavenger hunts to explore the campus in small groups and find the location of services, which gave them a chance to get to know other students in the class and the campus resources in a fun way. They reported they felt much more confident about navigating the campus and accessing important support resources when needed as a result of such activities as the scavenger hunt. As Terry described,

I definitely learned about different resources. I thought like, now I know where certain buildings are that I did not know before, like career services...., We went there, and someone talked to us about all of the good things they could help us with and that really helped. And at the library they taught us how to use the online data bases. I thought that was very important.

Students therefore seemed to have had particular appreciation for AYG 100 teachers who used activity-based and discussion-oriented classes that raised their awareness of campus support

resources, and who provided opportunities to interact and successfully navigate and learn the SU campus in concert with their peers.

Many of the respondents in the AYG 100 courses found it meaningful when their AYG 100 teachers went the extra step in running their class, when they brought in guest speakers who added awareness or unique insight into relevant course topics. Crystal recalled advice from a guest speaker that stood out to her.

I feel like everyone was kind of wondering about majors and stuff, so she took the initiative to bring in one of her prior students to talk to us about different majors. And the girl spoke about I was once this major, and then I changed to this major and then I changed again. So she kind of let us know that you come to college thinking that this is what I want to do, but you probably are going to change your mind a lot during college.

Students found it particularly meaningful that AYG 100 teachers ran their classes in a manner that was inclusive, engaging, relevant, hands-on, and occasionally supported by additional perspectives, including guest speakers.

With regard to how the AYG 100 course was organized, students repeatedly spoke of how much they appreciated when the course was well organized. They indicated that the teachers communicated clear expectations for the course and for them as students. In addition, students reported that it was evident that the teachers had high expectations for them as students and expected them all to do well in the course. They felt this indicated that the teachers believed in them and believed they could meet the expectations. Some students also noted it made them feel the teachers took the AYG 100 course and the students seriously, which in turn made them take the course seriously. For example, Bruce recalled how the teacher's expectations made him want to try harder in the course. "I felt like she was pretty prepared for the class, and overall her

expectation just reflected on me that I should invest more time in the course than I thought I should.” And Sam shared, “He definitely wanted us to do things like make sure we had a nice GPA our freshmen year and he really drove that home.”

Students appreciated that their teachers provided them with a class syllabus, but were particularly appreciative of those who took the time to review and outline key course topics, making sure the students knew what they had to do in order to do well in the course.

In a different vein, students shared how much they appreciated how sensitive their teachers were in leading discussions about their personal experiences and concerns. Tim recalled his response to the method his teacher used in an AYG 100 class discussion on the topic of diversity.

What do we think of when we see somebody of a different race? So we wrote down our initial thoughts and they were placed in an envelope and then we discussed it and different things. Everyone was pretty engaged and my instructor was pleased at our engagement in it.

I was engaged in discussing opinions as well, giving different views points and how to accept others.

Students particularly liked the fact that their teachers used a collaborative approach, although they did not use that term, but rather, class discussions, activities, group projects and the like. They said it made them feel the teacher respected their viewpoints and that they were included. Students liked when their teachers encouraged them to share their opinions and sought their input and thoughts on topics. Bruce described the inclusive approach he experienced in his AYG 100 classroom. “A good majority of the class was the teacher leading discussion, but it was also student-led. We met in groups and you communicated with your peers on how you felt on any issue.”

Students also spoke about how much they liked the way their teachers used technology that students were familiar with to foster class participation; for example, the use of clicker technology in class discussions. They liked the fact that everyone participated and they felt it made the class more interesting and fun when they saw a visual display of other student responses about a course topic. Tim said: “We used clickers to interact. We had to be engaged to get the grade so I always participated, talked, gave answers and gave opinions.” Sam added how his teacher’s use of technology fostered interaction in his AYG 100 class “we were more likely to get involved with our clickers. We were more likely to get involved than someone just talking.”

Collectively therefore, students reiterated the significance of how differently teachers conducted and organized the AYG 100 course and fostered engagement, compared to other non-AYG 100 general education courses students were enrolled in. In addition, students seem to indicate that the AYG 100 teacher’s efforts to include them and seek their input in class discussions were particularly meaningful to them.

Theme 3: Student-Student Interaction Inside and Outside of the Classroom

The theme of student-student interaction inside and outside of the classroom referred to the interpersonal connections students established with each other in the AYG 100 course, and peer-to-peer friendships which developed as a result and extended beyond the AYG 100 classroom. As a result of the way the teachers ran the courses and the kinds of actions and activities in which they had the students engage, the students got to know each other and were able to interact with each other comfortably. They built connections with one another in the classroom and through class discussions and group activities that spilled over into outside of class interactions, social and academic. For example, when students were asked to give their impressions of the

first day of class in the AYG 100 course, some initially expressed some anxiety about approaching and interacting with new people they met for the first time, but they said that quickly changed when they got involved with student peers in ice-breakers and other classroom activities. Their first-day fears were assuaged, they said, when they engaged each other in the small AYG 100 course. As Terry noted, fun class activities such as icebreakers improved their familiarity with each other. Terry said:

It was an entering groups and I thought that was nice and it made um icebreakers easier because we got to know each other quicker as a smaller group. I liked all these students, and I thought it was cool they were different types of people in there.

When students were asked about what in the course had the most influence on them, they spoke with great eagerness about making friends and the benefits they derived from peer-to-peer friendships that were established inside the AYG 100 classroom. A number of students spoke about the importance of getting to know and interact with “someone they could call on,” which referred to knowing another AYG 100 student who would be there for them when needed. Students further shared the significance of having peers in the AYG 100 course who related to their college transition experience, because it made them aware that they were not alone at SU. Repeatedly students emphasized the significance of making friends within a cohort of peers in the AYG 100 course who were experiencing similar adjustment issues in their transition to college as particularly meaningful, and spoke of the difference that had made. Kate summed up the significance of peer-to peer friendships for her:

When you know more people it makes the campus smaller and when you know more people care about you it feels like a community. So it definitely helped me to realize that everyone

has a different story than I do, and not everyone has the same background. It made me want to learn more about the actual people on the campus.

Students reported that connecting and interacting with student peers in the class provided them with a defined social support network, and the opportunity to be “included” in the campus community.

Of all of the themes that emerged, student-student interaction was the one that students found most meaningful, and attributed it the interaction in the AYG 100 course made possible by the way the teacher organized the class and provided opportunities for them to make friends quickly and easily. For example, Trace said,

I got to know them on a more personal level through the class. The class delved into what backgrounds did you come from, what makes up your hobbies and stuff like that. So I would say that I understand people's hobbies through the class (and) having to go up and say what did you like, or how do you uh enjoy SU.

Overwhelmingly, student participants made it clear that peer-to-peer interactions did not end in class discussions, but usually extended into friendships beyond the AYG 100 classroom. Respondents said they felt more confident in reaching out to other students because of their interactions in the AYG 100 class, and they actively sought opportunities to connect with others more frequently. Crystal summed up the perspective of many.

I made some really close friends and some of those people I bonded with. We had study groups and we hanged out all of the time to like help us get through college... you always need a person to lean on or to ask for advice or help me out with tests or even just hanging out and they are always there for me. I like that.

Students also noted that having a chance to establish friendships encouraged them and boosted their confidence about attending social functions on campus, getting involved in clubs and organizations and interacting within the residence halls.

Taken as a whole, the three overarching themes, teacher-student rapport, course facilitation, and student-student interactions inside and outside of the classroom, addresses what was most meaningful to the students during teacher-student engagement in the AYG 100 course. In chapter 5, I provide a discussion of the findings, relate my findings to previously reviewed research on teacher-student engagement in first-year studies courses, and discuss the implications and recommendations for practice and future research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year studies classes. Specifically, it examined what students found most meaningful during their engagements with teachers inside of the first-year studies classroom.

This descriptive exploratory study used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data with eight first-year student participants from five of the top 10% rated instructors' sections of AYG 100 courses. The data were analyzed using a three phase coding process which included open coding of the individual participants' transcripts, identification of groupings within the first phase, and the derivation of themes from those categories that answered the research question guiding the study. The research question guiding the study was: What do students find most meaningful during their engagement with their teachers in the first-year studies courses? In this chapter I present a summary and discussion of the findings, followed by implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Findings

Three themes emerged from the data and answered the research question about what students found most meaningful during their engagements with teachers inside of the first-year studies classroom. The three themes were: (1) Teacher-student rapport, which referred to the strong positive emotional connection and personal support teachers established and extended to students; (2) Course facilitation, the way teachers ran and organized their sections of the AYG 100 course and the extent they went to help students understand and meet the expectations of college work; and (3) Student-student interaction inside and outside of the classroom, which referred to the interpersonal connections and peer-to-peer friendships students established during engagement in the AYG 100 course and extending beyond the classroom.

Discussion of the Findings

As previously mentioned in chapters one and two, first-year student retention continues to be a major challenge and focus of higher education administrators. First-year studies courses have been found to be a high-impact practice and major resource in addressing the challenge of retaining first-year students (Barefoot, 2004; Gardner, 1986; Kuh et.al, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Ullah & Wilson 2007). According to Barefoot (2004) and Gardner (1986), the first-year studies course was a particularly effective practice because it fostered opportunities for positive teacher-student engagement in the classroom, and was specifically designed to assist and support the unique academic and social needs of first-year students during the college transition. The findings of this study were consonant with the existing literature on first-year studies courses, and affirmed why the first year studies course is a powerful tool for fostering academic and social integration in college. According to Rentz and Saddlemire (1998), the attitudes, skills and habits students establish in the first year are transferable throughout their undergraduate career and foster student retention.

The findings related to teacher-student rapport and course facilitation are consonant with the existing literature on academic integration, and illuminate *how* the practices and procedures successful AYG 100 teachers used foster successful academic integration of their students in the course. Academic integration, as variously described in the literature, includes a number of different components which include fostering positive teacher-student engagement inside the classroom, which is perceived to make the student more likely to invest in the learning experience and feel more satisfied with her/his experience in the institution: motivating students to succeed, providing timely feedback to students to allow them to see where they stand, and setting high expectations for academic success, among other components (Astin, 1984; Barefoot,

2004; Bean, 1985; Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh et.al, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975; Ullah & Wilson, 2007;). These are precisely the things that the AYG 100 teachers did.

The successful AYG 100 teachers fostered academic integration by establishing ongoing rapport with students both within and outside of the classroom and in the way they affirmed and motivated them to get involved in the course. They set high expectations for the course, but provided support in reaching those expectations. The teachers recognized and affirmed students' efforts in class, provided timely feedback about their academic progress on assignments and provided ongoing guidance and referrals to academic support resources to enhance their grade for the course. In addition, they fostered academic integration in the way they facilitated the course; that is, by using a collaborative teaching approach to motivate student involvement in the course. Furthermore, successful AYG 100 teachers made themselves accessible and available to students and offered assistance whenever needed to enhance academic performance and foster successful academic integration in the course and to college life. The existing literature talks about the importance of successful academic integration and what teachers should do, but in very general terms (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975).

The theme of course facilitation also resonated with the existing literature on social integration in a way that has not been clearly established in the literature. The existing literature describes social integration as the non-cognitive factors that minimize social isolation in college, including interaction with institutional representatives such as teachers and staff, and involvement in campus activities, clubs and organizations (Astin, 1984; Barefoot, 2004; Bean, 1985; Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Payne, Kleine, Purcell & Carter, 2005; Kuh et.al, 2008;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Fostering social integration is critical, but more impactful when it includes active student-faculty interaction, collaborative learning, enriched educational experiences and a supportive classroom environment (Bruffee, 1999; Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Payne, Kleine, Purcell & Carter, 2005). The way in which the teachers facilitated the course fostered social integration by intentionally involving students in discussions, requiring them to interact with each other, and assigning them to team building projects and activities designed to ensure they got to know each other and thereby broke down the historic social isolation experienced by such new students.

These facilitated social interactions engendered by the teacher within the AYG 100 course became the means and basis by which social networks were established among the students. Interactions begun in the classroom led to what became peer networks outside the classroom. The establishment and importance of these student peer networks fostered by how the teacher facilitated the course, is seen in the students' identification of student- to-student interaction, the third theme, as the most meaningful experience.

While the first two themes that emerged from the study, teacher-student rapport and course facilitation were not unexpected, having been suggested, if not identified, in the literature, the finding that student-student interaction was the most meaningful, from the perspective of the student, was surprising, at least at first, because it had not been talked about in the literature. The emphasis in the existing literature on academic and social engagement focuses on the impact of teacher-student interaction and says little about the effects of peer-to-peer interactions in fostering social integration. Further consideration of the finding, however, makes it anything but surprising; rather, it seems both plausible and reasonable. Higher education researchers have all emphasized the importance of successful social integration in college (Astin, 1984; Barefoot,

2004; Bean, 1985; Gardner, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) , which by implication, suggests that making connections with others and building peer support networks fosters social engagement. It is not surprising, then, that having the opportunity for extended interactions with others in class, indeed, being required to do so in multiple ways, built connections that made a difference for the participants and carried over to interacting together out of class. This appeared to allow for social integration with people who shared their experience and to whom they felt comfortable turning to discuss concerns, to share a meal, and to provide comfort and reassurance—a ready-made, no-stress peer support network.

The three themes of teacher-student rapport, course facilitation and student-to-student interaction inside and outside of the classroom are not distinct, but inter-related, key factors that worked together to achieve the successful academic and social integration of these students in ways identified or suggested in the literature (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). For example, teacher-student rapport and student-student interaction inside the classroom were very effective in addressing and minimizing first-day of class fears. In addition, AYG 100 teachers facilitated the course using engaging ice-breaker activities, paired students together to work on class projects, and conducted group oriented discussions to foster student interaction with their teacher

The three inter-related themes are things that appear to have led to or at least established the groundwork for student academic and social integration into the institutions, and if the literature is correct about the impact of those things, to satisfaction with their experience and ultimately, to foster retention. They speak powerfully to the things we make happen for students to be more successful in their academic and social integration into college.

Implications for Practice

The transition from high school to college is complex and continues to be an area of concern with respect to institutional retention efforts. Higher education administrators and college teachers continue to offer first-year studies courses as an important, high-impact intervention strategy to support first-year student retention efforts. The findings in this study lend support to the first-year studies course as a contributing factor in effective teacher-student engagement and ways in which it fosters opportunities for successful academic and social integration for first-year students.

The findings from this study will benefit my administrative practice in higher education in a number of ways. First, the findings allow me to look more deeply at my practice and affirm the selection of teachers who are skilled in establishing rapport with students and who support and encourage them within and outside of the classroom. The three themes provide a broader understanding of the kinds of practices needed to achieve the objectives of AYG 100. In addition, the findings of the study have made me very aware of the need for AYG 100 teachers to be attentive and embrace the urgency of being pro-active in fostering intentional opportunities for student peer-peer relationships inside and outside of the classroom.

Second, I will share the findings of this study with all of the AYG 100 instructors during the required annual professional development training at SU. I will encourage AYG 100 instructors to do more of what students have identified in this study as most meaningful; i.e. positive teacher-student rapport, course facilitation both in structuring and conducting their classes, and opportunities for student-to-student interaction inside and outside of the classroom.

I plan to share the findings of what students found most meaningful in the AYG 100 first-year studies courses with other interested faculty working with first-year students. The goal

would be to help all teachers of first year students learn and use practices and approaches that appear to be successful in ensuring academic and social integration of these students. It would be particularly beneficial if first-year teachers, especially those teaching general education courses, fostered effective teacher-student engagement in a variety of subject matter areas as they utilized pedagogies that maximizes the students' academic and social integration. To the extent that all of the teachers working with first year students reinforce these approaches and outcomes, it is likely to make the students' transition to college that much smoother and more satisfying.

In addition, I will share the findings at retention related committees, professional development seminars and department and college wide meetings with other campus administrators involved in retention and learning efforts at SU. In terms of guiding institutional policy and practice to enhance retention efforts, the findings of the study offer additional ways of thinking about what strategies will be most effective and whether strategies that have not previously been considered might be added to the repertoire. For example, using the practices and approaches of the successful AYG 100 teachers will be beneficial in decision making related to the prioritization and funding of college departments and campus units responsible for providing academic and social support of first-year students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limitations of the study, there is a need to replicate the study with a larger number of students at similar and other kinds of higher education institutions, such as regional, comprehensive, and liberal arts colleges and universities (both public and private). A larger student sample could affirm or contradict claims of the impact of the three overarching themes, as well as identify factors that may be related to type of institution. Building on such individual

site studies, a multi-site study of student engagement in first-year studies courses across institutional types would allow for comparing, incorporating and/or extending findings.

While the findings speak to the first year of the college transition, we need to know the impact of the students' peer relationships on their learning and preparation for college success in the second year of college. As previously noted in chapter one, higher education researchers (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Freeman, Hall, & Bresciani, 2007) have placed considerable emphasis on the first year of college because the attrition rate is highest during the high school-to-college transition. However, the second year of college also deserves more attention, because successful institutions have implemented second year courses similar to the AYG 100 course. It would be helpful to conduct a study with students at institutions that have a second-year course experience and see if those students report the same kind of findings during teacher-student engagements that are most meaningful.

Lastly, this study focused on teacher-student engagement in an AYG 100 course, and affirmed the importance of this engagement, including the practice that seems to enhance it. However, there is a need for more research into discourse during teacher-student engagement. According to Wood and Kroger (2000), discourse analysis provides insight into talk in action and how meaning and context is constructed around talk. Studies using discourse analysis during teacher-student interactions should be undertaken in the first-year classroom to provide another context for understanding what students find most meaningful during teacher-student interaction in first-year courses.

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Appendices

Appendix A

E-mail to Potential Student Participants

Dear Student:

I am conducting a research study of teacher-student engagement in first-year studies courses for my doctoral dissertation, which is required for a PhD in Education Psychology and Research, Collaborative Learning concentration. Successful first year student retention is a major initiative at the University of Tennessee, and the first-year studies introduction to college course serves as a major program to assist students in a successful transition from high school to college. Teacher-student engagement inside the classroom is also an important factor that contributes to overall retention efforts. Despite the success of first-year studies courses and the importance of teacher-student engagement, what remains unclear, is the student perspective of the nature of teacher-student engagement in first-year studies courses.

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year study courses. Specifically, it will examine what students find most meaningful during their engagements with teachers inside the first-year studies classroom.

You have been identified as a student for this study because you are (a) a first-year student who is at least 18 year of age, (b) enrolled in an AYG 100 first-year studies course. I would like to learn first-hand from you as a student about your perspective of teacher-student engagement inside your classroom. I am cognizant of my dual role as the researcher and coordinator of the AYG 100 courses. Therefore, I want to assure you that your participation is **strictly voluntary and you can withdraw at anytime without penalty and without any explanation**. Next, please be assured that participation in this study will have no impact on your

grades in this course. I do not teach a section of the first-year studies course nor assign grades. In addition, any feedback that you provide during this study will not be used for evaluation of you or your teacher. Please also note there are no physical risks associated with this research study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be involved in a one-on-one interview which will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration. Prior to the beginning of the interview I will review the attached consent form and have you to sign it if you agree and make a copy for your records. I will also be asking your permission to audiotape the interview and after I receive your approval, I will then proceed with some questions to learn more about you and your experience inside the AYG 100 classroom. I will be transcribing the audio taped interview and I will be emailing you a copy for your review and input to ensure I have accurately captured your comments from the interview. Your input is very important because I want to learn and understand your experience so you will have the option to add, delete, or modify comments in the transcript.

In order to protect your identity, I will not use your name and I will provide you with a pseudonym, which will be used when I transcribe your responses. I will also not use the name of the university and a pseudonym will be assigned to it to further protect your identity. All data will be aggregated for reporting purposes and no institution or individuals will be identifiable. The audio tapes and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the dissertation has been completed. The findings from the study will be reported as part of the dissertation, which is a requirement for the PhD degree.

If you agree to participate in this study **please confirm your interest by responding to this email at areece@utk.edu and please include your telephone number.** Participants in this

study will eligible for a drawing for a gift certificate valued at \$30.00, \$20.00 or \$10.00. Winners will be notified by email to pick up their prize under an assigned pseudonym at the front office of the Oasis Center. I will follow up with you regarding the date, time and place at your convenience for the one-on-one interview. Thanks for your time and consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Anton Reece

areece@utk.edu

Anton Reece is the Director of the Student Success Center. Anton is currently pursuing his PhD in Educational Psychology and Research with a concentration in Collaborative Learning. Anton has a B.A in broadcasting news and a M.A in counseling student personnel in higher education from Eastern Kentucky University. The Student Success Center's mission is to provide academic support for all students at UT, and support retention efforts of all students. The first-year studies course is designed for first-year students at UT and provides them with an array of institutional academic support resources, which focuses on the successful transition from high school to college.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Student Participants

Name of student: Pseudonym

Date:

Time:

Location:

Leadoff Question: Tell me about a typical day in class?

2. Tell me about the first day of class?

3. What are your impressions of your teacher?

4. What kind of expectations did your teacher have for the class?

5. Tell me about an interaction with your teacher that stood out to you?

6. What kind of feedback, orally or written, did you receive from your teacher?

7. Did you have class discussions? And if yes, tell me about a discussion that stood out to you?

8. Describe your participation in class?

9. In this class what had the most influence on you?

10. Do you plan to return to SU next term?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Title of Project: Understanding the Student Perspective of Teacher-Student Engagement in First-Year Studies Courses

Principal Investigator:

Anton Reece

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Phone: 865-974-0366

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of teacher-student engagement in selected first-year study courses. Specifically, it will examine what students find most meaningful during their engagements with teachers inside the first-year studies classroom. Successful first-year student retention is a major objective at the University of Tennessee. First-Year studies introduction to college courses serve as a major program to assist students in a successful transition from high school to college. Teacher-student engagement is also an important factor that contributes to overall retention efforts and thus the objective of this study is to understand the student perspective of engagement in the first-year studies course.

You have been identified as a student who is eligible for this study because you are (a) a first-year student who is at least 18 year of age, (b) enrolled in the top ten percent rated AYG 100 course. I would like to learn first-hand from you as a student about your perspective of teacher-student engagement inside your classroom. **Please note participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty and without any explanation.** Please also note there are no physical risks associated with this research study. Please be assured that participation in this study will have no impact on your grades in the course nor will any feedback you provide be used for evaluation of you or your teacher.

In order to protect your identity, I will not use your name and I will provide you with a pseudonym, which will be used when I transcribe your responses. I will also not use the name of the university and a pseudonym will be assigned to it to further protect your identity. All data will be aggregated for reporting purposes and no institution or individuals will be identifiable. The audio tapes and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the dissertation has been completed.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be involved in a one-on-one interview, which will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration. The interview will take place in a room in the University Center. Prior to the beginning of the interview I will review the attached consent form and have you to sign it if you agree and make a copy for your records. I will also be asking your permission to audiotape the interview and after I receive your approval, I will then proceed with some questions to learn more about you and your experience inside the AYG 100 classroom. I will be transcribing the audio taped interview and I will be emailing you a copy for your review and input to ensure I have accurately captured your comments from the interview. Your input is very important because I want to learn and understand your experience,

so you will have the option to add, delete, or modify the transcript. In order to protect your confidentiality I will not use your name and I will provide you with a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview, which will be used when I transcribe your responses. I will also use a pseudonym for the name of the university to further protect your identify. The audio tapes of our interview will be secured at all times and destroyed after the transcription process is complete. My doctoral co-chairs will be the only other authorized individuals with access to the transcripts. All data will be summarized for reporting purposes.

Participants in this study will eligible for a drawing for a gift certificate valued at \$30.00, \$20.00 or \$10.00. Winners will be notified by email to pick up their prize under an assigned pseudonym in the front office of the Oasis Center. I will follow up with you regarding the date, time and place at your convenience for the one-on-one interview. Thanks for your time and consideration of my request.

If you agree to participate, you are giving me your consent to be interviewed, audio-record the session and transcribe the data from the one-on-one interview for my dissertation. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about the study at:

Anton Reece

324 Greve Hall

Student Success Center

821 Volunteer Blvd

Telephone (865) - 974-6641 or areece@utk.edu

or

Office of Research Compliance Officer

(865) 974-3466.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this study, please sign the form below and you will receive a copy of the signed agreement.

I have read the description and explanation of the study, the voluntary nature of my participation, and I agree to participate.

Student signature

Date

Name (Printed)

Appendix D

Audit Trail

1. Researcher data collection pre-and-Post interview notes and reflections

Student 1: Sam

I am here sitting at the interview site awaiting my first student interview. I hope I have everything ready, interview questions, consent form. I am double checking the digital recorder just to be sure that it is working. Should I have dressed down to casual? Maybe if I did the students will not take me seriously but I do lose the jacket. Now my mind goes to the student. Will the student show Will Sam be comfortable and relaxed? Will he open up? Do I have enough probes. Sam does show up and he lets me know he is recovering from a cold. I hope his energy level and enthusiasm is going to be ok and it is. Sam is very relaxed which helped me a lot and we proceed with introductions, I give him a moment to review and sign consent form and then we proceed with the interview.

I just completed my first student interview with Sam. I was struck by Sam's awareness of his first year status and the importance of completing a college degree. Sam placed emphasis on specific characteristics of his peers and teacher that he deemed as meaningful. Sam valued class discussions and activities that offered a dual benefit of meeting other students he could relate to, friendships and learning campus resources. Sam included clarity of teacher expectation and teacher's style as important factors to class participation. Sam used certain terms such as laid back teaching style, friendly teacher, emphasis on academics as caring. Sam also identified outside of class interactions teacher interactions as affirming to in class engagement.

The interview went well but I realize pretty quickly that the ten key questions went by pretty quickly and I needed more probes. When I followed up with Sam I was thinking of pursuing probes that were similar to the ten base questions. The interview did provide a few probes. What I will do with the next interview and subsequent interviews will be to let the probe questions free flow and hopefully they will tie back into responses that answer the research question.

Student 2: Bruce

Bruce is very verbose and eager to get on with the interview. I am looking forward to this interview because his energy level is high and he seems to be willing to share a lot of information.

I have just completed the interview with Bruce. Some of the things that stood out to me was his level of confidence. Specific examples he gave included an intentionally of going up and introducing himself to his teacher. Bruce placed emphasis on his comfort level in the class being boosted by other first year students living on the same floor. I am intrigued by his enthusiasm to

succeed and his example of ripping pages out of the class textbook that pertained to time management and organization. I am thinking I wish we had some more students with that level of excitement. Bruce also reiterated the importance of clear teacher expectations for the course and a laid back teaching style. Teacher feedback that involved a reflection on his high school journey and career track also stood out to me. Bruce also mentioned co-let discussions with teacher and the term “student voice” being heard in discussions as important to him.

Student 3: Crystal

Crystal reminds me of Bruce with regards to her enthusiasm and energy when first meeting her. Some of the things that stood out to me included her initial skepticism of her teacher and how that perception quickly changed. Crystal repeatedly emphasized and was passionately using terms such as caring, affirmation, teacher relateability and approachability when describing her teacher engagement. I was struck by her tone and recall of the significance of an unpleasant high school teacher engagement and the contrast to her experience at SU. At the same time though I am wondering if she came in with a bias in her expectations of teacher in AYG. I also note that Crystal also emphasized making friends inside and out of class and interaction with teacher or recognition from her AYG teacher as significant.

Student 4: Kate

Kate is somewhat introverted when we first began the interview. What stood out to me was her awareness and connection coming from a very small high school to SU. Kate placed a heavy emphasis on reaching out and connecting with other students and making friends. Some of her terms for teacher engagement include “mothering”, respect and one-on-one interactions as important. I think it is interesting that a value of the teacher-engagement in this course is learning approachability with office hours of other instructors.

Student 5: Katrice

Katrice: Katrice is also very introverted and soft spoken. Katrice also shared she represents SU in sports and my immediate thought is will she open up? Will her experience be biased because of the potential impact on teacher engagement because her coaches mandates student involvement in all classes. I am saying to myself to keep an open mind though. I felt she opened up more as the interview progressed particularly when she discussed group projects and class discussions. Katrice is very conscious of her teacher’s laid back style, peers attitudes and teacher respect. Katrice also shares examples of outside of class recognition by teacher but I wonder if her sports profile contributes to that. Katrice is very focused on grades and the effort needed in

class which again I am trying to put in perspective because of the academic demands of her sport. Teacher facilitated group projects was identified as meaningful to her.

Student 6: Terry

Terry was very enthusiastic throughout the interview. What stands out to me are terms she used to describe teacher including open, supportive, caring, flexible and clear expectations. Terry also appreciated teacher feedback, which included major and career choices. Terry identified her teacher's willingness to open us as important for relatability. I also think it is important that she mentions that her involvement in the class increased over time, which could suggest positive affirmation from teacher engagement.

Student 7: Tim

Tim is a very confident student. He brought an interesting perspective not shared by the other students thus far. He was not necessarily a fan of the AYG course and he felt there was too much hand holding at the beginning of the course. He states very clearly that he was just ready to jump right in. I say this is interesting because a skeptical view of AYG that evolves provides me with another perspective of the benefits of the course and how his teacher engagement factored into that evolution. He describes a teacher who "pulls students into the conversation. This resonates with me from my prior AYG courses that I taught in the past. One of the challenges was to get all students to participate in class discussions and I tried to set that expectation early by calling on students. Tim describes the use of technology by the teacher and how it was used to facilitate engagement. This also resonates with me because of the technology boom and student comfort with technology.

Student 8: Trace

Trace was clearly the most verbose of all of the student interviews. The interview felt like it went by quickly and her enthusiasm and energy for her peers, the teacher and course was very evident. Trace also provided an important contrast to the other students in terms of her inhibition and resistance towards coming to college. Traced used specific terms such as stubborn, close minded about her initial assessment of college and that really stood out to me. Trace attributes her evolving and changing perception of college to her teacher's straight forward and practical style. Trace used a powerful term of path to "self-discovery" as a result of the course and that stood out to me particularly when I think of the transition issues that we try to address in the AYG course.

Reflections and Overall Musings of student participant interviews

These were a very eclectic group of students. I was struck by the description and common theme of making friends and a laid back teaching style as meaningful. Students placed heavy emphasis on making friends in class and establishing out of class ongoing friendships. Students also placed a heavy appreciation of teachers who fostered group assignments and group class discussion where everyone is involved and interacting. Some students who were enrolled in sections that had an assigned student mentor found that to be useful.

Students valued timely one-on-one teacher feedback inside and outside of class. Students also seemed to emphasize teacher ability to relate to the unique dynamics of the first year transition as important. Several students reflected back on their high school teacher interaction and how it impacted their college orientation. I was surprised by the significance of out of class interaction and recognition by teachers. I was surprised by the student expectation of having clear teacher expectations of the them and the course.

I was surprised how quickly the interview questions went by but the probes became very significant because students took the question in another direction and offered a related perspective or expanded on the question that helped to provide more insight. I thought some students went off on tangents but eventually brought it back to the related interview question or the research question of the study. Now that I have completed all of the interviews and reflected on the questions and probes. I would probably have added questions that focused on high school teacher engagement and contrast and compare the experiences. I would also have added a question about learning, what are you learning in AYG that you can use in other classes.

2. Data Analysis Coding

I used a qualitative design to conduct a descriptive, exploratory study using interviews as the primary data collection source. I conducted the interviews over a two week period from mid-November to early December 2012. My approach to the initial coding of the data included the following: transcribing and paying attention to the emphasis on certain words and terms that related to the research question, identifying terms and phrases that related to the term meaningful, grouping related terms and phrases into categories and identifying overarching themes that answer the research question. I pulled up the research question of the study on my dual screen to guide me and to reflect upon as I read all transcripts at least a dozen times and wanted to be sure that I had a good sense of the broad and specific context of the documents I perused.

Step 1: I transcribed each of the interviews. While transcribing I notated initial terms or words that seemed interesting and relevant to each of the interview questions and related to the research question. I also identified related terms from my interview notes.

Step 2: I imported the transcripts into Atlas ti v6. I took each of the individual questions and compared it across participants. For example I began with question 1 and identified key terms across each of the 8 student responses to question 1, 2, 3 etc. I used the open coding feature in Atlas ti to identify terms and phrases. I then grouped similar and frequent terms when I re-read the transcripts and using the code manager in Atlas ti. I identified and defined categories that were specific and broad enough to incorporate the common terms and phrases across participant responses.

Step 3: I reviewed the categories across participant responses to the interview questions and identified three overarching themes.

The researcher shared his first draft of data analysis with ABD writing group colleagues, which consists of three other doctoral students who have been meeting bi-weekly for several years, one has graduated and the other two are in the latter stages of their doctoral work. All members of the ABD writing group are familiar with qualitative research and have an overlap with my professors and thus have a knowledge of their teaching styles and expectations. They provided feedback on the coding and data analysis steps, and ways to align participant responses to the research question of the study. I also solicited feedback from a faculty member who is familiar with qualitative work and teaches English, to provide feedback on the strengths and weakness of my written data analysis. Lastly, my co-chairs provided feedback and suggestions for my data analysis, which included several re-writes and a clearer understanding of the data analysis process from data to categories and overarching themes.

Appendix E

Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis (to be read from bottom up) (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002)

Third iteration: Essence of What Students Found most Meaningful

Theme 1: Teacher-Student Rapport	Theme 2: Course Facilitation	Theme 3: Student-to-Student Interaction inside and outside of the classroom
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Second Iteration: Categories and Patterns

First impressions	Class participation	Making friends
Relating to students	Fostering interaction	Peer-to- peer support
Encouragement	Student preparation for class	Approachable
Teacher verbal and written feedback	Group discussions	Fear
Teacher caring	Collaborative	Uncertainty
Major/Career inquiries	Organized	Connections to classmates
Teacher initiative	Teacher laid back style	Assignments
College transition	Course relevancy	Student's perspective of peers
Recognition	Teacher as enthusiastic	Inside and outside of class interactions
Student affirmation	Course expectations	Student-to-student relating
Teacher presence	Utilizing campus resources	Learning from each other
Teacher opening up	Working together	Return
Personal assessment	Learning from each other	Making good grades

First Iteration: Initial Open Codes

Constructive teacher feedback	Course relevancy	Peer
First impressions	Course enhancement	Relate
Recognition	Course expectations	Tasks
Feedback	Course perception	Awareness
Support	Valuable group discussions	GPA
Meeting	Enthusiasm	Activities
Sensitivity	Style	Respect
Advice	Clarified	Returning
Anxiety	Guidance	Friends

Count on	Participation	Class assignments
Safe	Tasks	Reflection
	Resources	Approachable
		Differences
		Background
		High school
		Large campus
		Easy class
		Different class
		Enthused
		Curious

Appendix F

PARTICIPANTS COMMENTS AND THEMES

THEME 1: TEACHER STUDENT RAPPORT

Categories: Teacher caring	Student Pseudonym	Participant Comments	Meaning Unit
q1, q2, q3, q4, q5,q6,q9	Tim	“I thought she was very nice she seems to enjoy being there and enjoyed what she was doing. She was very open to any questions and tried to learn all of our names tried to establish a strong interpersonal connection with us she seemed very nice.”	Teacher connectivity
	Crystal	“told me I was a great student and I could go a long way and to always believe in myself. If I don’t believe in myself then who will? So just little stuff like that. I guess side notes of encouragement to the students.”	Teacher inspired self confidence
	Terry	“would just talk to me like after class and like random things she noticed. I always had my calendar out and she would ask me about being organized random things like that.”	Attention to detail
College transition, q10	Sam	I am sure if I was on the fence about coming back next year this class would have definitely given me the confidence to finish up freshmen year and then with a high GPA and then that would give me more confidence to come back.	Motivated to return

	Katrice	“well for me personally no (laughs), but it did help me in certain ways learning campus and friends, just learning stuff about the university in general.”	AYG 100 course benefits
	Terry	“I think whether I took it or not I would definitely come back. I think I feel more comfortable as a student here, more informed as a student here after talking about it.”	Empowered to return

THEME 2: COURSE FACILITATION

Categories: Teaching style, academic success, utilizing campus resources, relaxed discussions, major/career, student preparation q1,q2,q6, q7,q8	Student Pseudonym	Meaning Unit	
	Tim	“We would have a discussion that was laid back, and mainly about getting to know information to the university and more so trying to engage students in what they wanted to for their career and major.”	Valuing a discussion based approach
	Sam	“I definitely think he wanted us to focus on what we needed to do as freshmen in turn of classes. Where we can	Academic Excellence

		go to get tutoring help, study help, who we could talk to get help. He definitely wanted us to do things like make sure we had a nice gpa our freshmen year and he really drove that home.”	
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	Bruce	“I felt like she was prepared for the class and overall her expectation just reflected on me that I should invest more time in the course than I thought I should, she would come in everyday and tell us what we were going to work on I knew it was not a class to blow off and turn homework last minute.”	Teacher organization and expectations
	Crystal	a little discussion mostly about resources on campus and stuff like how to utilize them, how to find them, what they offer, who’s there, what’s there and like how does this help students who she has dealt with before, stuff like that.”	Campus resources awareness
	Trace	“in the first year studies class you know everybody were freshmen and they were coming from like the same kind of high school background so you knew you weren't the only one going through the same kind	Peer-to-peer relatability

		of problems, so I think that just puts everyone at ease.”	
	Bruce	“a good majority of the class was the teacher leading discussion, but it was also student lead and we met in groups and you communicated with your peers and how you felt on any issue.”	Collaborative approach

Theme 3: Student-to-Student Interaction inside and outside of the classroom

Categories: student connections, connecting to classmates, making friends q1, q6, q8, q9	Bruce	“I am a people person and I was able to make friends so it helped that we lived on the same floor; so when we met in class I knew that guy.”	familiarity
	Kate	“we were able to develop a friendship and we meet a couple of times a week to eat and things like that. I also like see people walking around on campus which makes the campus feel smaller once you know more people.	Making friends and sense of belonging
	Tim	“Yeah absolutely. I know a couple of people that I am friends with now in that first year studies course. Whenever you have a small class like that you said funneling into a larger university it helps you get to know people quickly in any	Course facilitated friendship opportunities

		other lecture class that has 150 people in it.”	
	Crystal	<p>“I made some really close friends and some of those people I bonded with. We had study groups we hung out all of the time to like help us get through college. You know more so than with that backbone friendship and it’s like a good experience to learn everybody and to make friends. I would say because you always need a person to lean on or to ask for advice, or help me out with tests, or even just hanging out and there are always there for me I like that.”</p>	Multiple benefits of peer-to-peer friendships

Vita

Anton Ricardo Reece hails from the Caribbean country of Barbados and he is a 1988 honors graduate with a B.A in Broadcasting News and a 1990 M.A in Counseling, from Eastern Kentucky University, twenty-four hours above his masters from Murray State University (1996-1999) and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and Research at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

He is a professional who draws from his communication roots and skills as a former employee with the Voice of Barbados Radio, a guest anchor for the Caribbean Broadcasting Television news (1980-1984). In addition, regular guest on WPSD TV, WKYX radio, Channel 2 Minority Focus host, and commentator on various television and radio programs in Kentucky (1990-2003) before transitioning to higher education.

His higher education career began with a legacy of firsts: as the first Minority Affairs Coordinator in the University of Kentucky Community College System in 1990. From 1999 - 2003, Anton created history again by becoming the first African American Dean of Student Affairs in Paducah Community College/Paducah Junior College history. At that time the only African American Dean of Students in the state 28 Kentucky Community and Technical colleges. Anton is currently the Director of the Student Success Center and Co-chair of the Diversity Council at the University of Tennessee, in Knoxville.

He has coordinated key projects for community youth and adults including Rites of Passage, Minority Leadership Conferences, discussion forums, Black History Month activities and community-based cultural initiatives. Reece has received many awards including the E.K.U President's award for academic excellence, the Earl Combs outstanding student athlete E.K.U , the P.C.C Presidential Leadership Award, Academic All-American, 1982 Hampton Games

International Track and Field Gold medalist in the triple jump, distinguished speaker awards from many colleges and organizations and featured in the Kentucky Success Guide Magazine as an outstanding leader.

His academic pursuits are to successfully complete his Ph.D. at UT and seek opportunities for senior level higher education leadership positions in order to serve students, parents and the community.