I Belong at Harper College: A Qualitative Case Study on Fostering Community College Students’ Sense of Belonging Through A First-Year Seminar Course

Emily Reabe
emilyreabe@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations

Part of the Community College Education Administration Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Reabe, Emily, "I Belong at Harper College: A Qualitative Case Study on Fostering Community College Students’ Sense of Belonging Through A First-Year Seminar Course" (2020). Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations. 7585.
https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations/7585

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.
ABSTRACT

I BELONG AT HARPER COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON FOSTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSE

Emily Reabe, Ed.D.
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2020
Gudrun Nyunt, Director

While community college is often seen as an avenue that provides access to higher education for a greater part of the population, community colleges have struggled with improving retention, persistence, and degree completion. Research highlights the importance of helping students develop a sense of belonging at the institution, which has been found to improve retention, persistence, and degree completion. One avenue to do so may be through requiring students to enroll in a first-year seminar course. This qualitative case study explored the way in which a first-year seminar course may influence students’ sense of belonging at a community college. Using multiple methods of data collection including an anonymous post-course reflection survey, participant observations, document analysis of course assignments, and interviews, this study found that the First-Year Seminar contributed to students’ sense of belonging in a variety of ways: (a) the First-Year Seminar instructor created an atmosphere where students felt comfortable and were not afraid to ask questions; (b) the First-Year Seminar ensured that students connected with their advisors, which was important to making them feel supported on campus; c) activities which focused on introducing resources allowed students to get to know campus better; (d) students were able to explore their strengths, which helped them feel more confident in their ability to succeed in college; and (e) students were able to connect with peers in the First-Year Seminar, which fostered their sense of belonging at the institution. In
addition, while the First-Year Seminar contributed to students’ sense of belonging, students also shared the importance of other instructors and staff members being caring and supportive in fostering their sense of belonging at the community college. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.
I BELONG AT HARRER COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON FOSTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSE

BY

EMILY REABE
© 2020 Emily Reabe

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Gudrun Nyunt
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Gudrun Nyunt for the continuous support, motivation, and encouragement she gave me while on this journey. Dr. Nyunt’s support and guidance helped me to complete my dissertation; for this I am eternally grateful.

Second, the support of my family, especially my husband, Matt, and my two children, Chase and Avery, provided me inspiration to be better.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| LIST OF TABLES | v |
| LIST OF APPENDICES | vi |
| CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY | 1 |
| Statement of the Problem of Practice | 2 |
| Purpose and Research Questions | 3 |
| Background and Literature Review | 4 |
| Community College Student Retention | 4 |
| Low-Income, Minoritized, and First-Generation Students at Community Colleges | 6 |
| First-Year Seminar Courses | 8 |
| Sense of Belonging | 11 |
| Role of Faculty and Staff in Fostering Sense of Belonging | 12 |
| Research Design | 13 |
| Researcher’s Positionality and Background | 13 |
| Case Study Design | 15 |
| Case Selection | 15 |
| Case Description: FYS 101 Focus on Your Future at Harper | 16 |
| Participant Selection and Recruitment | 17 |
| Data Collection | 20 |
| Data Analysis | 22 |
| Trustworthiness | 23 |
| Limitations | 24 |
| Significance | 24 |
| CHAPTER 2 FOSTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR | 26 |
| Introduction | 26 |
| Literature Review | 28 |
| Theoretical Framework: Sense of Belonging | 31 |
| Research Design | 32 |
| Case Selection                                                                 | 32 |
| Case Description: FYS 101 Focus on Your Future at Harper                        | 32 |
| Researcher Positionality                                                        | 34 |
| Participant Selection and Recruitment                                          | 34 |
| Data Collection and Analysis                                                    | 35 |
| Trustworthiness                                                                | 37 |
| Findings                                                                       | 38 |
| Connections with Advisors                                                       | 38 |
| Getting to Know Harper College and Campus Resources                            | 40 |
| Exploring Their Strengths                                                       | 41 |
| Comfortable Atmosphere Where You Can Ask Questions                              | 42 |
| Connections with Peers                                                          | 43 |
| Connections with Faculty and Staff Outside of FYS                               | 45 |
| Discussion                                                                     | 46 |
| Limitations                                                                    | 48 |
| Implications                                                                   | 48 |
| CHAPTER 3 SCHOLARLY REFLECTION                                                  | 51 |
| Application to Practice                                                         | 55 |
| Application to Research                                                         | 58 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                                                                   | 61 |
| APPENDICES                                                                     | 68 |
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participation in Research Activities and Demographics of Participants ........................ 19
Table 2. Participation in Research Activities and Demographics of Participants ........................ 36
## LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>POST COURSE REFLECTION SURVEY</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>BLACKBOARD DISCUSSION POSTS</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>FINAL PAPER ASSIGNMENT</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>CONSENT FORMS</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

A student asks me to stay after class. We are only in the fourth week of class, but I can tell this is important, so I tell the student sure, let’s finish up class and once everyone has left, we can talk. The student shares with me that he just doesn’t feel like he has connected to anyone else on campus yet. “But you seem to get me,” he adds. “You are the first person I have met here who believes in me. I can move forward with my educational goals, and I can do it. I have never had someone in school who believed in me.”

This was not the only interaction of this kind that I ever had with a student. This summer I was attending a baseball game, and I ran into another one of my students. The student yelled to grab my attention. I turned around, and my student said to me, “I just wanted to thank you for encouraging and believing in me, even when I didn’t think it was possible for me to be a college student. I took what you taught in class along with knowing that I could be a college student, and I focused on my academics, and, you know what, I did awesome!”

I have been teaching First-Year Seminar for many years, and I always work to build relationships with my students and let them know they have someone who believes in them and believes that their goals are attainable. In my experience, we generally start connecting around the halfway point of the semester. That’s when my students realize I am there to help support them in becoming a successful student along with becoming successful in life. I believe part of
my role as an instructor is to work to create an environment where students feel they belong and start seeing themselves as college students able to achieve their career aspirations. But creating such an environment and helping students find a way to believe in themselves has been one of my greatest challenges because many of the students I teach have a fixed mindset that they are unable to be successful as students. And while the stories above show that, at times, I have been successful in achieving some of my goals, I have always wondered what else I could do or how I could support my students more. These personal experiences as a first-year seminar instructor and my thirst for finding better ways to support all my students inspired this study.

**Statement of the Problem of Practice**

First-year seminar courses have been found to positively influence academic achievement and persistence (Tinto, 1993). First-year seminar courses provide academic along with developmental support to help students learn how to navigate college (Hyers & Joslin, 1998). Students who do well in their First-year seminar course are more likely to be successful in college (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985).

First-year seminars are one of the tools utilized at Harper College to support students’ retention, persistence, and overall success. Retention and fall-to-fall persistence are big concerns at Harper College. Harper College only has a 29% graduation rate. Graduation rates are particularly low for men (24% compared to 35% for women) and students of color (ranging from 18% for Black or African American students to 27% for Asian students compared to 33% for White students; College Tuition Compare, 2019). Men of color are particularly at risk for dropping out early or failing to graduate, with graduation rates of 6% for Black/African American men, 18% for Hispanic men, and 20% for Asian men (College Tuition Compare,
These statistics are concerning as Harper attracts a diverse student body with 28% of students identifying as Hispanic, 13% as Asian, 4% as Black or African American, 50% as White, and 5% falling into other racial or ethnic categories in Fall 2018. Of those students, 55% identified as women and 45% as men.

Research has found that first-year seminars have the potential to positively impact student retention and sense of belonging at an institution (Boylan, 2009; Crissman, 2001; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Upcraft et al., 1989), particularly for students of color and first-generation students (Gardener, 1986). However, Harper College has not done an institutional assessment to better understand the impact its first-year seminars courses have on students’ sense of belonging.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence the first-year seminar, FYS 101 Focus on Your Future, has on students’ sense of belonging. Specifically, my study answers the following research questions and subquestions:

1. How, if at all, do community college students perceive FYS 101 at Harper College contributing to their sense of belonging to the institution?
   a. How, if at all, do students perceive FYS 101 at Harper helping them in creating positive relationships with faculty and staff?
   b. How, if at all, do students perceive FYS 101 at Harper helping them in creating positive relationships with peers?
   c. How, if at all, do students perceive FYS 101 at Harper helping them in becoming knowledgeable about campus resources?
d. How, if at all, do students perceive FYS 101 at Harper as fostering their confidence in believing in their ability to succeed in college?

2. What aspects of FYS 101 foster the development of a sense of belonging for students at Harper College?

**Background and Literature Review**

While community college is often seen as an avenue that provides access to higher education for a greater part of the population, community colleges have struggled with improving retention and completion.

**Community College Student Retention**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), only 13% of community college students graduate in two years. Within three years, approximately 22% graduate and by four years, the number has gone up to approximately 28%. While these numbers highlight the challenge community colleges face in retaining and graduating students, these statistics can also be misleading, as many community college students attend part-time and hold a variety of educational goals that may or may not fit within the commonly used definitions of retention.

Wild and Ebbers (2002) highlight the challenges of measuring retention in a community college context due to the varying definitions of retention. Definitions of retention have been created for four-year institutions, with the focus for retention being on continued full-time attendance in pursuit of on-time graduation. Crawford (1999), for example, defined retention as “the maintenance of continued enrollment in classes throughout one semester” or “the ratio of units that students successfully completed to the units attempted” (p. 13). Such a definition of
retention does little to understand students’ ability to succeed at a community college. A better measurement thus is persistence rates (Wild & Ebbers, 2002, p. 506). Persistence rates at a community college look at students enrolling from Fall to Spring along with graduating in their program of study. For example, Crawford (1999) defined persistence at community colleges as ‘‘maintenance of continued enrollment for two or more semesters, specifically from Fall term to Spring term and/or completion of a degree/certificate or transfer to a four-year college’’ (p. 13). Wild and Ebbers (2002) also share a definition from Mountain Empire Community College, which refers to persistence as “enrollment in a subsequent semester and academic achievement as completion of two-thirds of courses attempted with a 2.0 GPA or higher” (p. 506). These types of definitions allow for a better conceptualization of success in the community college context. The variations and inconsistency in definitions of retention and persistence in the community college context, however, make it difficult to measure and assess retention and persistence at these institutions.

No matter how retention and persistence is defined and measured, it is clear that community colleges struggle with supporting student retention, persistence, and degree attainment (Community College Research Center, 2020). One reason why retention, persistence, and completion at community colleges are low may be that community colleges tend to enroll more underprepared students compared to four-year universities due to their open door admission policy. Underprepared students are encouraged to enroll at the community college where they can take developmental or remedial coursework to prepare them for college-level courses (Barbatis, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reports that 42% of community college students enroll in at least one remedial course.
Such developmental or remedial coursework leads to a longer path to completion, which often negatively impacts students’ ability to obtain a degree (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Recent statistics indicate that less than 20% of students who enroll in at least one remedial class graduate from college within five years of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

In addition to academic underpreparation, community college students often face competing obligations that negatively impact their retention and academic success (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Nakajima, Dembo & Mossler 2012; Porter & Umbach, 2019; Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2013). Many community college students struggle to balance work and family life demands (Rath et al., 2013). Community college students tend to be nontraditional students, with 42% being over the age of 24 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In addition, 65% of students at public community colleges attend part time as compared to 29% at public four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), and 80% of community college students work, with 39% working fulltime (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Thus, unlike many of their peers at four-year institutions, community college students have less time to focus on their academics.

**Low-Income, Minoritized, and First-Generation Students at Community Colleges**

Most community colleges have an open-door admissions policy, which allows for open entry, where a student’s background will not impact their acceptance into the college (Roa, 2004). An open door policy allows students access to higher education who would otherwise be denied entry due to additional admissions requirements such as SAT or ACT scores, low high school GPAs, or a lack of recommendation letters (Roa, 2004). Open door policies have thus
allowed a more diverse group of students to access higher education through community colleges.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2020) reports that 11.8 million students take courses at one of 1,050 community colleges nationwide, with 29% of students being first generation (defined as neither parent having completed a college degree), 15% single parents, and 9% percent non-U.S. citizens. Of all community college students, 57% of students are women while men make up 43%. The average age is 28 and the median age 24. Among students who are enrolled for credit, 26% identify as Hispanic, 13% as Black, 45% as White, 6% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and as 2% Nonresident Alien.

While community colleges provide access to higher education for a diverse group of students, not all students are successful at obtaining a degree at community colleges. Much research indicates that low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students are less likely to engage in in- and out-of-class experiences that have been found to foster student success due to financial restraints, competing obligations, and a lack of understanding of the importance of such experiences (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). These students also often lack access to the social capital, connections to mentors and individuals who can support them in any given situation, needed to succeed in college (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Research, however, shows that students, no matter their background, who receive critical supports from their college/university can find success at college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Tinto, 1999).

An important aspect in supporting first-generation, low-income, and minoritized students is helping them gain access to the social capital needed to be successful in college (Sandoval-
Lucero et al., 2014). Faculty, instructors, and staff can play an important role in doing so (Barnett, 2011; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Faculty, instructors, and staff may do so by validating students’ experiences and their ability to succeed in college (Barnett, 2011; Majer, 2009; Rendon, 1994). By doing so, faculty, instructors, and staff can help students improve their self-efficacy, which in turn has been found to positively impact their academic success in college (Majer, 2009).

**First-Year Seminar Courses**

One initiative that has been found to positively impact student success are first-year seminars (Boylan, 2009; Crissman, 2001; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Upcraft et al., 1989). First-year seminars have long been a part of the college curriculum, with the first one taking place at Lee College back in 1882 (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Seminars became more popular in the early 1900s because the Carnegie Foundation recommended colleges create something that allowed for freshman students to find themselves, but these were later critiqued because they did not have enough academic rigor, and the seminar courses were eliminated in the 1960s (Drake, 1966). However, First-year seminar courses saw a return to colleges and universities in the 1970s, when more non-traditional students, first-generation students, and students of color began attending college (Gardener, 1986).

The first-year, especially the first few weeks, is a critical time in the development for the student, when first-year students are focused on finding themselves; learning their own beliefs, values, and identities; and making their own goals, hopefully leading to becoming a successful college student who will persist (Connolly et al., 2017). Most colleges and universities have added “some deliberate form or method of intervention to help embed students and enhance the
learning and retention” during the first semester of the First-Year of college (Palmer, Okane, & Owens, 2009, p. 37), with first-year seminars being a popular option among such initiatives.

First-year seminars differ in form and function across institutions (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). First-year seminars are particularly prevalent at four-year institutions, with scholars estimating that 95% of four-year institutions have some type of first-year experience initiative for their students (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Research indicates that first-year seminars have a positive impact for all kinds of students and are a good all-purpose intervention to increase persistence from first to second year (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

First-year seminar courses are created to help students build a foundation of success in their first year, so students can learn how to support their own success in college (Gardener, 1986). First-year seminars may do so by allowing students to work with different faculty and staff on campus, educating students regarding support services on campus, informing students of different clubs and activities on campus along with educating students on campus student involvement, teaching students about the library and the services they offer, reviewing study skills and time management, and learning the steps to career decision making (Upcraft, Gardener & Associates, 1989). By doing so, first-year seminars can help students have a smoother transition from high school to college, create relationships on campus and thus develop social capital needed to succeed, get connected to in- and out-of-class engagement opportunities, feel more connected to campus, and become more confident in their ability to succeed (Boylan, 2009; Connolly et al., 2017; Crissman, 2001; Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Since such experiences have been found to be essential for academic success (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Majer, 2009;
Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014), first-year seminars are also a great tool in supporting students’ academic success in college (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

First-year seminars have been found to improve retention among students from first year to second year (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2017). FYS courses focus on teaching the whole student by teaching them about the college, organizations on campus, work/life skills, and how to successful students, while creating an environment where students feel comfortable to ask questions, such as, how many credits do I need to graduate (Boettler, 2012). Research has shown students who participate in an FYS course are more likely to receive higher grades than those students who do not, leading students to find academic success when they are sophomores and juniors (Lake, 2012).

First-year seminars are not only common at four-year institutions but are and have been used by many community colleges to improve student outcomes and retention (Cuseo, 2010; Kelley, 2017; Weaver, 2018). For example, as early as in the 1990s, research completed at Sacramento City College showed students who enrolled in and completed an FYS course persisted at a 50% higher rate than those who did not enroll in the course (Stupka, 1993). Research also indicates that first-year seminar participation can lead to better GPAs and higher pass rates for community college students (Cuseo, 2010). Similar to first-year seminars at four-year institutions, first-year seminar courses at community colleges are used to introduce students to college and connect them with campus resources. In a community college, the focus may be more on academic resources, for example by introducing students to their academic advisors (Jaijairam, 2016), rather than out-of-class engagement as at four-year institutions.
This study was guided by the concept of sense of belonging, as defined by Strayhorn (2019) and understanding from the literature on how students develop a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging refers to “an individual’s psychological experiences and, most importantly, their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in particular context such as family, school or college” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 11). In other words, in a university setting, fostering sense of belonging refers to students feeling they are cared about, they matter, and they belong in college.

Literature on students’ sense of belonging initially referred to Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs and stressed that belonging is a basic need for students to be successful. A student needs to feel “valued, needed, and significant within a system or environment” to have their basic need of feeling a sense of belonging met (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 21). Sense of belonging is thus a “subjective evaluation of the quality of relationships with others on campus” (Strayhorn, 2009b, p. 505). For students to feel a sense of belonging at an institution of higher education, they also need to believe that they can be successful at this institution or, in other words, belong at that institution (Freeman et al., 2007). Thus, for students to develop a sense of belonging, they need to be able to (a) create positive relationships with faculty and staff, (b) create positive relationships with peers, (c) become knowledgeable about campus resources, and (d) believe that they can be successful at the institution (Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2009a; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). This conceptualization of how students develop a sense of belonging guided my research study.

Past research indicates that non-White students often have a lower sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007). For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that when students of color, especially Hispanic students, attend primarily White campuses, they face unique
challenges and stresses related to their minoritized status, which can lead to these students feeling alienated and disconnected from the campus community. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2007) found that African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Pacific American students reported lower levels of sense of belonging than their White peers.

However, non-White students who participate in support programs, live on campus, and socialize with students who are different from them have been found to have a stronger relationship to their college, which in turn helps students feel like they belong (Strayhorn, 2019). When faculty members support non-White students in academic support programs, this also helps to create a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

**Role of Faculty and Staff in Fostering Sense of Belonging**

Faculty and staff play an important role in fostering students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Colleges can create environments of belongingness by having academic supports such as supplemental instruction, study groups, and tutoring, to mention a few, along with programming and activities, positive messaging such as having notes around campus with positive sayings, building learning communities, and creating an environment where students want to stay on campus. When faculty, staff, and administrators do not focus on students’ sense of belonging, “they conspire in the academic failures of the students” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 17). According to Maslow (1954), basic needs must be met prior to moving forward; it is necessary for faculty and staff to meet these basic needs by working to have the students feel they belong and they matter.

Faculty and staff need to encourage an environment which focuses on positive interactions, helping students to make connections on campus with their faculty and staff.
members, along with providing programming which helps to create a student’s sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 22). Research has found a strong association between sense of belonging when college students have discussions with their peers, peer tutoring, and frequent interactions with their faculty members (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). When students are struggling with their sense of belonging, these students should be given opportunities to join different clubs, organizations, or athletics on campus to help foster their belief of belonging on campus (Strayhorn 2019).

Research currently shows how an individual student may feel regarding their sense of belonging; however, it does not show how institutions can influence and support a student’s sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). First-year seminars could be one initiative that helps students foster a sense of belonging.

**Research Design**

To explore how participation in FYS 101 fosters students’ development of sense of belonging, I used a qualitative case study design. In this section, I first discuss my positionality and background. I then share details about my research design including, data collection methods and data analysis. I also discuss how I strengthened the trustworthiness of my study and share limitations of the study.

**Researcher’s Positionality and Background**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main research instrument; thus, it is important to understand how the researcher’s worldview and background shape the research design (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2011). I view the world through a constructivist lens. Constructivists believe knowledge is constructed from experiences (Creswell, 2014). Individuals
create meaning through their interactions with others (Creswell, 2014). Constructivists are interested in understanding their research participants’ perspectives and interpretations of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). Being a constructivist, I lean toward qualitative methodologies because they allow me to explore the lived experiences and meaning making of research participants. For this dissertation, I was interested in hearing students’ voices and learning about their perspectives on their experiences with first-year seminars.

Along with my constructivist worldview, my background as a counselor shapes my research design. I started working as an academic counselor at Harper College in 2004, and in 2006 I started teaching courses in the department. I have seen many transformations of the orientation course and have worked in the Summer Scholars program, which is intended to support academically underprepared students for college. My personal experiences of supporting students from various backgrounds and my past experiences of teaching FYS 101 have shaped my interest in this research topic.

My social identities also impacted this study. I am a White woman from a middle-class background, which makes me an outsider to the group I studied. My college experiences differed greatly from that of my students, as I was able to attend college fulltime at a four-year institution. I am also an outsider to the population I studied because I served as the instructor of their FYS 101 course. While playing the dual role of instructor and researcher provided me with access to the research site and insights into the students’ experiences in the classroom, I needed to make sure not to let my personal biases and experiences shape the findings. To avoid this, I engaged in reflective memoing.
I also recognized that serving as the instructor of the course have led to some challenges in building rapport with the research participants. When explaining the study to my students, I highlighted how participation in the study would not impact their grade in any way. While I asked students to complete the consent forms while in class, I did not look at who agreed to participate in the study until grades had been posted. During the interviews, I also needed to spend time building rapport with my study participants to make sure they felt comfortable opening up to me. I used my experiences as a counselor to connect with students and create a welcoming and safe environment during interviews.

**Case Study Design**

My study used a qualitative case study design to explore participants’ experiences in the FYS 101 course. Case study tries to gain an in-depth understanding of a clearly bounded system within its real-life context (Yin, 2011). The clearly bounded system for my study was the Fall 2019 FYS 101 Focus on Your Future course. The phenomenon I studied was students’ perceptions on their experiences in the Fall 2019 FYS 101 course. Since I was interested in students’ lived experiences, using a qualitative case study methodology was appropriate (Merriam, 2009).

**Case Selection**

I chose the Fall 2019 FYS 101 Focus on Your Future course as my case because I wanted my study to give me insights into ways to improve my own teaching in FYS 101. I also plan to share this information with my colleagues who teach similar courses at Harper College.

FYS 101 at Harper College is an information-rich case for this study, as the institution has struggled with low retention rates. Studying sense of belonging at Harper will be informative.
when exploring how other community colleges may better support students in hopes of improving retention and persistence.

I also chose Harper College as my research site because I had unique access to potential participations. In Fall 2019, I taught two sections of FYS 101: a semester-long (16-week) course and a late-start course (12 weeks). Prior to defending my dissertation proposal, I discussed my study with the chair and dean of Student Development and got permission to use my two sections as the research site for this study.

**Case Description: FYS 101 Focus on Your Future at Harper**

In Fall 2019, Harper College started to require all students to enroll in a Start Smart course. While these courses previously existed at Harper, enrollment was recommended but not required. One of these courses is FYS 101 Focus on Your Future. The FYS 101 Focus on Your Future course is designed for students who are undecided regarding their major and counts as an elective for students planning to earn an Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degree. This course focuses on developing critical thinking and information literacy skills to make better informed decisions regarding college and career planning. Focus on Your Future is a 3-credit-hour course designed to assist students with the process of chartering a path for their future. Students examine the choices that emerge before them, choose their path consciously and take responsibility for the choices they make. Throughout the course students engage in self-exploration, career exploration and decision making as it applies to them and the future they wish to create. Concrete tips and strategies are explored to assist students in preparing for success, preparing for college-level work, and preparing for career and life.

The learning outcomes for the course are:
1. Utilize support services available in the college environment to meet students’ personal and academic needs.

2. Demonstrate responsible academic behaviors appropriate to intellectual engagement, including the application of active learning strategies.

3. Critically evaluate academic and career goals and pathways for completion.

4. Interconnect course concepts and experiences (personal, campus, or community) in ways that produce new knowledge and skills.

5. Identify and evaluate issues, problems, positions, and supporting evidence through an objective critical thinking process.

6. Research print and electronic sources assess their credibility and support a position using appropriate documentation.

7. Articulate intercultural ideologies, perspectives, and contributions that people of diverse backgrounds bring to a multicultural world.

Along with meeting these course outcomes I also strive to create relationships with each student in my course along with helping the students develop a sense of belonging at Harper College.

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Participants in my study were students enrolled in FYS 101 Focus on Your Future. After receiving IRB approval, I shared with my students that I was writing my dissertation and studying the experiences of students enrolled in FYS 101. I went over the purpose of my study and the different methods of data collection: observation of verbal and non-verbal behavior during FYS 101 course sessions, document analysis of Blackboard discussion board posts,
document analysis of final papers, document analysis of the post-course reflection survey completed on the last day of class for the purpose of this study, and interviews. I informed students that they could choose which, if any, research activities to participate in. I also explained that participation would not have an impact on their grade and that I would not look at their consent forms or invite students to participate in interviews until after final grades were submitted.

After explaining the study to my students, I passed out consent forms to students that allowed them to opt into different research activities (i.e., observations, data analysis of course assignments, and interviews). I had a student collect the forms and put them in a sealed envelope. After grades were submitted, I opened the envelope to see who chose to participate in the study. At that time, I pulled course assignments and surveys of students who consented to these research activities, reviewed observation notes to mark information on the students who agreed to participate, and contacted students to set up interviews.

Of the 27 students in my two FYS 101 sections, all 27 agreed to participate in observations, allowed me to review their Blackboard discussion board posts, allowed me to analyze their final papers, and agreed to analysis of their post-course reflection surveys. Three students also participated in interviews. See Table 1 for information on students’ participation in research activities.

Of the 27 participants, 48% identified as men and 52% as women. More than half (59%) identified as White, 33% as Latinx, 4% as Black, and 4% as Asian. See Table 1 for participant demographics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Blackboard Posts</th>
<th>Final Paper</th>
<th>Post Course Reflection Survey</th>
<th>Classroom Observations</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>First-Generation Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenna</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giana</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gage</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

As is typical for case study methodology (Merriam, 2009), I used multiple methods of data collection. I explain each of those methods below.

Observations

I used participant observation to gather data for both of my FYS 101 course sections throughout the Fall semester. Specifically, I conducted observations for a total of 32 class sessions for the 16-week course and 24 class sessions for the 12-week course. As an instructor, I always focus on the level of engagement in class, along with behavior of students during class and any changes in that behavior over the course of the semester. I engage in these observations to identify students who may be struggling as well as to be able to grade participation at the end of the semester. I used those same observation techniques throughout the study for the purpose of this study. Specifically, I looked to see if there was any change in a student’s behavior from when the class began to the end of the semester, which included coming to class on time, coming prepared, and behavior in the classroom. Whenever possible, I jotted down quick notes during class of actions I observed and then spent some time after each class session compiling more detailed observation reports on the class and students’ engagement in the class. At the end of the semester once grades, were submitted, I checked which students agreed to being observed on their consent form. I then edited my notes to delete any information of students who chose not to participate in this aspect of the study.

Post-Course Reflection Survey

During the last class, I had my students complete an anonymous post-course reflection survey, which I made available on Blackboard. The survey included only open-ended questions. The purpose of this survey was to gauge students’ perceptions of their experiences in the FYS course,
their sense of belonging at Harper, and their ability to succeed in college (see Appendix A) after
consent form. I then edited my notes to delete any information of students who chose not to participate in this aspect of the study.

Post-Course Reflection Survey

During the last class, I had my students complete an anonymous post-course reflection survey, which I made available on Blackboard. The survey included only open-ended questions. The purpose of this survey was to gauge students’ perceptions of their experiences in the FYS course, their sense of belonging at Harper, and their ability to succeed in college (see Appendix A).

Document Analysis of Course Assignments

With students’ permission, I analyzed students’ responses to certain Blackboard discussion posts (see Appendix B) as well as their final papers (see Appendix C) because some of the questions I asked in the assignments closely relate to this study.

Interviews

After final grades were submitted, I checked which students consented to participating in interviews. I contacted the seven students who had initially agreed to be interviewed. Five set up interview times with me. However, only three students followed through and completed interviews.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain a more in-depth understanding of students’ perceptions of their sense of belonging at Harper College and their experiences in the FYS 101 course (see Appendix D for interview questions). Prior to each interview, I reviewed all other data the student had given me permission to use for this study, including their post-course
reflection survey responses, final paper, Blackboard posts, and my observations of their behavior in class. This other data informed my conversation during the interview.

All interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes. With permission of participants, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. One participant requested not be recorded; for this interview, I took notes during the interview and then engaged in reflective memoing immediately after the interview. All participants who completed an interview received a $10 gift card to either Target, Starbucks, or Subway, depending on their choice.

**Data Analysis**

As is typical in qualitative research, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently (Creswell, 2014). To analyze my data, I used the constant comparative method, which involves categorizing and comparing data to develop themes (Merriam, 1998). This method emphasizes the need for “constant comparisons [between data and interpretation] at every stage of the analytic process” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 79).

I started data analysis by coding Blackboard discussion board responses, followed by the post-course survey, next the final paper, and at the end interviews. The first round of coding consisted of identifying segments of data that relate to my research questions. In the second round, I coded data into categories. As is common in qualitative research, I went through my data multiple times. I revised codes as I analyzed more data to better fit what I was seeing across multiple participants and multiple data collection methods. Next, I collapsed codes into themes. As these themes emerged, I went back to my data again to compare themes to the raw data.
looking for any disconfirming data. This round of analysis allowed me to ensure that my themes were accurately reflecting my data.

**Audit Trail**

Throughout data collection and analysis, I created an audit trail. I engaged in memoing on my data collection and analysis process. I also kept track of all data collected. Hard copies of data were placed in file folders and stored in a locked cabinet. Electronic data was stored on a password-protected computer. After assigning pseudonyms to students, I marked data with the pseudonym and stripped data of all identifiable information.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of my study, I used triangulation, peer review, and disclosure of the researcher’s positionality (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) defines triangulation as using multiple methods to confirm emerging findings. For this study, I collected data through observations, document analysis of course assignments, a survey, and interviews. I was able to triangulate my findings from these different data collection methods. I also engaged in peer review by asking my colleagues who teach the course and have knowledge regarding students’ sense of belonging for feedback on my study during the development of my research design, data collection, and analysis. Soliciting their feedback allowed me to see my study and data from different perspectives, thus gaining a more accurate description and interpretation of student experiences in FYS 101. Finally, I shared my positionality earlier in this chapter in an effort to provide the reader with insights on how I approached the study and potential biases I hold.
Limitations

One limitation of my study is that I only looked at FYS 101 at one institution, a community college in the Midwest, thus I cannot generalize to students and their sense of belonging at other institutions. However, the purpose of the study was to provide me and other instructors at Harper College with valuable insights into the experiences of students in FYS 101 and thus influence practices at Harper College. In addition, in any future publications, I will provide a detailed case description, so readers can determine what findings and recommendations from my study may be applicable to their unique contexts.

A second limitation is the uneven data I have from various data collection methods. More students were willing to participate in document analysis, the post-course reflection survey, and observations, as these data collection methods did not require them to spend time outside of class. I did not get many students to participate in interviews with me. Some students initially agreed to participate but then did not respond when contacted; two set up interviews with me but rescheduled multiple times and in the end failed to show up. As I triangulated data, I had to keep in mind that my data sources were uneven and to reflect on how that impacted my analysis and interpretation of data. I also reflected on whether the students interviewed were reflective of all participants. Two of them seemed to be reflective of the group and their answers aligned with the themes I found from other data sources. One of them seemed to give me the answers she thought I was looking for; her interview data was thus less useful in understanding student experiences.

Significance

This study adds to the literature by exploring how a first-year seminar course could contribute to students’ sense of belonging in a two-year community college context. Community
college students serve a large percentage of today’s college students, particularly minoritized, first-generation, and low-income students (Flowers, 2006). Community colleges, however, struggle with retention and graduation rates, particularly for diverse students. Thus, faculty and staff working at community colleges need to know more about how to support students at their institutions. My study indicates that first-year seminars could be one effective tool to do so.

This study also adds to practice by providing my colleagues and me with practical recommendations on how to better support our students in First-year seminar courses. Gaining insights into ways we can help students feel connected to the institution can shape the curriculum for future FYS courses. Specifically, understanding what activities did or did not have the intended outcome of fostering a sense of belonging will help my colleagues and me decide what to spend time on in future FYS courses and what activities we may want to cut or revamp. The information will also help me improve my teaching, so I can create an environment, that will foster students’ sense of belonging at college and support their success. If we can create an environment where students feel a sense of belonging in the first six weeks of the semester, they will be more likely to return to campus for the Spring semester and following year. As Tinto (1988) has stated, the first six weeks are the most significant to create a relationship with the college/university. Because Harper College has made Start Smart courses mandatory for all students, it is essential that my colleagues and I teaching these courses, which includes FYS courses, know how to best utilize these courses to foster students’ sense of belonging and support their success at Harper.
CHAPTER 2

FOSTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH
A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR

Introduction

While community college is often seen as an avenue that provides access to higher education to a greater part of the population, community colleges have struggled with improving retention, persistence, and degree completion (Community College Research Center, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), only 13% of community college students graduate in two years. Within three years, approximately 22% graduate, and by four years, the number has gone up to approximately 28%. While these numbers highlight the challenge community colleges face at retaining students and graduating students, these statistics can also be misleading as many community college students attend part time and hold a variety of educational goals which may or may not fit within the commonly used definitions of retention. Nevertheless, improving retention, persistence, and completion has been the focus of the community colleges across the nation.

One reason why retention, persistence, and completion at community colleges are so low may be that community colleges tend to enroll more academically underprepared students compared to four-year universities due to their open-door admission policy. Academically underprepared students are encouraged to enroll at the community college where they can take
developmental or remedial coursework to prepare them for college-level courses (Barbatis, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reports that 42% of community college students enroll in at least one remedial course. Such developmental or remedial coursework leads to a longer path to completion, which often negatively impacts students’ ability to obtain a degree (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Recent statistics indicate that less than 20% of students who enroll in at least one remedial class graduate from college within five years of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

In addition to academic underpreparation, community college students often face competing obligations that negatively impact their retention and academic success (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012; Porter & Umbach, 2019, Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2013). Many community college students struggle to balance work and family life demands (Rath et al., 2013). Community college students tend to be nontraditional students, with 42% being over the age of 24 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In addition, 65% of students at public community colleges attend part time as compared to 29% at public four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), and 80% of community college students work, with 39% working fulltime (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Thus, unlike many of their peers at four-year institutions, community college students have less time to focus on their academics.

An initiative commonly used to improve student retention is the first-year seminar (Boylan, 2009; Crissman, 2001; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Upcraft et al., 1989). The courses geared toward new students at an institution provide academic as well as developmental support to help students learn how to navigate college (Hyers & Joslin, 1998). Research indicates that
students who do well in their first-year seminar course are more likely to be successful in college (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). First-year seminars may be particularly valuable for students of color and first-generation students (Gardener, 1986), populations that make up a large percentage of community college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). These students are less likely to engage in in- and out-of-class experiences that have been found to foster student success due to financial restraints, competing obligations, and a lack of understanding of the importance of such experiences (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Minoritized and first-generation students also often lack access to the social capital, connections to mentors and individuals who can support them in any given situation, needed to succeed in college (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). First-year seminars could be one avenue to provide the needed social capital and help students successfully adjust to and create a sense of belonging at their community college.

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence the first-year seminar, FYS 101 Focus on Your Future, has on students’ sense of belonging at Harper College, a public community college in Illinois. Specifically, my study answers the following research questions:

1. How, if at all, do community college students perceive FYS 101 at Harper College contributing to their sense of belonging to the institution?
2. What aspects of FYS 101 foster the development of a sense of belonging for students at Harper College?

**Literature Review**

First-year seminars have long been a part of the college curriculum, with the first one taking place at Lee College back in 1882 (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Seminars became more
popular in the early 1900s because the Carnegie Foundation recommended colleges create
something that allowed for freshman students to find themselves, but these were later critiqued
because they did not have enough academic rigor, and the seminar courses were eliminated in the
1960s (Drake, 1966). However, first-year seminar courses saw a return to colleges and
universities in the 1970s, when more non-traditional students, first-generation students, and
students of color began attending college (Gardener, 1986).

The first-year, especially the first few weeks, is a critical time in the development of the
student, when first-year students are focused on developing themselves; learning their own
beliefs, values, and identities; and making their own goals, hopefully leading to becoming a
successful college student who will persist (Connelly et al., 2017) Most colleges and universities
have added “some deliberate form or method of intervention to help embed students and enhance
the learning and retention” during the first semester of the First-Year of college (Palmer, Okane,
& Owens, 2009, p. 37), with first-year seminars being a popular option among such initiatives.

First-year seminars differ in form and function across institutions (Goodman &
Pascarella, 2006). First-year seminars are particularly prevalent at four-year institutions, with
scholars estimating that 95% of four-year institutions have some type of first-year experience
initiative for their students (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Research indicates that first-year
seminars have a positive impact for all kinds of students and are a good all-purpose intervention
to increase persistence from first to second year (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

First-year seminar courses are created to help students build a foundation of success in
their first-year, so students can learn how to support their own success in college (Gardener,
1986). First-year seminars may do so by allowing students work with different faculty and staff
on campus educating students regarding support services on campus, informing students of different clubs and activities on campus along with educating students on campus student involvement, teaching students about the library and the services they offer, reviewing study skills and time management, and learning the steps to career decision making (Upcraft, Gardener & Associates, 1989). By doing so, first-year seminars can help students have a smoother transition from high school to college, create relationships on campus and thus develop social capital needed to succeed, get connected to in- and out-of-class engagement opportunities, feel more connected to campus, and become more confident in their ability to succeed (Boylan, 2009; Crissman, 2001; Connelly et al., 2017; Keup, 2005). Since such experiences have been found to be essential for academic success (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Majer, 2009; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014), first-year seminars are also a great tool in supporting students’ academic success in college (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

First-year seminars are not only common at four-year institutions but are and have been used by many community colleges to improve student outcomes and retention (Cuseo, 2010; Kelley, 2017; Weaver, 2018). For example, as early as in the 1990s, research completed at Sacramento City College showed students who enrolled and completed their FYS course persisted at a 50% higher rate than those who did not enroll in the course (Stupka, 1993). Research also indicates that first-year seminar participation can lead to better GPAs and higher pass rates for community college students (Cuseo, 2010). Similar to First-year seminars at four-year institutions, first-year seminar courses at community colleges are used to introduce students to college and connect them with campus resources. In a community college, the focus may be
more on academic resources, for example by introducing students to their academic advisors (Jaijairam, 2016), rather than out-of-class engagement as at four-year institutions.

**Theoretical Framework: Sense of Belonging**

This study was guided by the concept of sense of belonging, as defined by Strayhorn (2019), and understanding from the literature on how students develop a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging refers to “an individual’s psychological experiences and, most importantly, their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in particular context such as family, school or college” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 11). In other words, in a university setting, fostering sense of belonging refers to students feeling they are cared about, they matter, and they belong in college.

Literature on students’ sense of belonging initially referred to Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs and stressed that belonging is a basic need for students to be successful. A student needs to feel “valued, needed, and significant within a system or environment” to have their basic need of feeling a sense of belonging met (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 21). Sense of belonging is thus a “subjective evaluation of the quality of relationships with others on campus” (Strayhorn, 2009b, p. 505). For a student to feel a sense of belonging at an institution of higher education, they also need to believe that they can be successful at this institution or, in other words, belong at that institution (Freeman et al., 2007). Thus, for students to develop a sense of belonging, they need to be able to (a) create positive relationships with faculty and staff, (b) create positive relationships with peers, (c) become knowledgeable about campus resources, and (d) believe that they can be successful at the institution (Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2009a; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). This conceptualization of how students develop a sense of belonging guided this research study.
Research Design

To explore how participation in FYS 101 fosters students’ development of sense of belonging, I used a qualitative case study design. Case studies are explorations of a clearly bounded system or case within its real-world context (Merriam, 1998). The case for my study was the Fall 2019 FYS 101 Focus on the Future First-Year Seminar course at Harper College. I collected data through observations of students in the classroom, analyzing Blackboard discussion board posts and students’ final papers, collecting data through an anonymous post-course reflection survey, and interviewing student volunteers.

Case Selection

I chose the Fall 2019 FYS 101 Focus on Your Future course as my case because I wanted my study to give me insights into ways to improve my own teaching in FYS 101. I also plan to share this information with my colleagues who teach similar courses at Harper College.

FYS 101 at Harper College is an information-rich case for this study, as the institution has struggled with low retention rates. Studying sense of belonging at Harper will be informative when exploring how community colleges may better support students in hopes of improving retention and persistence.

I also chose Harper College as my research site because I had unique access to potential participants. In Fall 2019, I taught two sections of FYS 101: a semester-long (16-week) course and a late-start course (12 weeks).

Case Description: FYS 101 Focus on Your Future at Harper

I chose the First-year seminar course at Harper College as the case because of the institution’s low retention rate. Harper College only has a 29% graduation rate. Graduation rates
are particularly low for men (24% compared to 35% for women) and students of color (ranging from 18% for Black or African American students to 27% for Asian students compared to 33% for White students; College Tuition Compare, 2019). Men of color are particularly at risk for dropping out early or failing to graduate, with graduation rates of 6% for Black/African American men, 18% for Hispanic men, and 20% for Asian men (College Tuition Compare, 2019). These statistics are concerning because Harper attracts a diverse student body, with 28% of students identifying as Hispanic, 13% as Asian, 4% as Black or African American, 50% as White, and 5% falling into other racial or ethnic categories in Fall 2018. Of those students, 55% identify as women and 45% as men.

In Fall 2019, Harper College started to require all students to enroll in a Start Smart course. While these courses previously existed at Harper, enrollment was recommended but not required. One of these courses is FYS 101 Focus on Your Future. The FYS 101 Focus on Your Future course is designed for students who are undecided regarding their major and counts as an elective for students planning to earn an Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degree.

This course focuses on developing critical thinking and information literacy skills to make better informed decisions regarding college and career planning. Focus on Your Future is a 3-credit-hour course designed to assist students with the process of charting a path for their future. Students examine the choices that emerge before them, choose their path consciously, and take responsibility for the choices they make. Throughout the course, students engage in self-exploration, career exploration, and decision making as it applies to them and the future they wish to create. Concrete tips and strategies are explored to assist students in preparing for success, preparing for college-level work, and preparing for career and life.
Researcher Positionality

I also chose Harper College’s FYS 101 Focus on Your Future course for my study because I had unique access to the research site and participants. In Fall 2019, I served as instructor for two sections of FYS 101 Focus on Your Future, which allowed me to incorporate aspects of my data collection into the course structure. Serving in a dual role as instructor and researcher, I however also had to make sure that students did not feel pressured to participate in the study and that they would feel comfortable sharing their perspectives with me. Thus, when I introduced the study in my classes, I highlighted how participation, or lack thereof, would not impact their grade in any way. While students completed the consent forms in class, I did not look at who had consented to participate until after final grades were submitted. One of my data collection tools – an end-of-course survey – also allowed students to shared information anonymously.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants in my study were students enrolled in FYS 101 Focus on Your Future. I introduced the study half-way through the Fall semester during a class session. I asked students to complete a consent form indicating which, if any, research activities they would like to participate in. While students completed the consent form, I left the room and asked a student to collect the forms and put them in an envelope. I did not open that envelope until after final grades were submitted.

Of the 27 students in my two FYS 101 sections, all 27 agreed to participate in observations, allowed me to review their Blackboard discussion board posts, allowed me to analyze their final papers, and agreed to analysis of their post-course reflection surveys. Three
students also participated in interviews. See Table 1 for information on students’ participation in research activities.

Of the 27 participants, 48% identified as men and 52% as women. More than half (59%) identified as White, 33% as Latinx, 4% as Black, and 4% as Asian. Participant demographics, overall, were representative of the student body at Harper Community College, though Asian students were underrepresented. See Table 2 for participant demographics.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

As is typical for case study methodology (Merriam, 2009), I used multiple methods of data collection. First, I conducted participant observations of the students in both of my FYS 101 course sections throughout the Fall semester (a total of 32 class sessions for the 16-week course and 24 class sessions for the 12-week course) and engaged in reflective memoing on what I observed during course sessions. Second, during the last class session, I asked students to complete an anonymous post-course reflection survey via Blackboard. The survey included only open-ended questions and strove to gauge students’ perceptions of their experiences in the FYS course, their sense of belonging at Harper, and their ability to succeed in college. Third, I analyzed students’ responses to certain Blackboard discussion posts as well as their final papers. In addition, I invited students to participate in 45-minute, semi-structured interviews after the course ended to gain further insights into their experiences in the FYS course. Only three students completed interviews with me.

As is common in qualitative research, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently (Creswell, 2014). To analyze my data, I used the constant comparative method, which involves categorizing and comparing data to develop themes (Merriam, 1998). This method emphasizes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Blackboard Posts</th>
<th>Final Paper</th>
<th>Post Course Reflection Survey</th>
<th>Classroom Observations</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>First-Generation Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenna</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giana</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gage</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the need for “constant comparisons [between data and interpretation] at every stage of the analytic process” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 79).

I started data analysis by coding Blackboard discussion board responses, followed by the post-course survey, next the final paper, and at the end, interviews. The first round of coding consisted of identifying segments of data that relate to my research questions. In the second round, I coded data into categories. As is common in qualitative research, I went through my data multiple times. I revised codes as I analyzed more data to better fit what I was seeing across multiple participants and multiple data collection methods. Next, I collapsed codes into themes. As these themes emerged, I went back to my data again to compare themes to the raw data looking for any disconfirming data. This round of analysis allowed me to ensure that my themes were accurately reflecting my data.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of my study, I used triangulation, peer review, and disclosure of the researcher’s positionality (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) defines triangulation as using multiple methods to confirm emerging findings. For this study, I collected data through observations, document analysis of course assignments, a survey, and interviews. I was able to triangulate my findings from these different data collection methods. I also engaged in peer review by asking my colleagues who are teaching the course and have knowledge regarding students’ sense of belonging for feedback on my study during the development of my research design, data collection, and analysis. Soliciting their feedback allowed me to see my study and data from different perspectives, thus gaining a more accurate description and interpretation of student experiences in FYS 101. Finally, I shared my positionality earlier in
Chapter in an effort to provide the reader with insights on how I approached the study and potential biases I hold.

Findings

I found that the structure of FYS contributed to students’ sense of belonging in a variety of ways: (a) FYS ensured that students connected with their advisors, which was important to making them feel supported on campus; (b) activities that focused on introducing resources allowed students to get to know campus better; (c) students were able to explore their strengths, which helped them feel more confident in their ability to succeed in college; (d) as the FYS instructor, I was able to create an atmosphere where students felt comfortable and were not afraid to ask questions; and (e) students were able to connect with peers in FYS, which fostered their sense of belonging at the institution. In addition, while FYS contributed to students’ sense of belonging, students also shared the importance of other instructors and staff members being caring and supportive to fostering their sense of belonging at Harper. I discuss each of these themes next.

Connections with Advisors

FYS ensured that students connected with their advisors, which was important to making them feel supported on campus. As part of FYS, students were required to meet with their advisors. When introducing this assignment in class, I observed many students were put off and felt they didn’t need help choosing their courses. Other students shared that they had bad experiences in high school with counselors and thus were afraid of having the same experience. At the same time, many of the students admitted in class that they were unsure of degree requirements or what steps they would need to take for transferring. One of our class sessions
focused on the role of advisors at Harper along with what an appointment would look like. This course discussion seemed to help students realize the value of having an advisor at Harper. Our conversations and the required meeting with their advisor helped students develop relationships with their advisors and recognize that an advisor is someone they may go to with questions. For example, a student shared in the anonymous post course reflection survey:

I feel like I’ve connected most to my advisor. We immediately bonded because we are both Hispanic so we started talking about things that we eat and do that are in common. He has also help me feel more comfortable in my decisions because I am undecided so I’m trying to explore the classes Harper has. During my first meeting with him I kept saying sorry because I was so unsure about where I wanted to go with my classes, but he told me that he’s here for me and that it’s okay to be unsure because he will be there for me and help me throughout the way.

This student seems to have been nervous about not having chosen a major yet. The student mentions apologizing for not knowing what they wanted to do; it seems that the student felt that they were doing something wrong. The advisor reassured the student that it was okay to take your time as you figure out what you want to do. This seems to have helped the student feel more confident in what they were doing.

Similarly, another student, George, connected with his advisor, which fostered his sense of belonging. George shared in his interview, “My old advisor Brian, he made me feel like he really wanted to get to know me and help me with my education.” Participants like George seemed surprised at advisors genuinely wanting to get to know them and support them. In addition to building relationships with advisors, what was most important for many participants was that their advisors believed that they could be successful. For example, Sarah shared in her interview:

I was so nervous to attend college, but I was a part of the OMD Program, so I was required to come on campus in the summer for events, and at first I was so nervous, because the campus is so big, and high school was really hard, however I met my advisor,
and she immediately told me I was meant to be here. I realized then I wanted to do school, so I could make her proud—she was the first person who believed I could be a college student. Participants like Sarah questioned their ability to be successful in college. But once Sarah knew someone else believed that she could succeed, she started believing it herself, which made her feel like she actually belonged in college.

**Getting to Know Harper College and Campus Resources**

Activities focused on introducing resources allowed students to get to know campus better. One of the activities FYS students participate in at the beginning of the semester is a scavenger hunt, where students visit either in person or virtually different success offices on campus, so students are aware of the resources available to them. When I shared with the class they would be travelling around campus to get to know the campus, I observed students groaning and complaining that they didn’t want to walk around campus and visit different offices. However, when students returned to class after the activity, they shared their surprise at the many resources offered on campus to help them be a successful student, along with the number of students who actually use the services.

While students initially did not seem excited about the activity, the anonymous post-course survey indicates that many of them found it beneficial. For example, one student shared, “I really like how we did the scavenger hunt in the beginning. It was very helpful to know where things were and how to get to different things.” Having to physically walk to the offices seemed to have been useful, as participants indicated part of the value of the activity was in knowing how to find offices on campus. In addition, some participants indicated that visiting various offices not only helped them get to know campus but also made them feel more comfortable at the institution. For example, one student shared in the post-course survey, “The scavenger hunt
This participant connected knowing where things are on campus with feeling comfortable, which in turn helped the student feel at home at the institution or like they belonged.

Exploring Their Strengths

Another theme revolved around students being able to explore their strengths in FYS, which made them feel more confident in their ability to succeed in college. One required activity for FYS is to take the Clifton Strengths Finder. In class discussions, I observed that students had a really hard time finding positive adjectives to describe themselves; however, on the flipside, they were able to easily find things they needed to improve on. Prior to beginning the activity students were clamoring they wouldn’t learn anything new about themselves because they already knew their strengths. But when they received their results, I observed an immediate change in their posture as well as students proudly sharing what their strengths were. One student shared in the post-course reflection survey that completing Strengths Finder helped them learn “important things that I feel I will carry throughout my life.” This student seems to really value knowing his strengths, as he sees it as something that will help him beyond college.

Another student shared in the post-course reflection survey, “FYS 101 helped me a little in realizing things about myself, for example the five strengths activity (Strengths Quest).” The student’s comment indicates that she may not have been aware of her strengths; participating in this activity raised her self-awareness, specifically related to things she may be good at. Similarly, another student wrote that Strengths Finder helped them “because it made you think about who you are and what values are important to you and how all these factors can help you make a more solid decision in choosing a career that I will enjoy and love.” This student,
similarly, highlighted the learning about oneself but connected that to choosing a career. For others, it wasn’t just about choosing a career but being successful – in the career as well as at Harper. For example, one student shared in the post-course reflection survey, “I was able to see how a connection to myself and my skills could help support me in my chosen career, while making me feel I belong at Harper working toward my life goals.” The student connects their strengths to their chosen career, recognizing how the things they are good at may allow them to excel in their career. In addition, the student comments on how the activity helped them feel like they belong at Harper. The student may have questioned their ability to succeed at college; recognizing that they have strengths – particularly strengths related to their chosen career - may have made the student feel more confident about their ability to succeed, thus helping the student recognize that they belong in college.

**Comfortable Atmosphere Where You Can Ask Questions**

First, students shared that as the FYS instructor, I created an atmosphere where they felt comfortable, could be themselves, and were not afraid to ask questions. One of the most important rules discussed and set at the beginning of class was that everyone should feel comfortable asking questions. Early in class, we talked about how everyone was new to college, and other people probably had the same question, but they might be too afraid to ask. In this conversation, I shared with students that I believe that they belong in college and that they have done the work and earned the right to be a college student. I let students know that I want to be one of their biggest supporters because I know they can be successful, even when they don’t believe in themselves.
In addition, I created a “parking lot” discussion board, where students could post any questions they were afraid to ask in person and I would respond. This approach to setting the stage for the class and creating a comfortable atmosphere seemed to work as students shared they felt comfortable asking questions in class. For example, a student shared in the anonymous end-of-course survey: “[My FYS instructor] made me feel very comfortable in class and not nervous to ask questions.” Similarly, another student shared in the survey, “After this first semester being at Harper I was able to get comfortable around my FYS 101 teacher. She has become someone who I would not be afraid to ask any questions about.” My observations also backed this theme. I noticed that at the start of the semester, it was very difficult to get students to become active participants in class. The “parking lot” discussion board, however, soon saw increasing traffic, and throughout the course of the semester, students also became more talkative in class and felt more comfortable asking questions in person.

**Connections with Peers**

Students were able to connect with peers through FYS, which fostered their sense of belonging at the institution. FYS 101 class sizes are limited to 20 students per class. The goal is to have a class size that is large enough to break students into small groups for certain activities but small enough to allow students to get to know their peers in the class. The small class size as well as the interactive nature of the course allowed students to make meaningful connections with other students. For example, on student shared in the anonymous post-course survey:

FYS was a small class which helped me connect with a lot of people. We all bonded on the same things and liked talking about things in class. This class also had a lot of group work that encouraged me to talk more.
The fact that the student emphasized the small course size may indicate that many of the student’s other courses are probably larger, thus making it more challenging to get to know others in the course. The student also seemed to credit the interactive nature of the course and its content – group work, in-class discussions that sometimes got more personal and allowed students to share who they are and what they are interested in – with their ability to connect with others.

Similarly, another student shared in the post-course survey:

FYS 101 helped me get out of my comfort zone and get to know new people. I’m not too social, but I got to talk to others and learn a lot about them through several activities and exercises that were pretty fun.

The interactive nature of the course seemed to force this student, who considered themself “not too social,” to interact with others, which, in the end, the student was grateful for. Other participants also shared how FYS made them connect with peers they otherwise may not have felt comfortable interacting with. For example, Grace shared in her interview, “I was able to make new friends, and we tried to take a class together in the Spring, and these were girls I would have never gone up to before this class.” Not only did FYS allow Grace to connect with other students she normally may not have been friends with, her comment also indicates that these connections went beyond FYS. Having “friends” is likely to make her feel a greater sense of belonging at the institution. Moreover, being able to enroll in courses with friends may make Grace feel more comfortable in these other courses. She will also have a support network should she struggle in the course. Thus, the connections students made in FYS may not only shape students’ sense of belonging at the institution but also increase their ability to succeed.
Connections with Faculty and Staff Outside of FYS

Finally, while FYS seemed to foster a sense of belonging for students at the institution, connections with faculty and staff – outside of FYS – also contributed to students’ sense of belonging. The second theme focused on how FYS helped students connect with their advisors. If these advisors, however, had not been as caring and encouraging, students would likely not have seen their required meeting with an advisor as fostering their sense of belonging at the institution. In addition to advisors, students also shared that many of their other faculty were caring and empathetic. For example, one student shared in the post-course reflection survey:

I feel pretty comfortable with each and every one of my teachers. Everyone at this campus is friendly; it’s actually been a shock, the transition from high school to college. I honestly don’t really go out to get help from the other buildings and counselors because I tend to do things on my own, but I do feel comfortable enough with my professors if I need to ask some questions.

The student seemed surprised at the friendliness of instructors at the institution, as the student had not had the best experience with teachers in high school. While the student indicates that they do not often ask for help, they share that they feel comfortable going to an instructor if they need something.

Similarly, another participant listed several instructors in the post-course survey as people they’d be comfortable asking questions to. The student shared:

One teacher that I feel as though I am comfortable asking questions would have to be ... my FYS teacher, ..., my Intro to Ed teacher, ... my American Experience teacher and last but not least ... my Intro to Theatre teacher.

The student listed four instructors. As this was the first semester at the institution for all participants, the student is likely only taking four or five courses; thus it appears that the student is comfortable with all or almost all of their instructors. While participants did not directly connect the friendliness of instructors with their sense of belonging, feeling comfortable asking
their instructors’ questions is likely to help students feel more confident in their ability to succeed in their various courses, which in turn is likely to improve their sense of belonging at the institution.

**Discussion**

Observations, analysis of course assignments and an anonymous post-course reflection survey, and interviews indicated that FYS 101 helped students connect with instructors and staff at the institution, get to know resources on campus better, and see themselves as a college student able to achieve their goals. By doing so, FYS 101 allowed students to feel “valued, needed, and significant” within the community at their institution, conditions that Strayhorn (2019, p. 21) indicates are essential for developing a sense of belonging.

My findings support existing literature that indicates that to develop a sense of belonging, students need to create positive relationships with faculty and staff as well as peers, become knowledgeable of campus resources, and believe that they can be successful at the institution (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2009a; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Because students at community colleges may not have the same opportunities to connect with peers and faculty or staff through out-of-class experiences, a course like FYS 101 can become particularly important in allowing students to develop positive relationships and find a support network. The network established during FYS 101 went beyond the boundaries of the course as participants like Grace talked about planning on taking future courses together with her friends from FYS 101.

For FYS in a community college context to be effective, the course needs to have specific goals. For Fall 2019 the goal was to help students find a sense of belonging at Harper and
believe they could succeed in college. Considering the community college context, where students may choose to transfer to a four-year institution for further education, what was most important for students was to see themselves as a college student. Particularly first-generation students or minoritized students may face imposter syndrome – questioning whether they belong in college and can succeed there (Canning et al., 2020; Peteet et al., 2015). Thus, by fostering a sense of belonging in college, FYS allowed students to see themselves as a college students and, at least partially, overcome their imposter syndrome.

While FYS 101 provided opportunities for connections with faculty and staff, the welcoming and caring attitudes of staff members like academic advisors and faculty in the students’ other courses were essential for the creation of those positive relationships. Previous research stresses the importance of faculty and staff providing academic and personal validation to students in an effort to support student success (Barnett, 2011; Majer, 2009; Rendon, 1994). My findings similarly highlight the importance of faculty and staff engaging in validating behaviors. Several participants shared the impact it had on them when faculty or staff believed in their ability to succeed. Particularly first-generation and/or minoritized students, who may not feel as prepared for college, can benefit from such validation and support.

It is important to note that sense of belonging takes time to develop; one course or one initiative will not be enough to ensure that students feel a sense of belonging at the institution. However, FYS can be one step an institution can take toward developing a sense of belonging, but this needs to be an ongoing institution-wide effort. Faculty, staff, and administrators need to realize students may not feel they belong at the institution and thus continuously strive toward making students feel welcome and accepted on campus.
Limitations

While this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of community college students taking FYS 101, this study also has several limitations. A first limitation is the uneven data I have from various data collection methods. More students were willing to participate in document analysis, the anonymous post-course reflection survey, and observations, as these data collection methods did not require them to spend time outside of class. I did not get many students to participate in interviews with me. Some students initially agreed to participate but then did not respond when contacted; two set up interviews with me but rescheduled multiple times and in the end failed to show up. Thus, most of my findings are based on responses from data sources other than interviews (post-course reflection survey, course assignments, observations), which led to the second limitation of this study. Most data sources often included only brief comments from students and, due to the nature of these data sources, I was unable to ask students to elaborate on their responses. An advantage of these data sources and in particular the anonymous post-course reflection survey was that students did not feel pressured to provide certain answers but were able to share their thoughts without fear of repercussions. In addition, instructors teaching FYS 101 courses could easily replicate my study design, as most of these data sources can be incorporated into the course structure. Thus, my study could serve as an example for a way to evaluate FYS 101 courses and the role they play in fostering students’ sense of belonging at an institution.

Implications

My study also leads to several implications for future research, institutional assessment, and practice. Future research should compare the experiences of developing a sense of belonging
of students who participate in a first-year seminar at a community college with those who do not enroll in this type of course. Such research could provide further insights into the ways in which students develop sense of belonging at a community college. Such research may also consider comparing retention, persistence, or degree completion rates to understand not only students’ perceptions of their sense of belonging at the institution but also how that sense of belonging shapes persistence, retention, and degree completion.

My study is also an example of a way to assess students’ experiences in a first-year seminar course and, more generally, at an institution. Instructors of first-year seminar courses can build in assessment strategies, such as an anonymous post-course survey, to get a better sense of students’ experiences. Such assessment allows institutions to hear students’ voices and gain insights into their perspectives of what is and is not working.

Regarding implications for practice, my findings indicate a need to validate students’ belonging and ability to succeed in college, particularly for the student population community colleges like Harper serves. Community college students attract a large percentage of today’s college students, particularly minoritized, first-generation, and low-income students (Flowers, 2006). These students, like many of the participants in my study, may question their ability to succeed in college and thus may not feel that they belong in college. Faculty and staff thus need to be intentional in creating a sense of belonging on campus. One way to do so is to offer training to all FYS 101 instructors on how to create a culture of belonging in the classroom. Such training could emphasize the need to create a welcoming environment in the classroom, encouraging students to ask questions, validating students’ ability to succeed in college, and connecting students with campus resources and academic support staff. Such approaches to
teaching FYS could help students create a connection with someone on campus, which seemed important to creating a sense of belonging for participants in my study.

Another strategy may be to embed learning modules into every FYS 101 course covering the topics and activities that students found most helpful, such as the Strengths Finder activity and the campus scavenger hunt. While instructors could alter these activities in alignment with their teaching styles, encouraging everyone to include certain activities that have been found helpful for building a sense of belonging could lead to a more consistent approach to helping students adjust to campus. Institutions can then assess the effectiveness of this approach and revise it as needed in an effort to best support students’ sense of belonging at the institution and, by doing so, their persistence, retention, and degree completion.

Finally, as my study indicated that other faculty and staff played an important role in helping students create a sense of belonging on campus, training should also be provided to other faculty and staff. Creating a sense of belonging on campus cannot be accomplished with one initiative, like a first-year seminar, on its own but requires a campus-wide commitment to supporting student access through providing welcoming and validating spaces for students.
CHAPTER 3
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

When I started my doctoral program, I never thought I would ever be at this point—it seemed so unattainable. To be honest, I started the program because I started a new job, and the vice president reminded me that I said in my interview that I wanted to receive my doctorate degree. Prior to having a family and being solely focused on my career, I was aiming to be a top administrator at a community college. However, during my tenure in the program, I had a few life experiences that influenced my career goals. During the program I was blessed with two beautiful children who became my focus, while school took a backseat, and then my husband had a health issue where he needed to retrain, so I stopped attending school altogether, because I was afraid of completing the dissertation.

There are two reasons I decided to return to pursue my dissertation: One is that my profession is slowly dying. Very few community colleges have counselors, with the trend moving toward advisors, and I didn’t receive my master’s in Counseling to be an advisor. I have been blessed to work in my dream job for the past sixteen years, but I know at any time this role could disappear, but I also know I want to continue working at a community college. By having my doctorate, I would be able to move into administration, so I could continue working at the community college. One day at work, one of my colleagues, a past vice president, came up to me and said, “I see so much of myself in you—I know you are going to do great things here;
however, you might need to start thinking about moving into administration.” Her comment resonated with me and made me reflect on why, if others can see me in that role, can’t I? The second reason I returned to the program is because of my children. We work hard to instill in our kids the value that when you start something you complete it. I want my children to see that if you work hard enough and put your mind toward something, you can complete it.

When I started the program, I now realize, I didn’t have the relationship with my dissertation chair that I have now. Looking back to when I started the program, I wish I had made more of an effort to meet with my dissertation chair from the start of my program, along with working with my chair to determine what I wanted to study. I had most recently been working with nontraditional adult students, so I was leaning toward doing my dissertation on that population because I didn’t know what else I should be focusing on. However, I wasn’t passionate about that population, so I continued going through the program taking classes to meet graduation requirements. It wasn’t until I was sitting in class on a Saturday in Naperville with Dr. Nyunt, after giving a practice dissertation proposal, that she asked questions about what I really wanted to study, and she shared Terrell Strayhorn’s conceptualization of sense of belonging, and I knew this was it.

Along with being a counselor at a community college I also teach a first-year seminar (FYS) course, and I wanted to know if FYS supported a student’s sense of belonging at the community college. I wanted to know if FYS could help support and encourage students to continue on their paths toward a college degree. I know students would not want to stay at Harper if they didn’t feel like they belonged because many of the students I work with constantly
tell me that they weren’t good high school students and they don’t know how to be a college student. I wasn’t sure what could help students to start feeling like they belonged.

Not everything in my dissertation research project turned out as I had planned. I aimed to interview about 10 students after their Fall 2020 grades were posted, along with using data I collected in class from Blackboard discussion posts, an anonymous post-course reflection survey, class observations, and final papers. I was, however, only able to interview three students.

When I first brought up the interview, I had students who seemed really excited about it, and they appeared to really want their voices to be heard. A few students came up to me at the end of class asking if I had read the informed consent forms yet. I had to share, however, that I wasn’t going to open my forms until grades had been posted for the Fall 2019 semester to avoid students feeling pressured to participate. Having to wait to contact students for interviews until after the semester ended led to one of the biggest struggles I had with my data collection: getting students to come to the interview. I reached out numerous times via email, text, and phone, but I was only able to get three students to participate in the interviews. I had two additional interviews scheduled, but the students were no shows. I feel like I had really good relationships with my students when we were in class and I saw them twice a week; however, when the new semester started, my students had moved onto the their next classes, and this wasn’t a priority for them anymore. I think it would have helped if I would have contacted the students immediately after I posted grades to schedule the interviews, which might have helped with the timelines, but that was difficult due to the holidays being right after the semester ended. While I understand IRB’s concerns about students feeling pressured to participate in interviews, it may have led to
even more participation if I could have interviewed students toward the end of the course, rather than waiting until afterwards.

I felt I was lucky to be able to have access to so much additional research from my classes. Since I had previously taught FYS, I already had the course and activities planned out. I, however, altered the Blackboard discussion questions and the anonymous post-course survey to align better with my research purpose and questions. After Dr. Nyunt and I created the questions, I had the student workers in the Counseling Office read them to make sure we were using college-student appropriate language and that my questions were easily understandable and would make sense to students. The Blackboard discussion board questions and final papers were effective data collection tools, as they were part of the class; they were not additional work students needed to complete. Students solely had to indicate on the consent form that they were comfortable with me using this information for my research, which every single student in my class did.

The post-course reflection survey was anonymous, so I could not require it for class. However, the reason I had good participation in the post-course survey (all students completed it) was because I gave students time during a class period to complete the post-course survey. On the last class meeting day, I reserved a computer lab, and I showed the students how to get onto the survey in Blackboard at the start of our class. We did not cover new material during this class; students were asked to first complete the survey, then they could work on their final or any course assignment that they hadn’t completed yet.

I also feel the Blackboard discussion posts, post-course reflection survey, and final paper formed an effective data collection method because students were able to share their opinions via
a safe environment. Students who may not have felt comfortable speaking up in class seemed to be more comfortable sharing their opinions in writing. While the final papers and Blackboard discussion board posts had their names attached, the post-course reflection survey provided an additional avenue to give feedback that was anonymous. I found data from the post-course reflection survey particularly insightful as students could share anything they wanted via that instrument. The data collection through the assignments worked really well, which allowed me to gain valuable data to help in my practice. If I were to do another research project with undergraduate students, I would definitely look for ways to incorporate data collection into course assignments or other required activities of students again.

**Application to Practice**

My research has made me a better instructor along with a better counselor. It has always been important to me to create a relationship with every student I meet with during a counseling session or who I teach in class. I never want a student to feel like they are a burden when they come to me. Instead, I want them to know I am someone who cares about them along with being one of their biggest supporters on their college journey. However, after completing my research I realized students need to build a connection to their institution so they feel like they belong and they can be successful.

I got a chance to apply what I learned from my research the following semester while I was still working on finishing up data analysis. During the Spring 2020 semester, when we were told we would be moving to online instruction, it became apparent to me that I would need to complete a lot of outreach to my students. Even though I was only an instructor, I wanted my students to know I cared about them, and I was there to help them find their success in the
course, whether that meant staying enrolled or if it meant dropping the course. I learned rather quickly that students were not checking their school email, and I needed to use their personal email or call them on their phone. In the past I would have not spent so much time on outreach to students who quit attending class, but from my research I knew this was important, and it could make the difference for many students. One of the students from my class sent me an email thanking me for believing in him, and I knew the time spent on the outreach was impactful.

With the COVID-19 pandemic it has been apparent to me students need to feel they belong at college even more than during a regular semester. Right now, students may not be sure of their next steps, or due to COVID, they may have had to change their plans and attend a community college instead of a four-year college or university. Then there are no longer in-person courses; but at my institution, courses are solely online. During the first week of classes students were continually emailing me because they didn’t know how to use Blackboard or they were unsure if they should be at college because they don’t know how to learn online. I worked to respond to student emails sooner than 24 hours because I wanted my students to know they were important to me, they mattered, and they were not just a name on my roster. When replying to each student I made sure to start with something positive along with telling the students I believe in them and they can be successful in college. It was harder for me to share this message, so I had to work on becoming creative, for I knew from my research the impact that connecting with someone at the college could have. As I write this, we are almost at week five, and I have not had a single student drop my course.
This semester has been challenging with teaching asynchronously, but I have been working with students to create relationships with their classmates by having the students engage in rich conversations in the discussion board, as the importance of connections with peers was something my findings highlighted. For Week 1, I had students share three things about themselves, and many of the students shared they wanted to get to know their classmates, and when one student shared they wanted to meet other people, students started having their own conversations, which led to conversations happening outside the class.

My findings also emphasized the value of the scavenger hunt activity I usually organize for my FYS students. Thus, I moved this activity to a virtual format. For Week 2, I had students complete a virtual scavenger hunt to show students even though Harper is virtual it doesn’t mean their resources are not available and accessible. Many of my students were surprised to see that the Tutoring and Writing Centers were offering student appointments virtually, along with the library having many resources available. When students posted in the weekly discussion board after the activity, they couldn’t believe there were all these resources available for them to use even though the campus is closed. In addition, because my findings highlight the importance of students connecting with their academic advisors, the final question on the scavenger hunt asked students to name their academic advisor. Most students knew who their advisor was, and for the students who didn’t know I was able to respond to their assignment with their advisor. In the next few weeks one of the assignments for the students will be to contact their advisor and set up an appointment. Thus, while many activities had to change this year due to the virtual format of my class, I was still able to incorporate what I learned through my research into my course.
When meeting with students I have been counseling I have also been working to create a stronger relationship and to be specific in my language to let students know they belong at college. Many of the students have been sharing feelings of being overwhelmed because we are working remotely. It has become apparent to me students need to feel they belong at this weird time or else they will quit attending college. With so much unknown in the world, the students need to feel they are at the right place for them. During my counseling sessions, I have spent more time getting to know the students personally prior to talking about courses—I have been focused on getting to know the whole person, which has helped to create relationships where students feel comfortable sending me an email asking questions or just checking in to let me know how life is going.

I believe I am a better practitioner because of my research study in that I am more intentional now in helping students create a sense of belonging at the community college. I also have a better idea of strategies that may work to make that happen. Prior to conducting this study, I didn’t realize how impactful students not connecting with their institution could be on their self-concept regarding their ability to be successful college students. My research showed me how important it is for me in my roles as instructor and counselor to help a student make a connection and recognize that they belong at college.

**Application to Research**

Writing a journal article has to be one the hardest things I have ever done. I learned writing a journal article takes a long time, and as a researcher I need to be very diligent with regard to conducting research, from collecting data to analyzing data and writing the actual article. When I first started working on the article, I felt like there was no way I could ever do
this—the imposter syndrome was very strong. Once I worked with Dr. Nyunt to chunk out sections of the article, it became more realistic that I could do this. This helped me recognize the importance of breaking a large project—like a journal article—down into sections and taking it one section at a time. It was also helpful to see different examples of journal articles to have an idea of what my writing should look like. First, I was surprised at how concise the literature review is in a journal article (the literature review had been the most challenging part of my proposal); however, when I realized how concise the literature review is, I realized I could write this. I also focused on the organization of the journal articles I reviewed and saw how well they flowed. I am not sure why I hadn’t focused on this before, but I believe when I was reading articles for research, I was reading differently than when reviewing an article to learn how to write a journal article.

My training as a counselor helped me when conducting in-person interviews. I could use my counseling skills, such as focusing on non-verbal language and asking follow-up questions, to get more in-depth data. While I struggled with the writing aspects of the dissertation process, I felt much more comfortable with collecting data, particularly as it came to interviewing participants.

As discussed earlier, I had low participation in interviews. I thought students would be really excited to share their ideas and have their voices heard. While the students seemed eager to have their voices heard, they wanted to do so on their own time. If I were to conduct a similar research project again, I would try to either complete interviews earlier in the semester or build them into the course, possibly as individual check-in meetings where I could discuss students’
experiences and they could then choose whether they were comfortable with me using that data for my research.

I also learned you can spend a lot time on an interview and receive no usable data. One of my participants was really upset they had to take the FYS 101 course and thus wanted to share their dissatisfaction with having to take the course in the interview. They were very passionate about how this course was a waste of their time. However, when I tried to bring the subject back to the interview questions, they had their own agenda. Rather than answering my questions, the student shared their own ideas about what the community college curriculum should be like. Little information from the interview was useable, as much of did not relate to my research questions. I had to learn to be okay with that and focus on the useable data I received from other participants in the study.

The take-away I am most surprised with is that I believe I want to do research again. After completing the entire process of researching and writing a dissertation, I know I have gained valuable information from my research which helps me become a better practitioner. Yes, the data collection was challenging at times and the research to complete the literature review was so overwhelming that I wanted to quit, but the information I gained can help me be my best self when I am teaching and counseling.


Crissman, J. L. (2001). The Impact of Clustering First-Year Seminars with English Composition Courses on New Students’ Retention Rates. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 3*(2), 137–152. [https://doi.org/10.2190/FJHU-RT1X-GA6Y-EME5](https://doi.org/10.2190/FJHU-RT1X-GA6Y-EME5)


[https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552108320222](https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552108320222)


[https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9137-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9137-8)


APPENDIX A

POST COURSE REFLECTION SURVEY
1. How has FYS 101 helped you make friends at Harper College?

2. Is there a faculty or staff member at Harper College that you feel comfortable going to with questions? If so, how have you met that person?

3. How do you feel about attending Harper College?

4. How do you feel about your ability to succeed at college?

5. How has FYS 101 helped you feel able to succeed at college?

6. What were your favorite activities in FYS 101 and why?
APPENDIX B

BLACKBOARD DISCUSSION POSTS
1. When completing the Team Project, what do you feel is the most instrumental in helping new students create a connection to Harper College?

2. What guest speaker (office) did you feel you most connected with? Why?

3. List a relationship at Harper, that is important to you. How does this relationship impact your success at Harper College?

4. How have your values changed since you started Harper College? What caused this change?
APPENDIX C

FINAL PAPER ASSIGNMENT
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

FYS 101 for Fall 2019

The Personal Development Plan is a three-part assignment. The first two portions are Personal Statement Writing Assignment and Educational Plan (developed with your Advisor). Please complete the 3 parts (directions below for the PDP) and turn in by December 12, 2019. This completed assignment is worth 110 points.

A. Personal Statement Writing Assignment

B. Educational Plan

C. Transfer School (major, location, cost, size, admission requirements)

D. One-page typed response to the following:

a. Discuss the impact the FYS 101 course had on your first semester in college. The title of our class is “Focus on Your Future.” The theme focused on you as a new college student – exploring who you are, if you developed a connection to Harper, what helped you connected to Harper, what you want out of life, and focusing on a career that will help you achieve your dreams and goals.
What is a personal statement or statement of purpose?

A personal statement is an essay about you! The personal statement can also be a key component of an application to a four-year college or university. This is your opportunity to convey a sense of who you are, what makes you unique, your intellectual and academic development, what is important to you, and why you would be an outstanding candidate.

What should go in a Personal Statement?

1. Explain your reasons for wanting to enroll in the college or pursue a particular major.
   What motivates you to pursue this major or career?

2. Discuss your reasons for starting your college career at Harper, what helped you feel like you belonged at Harper. What experience, class, instructor helped you feel a sense of belonging? How will this impact your decision on transfer?

3. Discuss your values, your strengths, your learning preferences, your interests and skills (use the five reflections you have completed thus far in this class). Reflect on these characteristics and how they align with your educational goals and/or with a particular major or career.

4. Discuss what you’ve done outside of the classroom. What have you learned and how has that contributed to your growth? Include any work experience, volunteer activities, leadership roles, or athletic endeavors in which you have participated.
5. Explain how your unique background (life story) is distinctive and relevant to your pursuit of higher education and/or major or career. Explain what you have learned from these experiences or how they have helped you develop your interest in a specific career or major. Talk about the skills required to complete your degree or skills needed in a specific career and how you have developed these skills yourself.

6. Identify your soft skills such as your ability to work independently, teamwork, good time management, problem-solving, listening or organizational skills. Think about which skills relate most to you and accomplishing your goals. Then demonstrate how you’ve developed, used and continue to strengthen these skills.

7. Talk about your long-term plan. What are your longer term goals? How does your education and career help you accomplish your life goals?

8. Keep it positive. Emphasize your strengths, include your enthusiasm for completing your education and working in your chosen career. Talk positively about yourself.

Remember:

✓ Be honest: Never misrepresent your record or experiences.
✓ Be specific: Avoid vague statements, clichés, and sweeping generalities.
✓ Be true to yourself: Trust your ideas, experiences, and perspective.
✓ Be letter perfect: Make sure there are no spelling, punctuation, usage, or grammar mistakes.
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. What has your experience been like at Harper this semester?

2. In your post course rsurvey, you shared that you [did/did not] feel like you belonged at Harper at the start of the semester, can you talk to me about how your feelings changed throughout the semester?

3. What helped you create that sense of belonging at Harper?

4. What specifically related to FYS 101 has helped you create a sense of belonging at Harper?

5. Is there anything I could have done differently as your FYS 101 instructor to help you feel more connected to the institution or, in other ways, support your success at Harper College?
APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORMS
Students’ perception of how FYS 101 shapes their sense of belonging at their institution

Title of Study: ____________________________________________

Investigators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Dept</th>
<th>Phone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily Reabe</td>
<td>CAHE</td>
<td>(224)659-6121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudrun Nyunt</td>
<td>CAHE</td>
<td>(815)753-9373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Dept:</td>
<td>Phone:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on students’ perception of the ways in which First-Year Seminar shapes their sense of belonging at their institution.
- Students in FYS 101 can choose to participate in any of the following research activities: observations during FYS 101, document analysis of FYS 101 course assignments 101, and interviews.
- Participation is voluntary and lack of participation will not impact grades or lead to any loss of privileges.
- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks for participating in this study.

Description of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore community college students’ perception of the ways in which FYS 101 shapes their sense of belonging at Harper College. The study aims to provide instructors of FYS 101 at Harper College with practical information on how to better support their students and help them find their place at Harper College.

If you agree to participate in this study, you can choose to participate in any or all of the following research activities:

- Observations during FYS 101 course sessions
- Document analysis of class assignments, specifically your Blackboard Discussion Board posts, final paper, and post-course reflection survey
- 45-60-minute interviews about your experiences with FYS 101 and at Harper College during the Fall semester, conducted after the completion of the FYS 101 course

Risks and Benefits

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks for participating in this study.

The benefits of the study include improving future iteration of FYS 101 as well as adding to the literature on how first-year seminars can shape students’ sense of belonging in a community college context.

Participants in this study benefit from having an opportunity to share their experiences in FYS 101 and positively impact future iterations of FYS 101. In addition, interview participants may
benefit from reflecting on their experiences in FYS 101 and at Harper College, as a whole, and recognizing ways they can improve their college experience and success.

Confidentiality
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. Once collected, data (interview recordings, teaching evaluations) will be stripped of all identifiable information and names will be replaced with pseudonyms. No identification key will be kept that could later link data to identifiable information again.
- Any reports and publications will use the participants’ pseudonyms.
- Non-identifiable data will be stored in a password-protected iCloud folder that only the researchers will have access to. Data will be maintained for three years before being destroyed (all electronic data will be permanently deleted; hard copies will be shredded).
- Signed consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in the main investigator’s office. Consent forms will be maintained for three years before being shredded.

Your Rights
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Emily Reabe at ereabe@harpercollege.edu or by telephone at (224) 659-6121. Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, Northern Illinois University faculty member, may be contacted at gnyunt@niu.edu or (815) 753-9373. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Future Use of the Research Data
After removing all identifying information from your data, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

Research Activities and Informed Consent
Please indicate which of the following research activities you are comfortable participating in by checking the appropriate boxes. Please note that the main investigator will not review your consent form until after grades are submitted for this class; choosing not to participate will not impact your grade in FYS 101.

- Observation of verbal and non-verbal behavior during FYS 101 course session
- Document analysis of Blackboard discussion board posts
- Document analysis of final papers
Document analysis of the post-course reflection survey completed on the last day in class for the purpose of this study.

Participation in a 45-60-minute interview conducted after completion of FYS 101. If you agree to participate in the interview, please indicate the best e-mail and phone number to contact you:
E-mail: ________________________________; Phone #: ____________________

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for the research activities of this study indicated above, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Participant’s Name (typed)

Participant’s Signature  Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the interview.
[Please complete if you agreed to participate in the interview.]

Participant’s Signature  Date