Basic Communication Course Annual

The Importance of the Basic Communication Course in the First-Year Experience: Implications for Retention

Tim McKenna-Buchanan
Manchester University, tpmckenna-buchanan@manchester.edu

Stevie Munz
Utah Valley University, smunz@uvu.edu

Anna Wright
Illinois College, anna.wright@ic.edu

Jeremy Williams
Kansas State University, jeremywilliams8281@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

The Importance of the Basic Communication Course in the First-Year Experience: Implications for Retention

Cover Page Footnote

Author information and correspondence: Tim McKenna-Buchanan (PhD, Ohio University, 2014) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Manchester University. Stevie M. Munz (PhD, Ohio University, 2016) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Utah Valley State University. Anna M. Wright (EdD, Illinois State University, 2019) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies, Illinois College. Jeremy Williams (MS, Kansas State University, 2019). Correspondence to: Tim McKenna-Buchanan, Department of Communication Studies, Manchester University, 604 E. College Ave., North Manchester, IN 46962, USA. Email: tpmckenna-buchanan@manchester.edu.

Research Article

The Importance of the Basic Communication Course in the First-Year Experience: Implications for Retention

Tim McKenna-Buchanan, Manchester University
Stevie Munz, Utah Valley University
Anna Wright, Illinois College
Jeremy Williams, Kansas State University

Abstract

This study examines the basic communication course (BCC) as it relates to students' first academic year at a university. Specifically, we compared students completing both a first-year experience (FYE) course and basic communication course (BCC) against students completing only an FYE course. Data was collected over two cohorts of students and after analytical procedures, we found that there is an association between courses taken (both a FYE course and BCC or just a FYE course) and retention at the university. Additionally, the results revealed that the combination of both a FYE course and BCC during the first-year fostered emotional support and classroom connectedness, which previous research suggests improves students' integration into the larger academic community (see Dwyer et al., 2004; Titsworth et al., 2013). Ultimately, this research provides implications for the integral role the BCC plays in the first -year.

148

Introduction

Today, the basic communication course (BCC) is a well-established fixture in the first-year college curriculum. This foundational course is often the only formal training in communication that students receive during their post-secondary education (Morreale et al., 2010). Despite students' relatively limited exposure to communication studies, organizations continue to emphasize the relationship and importance of the skills taught in the BCC to the workplace (see Hansen & Hansen, 2007; Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Robles, 2012). Morreale and Pearson (2008) argued that communication is critical to students' future personal and professional success. Today, many professional organizations are highlighting social skills, interpersonal communication, and teamwork as essential skills for employability (Robles, 2012). Emphasizing the importance of communication skills, an article featured by LinkedIn, argues that effective communication is essential for organizational goals, employee morale, and teamwork (Senapati, 2016). Effective communication skills such as argumentation, extemporaneous speaking, audience analysis, and establishing credibility, among others, are argued to be core competencies taught in the BCC (Hooker & Simonds, 2015). Given that a goal of the BCC is to prepare students with effective communication skills, which can help students throughout college and in the workplace, it is essential to strengthen the disciplinary conversations and research about the relationship of the BCC in the first-year experience (FYE) — especially if the BCC is the only communication course students will take during their college career. Student experiences in foundational courses, such as BCC and FYE courses, are intertwined with instructional behaviors that influence the classroom environment. Specifically, the BCC has been identified as a course that increases students' perceptions of instructor rapport, peer connectedness, teacher credibility, teacher immediacy, and student motivation (Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019; Titsworth et al., 2010). Forwarding possible explanations for the relationship among these instructor behaviors and student learning outcomes in the BCC, Emotional Response Theory (ERT) argues relationships among instructor communication and student responses are mediated by the "emotional responses of students to instructor messages" (Horan et al., 2012, p. 211). Moreover, ERT has established connections between students' emotional responses in the classroom and responses that enhance or hurt student and teacher connections, as well as student learning (Frymier & Houser, 2017). Likewise, classroom connectedness fosters a sense of community and belonging and the BCC often integrates opportunities for increased connectedness

149

between and among students. Thus, this study used ERT and classroom connectedness to explore how the BCC and FYE contribute to student retention in the first-year. Specifically, this study presents an analysis of student retention after participating in both the BCC and FYE course or only the FYE course in the first-year.

First-Year Experience

Many colleges and universities have organized an FYE course, which can encompass a myriad of activities, including opportunities for community building through learning communities, service-learning projects, writing across the curriculum, and even communication across the curriculum (Mintz, 2017). According to Purdie and Rosser (2011), many universities have adopted specific FYE courses, be it a seminar on a particular topic of interest, an intensive writing course, and/or a course organized around a university theme or initiative (e.g., civic engagement or social justice). FYE courses may also vary in the number of credit hours or frequency and duration of course meeting times. Often FYE courses have low course sizes and take a student-centered approach that requires small group interaction in order to meet course objectives (Severiens et al., 2015). These courses are often offered in the fall for students entering the university, and sometimes are part of a sequence to develop a full year FYE program. Research has shown that FYE courses lead to higher student perceptions of fitting in on campus, social connectedness, and enjoyment of the college learning environment (Severiens et al., 2015). In fact, FYE courses were identified as a predictor of student success and as a high-impact practice for first-year college experiences within post-secondary education (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Although FYE courses help students transition to college life, there are also academic benefits.

FYE courses can provide a unique framework for integrating campus resources, course content, as well as interweaving a number of high-impact practices connected with academic achievement. According to Goodman and Pascarella (2006), FYE courses are "vital for our students' achievement" and persistence through college (p. 26). In examining retention through a four-year period, Schnell and Doetkott (2002-2003) forwarded that students who participated in a FYE course were retained at significantly higher rates from year one to year two and to graduation in comparison to students who did not participate in FYE. When controlling for courses that most likely integrated FYE goals such as collaborative activities and peer-to-peer mentorship, Jamelske (2009) found a positive effect on student retention and GPA.

150

Rogerson and Poock (2013) asserted that students who participated in FYE seminars organized by common major were retained at higher rates compared to students who selected to not participate in the experience. Such findings are aligned with other scholarly research which argues that integrating academic and peer support for first-year students leads to increased connections to peers, faculty, and the campus community, and in-turn leads to greater student retention (see Berger & Braxton, 1998; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). Substantiating a positive relationship between FYE and student retention is critical for understanding a student's persistence at a university.

Success in foundational courses, such as a FYE course and BCC, can serve as a predictor of future student success at a university. Foraker (2011) examined the relationship between success in various foundational courses and matriculation rates through the university and identified four courses (a first-year experience course, a foundational English course, and two foundational Communication courses) that served as predictors of student retention from first to second year enrollment. Additionally, Flanders (2017) found that students who completed foundational courses were more likely to persist than other students who did not complete the foundational courses in their first-year. Although academics are only one of many challenges first-year students may experience (Moody, 2019), it seems apparent that student success in their first-year foundational courses, which teach skills that will be used throughout an academic career and beyond, have a potential influence on retention and matriculation. For the purposes of this study, we examined the BCC and a FYE course which focused on introducing students to academic writing (e.g., analytical, reflective, and creative). Taken together, these courses should help students' transition to college by developing their social and academic skills in their first-year as well as support their persistence to graduation.

Basic Communication Course

As a foundational communication course, the BCC is identified as one of the courses required for most undergraduate students to graduate (Morreale et al., 2010). Approximately half of all U.S. universities have a BCC with public speaking as the primary content area (Sidelinger et al., 2015). However, within the last decade the BCC has evolved at many universities to also include instruction for other aspects of communication, both theoretical and practical (e.g., critical inquiry, intercultural, interpersonal, or small group communication; Morreale et al., 2016). The BCC

151

provides students with valuable skills that are essential in and outside of the classroom. For example, it affords students opportunities to learn different presentation styles such as impromptu presentations, special occasion speeches, or persuasive speeches, which they may encounter outside of the classroom, and it provides opportunities to enroll in diverse course structures such as face-to-face, online, hybrid, and large lecture, which benefits students. As a result, students gain skills in giving public presentations, navigating communication interactions with friends and in work-groups, as well as learn how to become critical consumers of information.

The BCC serves to educate students about how both the content and context of messages influence the communicative spaces and interaction. In doing so, the BCC provides an interactive environment for students to learn about their own communication behaviors and apply skills to different communication interactions they may encounter in the future. Given the interactive nature of the BCC and the fact that it necessitates communication between students and among students and their instructor, we believe this course is in a unique position in the first-year. Worley and Worley (2006) asserted that the communication content and competencies taught and learned by students in the BCC are highly compatible with FYE goals. For example, BCC instructors frequently require students to engage in instructional discussion experiences with an explicit reading expectation that encourages higher order learning and deeper probing of the content (Simonds et al., 2015). This type of experience is well-aligned with the goal of first-year courses to prepare students for college level academic learning. In particular, we see the BCC as positively supporting first-generation or reticent students, helping create a sense of community, and preparing students for success later in college (Ishitani, 2016; Worley & Worley, 2006). Further, it is a course that provides foundational skills such as delivery, critical thinking, and argumentation, which can support student learning across student's education (see Ruiz-Mesa & Broeckleman-Post, 2018 for discussions about transferable skills in the BCC). Most importantly, we argue that the BCC may enhance the FYE course as this course facilitates emotional support through ERT and connections as a part of the larger university community which we believe will have implications for university retention (Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019; Titsworth et al., 2010). Based on the above literature we forward the following hypothesis:

152

Emotional Response Theory

ERT posits the certain communication behaviors undertaken by an instructor can influence student emotions in the classroom (Mottet et al., 2006). Theoretically, this theory argues that the "relationships among instructor communication and student behavior are mediated by the emotional responses of students to instructor messages" (Horan et al., 2012, p. 211). The theory further discusses two broad emotional processes that are linked to either positive or negative outcomes: emotional support and emotion work (Mottet et al., 2006). In short, students develop emotional valences towards their instructor, activities, and the classroom environment, which can create positive or negative reactions toward learning (Honeycutt et al., 2008; Mottet et al., 2006). Mottet and Beebe (2002) found positive support that students' feelings of pleasure were predictive of increased cognitive and affective learning. If student success in foundational courses is a predictor of retention and matriculation (Foraker, 2011), it is plausible that students' emotional responses may be a motivator of their behavior and in this way related to their academic goals (e.g., success in a course or graduation). Taken together, we argue students' feelings of emotional support or emotion work with instructors may greatly influence student success, retention, and matriculation at the university. To better explore ERT, we outline the two broad emotional processes connected to this theory.

First, *emotional support* processes are those that foster desirable outcomes, such as decreased emotional stress and feelings of supportiveness (Titsworth et al., 2013). Through communication, emotional support can be conveyed by messages in which students ascribe either a positive or negative assessment of their relationship with the message sender (Titsworth et al., 2013). If a student perceives higher levels of emotion work with an instructor then they may also perceive lower levels of emotional support (Mazer et al., 2014). Within the BCC, students are encouraged to work collaboratively with both peers and instructors. Many instructors make great efforts to assure that the classroom environment within these courses is open, welcoming, and affirming (Sidelinger et al., 2012). Students are often provided space to feel heard through their speeches and their contributions to group discussions are valued through positive affirmation by the instructor. We believe that in developing interpersonal relationships in the BCC, students can learn coping skills, decrease their emotional stress, and gain supportive relationships. Additionally, collaborative problem-solving skills are often a topic of conversation in the BCC which helps

153

students learn how to communicate through complex problems (Beall, 1993). Obviously, these types of skills and interactions serve students in their FYE as they continue their academic journey to reach their goals in college.

Second, *emotional work* which is broadly defined as masking real or presenting inauthentic emotions, though not necessarily a negative activity, can cause increased stress and lead to negative feelings about a particular person or situation (Titsworth et al., 2013). An example of this would be the "surface level acting" required of a student who is fearful of public speaking, as they attempt to appear enthusiastic about their particular topic (Hochschild, 2012, p. 67). This inherent cognitive dissonance between the fear of public speaking and desire to do well in the class often leads to some level of emotional distress or emotion work (Bodie, 2010). Although this distress, if maintained at a manageable level, may be a motivating factor, if not properly managed by the instructor could be detrimental emotionally to student performance.

Again, the BCC is uniquely positioned to help students manage and, ultimately, overcome these types of negative emotions in the classroom (Burleson, 2009). Instructors of the BCC can provide tips and training for dealing with fears associated with public communication (e.g., communication apprehension) or with instructing challenging discussions topics (e.g., identity or a current political debate). And through fostering a safe and open environment, instructors can provide a place for students to be themselves and explore ideas that may challenge or complicate their worldviews and understandings about human experiences. We believe it is important to examine ERT in relation to FYE courses and the BCC because instructors play a pivotal role in navigating emotional support for students in their first-year, but also in managing negative feelings and anxieties (i.e., communication apprehension, college apprehension) in the classroom, which has implications for retention.

> H_1: There will be a significant difference related to retention between students who complete both a FYE course and BCC as compared to students who only complete a FYE course.

> H_2: There will be a significant difference in emotional support for students who complete both a FYE course and BCC compared to students who just complete a FYE course.

154

H[3]: There will be a significant difference in emotional work for students who complete both a FYE course and BCC compared to students who just complete a FYE course.

H[4]: Students who retained at the university will report more emotional support than those who did not retain at the university.

H[5]: Students who retained at the university will report less emotion work than those who did not retain at the university.

Classroom Connectedness

Classroom connectedness can best be understood as feelings of comfort and confidence with peers in the classroom. Historically, classroom climate research examined the student-instructor relationship in the college classroom; however, student-student relationships also have important influences on student learning outcomes and retention (Dwyer et al., 2004). Gillen et al. (2011) noted "the most highly rated item on a questionnaire related to the social elements of a classroom was related to individuals choosing who they sit with, highlighting the perceived importance of social elements such as friendship and support" in the classroom (p. 75). This study also found that the attitude instructors convey towards interactions and their ability to foster "mutual respect" influences how students feel about the importance of their peer relationships in the classroom (Gillen et al., 2011, p. 67). These findings highlight how emotional support from the instructor has an influence on peer relationships in the classroom, further supporting the importance of peer relationships as enhancing the classroom climate and overall first-year experience. Additionally, research has shown student-to-student connectedness can mediate many instructor misbehaviors, such as derisiveness and apathy (Sidelinger et al., 2011). Based on the aforementioned research, it is clear that peer connectedness plays an important role in fostering a supportive classroom framework and climate, but how FYE or a BCC contribute to this and student retention requires further examination.

As such, Dwyer et al. (2004) developed a student-to-student *classroom connectedness* scale based on various historically supported constructs (supportive climate, cohesiveness, belongingness, social support, and classroom community). She ultimately defines a connected classroom as "reflecting a strong within-group bond

155

that frees students to express themselves in communication with others" (Dwyer et al., 2004, p. 267). In subsequent studies, student-to-student connectedness has mediated the relationship between interaction in the classroom and student involvement (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Understanding that one of the goals of a FYE course is to foster a sense of community and belonging and that the BCC often integrates opportunities for increased connectedness, it stands to reason that both a FYE course and BCC should provide opportunities for such connections to be fostered between and among students. By the very nature of the BCC, instructors need to facilitate the making of peer-to-peer connections and articulate the importance of these connections to build a community of respect. Once established, peer-to-peer connections can help students cope with many of the stresses of the classroom (i.e., emotional work) or experience positive collaboration (i.e., emotional support). Classroom connectedness with peers also leads to integration within the larger campus community, which as mentioned is related with various desirable outcomes.

> H_6: There will be a significant difference in classroom connectedness for students who complete both a FYE course and BCC compared to students who just complete a FYE course.

> H_7: Students who retained at the university will report more classroom connectedness than students who did not retain at the university.

Methods

Participants and Target Class

Participants in this study included 671 first-year students enrolled in a FYE course at a private Midwestern university. Data were collected over two years to increase and diversify the sample population. Participants included 359 women and 310 men. The average age of participants was 18.27 years ($SD = 0.66$). First generation students accounted for 28% of the population. Additionally, 45% of the students participated in a NCAA athletics. Ethnic makeup of participants is as follows: Caucasian (73.6%), African American (7.9%), Bi-racial/Mixed (6.0%), Latino/Latina (4.8%), Other (4.0%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (2.7%).

156

Participants were asked to identify which class(es) they were enrolled in their first semester: both a FYE course and BCC ($n = 372$) or just a FYE course ($n = 283$). Participants reported an average of 20 students in their respective section of the course ($SD = 4.02$). Approximately 63% ($n = 423$) of students reported having a female instructor while the remainder ($n = 247$) reported having a male instructor. When questioned about classroom operations, more participants reported a discussion-oriented format ($n = 521$) than a lecture-oriented format ($n = 148$), which is typical for a first-year course. Finally, in support of this research the university where the research was collected obtained retention information that could be connected with student identification numbers; 66.8% ($n = 448$) of students were retained whereas 33.2% ($n = 223$) did not return to the university after their first-year.

Procedures and Measures

Approval of the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university in which the research was collected. Participants were recruited in the FYE course, a course that is part of the general education requirement at the university. It may be important to note that currently at the institution the BCC is not part of the FYE; however, students were recruited from these classes as part of a larger institutional research project (examining retention). Students were invited to complete the survey midway through the semester. Once invited students completed an electronic survey; students first provided informed consent electronically following IRB guidelines and then answered items on demographic measures, questions about their courses, and two scales used to assess variables. The following section presents the measures used in this study.

Classroom emotions. Titsworth et al.'s (2010) classroom emotions scale (CES) was used to measure student perceptions of ERT or emotional processes in the classroom. For the purposes of this project, the scale was used to assess two dimensions: *emotional support* (e.g., "I get the emotional help and support I need from my instructor") and *emotion work* (e.g., "Interacting with this instructor requires a lot of emotional energy"). Each item was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Mazer et al. (2014) obtained an alpha reliability coefficient of .82 and .68 for this instrument. Cronbach's alpha estimates for the current study are .64 and .75 for emotional support and emotion

157

work, respectively. Cronbach's alpha for emotional support is low for the present study, which is a limitation.

Classroom connectedness. The Connectedness Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) (Dwyer et al., 2004) was used to measure student perceptions of peer connectedness within the classroom. This 18-item instrument, which assesses perceptions of supportiveness and cooperation between classmates, is measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree.* Sample survey items included, "I feel a sense of security in my class" and "the students in my class are non-judgmental with each other." Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of .93 and .94 have been reported for the 18-item summed scale (Dwyer et al., 2004; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Prisbell et al., 2009; Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for this study is .95, which is slightly higher than those reported in the literature.

Data Analysis

To analyze participants' responses to various survey items, the data were entered into SPSS. First, a chi square test was run to determine the association to course groupings (FYE course and BCC compared to just FYE course). Next, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to explore the differences between students enrolled in both a FYE course and BCC compared to just a FYE course on the set of dependent variables. A second MANOVA was performed to determine differences on the dependent variables for students who retained at the university and those who did not. Beyond that, other demographic grouping variables were tested for differences. In what follows, we will briefly discuss the findings and then will enter into a larger discussion about the implications of this research.

Results

H_1 predicted that there would be a significant difference related to retention between students who complete both a FYE course and BCC compared to those that complete just a FYE course. A chi square test for independence indicated an association between course taken (FYE course only or BCC and FYE course) and retention, $\chi^2(1, 67) = 7.01, p < .01$. Students in both a FYE course and BCC their first-year were more likely to retain at the university than those enrolled in just a FYE course.

A MANOVA was performed to investigate differences in students who completed both a FYE course and BCC compared to those who completed just a

158

FYE course. This tested hypotheses H_2, H_3, and H_6. The independent variable was class taken (FYE course and BCC or just FYE course) and there were three dependent variables: emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted. There was a statistically significant difference between students in both a FYE course and BCC compared to those in just a FYE course on the combined dependent variable $F(3, 627) = 6.54$, $p < .01$; Wilks' Lambda $= .96$; partial $\eta^2 = .031$. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, both emotional support ($F(1, 629) = 18.42$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .028$) and classroom connectedness ($F(1, 629) = 8.07$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .013$) reached statistical significance, thus supporting H_2 and H_6, respectively. An inspection of the mean scores for emotional support indicated that students enrolled in both a FYE course and BCC ($M = 3.44$; $SD = .42$) reported slightly higher indicators of emotional support than those enrolled in just a FYE course ($M = 3.30$; $SD = .38$). Similarly, an inspection of the mean scores for classroom connectedness showed that students enrolled in both a FYE course and BCC ($M = 3.94$; $SD = .62$) reported more classroom connectedness than those enrolled in just a FYE course ($M = 3.81$; $SD = .52$). There was no statistical difference for emotion work for students enrolled in both a FYE course and BCC compared to those enrolled in just a FYE course ($F(1, 629) = 3.18$, $p = .07$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$). Thus, H_3 was not supported. However, an examination of the mean scores showed that, although not statistically significant, students enrolled in both a FYE course and BCC ($M = 2.25$; $SD = .78$) reported slightly less emotion work than students enrolled in just a FYE course ($M = 2.35$; $SD = .59$). This indicates that students enrolled in both courses are employing slightly less emotion work, which is desired. Mean scores are reported in the table.

Observed Descriptive Statistics for MANOVA

Variable	FYE Course Only		FYE Course & BCC	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Emotional Support	3.30	.38	3.44	.42
Classroom Connectedness	3.81	.52	3.94	.62
Emotion Work*	2.35	.59	2.25	.78

Note: Emotion work was not statistically different.

159

A second MANOVA was performed to investigate differences in students who retained at the university and those who did not. This tested hypotheses H_4, H_5, and H_7. The independent variable was retention at the university. The three dependent variables were emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted. There was no statistically significant difference between those who retained at the university and those who did not on the combined dependent variables $F(3, 628) = 1.05$, $p = .37$; Wilks' Lambda $= .99$; partial $\eta^2 = .005$. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, there was no statistical significance between retention and any of the dependent variables; H_4, H_5, and H_7 were not supported.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the BCC and an FYE course as they relate to students' first academic year at a university, as well as understand how emotion work, emotional support, and classroom connectedness influence student retention. Three ideas can be extracted from these results. First, emotional support and classroom connectedness are different for students who are completing both a FYE course and BCC as compared to students only completing a FYE course. Second, emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness are not factors related to retention. Finally, there is an association between retention and courses taken in the first-year (both a FYE course and BCC or just a FYE course). Overall, we believe these findings have important implications for why the BCC serves as a vital component in students' first-year.

First, the results of this research revealed that emotional support and classroom connectedness are significantly different for students who are completing both a FYE course and BCC as compared to students just completing a FYE course. For students, the combination of a FYE course and BCC results in increased emotional support and classroom connectedness. Of note, the effect size for both emotional support (2.7%) and classroom connectedness (1.3%) is small; however, the statistically significant findings provide a promising first step in understanding the impact of taking both courses during the first-year. Prior research suggests when students experience increased emotional support and less emotion work, they are more likely to report a positive valence of their learning (Titsworth et al., 2013). Research has also established emotional support as positively related to affect,

160

motivation, and other learning indicators (Mottet & Beebe, 2002; Mottet et al., 2006; Titsworth et al., 2013). Mazer et al. (2014) argued, "classroom emotional support reflects the extent to which students perceive that their instructor is available and able to provide emotional support about topics that are directly and indirectly related to school" (p. 151). This means that the increased emotional support obtained through taking a FYE course and BCC simultaneously can enhance students' learning and learning outcomes. Through previous research and the results of this study, there is now compelling evidence that students who take both a FYE course and BCC course during their first-year may benefit beyond the individual classroom learning environments by learning *how* to be a learner and communicator in college, which could be used throughout their education. Put another way, students who take a BCC and a FYE course may experience more supportive and connective learning environments, which allow students to explore, grow, and be a vulnerable learner in the classroom.

Additionally, students who completed both a FYE course and BCC reported increased classroom connectedness compared to their peers completing only a FYE course. These findings suggest the BCC provides students not only with skills to succeed academically and socially in the college environment, but also has implications for student integration into the larger campus community. When students have a sense of belonging, a supportive classroom climate influences their cohesiveness to peers and builds a community that enhances their academic experience (Dwyer et al., 2004). Research suggests students who feel connected in their classrooms report increased levels of participation and are willing to openly talk in class (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). In essence, we believe both a FYE coure in combination with the BCC creates a "sense of belonging" for students, which enriches their first-year in college. This experience is enhanced through the combination of these courses in the FYE and not just completing a singular FYE course.

Second, it is important to note that emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness are not mitigating factors for retention. This may be surprising because students completing both courses reported increased emotional support and connection in the classroom; however, retention is not always directly connected to the academic classroom experiences (e.g., student motivation or academic preparedness). Retention on university campuses may be connected to other experiences such as financial constraints, family challenges, or personal traumas, among other experiences (Moody, 2019). Another important factor

161

contributing to student retention, may be when students declare and complete the introductory course for their major (Flanders, 2017). If students enroll in and successfully complete the introductory course for their major during their first-year, they may be more likely to re-enroll the following year. There may also need to be a more holistic approach to advising that brings all university stakeholders into the conversation to support student retention (Schwebel et al., 2008). Although it is possible that faculty who teach the BCC and/or FYE course may provide more emotional support and peer connections in the classroom, they may lack the proper training to fully address factors influencing retention.

As we consider factors influencing retention, it is important to acknowledge the role faculty may perform in effectively communicating content, assessments, and emotional support in the college classroom and how these instructional strategies may impact students' overall experience at the university. In this way, faculty who are more effective at communicating in the classroom environment could contribute to creating a space for students to experience less emotional work and positive emotional support. Simonds et al. (2015) argued that instructors need teacher training to address how to "plan, facilitate, and assess instructional discussion," but further that these training programs are critical to how students engage in the classroom environment (p. 32). Extending this argument to first-year courses like the BCC or FYE course, we believe there is a strong reasoning that instructors may need specialized training to help prepare first-year students for college whether it be in terms of academics or life events. Taken as a whole, we believe instructors may to need to be trained to teach first-year students to assist with retention efforts and access campus retention resources. Lastly, it is worthy of mentioning that other support staff on campus may be better suited to support factors influencing student retention (e.g., health crises, personal traumas, etc.), which are outside the scope of instructional behaviors in the classroom. In this way, we envision campus retention efforts as a collaborative endeavor.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, this study found that there is an association between students enrolled in both a FYE course (writing intensive) and BCC (communication intensive) and university retention. We believe that the BCC complements a FYE course, which enhances student's first-year of college, as both courses facilitate emotional support and connections. Students are learning foundational skills in the BCC that are important for their success in college, and the skills learned across a FYE course and BCC are enhancing their experience at college. For example, through classroom discussion, students' voices are heard and

162

they feel connected, which we believe helps them grow into successful members of the university community. As prior research suggests, if these students are successful in these foundational courses, they are more likely to retain from year one to year two and then are more likely to graduate (Foraker, 2011). Hence, the implications of this study are instrumental in a time when many universities seek to increase retention and enrollment numbers. We argue administrators need to recognize the important role of sequencing in the first-year in regard to foundational courses similar to a FYE course and BCC. Most importantly, prior research has established the BCC is one of the courses required for most undergraduate students to graduate (Morreale et al., 2010), yet it is not always required in the first-year and may be taken later in a student's schooling. The results of this study help to provide a justification for the BCC in first-year curriculum, as it was identified as a predictor of retention.

Ultimately, the results of this study position the BCC as integral in the larger framework of a first-year curriculum, as the combination of BCC and a FYE course increase emotional support, classroom connectedness, and are related to retention at the university, which presents important implications for basic course directors and administrators. Complementing our results, Worley and Worley (2006) also strongly advocate for the symbiotic relationship between the BCC and FYE courses in first-year curriculum. Based on content taught and competencies (or skills acquired by students) like public speaking, critical thinking, relationship building and self-reflexivity, to name a few, the BCC can serve the needs of an FYE curriculum (see Worley & Worley 2006; "National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition," 2019). If universities are at all concerned with student retention and matriculation to earn a degree (especially in a timely manner), the results of this study provide a glimmer of encouragement and further situate the BCC as crucial for student success in college.

Limitations and Future Directions

We argue this research study calls for continued research to expand our understanding of factors that may influence retention beyond classroom behaviors, student experiences, and course sequencing. Although the current results are meaningful to understanding the importance of BCC and FYE courses sequencing in the first-year, there are limitations that should be considered. First, data were collected for the study after the midpoint in the course, and there are potential factors that could have changed by the end of the first-year first semester. However,

163

it is important to note that our retention data were from first to second year retention and not just after the first semester. Additionally, students were completing both a FYE course and BCC during the same semester, so we do not know how completing the courses through the first-year (or one course per semester) would compare or change the results (see Flanders, 2017 for discussion of the influence of course sequencing on retention). For example, if students took a FYE course in the fall and BCC in the spring it is unclear if we would find similar results in relation to retention. As such, future research should include a third group of students taking a FYE course in the fall and BCC in the spring to see the implications and effects of sequencing on retention.

Another important limitation of this research connects to potential institutional factors and the timing of when this research data were collected. Much like the larger grand narratives occurring at universities across the U.S. regarding retention and finances, the university from which this data were collected has also experienced a decline in first to second year retention. The retention decline spearheaded an initiative on campus to collect data regarding student experiences and retention. Therefore, it is possible students were attuned to this conversation and already thinking about whether or not to enroll the following semester. Finally, the internal consistency of the emotional support scale was low for this study, which is a limitation. Past research has shown more promising internal consistency, so this study should be replicated to attempt to improve the Cronbach's alpha.

Future research is needed to examine the relationship between student enrollment in the major gateway courses and retention as well as matriculation through to graduation. It is possible that students who are indecisive about their major or receiving pressure from the family to choose a degree program may be at a greater risk of withdrawing from the university. Future research should explore the likelihood for students to enroll from term to term if they have a declared major or not, especially during the first two years. Subsequent studies should explore variables beyond ERT and classroom connectedness to help identify additional challenges students face in the first-year that influence retention. Finally, we believe it may be valuable for researchers to survey advisors' experiences mentoring students through the first to second year enrollment process. Often as close mentors to students during their education, they may have insight into other university systems or structures as well as student experiences that are impeding students from matriculating through to graduation.

164

Overall, this research advocates for the importance of integrating the BCC in the first-year as a means to set students up for success in the larger academic community and to increase first to second year retention as well as matriculation to graduation. Through these findings, we argue that students who complete both a FYE course and BCC in their first semester are more likely to retain as compared to students who just complete a FYE course in their first semester. Additionally, it is through the emotional support and peer connections in both of these courses that students develop skills that encourage and foster first-year student experiences which we argue may lead to retention and matriculation at the university. The BCC is a vital component to a university's curriculum; however, it is essential the BCC is integrated into the first-year curriculum so it can be situated as a course pivotal to first-year academic student success and acclimation to broader university life. Through integrating skills acquired through the BCC, universities provide incoming students with the interpersonal, instigative, and critical thinking skills that complement FYE courses and are necessary for their successful integration and retention at a university.

References

Beall, M. L. (1993). Teaching thinking in the basic course. *Basic Communication Course Annual,* 5, 127-156. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol5/iss1/10

Berger, J. B., & Braxton, J. M. (1998). Revising Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure through theory elaboration: Examining the role of organizational attributes in the persistence process. *Research in Higher Education, 39*, 103-119. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018760513769

Bodie, G. D. (2010). A racing heart, rattling knees, and ruminative thoughts: Defining, explaining, and treating public speaking anxiety. *Communication Education, 59*, 70-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520903443849

Burleson, B. R. (2009). Understanding the outcomes of supportive communication: A dual-process approach. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 26*, 21-38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509105519

Dwyer, K., Bingham, S. Carlson, R. Prisbell, M., Cruz, A., & Fus, D. (2004) .Communication and connectedness in the classroom: Development of the connected classroom climate inventory. *Communication Research Reports, 21*, 264-272. https://doi.org/10.1080/0882409040935998

165

Flanders, G. R. (2017). The effect of gateway course completion on freshman college student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 19*, 2-24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115611396

Frisby, B. N., & Martin, M. M. (2010). Instructor–student and student–student rapport in the classroom. *Communication Education, 59*, 146-164. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520903564302

Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2017). Student participation and engagement in the classroom. In M. L. Houser & A. Hosek (Eds.), *Handbook of instructional communication: Rhetorical and relational perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 51-65). Routledge.

Foraker, M. (2011). WKU freshmen performance in foundational courses: Implications for retention and graduation rates. *WKU Office of Institutional Research.* https://www.wku.edu/instres/documents/freshmen_performance_in_foundation_courses.pdf

Gillen, A., Wright, A., & Spink, L. (2011). Student perceptions of a positive climate for learning: A case study. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 27*, 65-82. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2011.549355

Goodman, K., & Pascarella, E. T. (2006). First-year seminars increase persistence and retention: A summary of the evidence from how college affects students. *Peer Review, 8*(3), 26-28. https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/peerreview/PRSU06.pdf

Hansen, R. S., & Hansen, K. (2007). Quintessential careers: What do employers really want? Top skills and values employers seek from job-seekers. *Quintessential Careers.* http://www.physics.emory.edu/faculty/roth/careerskills/soft_skills.pdf

Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling.* University of California Press.

Honeycutt, J., Nasser, K., Banner, J., Mapp, C., & DuPont, B. (2008). Individual differences in catharsis, emotional valence, trauma anxiety, and social networks among Hurricane Katrina and Rita victims. *Southern Communication Journal, 73*, 229-242. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802219728

Hooker, J., & Simonds, C. (2015). From the outside looking in: Employers' views of the basic course. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 27*, 102-116. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol27/iss1/12

Horan, S. M., Martin, M. M., & Weber, K. (2012). Understanding emotional response theory: The role of instructor power and justice messages. *Communication Quarterly,* 60, 210-233. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2012.669323

166

Ishitani, T. T. (2016). First generation students' persistence at four-year institutions. *College & University, 91*, 22-32.

Jamelske, E. (2009). Measuring the impact of a university first-year experience program on student GPA and retention. *Higher Education, 57*, 373-391. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9161-1

Mazer, J. P., McKenna-Buchanan, T. P., Quinlan, M. M., & Titsworth, S. (2014). The dark side of emotion in the classroom: Emotional processes as mediators of teacher communication behaviors and student negative emotions. *Communication Education, 63*, 149-168. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2014.904047

Mintz, S. (2017, February 23). *Reinventing the First year Experience.* https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/reinventing-first-year-experience

Moody, J. (2019, March 20). How to Avoid Dropping Out of College. *U.S. News.* https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2019-03-20/dropping-out-of-college-why-students-do-so-and-how-to-avoid-it

Morrow, J., & Ackermann, M. (2012). Intention to persist and retention of first-year students: The importance of motivation and sense of belonging. *College Student Journal, 46*(3), 483–491. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Intention-to-Persist-and-Retention-of-First-Year-of-MorrowAckermann/a8aa1416c5d2fdf91cd07d56705987fe794a128a

Morreale, S., Worley, D., & Hugenberg, B. (2010). The basic communication course at two- and four-year U.S. colleges and universities: Study VIII – The 40th Anniversary. *Communication Education, 59*, 405-430. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634521003637124

Morreale, S. P., Myers, S. A., Backlund, P. M., & Simonds, C. J. (2016). Study IX of the basic communication course at two-and four-year US Colleges and Universities: A re-examination of our discipline's "front porch". *Communication Education, 65*, 338-35. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2015.1073339

Morreale, S. P., & Pearson, J. C. (2008). Why communication education is important: The centrality of the discipline in the 21st century. *Communication Education, 57*, 224-240. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520701861713

Mottet, T. P., & Beebe, S. A. (2002). Relationships between teacher nonverbal immediacy, student emotional response, and perceived student learning. *Communication Research Reports, 19*, 77-88. https://doi.org/10.1080=08824090209384834

167

Mottet, T. P., Frymier, A. B., & Beebe, S. A. (2006). Theorizing about instructional communication In T. P. Mottet, V. P. Richmond, & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Handbook of instructional communication* (pp. 255-282). Pearson.

National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. (2019). https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center

Prisbell, M., Dwyer, K. K., Carlson, R. E., Bingham, S., & Cruz, A. M. (2009). Connected classroom climate and communication in the basic course: Associations with learning. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 21*, 145-177. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol21/iss1/11/

Purdie, J. R., & Rosser, V. J. (2011). Examining the academic performance and retention of first-year students in living-learning communities and first-year experience courses. *College Student Affairs Journal, 29*, 95. https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/4710/research.pdf

Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly, 75*, 453-465. https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912460400

Rogerson, C. L., & Poock, M. C. (2013). Differences in populating first year seminars and the impact on retention and course effectiveness. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *15*(2), 157-172. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.15.2.b

Ruiz-Mesa, K. & Broeckelman-Post, M. A. (2018). Making the case for the basic communication course in general education. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 30*, 206-211. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol30/iss1/13/

Schnell, C., & Doetkott, C. (2002-2003). First year seminars produce long-term impact. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *4*, 377–391. https://doi.org/10.2190/NKPN-8B33-V7CY-L7W1

Schwebel, D. C., Walburn, N. C., Jacobsen, S. H., Jerrolds, K. L., & Klyce, K. (2008). Efficacy of intrusively advising first-year students via frequent reminders for advising appointments. *NACADA Journal, 28*, 28-32. https://www.nacadajournal.org/doi/pdf/10.12930/0271-9517-28.2.28

Senapati, A. (2016, March 22). Importance of effective communication in organization. *LinkedIn*. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-effective-communication-organisation-avinash-senapati/

168

Severiens, S., Meeuwisse, M., & Born, M. (2015). Student experience and academic success: comparing a student-centered and a lecture-based course programme. *Higher Education, 70*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9820-3

Sidelinger, R. & Frisby, B. (2019) Social integration and student proactivity: Precursors to improved academic outcomes in a first-year experience basic communication course, *Basic Communication Course Annual, 31*, 95-112. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol31/iss1/8

Sidelinger, R. J., Bolen, D. M., Frisby, B. N., & McMullen, A. L. (2011). When instructors misbehave: An examination of student-to-student connectedness as a mediator in the college classroom. *Communication Education, 60*, 340-361. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2011.554991

Sidelinger, R. J., Frisby, B. N.; McMullen, A. L., & Heisler, J. (2012). Developing student-to-student connectedness: An examination of instructors' humor, nonverbal immediacy, and self-disclosure in public speaking courses. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 24*, 81-121. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol24/iss1/8/

Sidelinger, R. J., Bolen, D. M., McMullen, A. L., & Nyeste, M. C. (2015). Academic and social integration in the basic communication course: Predictors of students' out-of-class communication and academic learning. *Communication Studies, 66*, 63-84. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.856807

Sidelinger, R. J., & Booth-Butterfield, M. (2010). Co-constructing student involvement: An examination of teacher confirmation and student-to-student connectedness in the college classroom. *Communication Education, 59*, 165-184. https://doi.org/10.1080=03634520903390867

Simonds, C., Hooker, J., & Wright, A. (2015). Instructional discussion: The most important area of training for new basic course instructors. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 27*, 32-43. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol27/iss1/9

Tinto, V., & Goodsell, A. (1993). Freshman interest groups and the first-year experience: Constructing student communities in a large university. National Center of Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.

Titsworth, S., Quinlan, M. M., & Mazer, J. P. (2010). Emotion in teaching and learning: Development and validation of the classroom emotions scale. *Communication Education, 59*, 431-452. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634521003746156

169

Titsworth, S., McKenna, T. P., Mazer, J. P., & Quinlan, M. M. (2013). The bright side of emotion in the classroom: Do teachers' behaviors predict students' enjoyment, hope, and pride? *Communication Education, 62*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2013.763997

Tukibayeva, M., & Gonyea, R. M. (2014). High-impact practices and the first-year student. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2013*, 19-35. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20059

Worley, D., & Worley, D. (2006). The first year experience (FYE) and the basic communication course: Insights from theory and practice. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 18*, 63-101. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol18/iss1/8/

The Basic Course Forum

This feature is designed to invite scholars and basic course practitioners to propose and debate specific key questions of concern related to the basic course.

The focus for Volume 32 highlights best practices for *recruiting* to and/or from the basic course. Essays address best practices for recruiting undergraduate communication majors from the basic course; how to attract graduate students to teaching opportunities in the basic course; strategies for recruiting and nurturing a pipeline of future basic course directors; and ideas for how to entice senior faculty interest in teaching the basic course to bring them back to disciplinary roots.

171