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A Case Study on the Impacts of Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships in a Freshman
Academy for Secondary Classroom Students

By
Anna S. Moose

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Anna S. Moose under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

Melinda Ratchford, Ed.D.
Committee Chair

Date

David Shellman, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Date

Steve Laws, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Date

Dr. Jeffrey Rogers, Ph.D.
Dean of the Gayle Bolt Price School
of Graduate Studies

Date

Abstract

A Case Study on the Impacts of Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships in a Freshman Academy for Secondary Classroom Students. Moose, Anna S., 2015: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Freshman Academy/Rigor/Relevance/Relationships

This study researched the impact a Freshman Academy approach has on rigor, relevance, and relationships in a secondary classroom setting. For the purpose of this paper, a Freshman Academy is one where ninth-grade students are grouped together in their core academic courses with a common group of teachers. Within these common academic courses, ideas and concepts are integrated in order to transition more effectively into the high school environment and provide students with a more cohesive academic experience. This paper further reflects the current, critical problems in existence in today's high school setting that can potentially be addressed using the Freshman Academy approach. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how integrating the curriculum, utilizing effective teacher collaboration, and creating a Freshman Academy impact the rigor, relevance, and relationships for both students and teachers during the ninth-grade year.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Educators are working in an era of accountability” (Drake & Burns, 2004, p. 1).

This is a well-known fact for educators in the United States. Westerberg (2009) noted that in today’s culture “all students are expected to graduate from high school, be ready to enter college or start a career, and have world-class, 21st century knowledge and skills” (p. 1). Subsequently, in an era of high-stakes testing and accountability, it is also imperative that teachers perform as well as students. Therefore, teachers must find a way to engage students in the curriculum in order to help them achieve. According to Goodwin (2011), years of research suggest that teacher behaviors directly impact student achievement.

The following teacher behaviors . . . distinguish highly effective teachers:

1. Highly effective teachers challenge their students. Good teachers not only have high expectations for all students but also challenge them, providing instruction that develops higher-order thinking skills.
2. Highly effective teachers create positive classroom environments. One of the strongest correlates of effective teaching is the strength of relationships teachers develop with students.
3. Highly effective teachers are intentional about their teaching. Good teachers are clear about what they’re trying to teach and then master a broad repertoire of instructional strategies to help students accomplish their learning goals. They know not only *what* to do to support student learning but *how*, *when*, and *why* to do it. (Goodwin, 2011, p. 19)

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the current secondary school structure in North Carolina where students and teachers are faced with larger, impersonal class sizes, a

blend of Grades 9-12, and a separation from other disciplines was used as the basis for understanding what teachers and schools must change in order to help students achieve their academic and personal goals.

Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships

The State of North Carolina has adopted the policy for secondary schools derived from three key principles: rigor, relevance, and relationships. The Department of Public Instruction defined these three principles as the guiding structure of developing sound curriculum decisions. This study looked at the integration of these three principles in action as they pertain to Freshman Academies. One must first understand what these three terms mean in order to understand how they are to be used for curriculum purposes.

First, rigor applies to the academic content as outlined by the standard course of study for each secondary subject course. “According to the ‘Non-Negotiables’ of Academic Rigor developed by the Academically or Intellectually Gifted Program, Exceptional Children Division, NCDPI,” academic rigor is defined as

1. Has Qualitatively Different Academic Environments (More In-Depth, Complex and Abstract Concepts and Ideas)
2. Builds Upon Interests, Strengths and Personal Goals
3. Engages Consistently in Sophisticated Investigations of Materials, Texts, Interactive Technologies and Learning Activities
4. Employs Advanced Critical and Creative Processes
5. Embraces Teachers and Students as Risk-Takers in Experimental, Investigative and Open-Ended Learning Processes
6. Utilizes Effectively Existing Knowledge and Creates New Knowledge
7. Develops and Applies Deep Understanding of Significant Concepts,

Generalizations and Essential Questions to Problem Finding and Problem Solving

8. Sets No Predetermined Limits
9. Creates Life-Long Learners and Thinkers Capable of Independent Reflection, Self-Evaluation and Reasoning. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2005, p. 101)

According to this definition, teachers are responsible to establish this learning environment in order to foster student success and achievement. However, NCDPI is not the only organization to create a working definition for teachers as it applies to academic rigor. Daniel Baron defined and outlined the goals of academic rigor, as noted by Westerberg (2009), as “the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, and personally or emotionally challenging. In rigorous schools, students are evaluated by how they apply their understanding of content in new and unique situations” (p. 41).

The International Center for Leadership in Education (2002) based its definition of rigor on one of two dimensions of higher standards and student achievement. According to the International Center for Leadership in Education, the first standard, founded on the principles outlined by Bloom’s Taxonomy, is the Knowledge Taxonomy (p. 1). This standard emphasizes awareness, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as the overall definition of the term rigor for educators (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2002, p. 4). This definition mirrors some of the components found in the NCDPI definition and emphasizes the need for a definition as a guideline for educators.

The terms relevance and relationships are not as clearly defined for educators,

according to NCDPI, but hold perhaps the most meaning in encouraging the emotional development of the student. NCDPI's (2006) resources guide, "Best Practices: A Resource for Teachers," stated that relationships are developed "through opportunities for communication and teamwork" (p. 2). In other words, it is the school's responsibility to provide students with these opportunities which enable students to see the need for what they do as well as the means to achieve it; however, providing these opportunities does not complete the definition. Sterrett (2012) wrote that one of the most important factors in student success is how teachers relate to students (p. 72). Sterrett further stated that "Our success hinges on our ability to build effective relationships with students" (p. 72). The idea of relevance ties directly to the relationships established by the school community. Sterrett again noted that "Effective teachers have always found way to connect with students, but having a consistent school wide system for creating communities can provide crucial structure and support" (p. 72). Therefore, relevance as defined by NCDPI suggested that if students find relevance with what they are asked to learn, then students

1. Develop a love of learning and become lifelong learners;
2. Understand themselves and those around them;
3. Demonstrate talents they bring with them to school; and
4. Develop new, necessary skills and abilities to be successful in school and in life. (p. 4)

The challenge that now exists for teachers and school administrators is to determine how to incorporate these principles into their daily curriculum to encourage student achievement. The International Center for Leadership in Education (2002) provided a method for educators to decide the best way to create relevance for students in the

classroom. Its definition for relevance is the second standard in its framework, the Application Model (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2002, p. 5).

The second standard implies a phase of action to aid teachers in their quest to provide relevance for their students. The model consists of a five-step approach that consists of providing knowledge in one discipline, applying knowledge in that discipline, applying knowledge across disciplines, application to real-world predictable situations, and application to real-world unpredictable situations (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2002, p. 5). On the lower end of the spectrum, educators provide “knowledge acquisition”; but on the higher end, the “use of knowledge to solve complex real-world problems, and to create projects, designs, and other works for use in real-world situations” (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2002, p. 2).

Goodwin (2011) included in his text a research report, *Silent Epidemic*, which determined that a

key reason students dropped out was being unable to connect what they were learning with the real world. Indeed, almost half (47 percent) of the high school dropouts surveyed said that they quit school because the “classes were not interesting.” (p. 69)

This study also noted that “81 percent of dropouts said that providing ‘opportunities for real world learning (internships, service learning, etc.) to make classroom[s] more relevant’ would have increased their chances of staying in school” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 69). The amount of relevance a school community can provide its students clearly impacts not only a student staying in school but also encourages the academic achievement of each student in their school. The Southern Region Education Board (SREB) has tested these theories for more than 20 years. Its main focus is to advocate for

personalized education in the high school setting. Its research continues to point to the fact that personalized schools are the best way to raise student achievement and graduation rates. During one of its studies, SREB examined “13 successful Georgia high schools” where achievement continued to rise (Goodwin, 2011, p. 69). “SREB concluded that the key to success for these schools was their twofold effort to both raise standards and personalize learning for students” (Goodwin, 2011, pp. 69-70). Many of these schools were also providing “career academies” where students were offered “real-world learning opportunities” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 70). SREB also noted that “these most-improved schools were not just about rigor; they were about students seeing a purpose in what they were being asked to learn” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 70). Evidence suggests, therefore, that academic achievement does not just come from rigor but it also comes from other factors such as relevance and relationships.

NCDPI does not have a clear definition or plan for defining or creating relationships; but as research shows, developing relationships is critical to school success. In 1969, Harvard doctoral student Judith Kleinfeld wanted “to find ways of improving education for children who were not doing well in school” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 22). During her research, she defined four types of teachers based on teacher interactions with students. The first type Kleinfeld identified was what she termed the “traditionalists.” Traditionalists are “teachers who set high expectations for students but viewed developing personal relationships with them as outside of their professional purview, offering little academic or emotional support to help students meet expectations” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 22). Kleinfeld’s second teacher type was identified as “sophisticates” and characterized as “aloof and undemanding.” The third type, identified as “sentimentalists,” were identified as “warm but undemanding” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 23).

The fourth teacher type was identified as the “supportive gadflies” which “were successful with students” as they “combined high personal warmth with high active demandingness” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 23). In later years, dozens of other scholarly works have referenced Kleinfeld’s model. Most recently, researcher John Hattie found that “one of the strongest correlates of teacher effectiveness is teacher-student relationships” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 23). Hattie cited the following reasons for variables that influence relationships and achievement.

1. Nondirectivity (i.e., encouraging student-initiated and regulated activities)
2. Empathy
3. Warmth
4. Encouragement of higher-order thinking. (Goodwin, 2011, p. 23)

Blum (2005) conducted a study to discuss the importance of school connectedness especially for students whose parents were in the military and moved from school to school. However, this study also has broader implications for all students as it draws upon research reported at the “Wingspread Conference Center in June 2003, and published in the *Journal of School Health*, September 2004” (Blum, 2005, Introduction).

This study and others have defined the importance of school connectedness as it pertains to the relationships students must have in order to succeed in school. According Blum,

School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals. Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. Critical requirements for feeling connected include high academic rigor and expectations coupled with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and physical and emotional safety. (p. 1)

According to this definition, school connectedness encompasses the relationships

students have throughout their academic life that must be maintained in order for students to be successful. Research continues to expostulate the importance of quality teacher-student relationships that provide students the type of emotional environment necessary for academic achievement.

If rigor, relevance, and relationships were established and met for each student, student achievement and success could be met and success could create positive attitudes towards school. The McRel research group has identified strategies and reasons why certain classroom strategies work to encourage student achievement. These nine strategies exemplify a combination of rigor, relevance, and relationships in order to create this success. The following are the nine strategies McRel has noted schools need to have in order to be successful.

1. Identifying Similarities and Differences. This approach supports acquisition of new knowledge by linking to prior learning.
2. Summarizing and Note Taking. This strategy deepens knowledge with critical thinking, review, and revision while demonstrating understanding and identifying misconceptions.
3. Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition. This strategy motivates through positive reinforcement.
4. Homework and Practice. This motivates through learning development of good work habits and deepens knowledge through application.
5. Nonlinguistic Representations. This approach supports acquisition of new knowledge through visual learning.
6. Cooperative Learning. This approach motivates students by making them interdependent and learning to talk through problems and strategies.

7. Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback. This focuses learning on important content and motivates by personalizing learning.
 8. Generating and Testing Hypotheses. This strategy deepens knowledge through critical thinking, evaluating, and creating.
 9. Questions, Cues, and Advance Organizers. This motivates students by increasing their curiosity and interest in a topic while linking to prior learning.
- (Goodwin, 2011, p. 28)

Blum (2005) showed how school connectedness can be increased by these measures:

1. Implement high standards and expectations, and provide academic support for all students.
 2. Apply fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.
 3. Create trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families.
 4. Hire and support capable teachers who are skilled in content, teaching techniques and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.
 5. Foster high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.
 6. Ensure that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school.
- (p. 2)

Garner (2013) discussed what would happen if teachers were to help students focus and notice what is happening within their education. Garner cited a study that posited, "What happens when we ask students, What do you notice? What do you wonder about?" (p. 50). The findings concluded in Garner regarding students were that

1. They focus attention and gather sensory data.
2. Their curiosity is aroused, and they become investigators.
3. They are empowered to trust themselves and their own capabilities.
4. They build trusting relationships with the teacher.
5. They follow their wonderings and questions instead of waiting passively for the teacher to tell them information.
6. They become their own teachers. (p. 50)

However, this is where the problem begins. Schools across the globe are facing a crisis of student apathy and lack of connectedness to their school environment. Research points to solutions, but the implementation has proven to be difficult. According to Goodwin (2011), while these ideas are not brand new research, “putting them all together in a consistent way with near flawless execution, across an entire system, *would* be new” (p. 152). Goodwin stated, “This idea—doing well what we already know needs to be done—is the essence of high-reliability systems . . . research suggests that school systems would do well to attend to the following touchstones for functioning as high-reliability organizations” (p. 152). The first touchstone includes “setting clear, ‘no excuses’ goals for teaching and learning” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 152). This touchstone includes setting goals collaboratively to create buy-in among all stakeholders and identifying clear strategies necessary to reach their goals (Goodwin, 2011, p. 152). The second touchstone posits that educators need to be “attending to the ‘core’ business of schooling: consistently high-quality instruction” which in turn means “filling every classroom, in every school, with a great teacher” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 152). The final touchstone notes that schools need to be “developing a healthy, data-driven preoccupation with failure, prevention, and intervention,” meaning that schools must quickly “identify error patterns

as soon as they occur, putting in place processes for responding to them and learning from failures in the spirit of kaizen, or continuous improvement” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 152).

Therefore, schools must find a way to implement the changes necessary for overall system and student improvement and engagement in light of the challenges students, teachers, and administrators face in the educational setting.

Problem Statement

High school students do not see or experience rigor, relevance, and relationships between core subject areas as related to the measures for school connectedness and success which encompass these concepts. As stated in Blum (2005),

By the time they are in high school, as many as 40 to 60 percent of all students—urban, suburban and rural—are chronically disengaged from school. That disturbing number does not include the young people who have already dropped out. (p. 4)

Therefore, students do not have a vested interest in their education as they do not see how their educational pathway will help them attain their future goals and interests. Gewertz (2006) provided the hard facts that say why students are disengaged and disinterested (Price, 2008, p. 11). Gewertz discovered that

in a series of focus groups in 2005 with dropouts in Philadelphia and Baltimore, few of these youngsters cited academic struggles as their primary reason for dropping out. They were far more likely to say they left school because they were unmotivated, were not challenged enough, or were overwhelmed by troubles outside school. (Price, 2008, p. 11)

The consequences of this mindset are seen and felt by many in the educational setting.

Teachers and administrators feel the pressure of meeting the requirements in ever-

changing reform measures while still meeting the needs of students. As teachers and administrators have now discovered, No Child Left Behind and other state and local policies have imposed many school reforms such as

imposing tougher high school graduation standards, establishing high stakes tests as prerequisites for advancing from grade to grade, ending social promotion, revising state school aid formulas, . . . reforming curricula . . . upgrading the caliber of teachers, and asserting mayoral control over school systems. (Price, 2008, p. 13)

With the many problems facing schools today such as ensuring the success of all students, meeting the ever-increasing standards set by state, local, and federal governments, and the lack of engagement seen in many high school freshmen, schools will have to find an answer and implement new strategies that will address these concerns.

Curriculum Integration

If students could find a connection or relevance to their daily curriculum, then the collective school may find students more apt to contribute to the classroom community and excel academically. As for now, many students are disengaged from the academic process. Eddy Bayardelle, president of Merrill Lynch and a former teacher and principal, noted that

school systems do not know what to do with these students, traditional schools do not reach them, and the kids themselves do not particularly care about remaining unreached . . . they simply are not “into” the education that is being offered. (Price, 2008, p. 11)

Therefore, something must be done to reach students in a way that engages rather than

disengages them from the academic world they are asked to be in. The benefits of this type of reform would unmistakably work its way up the ladder of the school social structure and change the current outlook of the entire academic community.

The problem exists in the high school setting of students who are disengaged with their academic responsibilities as they perceive a lack of rigor, relevance, and relationship in their lives. When students were asked the reasons for not completing school, Catterall (1998) found that “the three most common reasons students give for dropping out as: (a) not liking school, (b) not getting along with teachers and others, and (c) failing” (Fulk, 2003, p. 9). If a change of these attitudes can occur, then the current conditions of the American high school can change to a more positive student-oriented outcome. Marzano (2013) postulated a list of clear questions a teacher should ask him/herself in order to help students become more engaged in school. The first question is, “Do I provide a safe, caring, and energetic environment?” (Marzano, 2013, p. 81). Marzano noted that if this type of environment is not created, “student engagement will be minimal” (p. 81). “Teachers communicate caring through daily actions that show students the teacher likes them and is there to help them learn” (Marzano, 2013, p. 81). The next question Marzano feels teachers should ask is, “Do I make things interesting?” (p. 81). Marzano wrote that there are two types of interest, triggered and maintained. He pointed out that the goal of educators is to provide maintained interest. Maintained interest can include an interest in anything different from what we expect, a play on our natural curiosity, and when we disagree with someone (Marzano, 2013, pp. 81-82). The third question teachers should ask is, “Do I demonstrate why the content is important?” (Marzano, 2013, p. 82). Information has to be seen as important to a student’s life if engagement is to occur. Teachers can show importance through methods such as demonstration and enthusiasm

(Marzano, 2013, p. 82). Finally, the last question a teacher should ask is, “Do I help students realize that personal effort is the key to success?” (Marzano, 2013, p. 82).

Teachers can build this mind-set in students by teaching them about the elasticity of the human brain and how hard work and focus can actually change the brain’s physical aspects. In addition, they can continually remind students of the importance of effort, particularly when students are engaged in challenging tasks. (Marzano, 2013, p. 81)

A simple change in how teachers address their goals in the classroom can in fact encourage student success and change in attitude towards school.

One school’s response as researched by Fulk (2003) found that according to Reinhard (1997), “Ninth grade is clearly the ‘make or break’ year in terms of secondary school success or failure” (p. 9). Wagner (1999) noted that “Students who fail their classes are likely to: (a) begin questioning their ability to make graduation requirements, (b) lose interest in school, and (c) consequently drop out of high school” (Fulk, 2003, p. 9). An example of a change that can address these concerns exists in an academy approach which is seen as a means of creating student engagement. “The National Academy of Sciences recently identified four principles of engaging schools: high academic standards, personalization, relevance and flexibility” (Blum, 2005, p. 7). One way schools can achieve personalization is to “reduce their size by organizing around the concepts of schools-within-a-school, magnet schools and career academies” (Blum, 2005, p. 8). According to Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004),

The central assumption of Freshman Academy and other learning communities efforts in the USA is that students will learn better if they build strong social and intellectual networks amongst themselves, and if the curricula of their courses

make sense when considered together. (Daynes, Esplin, & Kristensen, 2004, pp. 115-116).

There are multiple versions of freshman academies, but for the purpose of this study, the definition is “a comprehensive freshman transition program for all first-time (or non-repeating) 9th graders. Each freshman is assigned to a Freshman Academy ‘team,’ consisting of a counsellor and four teachers and subjects” (JHS Freshman Academy, Frequently Asked Questions, 2008).

Research Questions and Purpose

The secondary school community is charged with providing students the last tools needed to successfully enter the world outside of an average public school. Herein lies the problem for students when they do not experience rigor, relevance, or relationships from class to class and to what they perceive as the world awaiting them outside their respective schools.

Freshman Academies and their teaming approach focus on considering their curricular courses together as a means of finding the solution to this quest. Several ways exist for the school community to create this form of integration of teams and their curriculum according to the needs of their schools. It is important then to note the three general methods denoted by theorists as a means to integration: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (Drake & Burns, 2004, pp. 8-13). Each method is a varied approach to integrating curriculum. Multidisciplinary refers to

1. Intradisciplinary Approach where teachers integrate sub-objectives within their discipline.
2. Fusion where teachers fuse skills, knowledge and attitudes within their discipline.

3. Service learning which incorporates community service projects into the curriculum.
4. Learning Centers/Parallel Disciplines where a theme or concept is analyzed across subject areas.
5. Theme-Based Units where multiple subject areas centers around a common theme with a culminating project at the end. (Drake & Burns, 2004, pp. 8-11)

The next method of integration known as interdisciplinary occurs when “teachers organize the curriculum around common learnings across disciplines. They chunk together the common learnings embedded in the disciplines to emphasize interdisciplinary skills and concepts” (Drake & Burns, 2004, p. 12). Drake and Burns (2004) provided the example of “children in Florida making wind and rain machines while learning language skills . . . they are learning the interdisciplinary skill of communication” (p. 12). The concepts found in the example lesson go beyond the original concept of wind and rain machines as students are not simply focusing on one particular subject. Finally, the third general method refers to the transdisciplinary approach where “teachers organize curriculum around student questions and concerns” (Drake & Burns, 2004, p. 13). Examples of a transdisciplinary approach as noted by Drake and Burns (2004) may be a project-based learning assignment where “students tackle a local problem” (p. 13) or where students “negotiate the curriculum” (p. 15) and “student questions form the basis for curriculum” (p. 15). Each general method can stand alone or can be connected with the other. It is important to determine how and what teachers can integrate so that rigor, relevance, and relationships can be determined prior to instruction.

Students and teachers should ask what they can do to encourage a more active

role in the educational process as they both work to understand what is needed for success in all areas of their academic and personal lives. Therefore, do freshman academies impact rigor, relevance, and relationships for students and teachers in the secondary education environment? The purpose of this study was to examine how integrating the curriculum and creating a Freshman Academy impacts the rigor, relevance, and relationships for both students and teachers. For this study, the primary research questions which gauged the effectiveness of the Freshman Academy approach as it relates to rigor, relevance, and relationships were

1. How do Freshman Academies impact rigor and subsequently student achievement?
2. How do Freshman Academies and their integrated, teaming approach provide relevance for students and teachers?
3. How do Freshman Academies impact student and teacher relationships?

Summary

The study was conducted at one high school to discover if the Freshman Academy in place utilizing the integration of curriculum and teacher collaboration impacted the need for rigor, relevance, and relationships for high school students. This high school is a rural high school in the western part of North Carolina. The school consists of multiple ethnic, academic, and economic backgrounds and houses approximately 1,100 students. The students for this study were a selected group of tenth-grade students who had completed the transition program. The transition program for this school mirrors that of other freshman academy programs where the academy is used to “help ninth-graders make a smooth transition from middle school to high school” (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001, p. 296). This high school is in the third year of implementing the Freshman Academy

concept. The current condition of this high school is a two-semester school year where students take four, 90-minute courses each semester for a total of eight possible high school credits at the end of each school year. Each core academic course is taught in a team approach where students are assigned to a team of teachers for the school year.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Problems with High School Today

The concept of the high school has been around for quite some time and unfortunately has seen only small leaps of change. As depicted in Sizer (2004),

School is to be like a job: you start in the morning and end in the afternoon, five days a week School is conceived of as the children's workplace Not surprisingly, many students see going to school as little more than a dogged necessity. (p. 79)

It is no wonder then that students see little reason or importance in the overall meaning of their education. DiMartino and Clarke (2008) outlined the six major problem areas for high schools that must be addressed for student success. DiMartino and Clarke noted that schools fail their students by the following: “depersonalization, lack of adult support, unresponsive teaching, imperceptible results, invisibility, and isolation” (p. 5). Schools are depersonalized as they “offer few options that appeal to young people with distinctive interests, talents, and aspirations” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, p. 5). Many high schools also lack adult support as students spend more time conversing with their peers than a “caring adult” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, a student's day is filled with unresponsive teaching and imperceptible results as “teachers use the same plan for all students, even when those students are characterized by vast differences” and if “a student does not earn good grades, the rewards for being in school remain elusive” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, p. 5). Finally, students feel invisible and isolated as many students see that “only the most notable students, leaders, and athletes (and troublemakers) earn recognition beyond a small group of friends” and they lack opportunities to “engage the larger community” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, pp. 5-6).

Unfortunately, educators are equally as concerned and challenged as students with regard to the overall meaning and impact of education.

Johnson (2013) outlined the challenges teachers face today that are equally as pressing as the challenges students are expected to address. In this era of accountability, teachers are facing a “teaching” challenge. This new teaching challenge has educators worried that new performance evaluations will be directly tied to compensation and tenure policies that are “poorly executed” (Johnson, 2013, p. 18). Another challenge teachers face deals with the ever-present standardized testing. “Schools are increasingly using standardized tests to provide independent measures of student learning and to shed light on classroom teachers’ effectiveness. But most teachers see standardized tests as an inexact and partial measuring of student learning at best” (Johnson, 2013, p. 18).

Furthermore, challenges present themselves with “the achievement gap” as noted by the Kettering Foundation (2010, p. 1) study, where they discovered that the term achievement gap held

almost no meaning for the people with the most at stake: the students, parents and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced.

At the start of the forums, many participants didn’t even know that those words meant, much less what could or should be done about the problem. (Johnson, 2013, p. 18).

However, these are challenges educators must address without the relationships and relevancy established to evoke true change. Finally, perhaps the most telling challenge teachers face today deals with “persistently failing schools” (Johnson, 2013, p. 18).

According to the Public Agenda study by the U.S. Department of Education, “many are not convinced that school officials really have their children’s best interests at heart

(Johnson, 2013, p. 18). However, research has noted that these are not the only or most pressing factors in achievement, relevancy, and cultivating relationships, yet they continue to be the driving factors of accountability. A California high school in 1979 set out a list of goals they wanted their school to achieve. In their minds, “The high school is to touch most aspects of an adolescent’s existence – mind, body, morals, values, career” (Sizer, 2004, p. 77). The problem is that each area is seen as a must, while none of them are given any real prominence (Sizer, 2004, p. 77). The problem Sizer (2004) defined pointed out a serious flaw: how are these goals made relevant to a student’s true existence outside of the high school classroom? The International Center for Leadership in Education (2002) further supported Sizer’s work by noting that “It is not enough to have higher standards. The standards must also reflect the relevancy of the goals that we have set for students to achieve” (p. X).

Drake and Burns (2004) also discussed this academic dilemma in further detail. Drake and Burns wrote that in order to ensure relevancy, teachers have “1) to begin with student-generated questions and 2) to set the learning in a local context” (p. 20). The example of the California school exemplifies how many academic goals lack a clear definition. The goals themselves may be valid and necessary, but with no clear vision as to how to achieve them, they tend to remain unmet. According to the International Center for Leadership in Education (2002),

Teaching through application is a very effective way to engage students in pursuit of higher standards and to ensure that graduates can use what they have learned.

When students see the relevance of what they are learning, they are more motivated to learn. (p. X).

Therefore, by allowing students to find out what they need to know and establishing a

clear context for the subject, students may see school as less of a chore.

So, if schools have a problem defining clear goals, what can be done to change this perception? Armstrong (2006) outlined why we seem to have valid goals but little clarity. Armstrong wrote,

The adventure of learning, the wonder of nature and culture, the richness of human experience, and the delight of acquiring new abilities all seem to have been abandoned or severely curtailed in the classroom in this drive to meet quotas, deadlines, benchmarks, mandates, and targets. (p. 7)

Schools have overwhelming goals, nearly impossible to meet, and the pressure of it all takes away any real connection or relationship the student may discover. Therefore, state and local governments have begun the process of change by adopting new standards in hopes of providing relevance of the curriculum content to the student. The Freshman Academy concept has been designed to address these concerns and some schools have used this approach as the vehicle for implementation of these new standards. By adopting new standards, the goals are to decrease the problems outlined in American high schools today. Can schools change the course of education and start a positive trend that encourages engagement and attendance, builds relationships, and provides a relevant perspective for a student's future outside of school?

School Attendance

Major concerns in an era of accountability are curriculum integration, preparing students for college, and providing relevance to future careers; but if the student does not come to school, then what? It is imperative to ensure students are attending school, but how can schools encourage students to enter the front door? Many school districts are looking at strategies to address this concern. One strategy many schools are examining is

the effectiveness of a targeted Freshman Academy that would monitor and track student attendance and then provide a preventative plan when a problem is noted. Casoli-Reardon, Rappaport, Kulick, and Reinfeld (2012) painted a clear picture as to why students “avoid” school. Casoli-Reardon et al. first outlined several reasons why students avoid school. One reason students avoid school is due to cultural factors. Casoli-Reardon et al. noted that “many schools face the increasing challenge of trying to integrate children from various backgrounds and cultures, making it difficult to meet all students’ needs” (p. 51). Another factor that keeps students from attending school revolves around the student’s family. Casoli-Reardon et al. discussed that “some families may not appear to value education or may put education second to the family’s personal or financial needs” (p. 51). Two other factors that influence school avoidance are peer-related social issues and neuropsychiatric factors which are more commonly seen as attention deficit disorder and learning disorders (Casoli-Reardon et al., 2012, p. 52). Identifying these factors early on with students can help change this epidemic of school avoidance.

Wilkins (2008) conducted a research study on a School Avoidance Program and also found there were certain characteristics that influenced student attendance. Wilkins discovered that some of the real reasons for truancy were not just the traditional home situations or personal issues but the school itself (p. 12). During student interviews at Brookfield Park, a school avoidance program, Wilkins found four emergent themes that impacted school attendance: school climate, academic environment, discipline, and relationships with teachers (p. 15). Wilkins later found that “the collaborative atmosphere that teachers promoted sent the message to all students’ contributions were valuable to learning” (p. 22). This study found that teacher collaboration had a positive impact on

school attendance; therefore, the change from the traditional setting prompts many considerations. Identifying factors for school avoidance can help schools address this growing epidemic and discuss possible changes in the way they conduct business. School systems recognize this problem and are looking for solutions to address not only the needs of students in school but also the needs of students at home.

Human Development Discourse (HDD)

Armstrong (2006) defined this discourse by a list of themes which include “unrolling or unfolding of the human, as well as the sense of disentangling, ridding, or freeing the human from encumbrances, complications, or obstacles” (p. 37). In other words, what can teachers and administrators do to relieve the pressures felt by students and teachers in order to create relevancy and encourage a relationship with their school and the content of each course.

Armstrong(2006), thus, went on to enumerate the positive consequences of a more relevant approach to education. These positive consequences are

1. HDD engages students in learning activities and coursework that will better prepare them to function in the real world.
2. HDD enables all students to shine in their areas of strength.
3. HDD lessens the need to classify students as learning disabled, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), academically underachieving, or with other negative labels.
4. HDD enables students to develop competencies and qualities that will ultimately help to make the world a better place.
5. HDD helps ameliorate many of the social problems that plaque our youth in today’s fragmented culture.

6. HDD helps students become more of who they really are.
 7. HDD gives educators and students more control over their learning environment.
 8. HDD results in fewer discipline problems in schools.
 9. HDD encourages innovation and diversity learning programs.
 10. HDD promotes the establishment of developmentally appropriate practices and discourages the use of developmentally inappropriate practices in schools.
- (Armstrong, 2006, pp. 56- 66)

Educators can use the concepts identified in HDD to impact student engagement and attendance as well as the instructional design process in order to improve the rigor and relevance of academic materials for their students.

Academic Achievement Discourse

Armstrong (2006) pointed out the negative consequences of what he termed the Academic Achievement Discourse (AAD) as a direct result of legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act. The consequences for accountability and student achievement are

1. AAD results in a neglect of areas of the curriculum that are a part of a well rounded education students need in order to experience success and fulfillment in life.
2. AAD results in a neglect of positive instructional interventions that cannot be validated by scientifically based research data.
3. AAD encourages teaching to the test.
4. AAD encourages student cheating and plagiarism.
5. AAD encourages manipulation of test results by teachers and administrators.
6. AAD encourages the student use of illegal substances as performance aids.

7. AAD transfers control of the curriculum away from educators in the classroom and toward the organizations that set the standards and exams.
8. AAD produces harmful levels of stress in teachers and students.
9. AAD increases the chances that students will be retained from year to year and drop out before graduation.
10. AAD fails to take into consideration individual differences in cultural backgrounds, learning styles and rates, and other crucial factors in the lives of real children.
11. AAD undercuts the intrinsic value of learning for its own sake.
12. AAD results in the institution of developmentally inappropriate practices in the schools. (Armstrong, 2006, pp. 23-32)

When goals are not clearly defined and when accountability becomes more and more test-based, students are the ultimate losers in the educational setting. Armstrong and others discussed methods for teachers and administrators to consider in order to avoid such pitfalls. Armstrong paralleled AAD with what he felt is the better alternative, HDD. This discourse could be a potential solution to the relevance of academic content in the minds of students. Schools that consider these strategies to address the challenges present in high schools today can encourage positive change and turn the tide in encouraging academic success. The Freshman Academy concept is one such strategy that schools have begun using in order to address these concerns. However, the academy approach heavily focuses on how to design a plan that bears in mind these issues while focusing on academic instruction.

Instructional Design Process

With the ever-looming demands and goals for schools to meet in this era of

accountability, research suggests there are necessary steps to follow in order to design a successful instructional plan to meet the demands of education today. Morrison, Ross and Kemp (2004) outlined the key elements of the instructional design process. Schools must first identify “for whom the program is developed” (Morrison et al., 2004, p. 7). In other words, what are the “characteristics of learners or trainees” within the design (Morrison et al., 2004, p. 7)? Next, designers must decide “What do you want the learners or trainees to learn or demonstrate;” then decide “How is the subject content or skill best learned;” and finally, “How do you determine the extent to which learning is achieved?” (Morrison et al., 2004, p. 7). These criteria, “learners, objectives, methods, and evaluation,” are imperative to the overall successful design of instructional planning (Morrison et al., 2004, p. 7).

Morrison et al. (2004) further outlined the nine important elements when designing an instructional plan. They are as follows.

1. Identify instructional problems and specify goals for designing an instructional program.
2. Examine learner characteristics that will influence your instructional decisions.
3. Identify subject content, and analyze task components related to stated goals and purposes.
4. Specify the instructional objectives.
5. Sequence content within each instructional unit for logical learning.
6. Design instructional strategies so that each learner can master the objectives.
7. Plan the instructional message and develop the instruction.
8. Develop evaluation instruments to assess objectives.

9. Select resources to support instruction and learning activities. (Morrison et al., 2004, pp. 7-8).

These criteria have to be met in order to ensure a successful, well-rounded, student-centered program of instruction.

Curriculum Integration

In theory, these plans and policies sound impressive, but how can this be implemented into the average high school classroom? One such approach that can meet these demands, according to many school reformers, is curriculum integration. Vars (1991) studied the historical use of curriculum integration and discovered traces of such an approach in Herbert Spencer's writings during the 1800s, 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1970s (p. 14). This is not a new idea but one that continually seems to find its way back to the educational forefront. Vars wrote that since the 1940s, as noted by the National Association for Core Curriculum in 1984,

more than 80 normative or comparative studies have been carried out on the effectiveness of integrative programs. In nearly every instance, students in various integrative/interdisciplinary programs have performed as well or better on standardized achievement tests than students enrolled in the usual separate subjects. (p. 15)

The next critical component to this discussion is how an already busy teacher can incorporate curriculum integration into the normal demands of the day. Fogarty (1991) provided a concise look at how this can be achieved. Fogarty provided a succinct list of models commonly used to integrate curriculum. These models include

1. The Fragmented Model which views curriculum as one directed focus on a single discipline.

2. The Connected Model that provides a close-up view of the details and interconnections within one discipline.
3. The Nested Model targets multiple dimensions of a lesson.
4. The Sequenced Model where topics are arranged into similar units.
5. The Shared Model brings two disciplines together into a single image.
6. The Webbed Model uses a theme to integrate subjects.
7. The Threaded Model where the big ideas are highlighted throughout all content.
8. The Integrated Model rearranges interdisciplinary topics around overlapping concepts and emergent patterns and designs. This model blends the four major disciplines.
9. The Immersed Model is where integration takes place within learners with little or no outside intervention.
10. The Networked Model allows learners to direct the integration process. (pp. 61-65)

These models are the most commonly used approaches towards integration. There are multiple avenues teachers and students can travel to help meet the needs of the learner and help them develop relevancy and relationships across subjects or within a subject. The proof of these approaches has been outlined by multiple studies. Hinde (2005) listed several studies of importance when wanting to see the evidence of the benefits to curriculum integration. Schubert and Melnick (1997) found that “integrating arts into the regular curriculum has a positive effect on student attitude and self-concept” (Hinde, 2005, p. 107). Similarly, as seen in a study from McBee (2000), “teachers of elementary and secondary students report that their students have more positive attitudes toward

learning and experience significant advantages when teachers employed integrated methods” (Hinde, 2005, p. 107). Finally, Hargreaves and Moore (2000) noted that “integration advances the rigor and relevance of classroom learning by making the curriculum more meaningful to students’ lives” (Hinde, 2005, p. 107). Therefore, one of the most important considerations a teacher must make deals with how can this be achieved effectively and correctly. There are potential caveats to an integrated approach if not done properly.

Caveats

Brophy and Alleman (1991) discussed the potential caveats to integration that must be considered so that the desired student outcomes are achieved. They wrote that “curriculum integration is not an end in itself but a means for accomplishing basic educational goals” (Brophy & Alleman, 1991, p. 66). Many teachers and administrators can easily fall into the trap of relying solely on integration, thus creating further problems for their students and increasing instead of decreasing frustration. These traps include

1. Activities that become pointless busywork.
2. Time-consuming artistic construction work.
3. Distortion of content in the name of integration.
4. Ill-conceived integration ideas can require students to do things that are strange, odd, or even impossible.
5. Some activities may require students to do things they are not prepared to do because they are either ambiguous, or because they have not yet acquired the knowledge necessary for the activity. (Brophy & Alleman, 1991, p. 66)

Therefore, it is important to consider what can or cannot be integrated and establish criteria for integration. Brophy and Alleman suggested the criteria should consist of

educationally significant activities even if they are not always integrated and activities that encourage accomplishment of major goals in each subject (p. 66).

Common Core and Essential Standards

Within the last few years, a new educational initiative has been adopted in “forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). The Common Core State Standards Initiative (2015) was meant to address the overwhelming concerns in the nation’s educational system such as poor academic performance, dropout prevention, and active engagement of students. This initiative was developed using criteria to develop college and career readiness standards as well as these K-12 standards:

1. Aligned with college and work expectations;
2. Include rigorous content *and* application of knowledge through higher order skills;
3. Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
4. Informed by top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
5. Evidence and/or research based. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015, para. 6).

These standards are primarily focused on Mathematics and English Language Arts.

These standards are understood as what students should be able to do. These standards are broken down into clusters or a summarized group of related standards and domains or larger groups of standards that relate (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015).

For English Language Arts, the standards are specific to college and career readiness for “reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language” (Common Core State Standards

Initiative, 2015, para. 4). These standards apply to literacy not only in English Language Arts but also in “history/social studies, science and technical subjects” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015, para. 3). In the introduction to the Mathematics Standards, How to Read the Grade Level Standards, the Common Core State Standards Initiative noted, “These standards are not intended to be new names for old ways of doing business. They are a call to the next step. It is time for states to work together to build on lessons learned from two decades of standards based reforms” (para. 4).

The State of North Carolina has also adopted a set of criteria known as Essential Standards that apply to other subjects outside of English Language Arts and Math. These include Science, Social Studies, Information and Technology, World Languages, Arts Education, Occupational Course of Study, Healthful Living, Guidance, and English as a Second Language (North Carolina Essential Standards, 2013). The New Essential Standards were written based on the “Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (RBT)” (The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, 2013, para. 1). The standards, in particular, utilize the cognitive processes and knowledge dimension of RBT. The “cognitive process refers to the verb used in the standard” such as explaining and inferring (The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, 2013, para. 2). The Essential Standards are constructed with these verbs in mind when creating the standards and questions geared towards student learning. The knowledge dimension “is a way to categorize the type of knowledge to be learned” (The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, 2013, para. 3). “Knowledge in the RBT falls into four categories: factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge, and meta-cognitive knowledge” (The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, 2013, para. 3).

Educators across the majority of the United States are now being asked to develop more rigorous standards in order to propel students to meet the demands of the 21st

century as well as becoming more competitive globally. These standards are meant to address student engagement, relationships, college and career readiness, and relevancy in what they are asked to learn in their classroom. These demands must be met in our global society; however, with these new standards, educators must learn how to create lessons that are appropriate and actually create student achievement in reality, not just in words alone. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, as some researchers feel these new standards do not in fact allow teachers to focus on the curriculum in a way that engages students in learning.

Teacher Collaboration

Therefore, to ensure that major goals of each subject are met, it is imperative to have a good standing relationship with teachers from other subjects. In the high school specialized arena, teacher collaboration is a must for true integration and student achievement in this era of accountability. Wilson (2008) suggested strategies necessary for effective co-teaching. Wilson suggested that as teachers collaborate in the same space, as is the case for this study, one teacher “grazes” or monitors student performance at all times (p. 240). Wilson also suggested that co-teachers constantly monitor student behaviors and look for adaptations and modifications which can help improve success (p. 241). These strategies can be extremely useful in establishing positive teacher collaboration leading to effective curriculum integration, student engagement, and involvement.

Student Collaboration

The collaboration of teachers is imperative to develop and design effective instruction, but the collaboration of students effectively gets the work done and builds the much needed relationships students need in the school environment. Daniels (2002)

defined collaborative learning as “the term preferred by teachers who are trying to sponsor true inquiry in small-group work by designing higher-order, student-centered, open-ended activities” (p. 35). Daniels noted the “characteristic features of true collaboration: student-initiated inquiry, choice, self-direction, mutual interdependence, face-to-face interaction and self-and group assessment (p. 35). According to Schmuck and Schmuck (2000), there are “six ingredients in the development of a mature, interdependent, productive group:”

1. Clear expectations.
2. Mutually developed norms.
3. Shared leadership and responsibility.
4. Open channels of communication.
5. Diverse friendship patterns.
6. Conflict resolution mechanisms. (Daniels, 2002, pp. 35-36)

With the incorporation of collaborative learning among students, student success, relationships, and relevancy can be achieved when educators design learning in such a way as to promote these group formations.

Freshman Transition Problems

Overall, schools are facing an unprecedented crisis in how they can address the problems of engaging students in their education, keeping students enrolled in school, and providing a rigorous curriculum that meets the demands of our government amidst the global competitiveness of the 21st century. Many stakeholders in education believe the ninth-grade year to be the most important year in addressing these concerns as this is where research has shown students have the most trouble in transition from one grade or school to the next. Many educational theorists believe the ninth-grade year is the pivotal

marker of student success in terms of graduation rates, academic knowledge, and preparedness to face the real world. Therefore, many theorists believe high schools should spend much of their focus on developing transition plans that will help ninth-grade students become successful and remain successful throughout their time in high school. “The U.S. Department of Education’s *A Blueprint for Reform: Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* sends all stakeholders a clear message to take action that results in every student completing high school both college and career ready” (Brown, 2010, p. 29). Therefore, according to Brown (2010), “If we are to reach the goal of educating every child entering the American school system, school districts must focus their efforts on successfully transitioning freshmen into high school” (p. 29). However, educators must understand the reasons high school freshmen find the transition difficult to make in order to fully understand how to address the problem.

According to Neild’s (2009) study, there are “four theories about why ninth grade poses difficulties for some students” (p. 53). Neild posed that “ninth grade coincides with life-course changes, such as reduced parental supervision and increased peer influence” (p. 53). Neild also noted that in the ninth-grade year, “students must break the bonds they have formed with their middle-school teachers and peers” as they move to a new school and building (p. 53). Finally, Neild theorized that “students are inadequately prepared for high school” and “the organization of some high schools is itself a major source of students’ difficulty” (p. 53).

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) further outlined the ninth-grade problem and noted that “Increased graduation requirements and rocky transitions from middle school to high school seem to comprise a majority of the reasons for students struggling, failing, and dropping out” (p. 447). The high school setting is the first time students are faced

with completing courses for graduation or a diploma, unlike in other grades where students are simply completing the class. Fulk (2003) stated that “students moving into the ninth grade are the first to experience the effect of any increase in state-mandated high school graduation requirements. For many ninth-graders, such rigorous requirements are a noticeable change from middle school expectations” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 448). Smith, Akos, Lim, and Wiley (2008) further extrapolated that “satisfactory completion of core courses is often required for graduation from high school, and these core courses are typically some of the toughest and most rigorous academic classes a student has to take in high school” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 447). As they enter the ninth grade, students are not only facing more difficult academic expectations, they are also transferring to a completely different setting. Cooper and Liou (2007) wrote that making the move to high school is often an important step in a young student’s educational life, but “it can also be a time marked with feelings of loneliness, isolation and disconnection” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 449). Unfortunately, these are just a few of the real problems students face as they transition to the high school from the middle school. Other concerns include standardized testing and the impact it has on student success and retention.

Schemo (2004) pointed out the increased use of standardized tests that “measure school performance, and exit examinations required to earn a diploma, add to the difficulty and importance of doing well in high school” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 447). Fritzer and Herbst (1996) gathered rather alarming data concerning the freshman year as a result of these increased demands. Fritzer and Herbst discovered that freshmen “have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more mis-behavior referrals than any other high school grade level”

(McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 448). According to Emmett and McGee (2012), “Expecting all 14-year-old students to make wise, adult-like decisions about their education is illogical at best” (p. 74). With the identification of the transition problem student’s face as freshmen, school districts must find and implement potential solutions to change the course of this trend.

Solutions to the Freshman Transition Problem

Multiple studies have now been conducted to determine the best measures to take in aiding in the pivotal transition year of freshman students. In each of the studies, researchers and schools used as a basis of change noted key components necessary to create long-lasting, effective change. Brown (2010) wrote, “Implementing practices that build student/adult relationships must be an essential component of transition programs if we are to combat the cycle of underachievement” (p. 29). Brown further suggested the best method for change is “to establish relationships between ninth-grade students and their high schools, and to help them develop interpersonal relationships with counselors, teachers, principals, and other staff members in order to enhance their achievement” (p. 29). Other researchers pointed out even easier transitional plans that are less intensive when finding all possible ways to ease the transition of students from middle school to high school. Morgan and Hertzog (2001) suggested simply

providing each ninth-grader with bell schedules and a map to help them better understand where they need to go and when, or handing out sample packets of ninth-grade tests and homework assignments to help answer questions about the level of difficulty of the classes in high school. (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 450).

In any case, when determining the necessary steps a school district should take when

discussing potential changes to the ninth-grade structure, multiple studies suggest there are essential guidelines and components that must be considered in order for the most effective, positive outcome to be reached.

Habeeb (2013), an assistant principal at Salem (VA) High School, compiled a list of the essential components necessary for the most effective, positive impact of freshman transition programs. Habeeb listed the following components to consider.

1. Make the high school a more nurturing environment where it is difficult for students to slip through the cracks.
2. Standardize expectations so that students know what they should do and teachers know what they should look for so that expectations can improve.
3. Equip students with belief systems they need to learn and succeed.
4. Create classroom cultures where excellence occurs.
5. Teach students organizational and time-management strategies.
6. Foster effective parent-teacher contact.
7. Ensure that the teachers of freshmen grow professionally and use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology.
8. Recognize freshmen for their accomplishments and make them feel at home within high school.
9. Preemptively and proactively provide support services for students who fall behind. (Habeeb, 2013, p. 20)

Habeeb also wrote that while a transition program is necessary, without the understanding of how to effectively sustain a program for the long-term, there are several characteristics that must be developed to achieve overall success. These characteristics include

1. Be flexible. A school's needs change over time. Effective transition programs adjust to a school's changing needs.
2. Be thrifty. Resources – rooms, teachers, class time, and money – are limited. Programs that drain too many resources will not fit well into a master schedule.
3. Be positive. The school community must believe in the program. Nothing kills a program faster than dissent from within a building.
4. Be effectual. The program must achieve the targeted goals.
5. Be empowering. The needs of freshmen are not met by a program but by amazing teachers who teach in an environment of continuous growth and professional support.
6. Be efficacious. What causes freshmen to have so many problems? The goal of a transition program is to address those needs as efficiently and effectively as possible. (Habeeb, 2013, pp. 20-21)

These characteristics are necessary to implement a transition plan that produces the positive, desired results a school district wants for freshman success. Some educational researchers posited that in order to create effective transition programs, an advisory program is imperative to develop. Clarke (2003) addressed the purposes high school advisory programs should consider when addressing student needs, including

1. To increase student motivation.
2. To guide course selection.
3. To help students imagine their future.
4. To connect families to student learning.
5. To celebrate student achievement.

6. To connect each student with a caring adult.
7. To relate student work to standards.
8. To explore noncurricular options.
9. To support identity formation.
10. To initiate lifelong learning.
11. To increase self-awareness.
12. To emphasize applications of knowledge.
13. To gather a best work portfolio.
14. To banish anonymity from school life.
15. To clarify graduation requirements.
16. To plan a path after high school.
17. To prepare for college application.
18. To define a personal pathway.
19. To promote reflection and reevaluation.
20. To improve basic skills.
21. To explore career choices.
22. To develop personal talents.
23. To extend community involvement.
24. To evaluate content acquisition.
25. To legitimize nonschool achievements.
26. To prepare for college applications. (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, pp. 15-16).

All of these components and qualities should be present when developing an effective transition plan. Many schools have attempted addressing these components in a variety of ways. According to Chmelynski (2004), a high school in Georgia has developed a

course called “High School 101” where “students are taught essential high school survival skills such as time management, decision-making skills, study skills, test-taking strategies, social tolerance, computer research skills, and career alignment” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 450). Kennelly and Monrad (2007) and Smith et al. (2008) have also compiled ideas other high school transition programs are utilizing such as “summer schools for incoming ninth-graders, programs that provide after school home-work and study help, seminar periods, and block scheduling” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 450). One leading transition program that is taking shape around the country is that of implementing Freshman Academies as a solution to the transition problem.

Freshman Academies as a Transition Solution

“According to NCES, 154 ninth-grade-only schools are in operation during the 2004-2005 school year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007), which jumps to 185 in the 2005-2006 school year (Wheelock & Miao, 2005)” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 450). Freshman academies can take many forms, but they “all have the same goal, which is to separate freshmen to help ease the transition to high school, and increase the number of successful ninth-grade students” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, pp. 450-451). Over the course of the implementation of Freshman Academies across the nation, studies have now been conducted that have determined some of the positive outcomes of using this strategy for the transition of freshmen from middle school to high school. “According to McIntosh and White (2006) some positives of freshman academies include improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parental contact” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451). White (2008) also noted that “students also realize increased academic success, as can be seen from the reduction of freshman class failures and an

increase in scores on standardized tests” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451). Fields (2005), Sammon (2007), and the U.S. Department of Education have reported that “Freshman small learning communities report a number of benefits, including increases in personalization, belongingness, connectedness, and care” (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010, p. 395). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) stated that “such increases are achieved by personalizing the learning environment around students’ developmental needs in an effort to help students gain the skills necessary to transition into and complete high school” (p. 395). High schools all across the country are looking at these results and implementing academies of their own. Several high schools have now studied their own freshman academies and have reported their own findings as well as their purpose for implementation.

Schools Utilizing Freshman Academies

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) included examples of freshman academies across the United States. One example of a school using the Freshman Academy concept is that of the Philadelphia talent schools. According to Useem, Neild, and Morrison (2001), “students who attended Philadelphia public schools prior to the talent school development only had a 40% to 50% chance of graduating in four years” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451). Therefore, Philadelphia public schools had to consider effective alternatives to this crisis in evident in their high schools. The academy approach was determined to be the method of change for this school system. Useem et al. noted that

the academy was organized around interdisciplinary teams of teacher whose aim was to create an environment for students to grow both academically and personally. In order for this to occur, one of the main goals was to increase the

attendance rate. (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451)

Within 2 years, the data referenced by Useem et al. saw the “ninth grade attendance improve by fifteen or more percentage points. There were also significant drops in arrests and suspensions” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451).

Another high school McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) discussed was one located in Scott County, Kentucky. Smith et al. (2008) referenced this school district as they realized the need for reform when “after analyzing statistics” it was determined that “45% of their incoming freshmen were likely to fail at least one ninth-grade class” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451). Scott County, Kentucky, decided to use the freshman academy concept to address this alarming concern by giving freshmen “their own ‘space’ and more focused attention” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 452). The results of this space and attention proved a positive change for this school district. Smith et al. showed that

student scores at the separate academy on the national Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills rose by six points, and were higher than the Kentucky average, especially in Math. Furthermore, the daily attendance rate went up, freshmen failures decreased from 17% to 6% as of 2001, and the amount of disciplinary expulsions and referrals declined. (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 452)

One other important study of the utilization of a freshman academy approach is evident at West High School in Bakersfield, California (Emmett & McGee, 2012, p. 74). After a review of their ninth-grade students, West High School discovered that their students

were woefully underprepared for the demands of high school. During their first year of high school, a significant number of these students earned failing grades

and became involved in matters of school discipline. A careful review of the data revealed that more than one-fifth (22%) of the freshmen students did not earn enough credits to promote to sophomore status, leaving them unable to graduate within four years. (Emmet & McGee, 2012, p. 74).

West High School determined that a freshman academy would be utilized in order to try and reverse these concerns. “As one teacher at West High School indicated: We were looking at trying to make sure that freshmen could have a successful first year so that they could be successful for the rest of high school” (Emmet & McGee, 2012, p. 75). Subsequently, West High School developed a freshman academy following these principles. First, they selected personnel “who possessed the capacity and passion to work with at-risk students and support them during the 9th-grade year” (Emmet & McGee, 2012, p. 75). Next, the school decided that teachers would share “a common group of students” (Emmet & McGee, 2012, p. 75). Another critical piece was to ensure that faculty in the freshman academy had “dedicated time for teacher collaboration” (Emmet & McGee, 2012, p. 76). This time allowed teachers to form strategies to support students and share ideas about how to best help students who were struggling in their courses (Emmet & McGee, 2012, p. 76). Other important components to the program included creating communities at the school, taking a positive approach to discipline, and using counselors to respond to “student misbehavior before a student’s actions rose to the level of involving the dean of students or requiring administrative action” (Emmet & McGee, 2012, pp. 76-77). West High School, after implementing the freshman academy concept, noted the following results: “the promotion rates of students (based on credit accrual) increased, “the reading skills of students improved . . . students began to keep pace with or exceed the expected reading-level growth,” and “the number of suspensions

for freshmen reduced significantly during the two years of the program” (Emmett & McGee, 2012, p. 78). The implementation of the freshman academy proved to be a positive change in the school and one that provided answers to some of their concerns about successful freshman transition.

Summary

There are multiple concerns with high schools today. Studies have shown that attendance, a lack of personal relationships, a lack of academic rigor, a lack of teacher collaboration and the time to collaborate, and the transition from middle school to high school are factors preventing the successful completion of high school for many students. Schools have developed strategies to address these concerns in a variety of ways. Freshman Academies can be one of those avenues to heighten rigor, relevance, and relationships in the school setting. An awareness of methods to address increasing rigor, relevance, and relationships can thus increase student achievement, attendance, and teacher collaboration.

Chapter 3: Methodology

High school students do not see or experience rigor, relevance, and relationships between core subject areas as related to the measures for school connectedness and success which encompass these concepts. Therefore, this study collected both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the impact Freshman Academies offer with regard to rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Participants

The study was focused on a sampling of tenth-grade students at one high school currently utilizing the Freshman Academy approach. Tenth graders were the focus as they had finished an entire year in the Freshman Academy; thus, they could evaluate the program, and their academic progress could be duly noted via end-of-course examinations. The students in this rural high school were from a wide-range of ethnic (Caucasian, Hmong, Hispanic, and African American) and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The researcher selected students using a systematic random sample approach. Participants were selected from tenth-grade English classes as this was a mandatory course requirement for all tenth graders. The researcher first determined the number of tenth-grade English courses and then selected 30% of those courses offered to participate in the survey. Once selected, each student selected within the 30% of courses selected received a permission form for him/herself and his/her parents in order to ensure he/she was allowed to participate in the study (Appendix A). After the signed permission statements were obtained, the students were allowed to participate in all facets of the study. All 11 teachers involved within the Freshman Academy also took a survey catered to analyzing teacher perceptions of rigor, relevance, and relationships. Each group understood that its confidentiality would be maintained in order to solicit honest, accurate

responses concerning the impact of rigor, relevance, and relationships within the Freshman Academy.

Instruments

For this study, the researcher used a survey developed by the Successful Practices Network. The *We Learn* survey is geared for students in Grades 6-12. This survey poses questions on rigor, relevance, and relationships (Successful Practices Network, 2015a, p. 4). The *We Survey* package asks a total of 60 questions to determine the percentage of agreement in relation to the impact of rigor, relevance, and relationships in their academic setting. The survey used a Likert scale system where survey participants marked if they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were undecided, agreed, or strongly agreed with a survey question. Questions related to academic rigor, relevance, and relationships were mixed throughout the 60 questions. Also, the survey questions were rephrased so that it would deter students and faculty from picking only one answer throughout the survey and would make the responses a more accurate reflection of student and teacher attitudes. Teachers used in the study took the *We Teach* survey which included questions relating to rigor, relevance, and relationships. This survey was “for the adults who have a part in teaching and learning in the classroom” (Successful Practices Network, 2015a, p. 5). An advantage to this survey suite was that “parallel items on the student and instructional staff surveys show comparisons” (Successful Practices Network, 2015a, p. 3). Once the surveys were taken, the responses were analyzed. The survey suite package then provided the percentage of those in total agreement (Successful Practices Network, 2015a, p. 3). By analyzing the report data, the researcher could discover perceptions about the “learning environment,” and “quality of instruction” (Successful Practices Network, 2015a, p. 3). The results from these aligned surveys were then used to

determine student and teacher perceptions of rigor, relevance, and relationships.

The researcher also used reported end-of-course examination scores on tests given to freshmen students via the data reported from the Department of Public Instruction. These examinations reflect how well a school performed in common assessments and are thus used to evaluate the schools on a yearly report card. In order to effectively determine the validity of these results for comparison, the researcher looked at the end-of-course examination scores from the 5 years prior to and during the time of these selected students.

The researcher also used the ANOVA test to identify any significant differences in agreement between groupings of students and teachers. The purpose of the ANOVA “is to test for significant differences between means” (ANOVA/MANOVA, 2010, para. 2). The ANOVA was used to code differences/similarities according to ethnicity. ANOVA tests “can detect *interaction* effects between variables, and, therefore, to test more complex hypotheses about reality” (ANOVA/MANOVA, 2010, para. 15). The *We Survey* data reports include initial breakdowns across gender and ethnicity, but the ANOVA provided a more in-depth analysis via a factorial analysis approach. The researcher used this method to determine the areas of agreement or disagreement among gender and ethnicity to help further understand all students’ perceptions of rigor, relevance, and relationships within the context of the Freshman Academy.

Finally, the researcher used focus group interviews as a final method of evaluation. Students and teachers participated in these focus group interviews. The groups themselves were formed using the permission forms obtained by the students. Once the permission forms were obtained, the researcher randomly selected 20 of these students to participate in the focus group. “A focus group can be defined as an in-depth,

open-ended group discussion of 1-2 hours' duration that explores a specific set of issues on a predefined and limited topic" (Robinson, 1999, p. 905). The size of the group itself can vary anywhere from "five to eight participants" (Robinson, 1999, p. 905), or "10 to 14 people" (Roach, 2007, p. 8). For this study, the focus groups consisted of five to eight participants per grouping. In order to effectively construct a focus group, one must develop "a protocol," containing questions, time allotments, and the meeting place, as well as the selection of a "target group" and a "facilitator" (Robinson, 1999, p. 907). Once the groups were selected, questions for the focus groups were created from the responses in the survey in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of both teacher and student perceptions of rigor, relevance, and relationships. After the questions were created, the researcher had them validated by two former district directors who are now employed with a federal grant program where they create questions for focus groups as part of data collected for the grant.

The focus group approach encouraged discussion of the topic which in turn led to an informed decision by the researcher. According to Robinson (1999), "Focus groups are a direct method of obtaining rich information within a social context" (p. 905). Robinson further noted that focus groups use an "interviewing technique"; in other words, it is not just a group where participants talk freely about an issue, nor is it "a problem solving session nor a decision making group" (p. 906). Therefore, a focus group must have a structured environment to allow participants to voice their point of view about the issue at hand. "The prime objective is to obtain accurate data on a limited range of specific issues and within a social context where people consider their own views in relation to others" (Robinson, 1999, p. 906).

Procedures and Design

The first step towards collecting the necessary data was to obtain the permission of the local principal (Appendix B). Once this was obtained, the next step was to present and obtain the approval of the school system's superintendent (Appendix B). Once the necessary approvals were documented, the students and teachers involved in the Freshman Academy were then selected.

Once students and teachers were selected and permission forms were signed and returned to the researcher, a 60-question assessment was administered online via the *We Survey Suite* created by the Successful Practices Network (Appendix C). This organization is

a national not for profit committed to supporting schools in achieving a culture of rigor, relevance and relationships for all students. Successful Practices Network works with schools, districts, regional education centers, state departments of education and other partner organizations to provide resources, best practices, data, research, and technical assistance. (Successful Practices Network, 2015b, para. 1)

Each survey took approximately 10-15 minutes, and once taken, the responses were analyzed by the Successful Practices Network staff. The students enrolled in 30% of the tenth-grade English courses selected for this study took this survey during their respective class period. The teacher for the course took students to a computer lab where the students completed the survey. The researcher was present in the computer lab to begin the survey process. Teachers in the Freshman Academy then took their version of the survey during their planning period via their classroom computer.

Once the surveys were completed, students and teachers were then selected to

take part in the focus group interview sessions. The researcher first met with the students selected for the focus group; and in a separate group and at a later date, the researcher met with teachers. The sessions lasted approximately one hour. Each session consisted of a facilitator posing questions for discussion and two former educators who have experience in writing and coding responses in focus groups. In order to effectively record the session, it was necessary to assign a “notetaker” to the group in order to “focus on points of conflict and consensus” (Roach, 2007, p. 8).

The researcher also provided a voice recorder in order to ensure accuracy of reporting responses of both teachers and students. The same setup also existed for the teacher focus group. The teacher focus group was also approximately one hour in length; and because of the number of faculty members, the focus group interviews consisted of the entire Freshman Academy staff.

Once all surveys and interviews were completed, the researcher ran the ANOVA test in order to determine if any significant statistical differences were present. The *We Survey* group agreed to provide all raw scores so that an ANOVA test could be conducted.

Procedures and Data Analysis

When all surveys were completed, the *We Survey* group presented the research with the percentage data for all questions as well as all the raw scores for each question and for each student. The researcher was then able to use this data to note impressions of the Freshman Academy approach based on the outcomes of the questions with regard to rigor, relevance, and relationships. The researcher was then able to use the raw data to complete the ANOVA to determine if the impressions of rigor, relevance, and relationships were statistically different among ethnic backgrounds or dependent upon

gender. The researcher then began to code focus group responses.

Once all focus groups were completed, answers were coded for emerging themes. The researcher had two preselected participants in the room notetaking responses from each participant using a Person A, B, C format as well as a voice recorder to ensure accuracy in reporting. These notetakers were selected based on their experience as notetakers in other focus groups for federal grant program evaluations. The researcher then reviewed the responses and looked for statements made that were similar from person to person and statements that showed a connection to the data collected from the surveys and ANOVA tests.

Once surveys and focus group interviews were completed, the researcher then triangulated this data with the standardized tests given during the ninth-grade year for those students who had completed the Freshman Academy program. The researcher used this data to determine if the information gathered from surveys and focus group interviews corresponded with academic achievement as determined by the standardized tests.

Although the researcher did not administer the state's end-of-course examinations, the researcher used this reported data for the group used in this study to determine if the Freshman Academy approach had any impact on their end-of-year evaluations which are posted to the school's annual report card.

The study and data collected helped determine something not fully reviewed in other studies and that is how Freshman Academies impact the whole child, not just narrowed portions or only one of the following important aspects of education: rigor, relevance, and relationships. The research findings were able to give a sense as to the effectiveness of this trend in high school organizations and if they are doing what the

stakeholders hope they are doing: meeting the needs as outlined by state and federal standards while engaging students academically and socially in a way to increase rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Limitations

The researcher used a qualitative and quantitative approach to collecting and coding data. All questions were validated, all permissions granted, and all groups were able to meet within the allotted times. The researcher acknowledged the limitations concerning the results of the 60-item Likert-scale survey completed by high school students were dependent upon the attention, seriousness, and honesty of the respondents. The researcher has a background in the study of the concepts surrounding freshman academies, but she has not allowed this to become a bias toward the gathering or evaluating of the data. The researcher worked to limit this influence by utilizing a quantitative component in the study and by utilizing expert recorders for the student and teacher focus group sessions. This approach was also utilized to limit the perceptions of the focus group teachers of any potential outcomes they may have perceived the researcher desired during this process. One final limitation/delimitation of this study was that the study itself was conducted in a rural high school in a southeastern state with a small sample group of students and teachers. The results of this study are valid for this setting, but are not generalizable to other settings.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Data collected from the tenth-grade class and from teachers in the Freshman Academy provided an in-depth look at the overall impact of the Freshman Academy approach with regard to rigor, relevance, and relationships. The researcher analyzed the results from the end-of-course test results gathered from this group of students during their ninth-grade year and years prior to the utilization of Freshman Academies, the *We Survey* package taken by both students and faculty involved in the Freshman Academy, as well as the focus groups and the outcome of the ANOVA test.

Focus group questions were based on the research questions posed for this study and on the information gathered from the survey taken by both students and faculty. The end-of-course test percentages of proficiency were gathered via the Department Public of Instruction's website as found on the school's report card for the past 5 academic years. The following findings reflect a compilation of the above qualitative and quantitative methods to determine the overall impact of rigor, relevance, and relationships in the Freshman Academy.

How do Freshman Academies Impact Rigor

The researcher's initial research question was to determine the impact Freshman Academies have on the rigor or academic content students are presented with in the classroom setting. State end-of-course examinations of ninth grade courses show a significant growth from years where a Freshman Academy did not exist to the year representing the students surveyed in this study (see Tables 1-5). The two standard end-of-course examinations for ninth-grade students are Algebra I and English I.

End-of-Course Examinations Testing Data

Table 1 represents the performance of students in the courses required during the

ninth grade for the selected site for this study. English I and Algebra I are the two required courses that are affiliated with a state examination. In the 2005-2006 academic year, 90.4% of testtakers were deemed proficient in Algebra I. By the 2006-2007 academic year, the number of testtakers proficient in Algebra I significantly decreased to 67%. In the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years, testtakers proficient in Algebra I were 71.1% and 75.1%, respectively. For the academic year 2009-2010, those students enrolled in the Freshman Academy and thus surveyed in this report showed an Algebra I proficiency rate of 84.6%, a 9.5% increase.

In the 2005-2006 academic year, 87.2% of testtakers were deemed proficient on the English I examination. The 2006-2007 academic year showed a significant decline in proficiency as the percentage of those proficient on the English I test was 76%. The 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years showed the percentage of those proficient in English I was 75.1% and 86.5%. In the academic year 2009-2010 and the year reflecting the results of the students enrolled in the Freshman Academy and surveyed in this report, there was a proficiency rate of 92.6%, a 6.1% increase.

Table 1

Performance/Proficiency of Students in Each Course on the ABC's End-of-Course Tests

	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Algebra I	90.4%	67.0%	71.1%	86.5%	92.6%
# of Tests Taken	437	535	415	197	292
English I	87.2%	76.0%	75.1%	86.5%	92.6%
# of Tests Taken	484	488	465	266	257

Note. *Percentage of students' scores at or above grade level.

The results of the end-of-course examinations for ninth-grade students enrolled in the Freshman Academy show an increase in the proficiency of the two tested academic subjects for ninth graders, Algebra I and English 9. The academic tests show an increase in the proficiency of the academic content of these two tested areas; therefore, the *We Survey* package and focus groups were utilized in order to determine if the students and faculty also noted this increase.

Student Responses to Rigor on We Survey

Students were asked to recall their time spent in the Freshman Academy when responding to the survey questions posed by the *We Survey* company. The number of students who took the survey equaled 79. The column marked total agreement is a combination of the strongly agree and agree totals. When presented with this statement, “In class we discuss and solve problems that have more than one answer,” the total number of students (n=79) in agreement of this statement was 91%. Of those surveyed (n=79), 82% also agreed they will be well prepared for college when they graduate; 71% agreed that when they struggle in class, they received the support they needed to be successful; and 71% agreed they clearly understood how they were graded in class. Student participants (n=79) also felt that their school had high expectations for them by an agreement of 72%, as well as 80% agreeing that they were taught to think for themselves (see Table 2).

Table 2

Student Survey Response to Rigor (n=79)

Rigor	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. In class we discuss and solve problems that have more than one answer.	91%	30%	61%	8%	0%	1%
5. Instruction in class is student-centered.	54%	4%	51%	37%	4%	5%
9. I am encouraged to create original solutions to complex problems.	49%	15%	34%	35%	13%	3%
13. It is clear to me how I am graded in my class.	71%	20%	51%	14%	11%	4%
17. My reading ability is measured regularly.	35%	8%	28%	30%	25%	9%
21. When I struggle in class, I received the support I need to be successful.	71%	20%	51%	17%	10%	3%
25. Passing the state test is the most important thing I do in school.	63%	23%	41%	14%	15%	8%
29. This school has high expectations for all students.	72%	25%	47%	17%	4%	8%
33. If I were given more challenging work in class, I would do it.	61%	19%	42%	25%	8%	5%
38. I am taught to think for myself.	80%	28%	52%	9%	4%	6%
42. My teachers use tests to adjust their instruction.	79%	15%	63%	13%	8%	1%
46. I am expected to apply what I learn in school to my life.	71%	18%	53%	19%	8%	3%
50. When I graduate from school, I will be well prepared for college.	82%	42%	41%	9%	4%	5%
54. My teachers present lessons in different ways.	72%	14%	58%	15%	9%	3%
57. When I struggle with class lessons, teachers give up on me.	16%	6%	10%	22%	38%	23%

Instructional Staff Responses to Rigor on We Survey

Instructional staff were also surveyed using the *We Teach* survey similar to the student *We Learn* survey. The column marked total agreement is a combination of the strongly agree and agree totals. Following the results, focus group questions were developed and again validated that correlated with the survey. Instructional staff (n=11) showed a 91% agreement rate in eight areas of the survey addressing the rigor within the Freshman Academy. The statements assessed via a Likert scale were

1. In my class students discuss and solve open-ended questions and problems.
5. Staff are expected to provide opportunities for students to discuss and solve open-ended questions and problems.
13. I encourage students to create original solutions to complex problems.
41. This school has high expectations for all students.
45. I expect students to become independent learners.
49. I use assessments to plan and adjust instruction.
53. Students are expected to exceed a basic understanding of what is being taught.
57. Students who graduate from this school are college and/or workforce ready
(see Table 3).

Table 3

Instructor Survey Response to Rigor (n=11)

Rigor	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. In class we discuss and solve problems that have more than one answer.	91%	30%	61%	8%	0%	1%
5. Instruction in class is student-centered.	54%	4%	51%	37%	4%	5%
9. I am encouraged to create original solutions to complex problems.	49%	15%	34%	35%	13%	3%
13. It is clear to me how I am graded in my class.	71%	20%	51%	14%	11%	4%
17. My reading ability is measured regularly.	35%	8%	28%	30%	25%	9%
21. When I struggle in class, I received the support I need to be successful.	71%	20%	51%	17%	10%	3%
25. Passing the state test is the most important thing I do in school.	63%	23%	41%	14%	15%	8%
29. This school has high expectations for all students.	72%	25%	47%	17%	4%	8%
33. If I were given more challenging work in class, I would do it.	61%	19%	42%	25%	8%	5%
38. I am taught to think for myself.	80%	28%	52%	9%	4%	6%
42. My teachers use tests to adjust their instruction.	79%	15%	63%	13%	8%	1%
46. I am expected to apply what I learn in school to my life.	71%	18%	53%	19%	8%	3%
50. When I graduate from school, I will be well prepared for college.	82%	42%	41%	9%	4%	5%
54. My teachers present lessons in different ways.	72%	14%	58%	15%	9%	3%
57. When I struggle with class lessons, teachers give up on me.	16%	6%	10%	22%	38%	23%

Student Focus Group Responses to Rigor

Once students completed the surveys, questions were developed by the researcher and then validated by two independent parties who create and collect data from focus groups for grant purposes. The responses from the focus group sessions do in fact correlate with the student responses in the surveys. In the focus group sessions, students were asked, “how has the Freshman Academy prepared or not prepared you in your academic achievement in high school?” Of those asked, Person F responded that “individual teachers set high expectations for student work,” and Person G stated that “in middle school they did well, first semester of Freshman Academy I made bad grades, but because the teachers made me work to my full potential, my grades improved.” All students in the focus group in some way stated and agreed that the Freshman Academy prepared them for academic achievement by teaching them note-taking skills and basic skills and that their teachers pushed them to get their work in. One student commented that they “would like to have this in tenth grade,” to which all the students quickly agreed.

Person B went on to explain that the “biggest thing the Freshman Academy prepared me for was completing homework.” Person A then responded that since entering the tenth grade, their grades had dropped, to which other participants then began to talk about how the Freshman Academy offered frequent remediation/tutoring sessions where they could go for help to pull their grades up but that these services did not exist as frequently in the tenth grade. Person G also noted that they received updated grades weekly and they were more aware of their academic grades than in the tenth grade, to which the other participants all nodded in agreement.

Instructional Staff Focus Group Response to Rigor

The teacher focus groups also noted similar statements as those students made. In this session, with regard to the impact of rigor on student achievement, Person F noted that in the Freshman Academy, “individual teachers set high expectations for student work” and that “teachers in the Freshman Academy have to differentiate between children.” All teachers in the focus group nodded in agreement to these statements. Both teachers and students agree that expectations are high at this school and that teachers are involved in their performance abilities in the classroom.

Students and instructional staff each showed a higher percentage in agreement when considering the statements of discussion and open-ended questions, receiving and giving support to students when needed, the understanding that the school has high expectations for students, and that students will be prepared for college and work upon graduation.

How do Freshman Academies Impact Relevance

The initial research question posed in this study asked, “how do Freshman Academies and their integrated teaming approach provide relevance for students and teachers?” The data collected for this question included students and instructional staff survey results and student and instructional staff focus groups. The focus group questions were developed by the results of the survey and read by two unbiased readers who form, lead, and compile research from focus groups in and outside of the school district. These two readers had no ties to the school where the research was conducted.

Student Response to Relevance on We Survey

In the student surveys (n=79), 70% of students agreed that some of their classes combine different subjects which reflect the similar topics discussed by teachers in their

focus groups. Again, the column marked total agreement is a combination of the strongly agree and agree totals. In terms of classroom work and projects, 75% of the students (n=79) surveyed agreed that they do a lot of hands-on activities; 87% of the students (n=79) surveyed agreed that they work with other students; 77% of the students (n=79) surveyed agreed that their teachers use computers and the Internet in the classroom; and 76% of the students (n=79) surveyed agreed that what they learn in school will help them in the future (see Table 4).

Table 4

Student Survey Response to Relevance (n=79)

Relevance	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. I use portfolios to show teachers how much I know and have learned.	34%	5%	29%	19%	33%	13%
6. Some of my classes combine different subjects.	70%	11%	58%	10%	15%	4%
10. I can apply what I learn to my everyday life.	60%	10%	49%	25%	8%	8%
14. We do lots of hands-on activities in my classes.	75%	20%	54%	18%	6%	1%
18. I am expected to use computers and the internet to help me learn.	73%	23%	51%	14%	10%	3%
22. Teachers use computers and the internet in the classroom.	77%	30%	47%	15%	5%	1%
26. My teachers encourage me to explore different careers.	62%	22%	41%	27%	8%	4%
30. My teachers make learning fun.	41%	9%	32%	30%	19%	10%
35. What I learn in school will help me in the future.	76%	28%	48%	14%	4%	6%
39. When I graduate, I will be prepared to compete in a global economy.	57%	14%	43%	28%	8%	6%
43. My teachers encourage me to use many resources to solve problems.	68%	20%	48%	23%	9%	0%
47. I work with other students in my classes to solve problems.	87%	33%	54%	6%	5%	1%
51. I am taught by my teachers to use computers and internet in a responsible way.	80%	33%	54%	6%	5%	1%

Instructional Staff Response to Relevance on We Survey

In the teacher surveys (n=11), 91% agreed that they are expected to use a variety

of instructional strategies to help students learn which is also seen as one of the highest areas of agreement among those students surveyed. Again, the column marked total agreement is a combination of the strongly agree and agree totals. The teacher survey (n=11) also shows that 100% agreed that they are expected to use information and communication technology to promote learning which corresponds with high percentages of agreement among students when asked a similar question. Furthermore, 91% of teachers (n=11) agreed that they encourage students to work with others to solve problems as also noted by students. Teachers (n=11) also all agreed that students can apply what they are teaching to their everyday lives, and 60% of the students surveyed agreed that they can apply what they learn to everyday life. On another note, when teachers were asked if staff were expected to do interdisciplinary planning and projects, only 36% agreed, but the teacher focus groups suggest teachers do this on their own (see Table 5).

Table 5

Instructor Survey Response to Relevance (n=11)

Relevance	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. Staff are expected to use a variety of instructional strategies.	91%	55%	36%	0%	9%	0%
6. I use performance based assessments to reflect how well students have learned.	91%	36%	55%	9%	0%	0%
10. Staff are expected to do interdisciplinary planning and projects.	36%	18%	18%	55%	9%	0%
14. Students can apply what I am teaching to their everyday lives.	100%	36%	64%	0%	0%	0%
18. Students in my classroom engage in hands-on activities.	100%	46%	55%	0%	0%	0%
22. I use information and communication technology.	100%	46%	55%	0%	0%	0%
26. I encourage students to explore career pathways.	91%	27%	64%	9%	0%	0%
30. What I do makes a major contribution to preparing students for their future.	91%	18%	73%	0%	9%	0%
34. Staff are expected to use information and communication technology.	100%	46%	55%	0%	0%	0%
38. I make learning exciting for my students.	91%	36%	55%	9%	0%	0%
42. This school prepares students to compete in a global economy.	64%	18%	46%	9%	27%	0%
46. I encourage students to use multiple resources when solving problems.	100%	46%	55%	0%	0%	0%

(continued)

Relevance	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
50. I encourage students to work with others to solve problems.	91%	36%	55%	9%	0%	0%
54. I teach students to use information and communication technology responsibly.	100%	46%	55%	0%	0%	0%
58. I reach out to colleagues to identify successful practices in my content area.	91%	27%	64%	0%	0%	0%

Student Focus Group Responses to Relevance

In the student focus group sessions, students discussed in great length the relevance provided by the Freshman Academy. Person F noted that the classes in tenth grade were completely different than ninth grade. All students then went on to add the Freshman Academy provided the following: “more of a variety of things to do,” “more choice in assignments,” “the teacher would tell us the lesson, and let students have some input,” “teachers asked our opinion in certain things,” and the “Freshman Academy has more choice and teachers would let us vote on assignments.” Person B also added that “in ninth grade, teachers would explain exactly what to do and give examples,” but “in tenth grade, projects are more like what you can get done in a day.” Teacher focus groups also discussed their views on how the Freshman Academy provides relevance.

Instructional Staff Focus Group Response to Relevance

The teachers in the focus group showed similarities to what students relayed in their focus group. Person F stated that “we have all tried as a group to integrate across the curriculum.” Person D noted that the “same planning period was a positive-it promotes easier work as a group.” Person C agreed and added the “same planning allows

the sharing of resources and can make for easier curriculum connections.” Person F then added that a great respect has developed “for what colleagues are teaching” and this person now “has a much greater understanding of the Standard Course of Study.”

The second teacher focus group shared similar thoughts as well. Persons A and B discussed an integrated unit as an example of relevance in the Freshman Academy. The unit looks at temperature conversions, the scientific method, carbon dating, and history. These ideas are first presented in the student’s science class 1 month before they see the problems that correspond in math. In the first teacher focus group, Person E noted that the “English curriculum impacts everyone else. Students are able to see it easier with the academy approach. Teachers can then help students when they have questions regarding projects from another class.” Each focus group mentioned how they work together as a team to understand other lessons and requirements, develop common lessons, and do so in common planning periods.

How do Freshman Academies Impact Relationships

The research question posed in this study asked, “how do Freshman Academies impact student and teacher relationships?” Again, the data were collected via surveys provided by the *We Survey Suite* company and focus group questions that were based on the results shown in the surveys themselves.

Student Responses to Relationships on We Survey

The total agreement column is a combination of the strongly agree and agree totals. In the student surveys (n=79), 84% of students noted they had a lot of friends in this school. Then, 81% noted that they in turn “encourage other students to do their best.” In terms of their relationships with teachers, 80% of students (n=79) agreed that they “respect teachers,” and 71% feel that they can share their “academic problems and

concerns with teachers.” Of those surveyed, 46% feel that they have a teacher they can talk with about personal issues. With regard to how students (n=79) perceive teachers’ care for them, 65% agreed that they felt their teachers cared about them. Students also agreed at 80% that their teachers cared if they participated in class. Finally, students (n=79) also agreed at 77% that their teachers respected each other (see Table 6).

Table 6

Student Survey Response to Relationships (n=79)

Relationships	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. Teachers care about me.	65%	22%	43%	22%	6%	8%
7. Teachers care if I participate in classes.	80%	35%	44%	13%	6%	1%
11. Bullying is a problem at this school.	29%	14%	15%	24%	37%	10%
15. I can share my academic problems and concerns with my teachers.	71%	20%	51%	11%	10%	8%
19. Teachers respect me.	57%	17%	41%	27%	5%	10%
23. I respect teachers.	80%	28%	52%	14%	1%	4%
27. My teachers are enthusiastic about what they teach.	66%	19%	47%	27%	6%	1%
31. Teachers respect each other.	77%	25%	52%	15%	6%	1%
34. My teachers know my academic interests and goals.	48%	11%	37%	25%	20%	6%
36. I have lots of friends at school.	84%	51%	33%	6%	8%	3%
40. My teachers know my interests outside of school.	44%	19%	25%	19%	22%	15%
44. My classmates encourage me to do my best.	52%	14%	38%	25%	11%	10%
48. I encourage other students to do their best.	81%	29%	52%	10%	5%	4%
52. My teachers often let me know how I am doing in their classes.	73%	25%	48%	13%	8%	6%
55. Good citizenship is rewarded in this school.	34%	11%	223%	30%	25%	10%
58. I have a teacher I can talk to about personal issues.	46%	32%	14%	20%	15%	19%
60. My teachers know what I love to do outside of school.	39%	15%	24%	15%	19%	27%

Instructional Staff Response to Relationships on We Survey

The teacher (n=11) surveys reflected more total agreement in their view of their relationships with students and each other than any other category. The column marked total agreement is a combination of the strongly agree and agree totals. The following statements reflected a 100% agreement rate.

1. Staff respect students.
2. Staff respect each other.
3. This school reaches out to all students to meet their individual needs.
4. Staff are expected to give frequent feedback to students about the quality of their work and actions.
5. I recognize students when they demonstrate positive behavior in school.
6. I am a source of encouragement for my students.

Teachers (n=11) at a 91% agreement rate felt that their colleagues were also a source of encouragement. Within the Freshman Academy, no teacher agreed that they felt isolated from their colleagues. The teachers (n=11) also agreed by 73% that their students talk with them about their academic problems and concerns in comparison to 71% of students agreeing on this same question (see Table 7).

Table 7

Instructor Survey Response to Relationships (n=11)

Relationships	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. Bullying is a problem at this school.	9%	0%	9%	9%	46%	18%
7. I can freely express my opinions and concerns to the administration.	55%	36%	18%	36%	9%	0%
11. Staff respect students.	100%	18%	82%	0%	0%	0%
15. Staff respect each other.	100%	18%	82%	0%	0%	0%
19. This school reaches out to all students to meet their individual needs.	100%	18%	82%	0%	0%	0%
23. Staff know the personal interests of each other.	36%	0%	36%	36%	27%	0%
27. I feel isolated from my colleagues.	0%	0%	0%	9%	64%	27%
31. I am aware of my students' interests outside of school.	73%	27%	46%	9%	18%	0%
35. My colleagues are a source of encouragement for me.	91%	27%	64%	0%	9%	0%
39. Staff are expected to give frequent feedback to students about the quality of their work and actions.	100%	36%	64%	0%	0%	0%
43. I recognize the students when they demonstrate positive behavior in school.	100%	36%	64%	0%	0%	0%
47. I know my students' academic interests and goals.	82%	18%	64%	0%	18%	0%
51. Students talk about academic problems and concerns with me.	73%	27%	46%	18%	9%	0%
55. I am source or encouragement for my students.	100%	55%	46%	0%	0%	0%
59. I know what my students are passionate about.	73%	9%	64%	9%	9%	9%

Student Focus Group Response to Relationships

During the focus group session, students all agreed that “teachers looked out for you in the academy” and “teachers cared more.” In comparison to their current tenth-grade year, students remarked that they felt they were “on their own.” Person H then stated that he/she “wouldn’t have done as well if I had come into a regular setting” instead of the Freshman Academy. Person C added that because of the Freshman Academy, students have “closer relationships with classmates within the academy,” and this particular student “liked being in a protective bubble.” Person C then interjected that the tenth grade prohibited them from being as interactive with each other as they had been in the Freshman Academy. For this statement, all students agreed that in the ninth grade everyone became friends with each other and felt that the entire academy was close. They all agreed that this closeness came by having the same classes with each other throughout the day and the same lunch time. Person G added that the “Freshman Academy created more of a personal relationship with teachers, and they would check in.”

Instructional Staff Focus Group Response to Relationships

The teacher focus groups were asked similar questions as the students in order to show a correlation between responses based on the completed surveys. Person F noted that because of the Freshman Academy, “teachers have cultivated close relationships with students.” This teacher then added that often times “students come to the teachers in the academy rather than their counselor.” Person C stated that this closeness came from their ability to “loop with kids through courses” as they then had the opportunity to really get to know students. This teacher added that this “has helped us identify kids who need modifications more easily.” Person F agreed and added that teachers in the academy

were “able to identify gaps in student learning from middle school and . . . monitor attendance” which allows teachers to shift students to other classes if necessary. All teachers in this focus group agreed with this statement. Person D noted that the “advantage of the academy works as a unit in comparison/contrast to the individual departments who do not meet with each other.” Person A in the second teacher focus session, who at the time of the focus groups was no longer a part of the Freshman Academy, stated that in the academy they “felt relationships with colleagues were closer . . . and teachers could discuss students problems and could see if they noticed the same problems.”

The results from the state end-of-course examinations, surveys, and focus groups provided insight into the impact of rigor, relevance, and relationships in the Freshman Academy. Once these data were collected and analyzed, an ANOVA test was run to determine if any significant difference was presented by gender or ethnicity (see Tables 8 and 9).

Table 8

Gender ANOVA Analysis

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
rigscore	Between Groups	144.625	1	144.625	1.501	.224
	Within Groups	7421.552	77	96.384		
	Total	7566.177	78			
relevscore	Between Groups	2.892	1	2.892	.025	.876
	Within Groups	9075.200	77	117.860		
	Total	9078.092	78			
relsore	Between Groups	120.931	1	120.931	.781	.380
	Within Groups	11919.050	77	154.793		
	Total	12039.981	78			

An ANOVA was conducted using $\alpha=.05$ as the statistical standard. In terms of the difference in gender in rigor, $F_{(1,77)}= 1.501$ and $p=.224$. For the difference in gender in relevance, $F_{(1,77)}= 0.025$ and $p=.876$. For the difference in gender in relationships, $F_{(1,77)}= 0.781$ and $p=.380$. In all three areas, no significant statistical difference was evident.

Table 9

Ethnic Background ANOVA Analysis

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
rigscore	Between Groups	55.562	3	18.521	.185	.906
	Within Groups	7510.615	75	100.142		
	Total	7566.177	78			
relevscore	Between Groups	287.581	3	95.860	.818	.488
	Within Groups	8790.511	75	117.207		
	Total	9078.092	78			
relscore	Between Groups	434.956	3	144.985	.937	.427
	Within Groups	11605.025	75	154.734		
	Total	12039.981	78			

An ANOVA was conducted using $\alpha=.05$ as the statistical standard. In terms of the difference in ethnicity, in rigor, $F_{(3,75)} = 0.185$ and $p=.906$. For the difference in ethnicity in relevance, $F_{(3,75)} = 0.818$ and $p=.488$. For the difference in ethnicity in relationships, $F_{(3,75)} = 0.937$ and $p=.427$. In all three areas, no significant statistical difference was evident.

The triangulation of data with the use of end-of-course test scores, student and teacher surveys, focus groups, and an ANOVA test provides a detailed analysis of the research questions formulated in this study.

Chapter 5: Research Summary

The study conducted in this report outlines the impact of Freshman Academies in a secondary setting. This study researched the effectiveness of the use of Freshman Academies in a rural high school located in North Carolina. The school selected for this study was based on the development and implementation of a Freshman Academy within that school. The school chosen developed this academy to address concerns highlighted in this study. This high school has a diverse ethnic population of students and is the only school in its district utilizing this approach. This Freshman Academy groups ninth-grade students in these subject areas: English, Math, Science, Social Studies, Health, and PE. There is also a common lunch period for ninth-grade students.

Throughout the study, students and teachers were asked a series of questions via surveys using the *We Survey Suite* package from the Successful Practices Network. Students enrolled in 30% of the tenth-grade courses at this school who were once in the Freshman Academy and all Freshman Academy teachers were allowed to participate in these surveys. The surveys asked students and teachers questions concerning their impressions or evidence of rigor, relevance, and relationships within their Freshman Academy. The *We Survey Suite* asked specific questions that addressed rigor, relevance, and relationships; and the responses of both students and teachers were analyzed for their percentage of agreement for each question. Selected students and teachers then participated in focus group surveys to further extrapolate their views on rigor, relevance, and relationships within the Freshman Academy. Students were randomly selected to participate in the focus group and were given permission forms to have a parent sign before the focus group session. These students were selected at random based on those who participated in the survey with a signed letter of permission by a parent/guardian.

The researcher selected every fourth student on the list who participated in the survey which resulted in 20 students participating in the focus group interviews. All ninth-grade Freshman Academy teachers participated in their respective focus-group session. The researcher also used end-of-course testing data released by the State of North Carolina on their annual report cards to look at the percentage of proficiency in tested subjects during the ninth-grade year. Finally, the researcher conducted an ANOVA analysis to determine if the answers given were different dependent upon gender or ethnicity. This particular study looked at three distinct areas of impact.

1. How do Freshman Academies impact rigor and subsequently student achievement?
2. How do Freshman Academies and their integrated, teaming approach provide relevance for students and teachers?
3. How do Freshman Academies impact student and teacher relationships?

Research Question: Rigor

Academic rigor is an important aspect of a student's educational experience. Research has proven that academic rigor is not only important for the student but also for the realities of many teachers today. In a world of increased state and federal testing, teachers and schools must provide a rigorous curriculum, and they are evaluated based on these tests. Also, the success of the student weighs heavily on the outcome of these tests. Johnson (2013) noted that the challenges teachers face today are just as pressing as the challenges students face. Johnson stated that "Schools are increasingly using standardized tests to provide independent measures of student learning and to shed light on classroom teachers' effectiveness" (p. 18). Furthermore, in order to address this era of testing, schools must also determine how to design successful instructional plans to meet

these current demands. Morrison et al. (2004) outlined that effective instructional designs must include the identification of who the program is for, what the needs and characteristics of the learners within that school are, what the students need to be able to demonstrate, how students will learn the subject matter at hand, and finally how the success of learning will be assessed (p. 7).

One crucial piece to success on these standardized achievement tests has rested on the effectiveness of integrated programs (Vars, 1991, p. 15). Fogarty (1991) addressed the importance of a successful integrated program by outlining models of instructional design that promote the integration of curriculum. These models include targeting multiple dimensions of a lesson, arranging topics into similar units of study, and overlapping similar concepts among multiple disciplines (Fogarty, 1991, pp. 61-65). The Freshman Academy model has used these concepts as a means of addressing the concerns of providing academic rigor and helping students achieve a positive testing outcome. According to White (2008), students in a Freshman Academy had “increased academic success, as can be seen from the reduction of freshman class failures and an increase in scores on standardized tests” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451).

Therefore, the research question “how do Freshman Academies impact rigor and subsequently student achievement” was addressed in this study as students and teachers both noted in surveys and focus groups that within the Freshman Academy they were held to high standards and expectations of achievement and felt prepared for their future endeavors. The school where the research was conducted showed a 9.5% increase in proficiency in Algebra II scores, a common ninth-grade assessment, from previous years where no Freshman Academy existed, and scores had begun to decline prior to implementing this new program. English 9 scores, another common ninth-grade

assessment, showed an increase of 6.1% proficiency again from years where no Freshman Academy existed, and scores had declined. Student surveys and focus group sessions showed a correlation between their improvement on end-of-course tests and their percentage of agreement of how academic rigor is impacted by the Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy developed in this school and the one referenced in this study effectively addressed the concerns of providing academic rigor and helped students achieve academic success by allowing for an integrated curriculum model and identifying who their students are and what they need to be successful.

Student surveys and interviews further reflected upon the impact the Freshman Academy made on their subsequent achievement in the ninth grade. Students noted that they discussed and solved problems as a group and agreed at a rate of 82% that what they were learning was in fact preparing them for college. Students also noted that they received help when needed. Students clearly recognized that the teachers in their academy held them to high expectations where teachers made them work to their full potential.

The instructional staff also noted similar concepts in relation to the research question involving rigor and achievement. They, too, noted that they expected students to become independent learners and held high expectations for their students. They continually adjusted instruction, worked to create solutions, and felt they were helping students become college and career ready, as students also noted in their surveys and interviews.

Research Question: Relevance

According to Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004), “students will learn better if they build strong social and intellectual networks amongst themselves, and if the curricula of

their courses make sense when considered together” (Daynes et al., 2004, pp. 115-116). Furthermore, according to the International Center for Leadership in Education (2002), “When students see the relevance of what they are learning, they are more motivated to learn” (p. X). It is imperative that students are motivated to learn and see the importance in their education as a

key reason students dropped out was being unable to connect what they were learning with the real world. Indeed, almost half (47 percent) of the high school dropouts surveyed said that they quit school because the “classes were not interesting.” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 69)

Goodwin’s (2011) research discovered that “81 percent of dropouts said that providing ‘opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service learning, etc.) to make classroom[s] more relevant’ would have increased their chances of staying in school” (p. 69). In fact, after a study of 13 successful high schools in Georgia, it was determined that “these most-improved schools were not just about rigor; they were about students seeing a purpose in what they were being asked to learn” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 70). Therefore, are Freshman Academies and their integrated, teaming approach a means of providing relevance for students and teachers?

The high school in this study provided personalization and relevance within the academy as seen in the surveys and focus groups that addressed the second research question. According to state testing data, the high school in this study achieved academic growth and excellence. Students and staff agreed that the sense of relevancy provided via the academy concept motivated learning. In the research question, “How do Freshman Academies and their integrated, teaming approach provide relevance for students and teachers,” the Freshman Academy approach seemed to address these concerns as well.

Students agreed that in the academy, they were able to work with other students and complete hands-on activities; and 76% of the students surveyed agreed that what they were being asked to learn would in fact help them in the future. Students discussed how teachers gave them options, choice, input, and a variety of methods to complete assignments. Teachers also noted that the idea of providing a variety of instructional methods and integrating materials helped provide relevance to what students were asked to learn. Teachers also discussed several areas in which they were able to combine concepts across curriculums in history, math, and English. In this way, students could take what they learned in one class and apply it in another in order to understand the relevancy of the concept. According to Morrison et al. (2004),

the instructional designer must obtain information about the capabilities, needs, and interests of the learners. This information should affect certain elements in planning, such as the entry point, selection of topics (and the level at which topics are introduced), the choice and sequencing of objectives, the depth of topic treatments, and the variety of learning activities. (p. 56)

Having students in this academy with the same teachers and classmates afforded this opportunity. The utilization of the Freshman Academy concept, according to the data collected and analyzed, showed a positive correlation between the academy approach and the positive relationships achieved and maintained as determined by students and staff.

Research Question: Relationships

The ninth-grade year poses a multitude of new problems and challenges for students as they typically enter a new environment and “must break the bonds they have formed with their middle school teachers and peers” (Neild, 2009, p. 53). According to Neild (2009), “ninth grade coincides with life-course changes, such as reduced parental

supervision and increased peer influence” (p. 53). These factors alone are immense stressors for ninth-grade students when considering that “the organization of some high schools” is inadequate and creates difficulties for many students (Neild, 2009, p. 53). Therefore, importance of relationships becomes critical for student success. High schools must become more personalized as outlined by DiMartino and Clarke (2008). DiMartino and Clarke felt that schools must address the need to provide students with a caring adult, banish anonymity, plan a path after graduation, connect families to student learning, and help students see a future (pp. 15-16). The need for this is magnified by the determination by McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) that the move to high school “can also be a time masked with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection” (p. 449). High schools must begin to address these concerns to encourage student success.

Habeeb (2013) noted that schools must make high school a more nurturing environment, create classrooms where excellence can be achieved, recognize students for their accomplishments and make them feel at home, and provide support services; and the faculty must also be able to grow together as a unit (p. 20). In the research question, “How do Freshman Academies impact student and teacher relationships,” students agreed that they had lots of friends; they respected teachers; their teachers cared about them; and they could see teachers working together in a collaborative manner. Students also noted that they worked to encourage each other to do their best. Students stated in interviews that they felt their teachers looked out for them, and they felt they would not have done as well beginning high school in a more traditional setting. In fact, students noted the differences between the Freshman Academy and their current tenth-grade year where no academy exists. They noted they could not be as interactive with their peers, and they missed the personal relationships forged with their teachers and the fact that their

Freshman Academy teachers would check in with them. Blum (2005) listed traits that help create positive attitudes towards school such as the creation of trusting relationships and ensuring “that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school” (p. 2). Teachers noted that with the academy approach, they were able to forge more complete relationships with their students, and students often came to seek their help or advice even above the counselors provided by the school. Teachers also discussed how these relationships helped their abilities to plan and create lessons that crossed curriculums based on student needs and interests.

Conclusions and Summaries of Findings

The qualitative and quantitative study conducted at this particular high school indicated that there was in fact a positive impact on students and teachers within the Freshman Academy. Student achievement on state exams and in their coursework showed an increase from years where no Freshman Academy existed. Students and teachers noted in their surveys and focus groups that they felt they belonged to the school and that people cared about their wellbeing within the building. Students and teachers also felt they had a voice in their role in the educational process and felt their ideas were valued. Furthermore, the ANOVA test proved that across diverse ethnic backgrounds and gender, students felt the same way about the Freshman Academy and their school. No one group felt differently or felt left out of the educational process. Therefore, this study concludes that the Freshman Academy approach did what it set out to do: change the landscape of the classroom and positively impact rigor, relevance, and relationships among ninth-grade students and the faculty members involved with those students as outlined in key research studies and the data collected via state exam scores, student and teacher surveys, and focus groups.

Links to Relevant Research

Overall, the Freshman Academy met many of the qualities as outlined in Armstrong's (2006) better alternative for learning, HDD. According to Armstrong, the positive consequences to a more relevant approach to education are "engages students in learning activities" (p. 56), "enables all students to shine in their areas of strength" (p. 57), "enables students to develop competencies and qualities that will ultimately help to make the world a better place" (p. 59), "gives educators and students more control" (p. 61), and "encourages innovation" (p. 63). The data collected in this study reflect and support these positive consequences.

Furthermore, according to The National Academy of Sciences, the four qualities of an engaging school are "high academic standards, personalization, relevance, and flexibility" (Blum, 2005, p. 7). The high school in this study, by using Freshman Academies, did, in fact, see significant impact in the areas of rigor, relevance, and relationships, thus reflecting the qualities of an engaging school. Student state exam scores were higher than in previous years without the academy, and interviews and surveys of both students and teachers further indicated the success of this program.

Implications of Findings

This study shows the implications of incorporating a Freshman Academy approach in the high school setting. Drake and Burns (2004) reminded us that "Educators are working in an era of accountability" (p. 4). When test scores and school evaluations are used to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, a school must address this requirement with an approach that will help not only their students succeed but also their school community. The Freshman Academy in this study showed significant growth in achievement on state exams when compared to years without an academy. Furthermore,

DiMartino and Clarke (2008) noted that there are major concerns that plague our high schools today. These include “depersonalization, lack of adult support, unresponsive teaching, imperceptible results, invisibility, and isolation” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, p. 5). Schools are depersonalized as they “offer few options that appeal to young people with distinctive interests, talents, and aspirations” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008, p. 5). The Freshman Academy noted in this study, via student and faculty interviews and surveys, showed agreement with the fact that their school offered support and personalized attention and that students had the opportunity to be involved in their education. Therefore, the Freshman Academy concept, as evidenced by the study and data collected, can be an answer to these problems and help students and schools succeed.

Recommendations for Future Study

One limitation noted in the focus groups for both teachers and students was that neither group was happy about the separation the academy created from older classmates. Many felt that this separation made it difficult to integrate with older classmates in their tenth-grade year when they were no longer separated from the larger group.

The focus groups also revealed another critical limitation as students agreed that in the tenth-grade year, they no longer had those same relationships with teachers and their grades suffered tremendously. Therefore, it may be of interest to determine what programs could or should be continued or what transition opportunities are available for students after the Freshman Academy. This need for other transition opportunities also revealed a lack of buy-in from the entire school faculty, as it was noted in teacher focus group interviews that some teachers would not teach in the Freshman Academy.

In future studies, it may be of interest to determine the impacts of separation or inclusion of Freshman Academies within the larger school. A study could be conducted

to determine the maturity, level of responsibility, and success of students academically after the ninth grade as students noted they felt sheltered from the larger school and were perhaps not ready for a more traditional schedule. One other potential study may be that students, as revealed in their focus group interviews, felt that the Freshman Academy helped them transition from middle school to high school. They felt teachers cared about their level of participation, kept them updated on their grades, and offered tutoring sessions. Therefore, a study could be conducted to determine what is or is not occurring in subsequent grade levels to promote rigor, relevance, and relationships that encourage student success and ensure graduation.

Conclusion

The utilization of the Freshman Academy concept in this study showed the positive impacts on rigor, relevance, and relationships for high school students. This study has determined that these three areas are of extreme importance in engaging students in meaningful education and keeping them enrolled in school. Therefore, this study suggests the Freshman Academy approach is, in fact, an approach in education that can address the concerns and problems that exist in high schools today.

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Appendix A
Parent Permission Letter

Dear Parent and/or Guardian:

My name is Anna Moose and I am a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University. I am currently finishing the requirements for my degree by completing a dissertation researching the impacts of rigor, relevance, and relationships of Freshman Academies on students in the secondary classroom. Your student has been selected to participate in this study as they were involved in the Freshman Academy during their ninth grade year.

The students selected will participate in a survey conducted by the Successful Practices Network entitled the *We Survey Suite*. After the survey, a sampling of students who participated in the survey will also meet in a focus group where they will be asked a series of questions related to the research. All information collected will be completely anonymous and all responses will only be reviewed by the researcher and two third-party participants who will write down responses during the focus group interviews. No student names or information will be collected or used for this study other than to state permission. No student names or information will be used in the research report.

Please respond to this letter by signing one of the following options.

_____ I agree to allow my child _____ to participate in the focus group interview and research study.

_____ I do not agree to allow my child _____ to participate in the focus groups and research study.

Thank you for your time and if you have any questions you may contact me by email at XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX or by phone at XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

Sincerely,

Anna S. Moose
 Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University

Appendix B

Informed Consent from Local District

Dear Superintendent and Participating Principal:

I am currently working to complete a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Gardner-Webb University. In order to complete this degree, I am required to complete a dissertation. In order to complete my degree, I have chosen to research the impacts on rigor, relevance, and relationships in Freshman Academies in the secondary classroom. Freshman Academies are currently in practice in the district and I would like to use one of these high schools as the basis for my field research. The research will consist of a sampling of students and teachers taking a survey conducted through the Successful Practices Network called the *We Survey Suite*. Once the surveys are completed, a sampling of students and teachers will also participate in focus group interviews to gather further data.

All collected information concerning the school and school district will remain confidential and anonymous. Participation in this research for students and teachers is completely voluntary. However, the more responders that participate will allow the researcher to gather more accurate data in order to provide a most accurate portrayal of the population and district under study.

If you have any questions you may contact the researcher, Anna S. Moose by phone at XXXXXXXX. Any questions regarding the research or requirements for Gardner-Webb University may be directed toward the chair of the dissertation committee, Dr. Jane King at XXXXXXXX.

If all parties are in agreement of this proposed study, please sign below. Thank you for your time and your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Anna S. Moose
 Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University

Superintendent Signature

Date

Principal Signature

Date

Appendix C

Successful Practices Network Permission Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Anna Moose and I am a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, NC. I am currently finishing the requirements for my degree by completing a dissertation researching the impacts of rigor, relevance, and relationships of Freshman Academies on students in the secondary classroom.

In other communications with your company, I spoke with Chief Academic Officer Dr. Linda Lucey about using the *We Survey Suite* package for both students and teachers as a way to measure the impact of Freshman Academies on the above standards. In the conversation, Dr. Lucey suggested that I may be able to obtain 50 of the student surveys as well as access to the teacher survey at little to no charge if I cite the use of these surveys as those from the Successful Practices Network. Any and all published work would also give the name of the survey and information as to where other educational leaders can access the survey for their own organizations.

I also discussed with Dr. Lucey that I would also need not only the processed data *We Survey* offers, but also the raw data from the surveys as well. I am asking for web access to the survey link, a copy of the original questions for students and teachers, the data as processed by *We Survey Suite*, the raw data of the surveys, and permission to use the Successful Practices Network name in my dissertation. I have found these surveys to be exceptional and feel that other educational leaders would as well. The surveys will only be mentioned as the means of collecting necessary data. I would greatly appreciate any and all help to implement this survey in a secondary school setting. I look forward to working with such an exceptional organization.

Thank you for your time and if you have any questions you may contact me by email at XXXXXXXXXXXX or by phone at XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

Sincerely,

Anna S. Moose

Anna S. Moose

Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University