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THE IMPACT OF CLUSTERING FRESHMAN SEMINARS WITH ENGLISH COMPOSITION COURSES ON NEW STUDENTS' GRADE POINT AVERAGE AND RETENTION RATES

A Thesis in

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by

Jennifer Lynne Crissman

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We approve the thesis of Jennifer Lynne Crissman.

Date of Signature

M. Lee Upcraft
Affiliate Professor Emeritus of Education
Thesis Advisor
Chair of Committee

Robert M. Hendrickson
Professor of Education
Head, Department of Education Polic Studies

Carol L. Colbeck
Assistant Professor of Education

Roger L. Geiger
Professor of Education
In Charge of Graduate Programs in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the impact of clustering freshman seminars with English composition courses on new students' first semester grade point averages and retention rates. The study occurred at a small, independent college in the northeast. To evaluate the impact of the cluster program (5 clustered sections, n = 90; 13 nonclustered sections, n = 237), both quantitative and qualitative research methods were utilized.

This study produced mixed results. Quantitatively, using multivariate regression models, no statistical difference was found between the clustered and nonclustered students in their first semester grade point average or in their retention rates. Qualitatively, differences did exist. Students interviewed in a focus group settings offered varying opinions about their clustered experience. Overall, clustered students reported being more active learners, gaining more academic skills, developing closer friendships with peers, establishing more meaningful relationships with faculty members, and participating more in campus life than the nonclustered students.

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Each day I live, I want to be, a day to give, the best of me. I rise and fall, and yet through it all, this wish remains: I want one moment in time, when I'm more than I thought could be, when all of my dreams are just a heart beat away and the answers are all up to me…….. (Whitney Houston, 1988)

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And now I can happily quote the words of one of my favorite authors, “The book is finished. Let the writer play.”

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

More students leave college prior to degree completion than stay (Tinto, 1993). Of the nearly 2.4 million students who entered higher education for the first time in 1993, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree (Tinto, 1993, p. 1).

The consequences of this departure from higher education are serious for both the individual and the institution (Tinto, 1993). For individuals, "the occupational, monetary and other societal rewards of higher education are conditional on earning a college degree" (Tinto, 1993, p. 1). Institutions, operating with reduced financial resources, have come to "appreciate and value, as never before, the necessity of retaining as many of their students as possible" (Tinto, 1993, p.2). For colleges and universities to survive financially, they must strive to retain the students that attend the institution. For as Bean (1986) states, "without students, there is no institution" (p. 47).

The first year of college is extremely important in the academic achievement and retention process for students and institutions (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Tinto, 1993). A student's first year is a time of transition and adjustment to the social and academic demands of college, and a time when the likelihood of dropping out is greatest (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989; Tinto, 1993). Research indicates that new students' most critical transition period occurs during the first two to six weeks of the first semester (Levitz &

Noel, 1989). Of the students who drop out during the first semester of the freshman year, half drop out during the first six weeks (Myers, 1981). Tinto (1993) reports that the largest proportion of institutional leaving occurs during the first year and prior to the beginning of the second year.

According to the most recent (1997) ACT study of National College Dropout and Graduation Rates, four-year public institutions have a 32% drop out rate while the four-year private institutions have a 30% drop out rate between freshman and sophomore year. Of those new students who dropped out, 9% were from highly selective schools (SAT scores of 1220-1380), 19% were from selective schools (SAT scores 1030-1220) and 28% were from traditional schools (SAT scores of 950-1070).

"For institutions, the freshman year is a period during which programs can have the greatest impact on subsequent student development and persistence," according to Tinto and Goodsell (1993, p.8). Research indicates that if transition during the first semester goes well for the incoming student, academic success is likely to follow (Howe & Perry, 1978; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984). To help incoming new students make the academic and social transition, colleges and universities have many options to assist new students. Levitz and Noel (1989) have stated that "fostering student success in the freshman year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence" (p. 65).

Doing well academically, like retention, is another concern for colleges, universities, and new students, because grade point average and retention are highly interrelated. For example, according to Upcraft and Gardner (1989), the best predictor of

second semester retention is first semester grade point average. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) further report that most first year students list "flunking out" as their biggest fear of college. While high school grade point averages and SAT scores may be predictive of scholastic abilities, they are not the only methods for identifying students who may persist in college (Larose & Roy, 1991).

Research addressing academic achievement has shown that, for many students, nonacademic factors are often better predictors of college success than are traditional academic measures (Clarke & Tomlinson-Clarke, 1994). Tinto's (1993) theoretical model discusses the positive impact of student integration into academic as well as social systems of a college. Involvement in campus activities as well as interactions with faculty have been related to persistence and academic achievement (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1985).

Frost (1993) asked, "How can we design a first year student experience so that more entering students are successful in their academic work?" (p. 21). The answer to this question concerning academic achievement is the same answer to the retention question....institutional commitment to new students.

To help new students earn good grades and stay in school, many institutions have adopted the concept of *front loading*: "putting the strongest, most student-centered people, programs, and services in the freshman year" (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 79). This front loading concept is the first recommendation for increasing student involvement in the report called Involvement in Learning. The recommendation is as follows:

Involvement in Learning:

> College administrators should reallocate faculty and other institutional resources toward increased services to first and second year undergraduate students. (National Institute of Education, 1984).

Institutions across the country that have utilized front loading techniques have reaped the benefits of improved student learning, student academic success, and retention (Levitz & Noel, 1989).

Common types of front loading programs include orientation programs (pre-entry and extended), first year advising and monitoring of academic performance, pre-college testing and assessment, first year seminars, and clustering programs. All of these efforts are more effective if concentrated in the first semester of enrollment (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Orientation

"Orientation is any effort on the part of an institution to help entering students make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and enhance their success" (Upcraft & Farnsworth, 1984, p. 27). According to Perigo and Upcraft (1989), orientation programs are designed to set the tone for student expectations, and begin the process of integrating students into the campus' academic and social culture. Orientation programs typically occur in the summer, or may occur several days before the start of the fall semester. Programs typically address parental or family

concerns, as well as the special needs of transfer, minority, commuter, and returning adult students. Orientation programs, coupled with quality academic advising programs exert a positive effect on the retention of students from freshman to sophomore years, and may also be associated with higher graduation rates (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Titley, 1985; Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff, & Nelson, 1987). While the impact of Orientation programs on new students' retention has been documented, research on the impact of orientation on academic achievement is lacking. Most Orientation programs espouse goals and outcomes such as successful academic transition and academic achievement. To achieve these goals, most programs include components such as curriculum requirements, grading policies, and workshops that discuss academic honesty, and how to interact with faculty. However, there have been no studies that directly measure the impact of Orientation programs on new students' academic achievement or grade point averages.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is viewed as an important academic component of a successful orientation program. Beal and Noel's (1979) research found that new students who utilize academic advising services persist at higher rates than students who do not use the services. One of the most important roles for faculty during the orientation process is to serve as academic advisors for the incoming new students (Frost, 1991). Thomas (1990) found that the quality of academic advising is a primary and positive retention factor. Special consideration should be given to the academic needs of high risk students, physically or learning disabled and transfer students (Fox et al., 1993).

Through academic advising, faculty can help students understand academic responsibilities and expectations in the college classroom and within the academic community.

Pre-college Testing

Placement testing is also seen as important to the academic success of new students. Students' academic success depends partially on being placed in the appropriate courses, based on national tests, ACT and SAT scores, high school grades and rank, and specialized college tests. (White, Goetz, Hunter, & Barefoot, 1995). White et al (1995) stress the importance of pre-college testing. Testing enables the institution and academic advisors to "ascertain the relationship between students' abilities and their interests" (White et al, 1995, p. 27). Using the test results, students are placed in courses according to their level of skill and ability. By using these results, students should be placed in courses that are neither too challenging and overwhelming to them, nor should they be placed in classes that too easy or boring. By using pre-college testing to match students' abilities with appropriate courses, institutions are utilizing another method to help new students succeed academically and to retain them (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995).

First Year Seminars

Institutions have established first year seminars to help students cope with their new environments, to improve retention, and grade point averages (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). These seminars focus on students' academic success and social integration (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). First year seminars of the 1990s tend to be small classes (up to 25 students), are usually worth one to three academic credits, are applied to general education or elective requirements, and are taught by faculty members and student affairs administrators. The first year seminars offer students the opportunity to develop relationships with a faculty member or administrator, as well as with a group of peers who are experiencing the same fears and anxieties. First year seminars provide many benefits to both new students and to colleges and universities. The most widely researched benefits of a First Year Seminar include higher retention rates and higher grade point averages for students taking the course (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Clustering

Clustering, also known as "freshman interest groups," "coordinated studies programs," and "linked courses" is another step in the evolution of freshman seminars, and designed to help improve first year retention rates. The cluster concept consists of grouping two or more courses together so that one group of students will be enrolled

together in these classes. Tinto and Goodsell Love (1995) explain that the purpose of clustering is that "groups of students, taking two or more classes together, will provide both social and academic support for each other and in doing so, enhance the classroom experience for all" (p. 15). Tinto and Goodsell (1993) found the benefits of clustering students in several academic courses include increased retention, better grades, and more positive perceptions about college. Benefits for faculty members who teach clustered courses include the opportunity to cross disciplinary lines and collaborate with other faculty members. Clustering helps to bridge the academic and student affairs communities together.

Importance of the Study

Considerable research has been conducted to assess the impact of freshman seminars on first year grade point average, freshman-to-sophomore year retention, and the impact of clustering courses on new students' grade point averages and retention (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Tinto and Goodsell, 1995). Yet the impact of clustering courses with the freshman seminar on retention and grade point averages has not been researched. A review of related literature showed a lack of research studies intended to assess the impact of clustered freshman seminars on the retention and grade point averages of new students. This study will contribute to the literature of higher education, specifically freshman seminars and clustering. To the extent that this study will help identify factors in first-to-second semester retention and grade point averages during the freshman year, this study will also contribute to the retention and academic achievement

literature. This study also hopes to provide evidence to campus administrators and faculty concerning the academic clustering of the freshman seminar. The results of the stud should provide justification for implementation, continuation or elimination of such programs.

Purposes

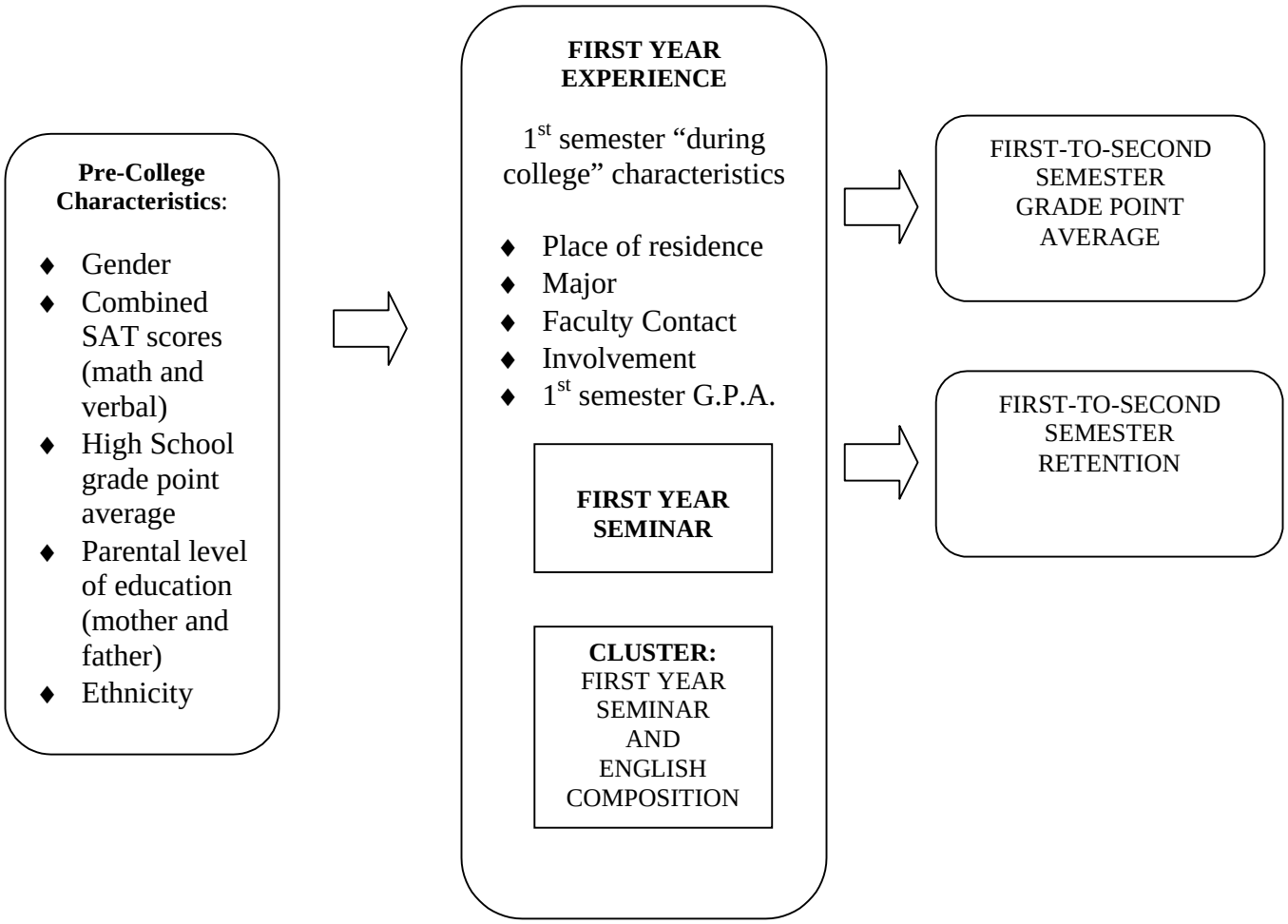
- To compare the first semester grade point averages of students participating in a freshman seminar clustered with an English composition course to students enrolled in a freshman seminar that is not clustered with an English composition course.
- To compare the first semester retention rates of students participating in a freshman seminar clustered with an English composition course to students enrolled in a freshman seminar that is not clustered with an English composition course.
- To examine the factors that clustered and nonclustered students report affect their first semester grade point average.
- To examine the factors that influence new students to persist into the second semester of study compared to those students who did not return for a second semester of study.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (see Table 1.1) for this research study is based on Alexander Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcomes model. Astin developed his model on the assumption that inputs (pre-college characteristics) and environmental (during college) variables affect outcomes, such as grade point averages and retention. The key constructs for this framework are "pre-college" characteristics; the first year experience which includes "during college" characteristics and the freshman seminar format (clustered first year seminars or nonclustered first year seminars); and the outcomes of first semester grade point average and retention.

The conceptual framework is designed to show that students enter college or university with a variety of background characteristics. Astin (1993) identified 146 input (pre-college) variables. It would be next to impossible to access and utilize every one of his variables. So for this study, the *pre-college variables* were selected based on the retention and academic achievement literature as well as the availability of data. This study will analyze the following pre-college characteristics: gender, academic aptitude (combined math and verbal SAT scores), high school achievement (high school GPA), parental educational level (father and mother), and racial origin. Pre-college characteristics are believed to affect students' experiences during college.

Table 1.1 The Conceptual Framework



Once students arrive at an institution, they begin to encounter their first year experience. *During college variables* to be controlled for this study include: place of residence, major, faculty contact outside the classroom, involvement in the academic life (number of credits, number of hours studying per week, participation in a study group), involvement in the social life (number of clubs or organizations of which they participate, number of close friends), and first-semester grade point average.

Another “during college” factor that is presumed to help integrate new students into an institution is the participation in a freshman seminar. For this study, every new student is required to take a three credit freshman seminar. Another possible factor in integrating new students into college is the participation in a cluster of courses. For this study, one cohort of students will take a freshman seminar that is clustered with an English composition course while a second cohort of students will take a nonclustered freshman seminar.

The final component of this conceptual framework is outcomes, specifically grade point average and retention. Research has shown that student participation in a freshman seminar is often positively related to higher academic achievement (Chapman & Reed, 1987; Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff, & Nelson, 1987; Shanley & Fidler, 1988; Fidler & Hunter, 1989). The evidence in the literature shows that students who participate in a freshman seminar achieve higher grade point averages than students who do not take a freshman seminar, even when other factors are controlled for.

The other outcome in this study is retention. Retention, for this study, is defined as re-enrollment in the second semester of study during the students’ first year of college. Research shows that students participating in a freshman seminar often have higher retention rates than students who do not participate in a seminar (Fidler & Hunter, 1989).

These constructs that comprise the conceptual framework are conceptually linked in a manner consistent with theories of student development (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students are assumed to arrive at college with a given set of personal background characteristics (Astin, 1993). As the students experience their

first year of college, different factors influence and impact on their decision to persist into the second semester of study, and also impacts on their academic success.

Research Questions

This study is designed to answer four primary research questions:

1. Do students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course have a higher first semester grade point average than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition experience

2. Are students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course more likely to enroll for their second semester of college than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered freshman English composition experience

3. What factors do students report that contribute to any differences between the first semester grade point averages of students participating in the cluster and students not participating in the cluster

4. What factors do students report that contribute to any differences between the first semester retention rates of first year students participating in the cluster and students not participating in the cluster

Methodology

A research design is formulated based on the purpose of the study, the nature of the research questions, and the available resources. Because this study is concerned with questions of *what* are the first semester grade point averages of the new students, *how many* new students will re-enroll for a second semester of college, and *what reasons*

account for that grade point average and retention, both quantitative and qualitative research methods will be utilized for data collection. Patton (1990) states "Quantitative and qualitative methods involve differing strengths and weaknesses and constitute alternative, but not mutually exclusive, strategies for research. Both can therefore be used in the same study." (p. 14).

Quantitative research

Quantitative research "is the assignment of numbers to objects, events, or observations according to some rule" (Rossman & El-Khawas, p. 85). Upcraft and Schuh (1996) state that quantitative studies "give us a very firm foundation for describing and analyzing what 'is', and offer some insight into 'why' it is the way it is" (p.85). Because the quantitative research questions are concerned with statistically significant differences between the students in the cluster versus those students not in the cluster, a form of multivariate analysis will be utilized.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research deals with "understanding the meaning people have constructed, how they make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Because several two research questions are concerned with the new students' first semester collegiate experience, focus group interviews will be utilized.

This study is an attempt to understand the impact of clustering freshman seminars with English composition courses on first semester grade point averages and retention rates between two cohorts of students. The study will utilize quantitative research methods to answer precisely what grade point averages students in the clustered and nonclustered sections achieved, and if any statistical differences existed between the two groups. And quantitative methods will also be used to determine exactly how many students in the clustered and nonclustered sections returned for a second semester of study, and if the difference was significant. The study will also utilize qualitative research methods to gather rich, detailed data about the students' first semester experiences and how the cluster or nonclustered freshman seminar experience impacted on their first semester. The research study will take place at a small, independent college in the northeastern part of the country, and will occur during the fall semester. The participants of the study will be the entire entering class of new students (n=327).

Limitations

- Students self-reported information on the questionnaire, as well as their participation in the focus group interviews. It was hoped that the information given was accurate and true, but there is no way to confirm the self-reported findings.
- The age and race of the new students participating in the study: Not all of the new students were 18 years old, and therefore, were unable to participate in the study. While it was hoped to gather information on all the new students

attending the college, it was not possible. The racial composition of students participating in the study was another limitation. Because only a small group of minorities attend this college, most of the views expressed in this stud were Caucasian students' views.

- The next limitation addressed the issues of external validity and generalizability. External validity asks the question: "to what extent populations, settings, treatment variables, and measurement variables can this effect be generalized?" (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, p.5). This research stud reduced generalizability by only studying students at this particular small, northeastern, independent College in the United States. This study may not yield the same results at other types of colleges or universities.
- The next limitation dealt with the specific information collected concerning the students. Because this study dealt with grade point averages and retention, an attempt to account for all factors influencing grade point average and retention had to occur. However, due to time and financial constraints, gathering all the data for this study was not possible.
- The final limitation dealt with the issue of the actual freshman seminar. Every new student was required to take a freshman seminar but 18 different professors taught the different sections. As a result, new students attended a freshman seminar that had a different professor with different teaching styles, different teaching philosophies, and different relationships with the students in the class.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature begins with an overview of the retention problem facing colleges and universities. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state, "the volume of literature directly or indirectly addressing retention during the last twenty years is extensive to the point of being unmanageable" (p. 387). This is in part due to the fact that more students leave college prior to degree completion than stay (Tinto, 1993). Because the consequences of this student departure are serious for both the individual and the institution, the literature review will focus on understanding two theories of student retention. Next, the literature review will address the factors that affect new students' academic achievement, grade point average, and success. Because the first year of college is important in achieving good grade point averages, as well as retaining new students, the literature review concludes with an examination of first year programs aimed at helping retain new students and helping them attain academic success.

Overview of retention

Concern about retention and attrition rates in higher education has increased over the past few years. Winston and Sandor noted that "....with college enrollment declining and college population changing, recruitment and retention have become key issues that affect the success of the institutions" (1994, p. 5). With shrinking budgets and lack of

external revenue sources, institutions have "come to view the retention of students as the only reasonable course of action left to insure their survival" (Tinto, 1993, p. 2).

Three reasons why institutions must retain students are economical, ethical, and institutional (Bean, 1986). The economic reason is most straightforward. There is a direct relationship between enrollment and income. When institutions lose students, financial resources decline. Bean also argues that it is unethical to admit students for the "benefit of the institution and not for the good of the student" (1986, p. 47). A high attrition rate shows a failure on the part of the institution to select or to socialize students to the academic and social environments of the college or university. Bean wrote that the third reason institutions must retain students is institutional. A high attrition rate "is likely to be associated with a low faculty morale. When faculty teach at an institution where attrition is high, they are likely to feel negative toward themselves, their institution, and their profession." (Bean, 1986, p. 48).

Because the largest proportion of institutional leaving occurs during the first year and prior to the second year, integrating and retaining new students into their new environment should be a main priority for college officials (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). No longer can institutions just admit students and hope they survive. Institutions must understand the needs of the new students they admit, and make a commitment to help them succeed. Gardner (1986) has stated numerous reasons why institutions have changed the ways in which they deal with new students. Some of these reasons include: decline of traditional age enrollees with increased competition for the pool of applicants; poor quality of high school graduates; federal mandates for recruiting and retaining

certain types of students; and the changing nature of new students (they are no longer all traditional, directly out of high school, eighteen year olds). Gardner further states that attention must be directed to students' needs so that they adapt and adjust to their new environments. The first year of college requires a series of profound adaptations, academically, socially, and emotionally (Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989). The inability to adapt to the new environment often causes students either to withdraw from school during or after the first year, or to perform at a lower academic level than expected (Tinto, 1982).

Relevant Conceptual Models of Retention

Two of the most noted theories of student retention are Alexander Astin's "input-environment-outcome" model (1993) and Vincent Tinto's theory of student departure (1993).

Alexander Astin's "Input-Environment-Outcomes" Model

Astin created the *Input-Environment-Outcome* (I-E-O) model to serve as a "conceptual guide" for studying college student development (1993, p. 7). The basic purpose of his model is "to assess the impact of various environmental experiences by determining whether students grow or change differently under varying environmental conditions" (Astin, 1993, p.7). Astin's model is designed to show that students enter college with a pre-established set of characteristics (inputs) that influence their views

about college. Once students arrive at an institution, they begin to encounter their first year experience. These environmental factors (during college characteristics) affecting new students' first year experience have the potential to influence new students' retention rates and grade point averages. Astin's model concludes with desired outcomes, such as grade point averages and retention.

Astin warns about a basic assumption in his model. He states, "we are not in a position to interpret the observed correlation between the outcome and any environmental factor until we have first controlled for the effects of input variables" (1993, p. 95). In other words, one can not simply look at outcomes without controlling for input and environmental variables.

In Astin's model, there are 146 input measures. *Inputs* refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution. These inputs or pre-college characteristics are a standard part of retention studies (Tinto, 1987; Pascarella, 1985). Because of the financial and time constraints, this study will not incorporate all 146 variables. The items chosen to measure pre-college characteristics were selected because of their salience in determining success in postsecondary education. Combined SAT scores and high school grade point averages were chosen to represent measures of future success (Loeb, 1982). Parents' education was also selected because it impacts on a student's desire to persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Examples of other commonly used input variables include: admission test scores, student expectations, preliminary choice of major, parental income, race, age, gender, and marital status. Identifying all the input variables is easy, but researching them is more challenging. An institution or a

researcher must make decisions based on the literature review, time and financial resources as to which variables to study.

Astin's model contains 192 *environmental* variables which refer to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed. He classified the 192 variables into seven categories: institutional characteristics, students' peer group characteristics, faculty characteristics, curriculum, financial aid, place of residence, and student involvement. As with the input variables, it would be next to impossible to study all 192 variables. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) suggest, "looking to previous research through a literature review and reasonable estimates of which collegiate experiences are more influential, given the outcomes being studied" (p. 227).

Because research has shown that the more contact students have with faculty in and out of the classroom, the more likely the student will persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). As a result, several questions asked of the participants in this research study will focus on student faculty interaction as a "during college" control variable.

Astin's student involvement theor

Astin's assumptions and research on environmental variables was the basis for his work on student involvement. He defined his student involvement theory as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1997, p. 199). Involvement is measured by the amount and nature of psychological and physical energy a student devotes to an activity, whether it is an

academic activity or a social activity. Students determine the extent of their growth by the choices they make and the energy they invest in their college experiences.

Astin further contended his theory of involvement has five basic postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).

2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (where the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.
(Astin, 1997, p. 200-201)

As a result of this involvement research, several questions asked of the students will focus on their involvement in the social aspect of college life.

The final component of Astin's model refers to outcomes. *Outcomes* are the desired effects of college and refer to the student's characteristics after exposure to the environment. He classified his 82 outcomes to include: personality and self concept, values, beliefs, and attitudes; satisfaction with the collegiate environment; political

orientation; academic and cognitive development; and career development. Upcraft and Schuh state, “Although outcome is the third dimension of Astin’s model, it should be the first to be determined, because the selection of the input and environment dimensions is determined by possible or demonstrated relationships between the outcomes and these other variables” (p. 226).

In this study, the two outcomes being measured are first semester grade point average and retention, which is defined as re-enrollment for the second semester of study.

Vincent Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure

Tinto (1993) studied the causes and consequences of students leaving an institution prior to degree completion. His model of student departure takes into account the interaction of several factors that determine whether or not a student will persist at a particular institution of higher education. If a student has the ability to make the initial transition to college, then remaining in college entails the incorporation of the student into the intellectual and social communities of the institution. Although some departures are involuntary (i.e. the institution may request the student withdrawal due to academic failure), most departures are initiated because the student perceives an insurmountable problem. Often this problem is the student’s perception of not belonging to or not being involved with the institutional community. Tinto (1993) argues that both forms of integration, intellectual and social, are essential to student retention.

Tinto (1993) also theorized that students enter a college or university with particular characteristics and skills that affect their initial commitment to their educational goals and to their institution. This commitment is increased or decreased

depending upon the quality and quantity of academic and social experiences. If students experience positive and rewarding academic and social incidents, they will become integrated into the institution. Tinto states that greater integration leads to higher retention rates. Conversely, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that "negative interactions and experiences tend to reduce integration, to distance the individual from the academic and social communities of the institution, promoting the individual's marginality and, ultimately, withdrawal" (p. 53).

Tinto (1993) wrote, "The point of retention efforts is not merely that individuals be kept in college. Education, the social and intellectual development of individuals, rather than just their continued presence on campus, should be the goal of retention efforts" (p. 145). In his book (1993), Tinto writes that successful retention programs consist of three principles. The first principle of effective retention is:

> *Effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals.* (p. 146).

Tinto (1993) believes that this very commitment is "at the core of an institution's educational mission" (p. 146) and that it should permeate the character of institutional life. He further believes that the commitment is the responsibility of *all* members of the institution, faculty, staff and students alike. Tinto believes that by caring for the students' welfare, the students in turn, will then care about the institution. He writes, "commitment to students then generates a commitment on the part of students to the institution" (p. 146).

The second principle of effective retention is:

> *Effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students* (p. 146).

Tinto (1993) believes that "effective retention programs do not leave learning to chance" (p. 147). He further argues that it becomes the responsibility of institutions to insure that new students either enter with or have the opportunity to possess sufficient knowledge and skills to meet the academic demands of the institution.

The third and final principle of effective retention stresses the importance of community. It states:

> *Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members* (p. 147).

Tinto (1993) encourages institutions to involve students "in the daily life of the institution" and to "provide social and intellectual support for their individual efforts" (p. 147). For his third principle, Tinto emphasizes "frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff, and students in a variety of settings both inside and outside the formal confines of the classroom" (p. 148).

After writing his three principles of effective retention, Tinto then answered the question as to how to implement programs utilizing these three principles. Because Tinto recognized that each institution must organize and implement its retention programs according to its particular resources and situation, he devised a plan comprised of seven action principles. The seven principles are:

1. Institutions should provide resources for program development and incentives for program participation that reach out to faculty and staff alike.

2. Institutions should commit themselves to a long-term process of program development.

3. Institutions should place ownership for institutional change in the hands of those across the campus who have to implement that change.

4. Institutional actions would be coordinated in a collaborative fashion to insure a systematic, campus wide approach to student retention.

5. Institutions should act to insure that faculty and staff possess the skills needed to assist and educate their students.

6. Institutions should front load their efforts on behalf of student retention.

7. Institutions and programs should continually assess their actions with an eye toward improvement.

(Tinto, 1993, p. 149-153)

Academic Achievement

Every fall, thousands of new students matriculate onto college campuses throughout the country. To be admitted, students must meet specific academic admissions criteria (high school grade point average and SAT scores). Besides these admissions standards, students also bring different abilities, backgrounds, goals and motivations (Richardson & Sullivan, 1994).

Research shows that more colleges and universities are admitting students that are not only are academically under-prepared, but also may lack the self-regulatory skills needed for successful adjustment to campus life (Dey, 1990). An estimated 30-40% of entering freshmen are, to some degree, deficient in college level reading and writing (Roueche, Baker, & Roueche, 1984). In many cases, "adjustment difficulties are demonstrated by failing or withdrawing from courses, alcohol abuse, violations of campus policies, depression, loneliness, and dropping out or transferring to another school" (Thombs, 1995, p. 280). The severity of these problems is underscored by the fact that most student attrition occurs in first-time freshmen (Gaither, 1992).

Academic achievement is one of the most researched topics in higher education. According to Astin (1993):

> Hundreds of studies using various measurements and methodologies have yielded similar results: college grade point averages can be predicted with modest accuracy (multiple correlation around .55) from admissions information. The two most potent predictors are the student's high school grade point average and scores on college admissions tests (p. 187).

Researchers studying academic achievement of new students have focused on identifying reliable predictors of academic success for first-semester college students (Larose, 1991; Aitken, 1992). Typically, students' high school grade point average, SAT scores, parental level of education, values about education, and student satisfaction are studied. Besides high school grade point average and test scores, other positive predictors of academic achievement are gender (being female), race (being white), and rank in high school.

Students' grades are probably the most revealing indicator of their successful adjustment to the intellectual demands of a university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Pascarella and Terenzini further contend that even with pre-college academic ability and intelligence, academic success is a result of "personal motivation, organization, stud habits, and quality of effort" (p. 388).

Belcheir (1997) discovered that academic readiness as "measured by a combination of high school grade point average and test scores was the best predictor of a high college grade point average" (p. 8). She further contend that other important predictors of grade point averages included: "conversations with faculty, participation in a program designed to facilitate entry to campus, and feeling connected to the university" (p. 8). Pike (1991) concluded that students who were more satisfied with their first semester experience were more likely to have higher grade point averages.

Some research indicates that academic success may be related to social integration. In the case of high-risk students, social skills have been found to be more significant predictors of academic achievement in the first semester of college than measures of academic potential (Larose, 1991).

Several studies that researched the effects of a freshman seminar on individual student grade point averages showed either mixed (Davis, 1992) or positive (Tokuno & Campbell, 1992) effects. Because of the variety of freshman seminars (mandatory v. voluntary; pass/fail; credit/no credit), it is difficult to determine the unique impact of the freshman seminar on a student's grade point average. However, the research does show that students who are academically under prepared, do benefit from freshman seminar sessions on time management, study skills, note-taking, and test-taking strategies (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995).

Belcheir's (1997) research confirms that first semester grade point average "is the most important predictor for retention" (p.7). Using Tinto's (1993) model of persistence, decisions about retention are based on a combination of academic integration and social integration. They summarized their research findings on new students' grade point averages as:

> Students who were the most successful, based on the highest grade point averages, were more likely to exhibit academic readiness, or adequate learning skills, had the ability to manage time resources, financial resources, and showed motivation to succeed. If right out of high school, they typically lived on campus, were involved with campus activities, made new friends, and were comfortable with the campus facilities. For non-traditional students, who all lived off-campus, motivation and time management appeared to be their key to success. (p. 13)

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

Fostering student success (academic and social) among first year students is the most significant intervention an institution can do to improve retention and grade point averages (Levitz & Noel, 1989). This first year is a time of transition and adjustment to the social and academic demands of college, and a time when the likelihood of dropping out is greatest (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989; Tinto, 1993). Research indicates that new students' most critical transition period occurs during the first two to six weeks of the first semester (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Of the students who drop out during the first semester of the freshman year, half drop out during the first six weeks (Myers, 1981). Retention research also shows that if students successfully complete their first year of college, their retention rates improve considerably (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, Myers, 1981).

According to the most recent (1997) ACT study of National College Dropout and Graduation Rates, four-year public institutions have a 32% drop out rate while the four-year private institutions have a 30% drop out rate between freshman and sophomore year. Of those new students who dropped out, 9% were from highly selective schools (SAT scores of 1220-1380), 19% were from selective schools (SAT scores 1030-1220) and 28% were from traditional schools (SAT scores of 950-1070).

"For institutions, the freshman year is a period during which programs can have the greatest impact on subsequent student development and persistence," according to Tinto and Goodsell (1993, p.8). Research indicates that if transition during the first semester goes well for the incoming student, retention and grade point averages follow (Howe & Perry, 1978; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984). To help incoming new students make the transition, many colleges and universities should heed Tinto's advice concerning front loading, which is defined as "putting the strongest, most student-

centered people, programs and services in the freshman year" (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 79). Tinto (1993) stated in his action principle number six that front loading is the wisest course of action in trying to improve new students' retention rates. Institutions have many front loading options. Common types of programs include orientation programs (pre-entry and extended), academic advising and monitoring of academic performance, pre-college testing and assessment, freshman seminars, and clustering programs. All of these efforts are more effective if concentrated in the first semester of enrollment (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Pre-enrollment Orientation

"For many students, the first personal contact with their new institution comes through some kind of pre-enrollment orientation program" (White et al, 1995, p.26). White et al (1995) further state that the size of the institution, the institutional mission, the traditions, and the available financial resources determine what type of pre-enrollment program occurs. Pre-enrollment orientation programs should have clearly defined components, which often include placement testing and academic advising.

Placement testing enables the institution and academic advisors to "ascertain the relationship between students' abilities and their interests" (White et al., 1995, p. 27). Because students' academic success partially depends upon placement in the appropriate courses, national tests, ACT and SAT scores, high school grades and rank, and placement test results, are all used by colleges and universities to identify students' skill level. Using placement test results, students are placed in courses according to their level of skill and ability. As a result, students should be placed in courses that are neither too challenging and overwhelming to them, nor should they be placed in classes that are too

easy or boring. In a study that analyzed scores on placement tests and academic performance of over 1,800 first year students at an urban public university, the results showed local placement testing measured academic preparation more accurately than the ACT test results (Hudson, 1993). By using pre-college testing to match students' abilities with appropriate courses, institutions are utilizing another method to help retain students.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is another important component of a successful first year program. Beal and Noel's (1980) research found that new students who utilize academic advising services persist at higher rates than students who do not use the services. Therefore, it is important that faculty, staff and administrators serve as academic advisors for the incoming new students, and meet their new advisees during the orientation process (Frost, 1991). As Gardner and Hansen state, "an effective orientation provides an initial opportunity for the new student to begin to develop that all important relationship with the academic advisor" (1993, p. 184). Through academic advising, faculty can help new students to understand academic responsibilities and expectations in the college classroom and within the academic community from the very beginning of the collegiate experience.

Thomas (1990) also found that the quality of academic advising is a primary retention factor. An effective academic advisor is knowledgeable about his or her discipline as well as general campus policies. The advisor should know a student's academic background, the course requirements for the student's major, and resources available to help the new student (Frost, 1991). Special consideration should be given to

the academic needs of high-risk students, physically or learning disabled, and transfer students (Fox et al., 1993).

Orientation

Coming at the beginning of the college experience, orientation serves as the transitional cushion between past and future learning experiences (Titley, 1985). Because the orientation program may be the first face-to-face meeting of student and institution, it can determine and perhaps even cement the relationship between the two (Titley, 1985). While the scope of orientation programs vary in time, length and content, it important for the entire campus community to support and participate in these programs.

Orientation is defined as "any effort to help freshmen make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and enhance their success" (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989, p. 82). Orientation programs set the tone for student expectations and begin the process of integrating students into the campus culture. According to Upcraft (1984), orientation programs have three basic goals: new students' academic success, personal success and integration into the institution, and family support.

Because of the link to retention, a trend to develop a more academic tone to orientation programs has evolved (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, 1985). The trend in the 1980s and 1990s has been to move away from "primarily social and personal adaptation, and instead, place more emphasis on academic issues" (Gardner & Hansen, 1993, p. 190). During orientation, academic informational sessions for the new students are usually conducted by faculty and academic administrators. Components of the curriculum,

graduation requirements, and grading policies are explained to the new students. Other components include workshops to discuss the expectations of the amount of work required in college classrooms, academic honesty and integrity, and the differences between high school and college.

Orientation programs should also address new students' personal and social adjustment to the institution. Orientation is a time for new students to become acquainted with other new students, current students, faculty, staff, and administrators. It is also a time to build community for the entire campus. It is a time to educate new students to issues of diversity, alcohol use and abuse, date rape, personal safety, campus services and resources, campus activities, clubs and organizations.

The third goal of orientation programs should consider the needs of the new students' families, either the parents or spouses. Families need to know how to support, advise, and encourage their loved ones during this transition. Research shows that parental involvement in a student's education is a critical determinant of academic success and social development (Futrell, 1986). Informed parents [or spouses] can be supportive and encouraging if they understand what their students are going through and what they are experiencing. To educate family members during an orientation program, they should be exposed to the campus, to faculty, staff, and administrators, to the support services offered, and to life on the college campus. One of the best ways of achieving this goal for traditional students is to have the parents stay overnight during orientation. This opportunity allows the parents to experience what college (residence hall life and dining hall) is like first hand.

Orientation programs must also consider the needs of minority, disabled, commuter, and transfer students. Minority students are at risk during orientation because of "extreme alienation, culture shock, and feelings of powerlessness over one's life, all

of which result from displacement from known and comfortable environments into situations that are different" (Dearing, 1984, p. 475). Orientation programs should create an atmosphere that stimulates and motivates entering minority students in the academic setting, while respecting the differing cultural backgrounds and values. To achieve this goal, orientation programs could utilize peer helpers, provide direct academic support services, openly address issues, and involve professional staff (Hughes, 1990).

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 has influenced the number of students with disabilities who have entered college. In 1992, 9.9% of students identified themselves as having a disability (This Year's College Freshmen, 1992). As a result, orientation programs must be able to accommodate disabled students attending the program. To do so, communication is essential between the student and the institution. The student must be able to express his or her needs (sign-language interpreters, Braille reading material, and accessible facilities) while the institution must make provisions. Besides physical handicaps, the other large group of disabled students are those with learning disabilities. As McGuire, Hall, and Litt (1991) state, "It is important to assist these students in understanding their specific learning styles and in recognizing compensatory strategies for dealing with the challenges of postsecondary education" (p. 101).

Commuting students are often separated from the overall campus community, due to their place of residence (off-campus) and their commitments to work, family, and school. Many of the social and recreational activities of orientation focus on the residential students. It is important to plan activities, workshops, and discussion groups that specially take into consideration the needs of commuters. Some orientation programs have even tried pairing commuter students with residence hall students so that

they learn about each other's lifestyle. In addition, some schools provide residence hall rooms for commuters during the orientation program.

Transfer students have many of the same needs as entering new students, fear of fitting in, and fear of the academics (Upcraft et al, 1993). Their main problems are usually academic in nature: delays in evaluating transcripts, not accepting credit from classes taken at previous institutions, and not having help from an advisor to schedule and register for courses.

Upcraft (1984) developed several components of a successful orientation program. First, the orientation program must be a continual process that begins with admission into the college; next, the orientation program needs to have the support, commitment, and involvement of the entire campus community; third, the orientation program must be evaluated by the orientation staff, new students and family members; and finally, the orientation program should be based on developmental theories.

First Year Seminars

Another way to enhance new students' academic and social integration into college are freshman seminars. Freshman seminars have helped students succeed in their new environments for over one hundred years in American higher education (Gordon, 1989). During the first decade of this century, Harvard's President Lowell discussed the needs of freshmen in his inaugural address. He proposed that freshmen be segregated into dormitories where advisers would live, and "help in developing the manhood of their charges" (Lowell, 1909, p.503). Not to be outdone by his counterpart, President David Starr Jordan of Stanford (1910), emphasized the importance of the care and culture of freshmen. The first freshman seminar was offered at Lee College, Kentucky, in 1882 and

the first credit-bearing freshman seminar course was established at Reed College in 1911. All Reed freshmen were required to take the "College Life Course" to help them adjust to college life and study. In 1900 the mechanical engineering department of the University of Michigan required all freshmen to attend a series of lectures, which included the basic elements of later freshmen orientation courses. Oberlin College offered a required noncredit course to orient freshmen toward future careers around the same time (Drake, 1966). Although only six American colleges offered freshmen seminars for credit in 1916, eighty-two established them within the next ten years (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958). While the objectives, content, administration, and format of freshman seminars have reflected the changing values and historical influences of American higher education, freshmen seminars have played a vital role in orienting students to college (Gordon, 1989).

A variety of other credit and noncredit courses for freshmen proliferated before World War I (Fitts & Swift, 1928). However, it was after the war that there was a more rapid growth. Between 1918 and 1922, large institutions like Princeton, Indiana, Stanford, Northwestern, and Ohio State initiated courses for credit. These courses evolved into three types (Fitts & Swift, 1928). The first was classified as an "adjustment" course because the content dealt with how the student was adapting to the new institution. The second course focused on helping students to succeed with the academics and emphasized methods of thinking and studying. The third type of course attempted to help students with social problems (Gordon, 1989).

Courses in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s emphasized the adjustment of new students. However, some faculty felt that the content of these courses was not academic enough, and in the 1960s some of these courses disappeared (Drake, 1966). With the increase of minority students, non-traditional older students, and first generation students

in the 1970s, there was a need to revitalize the freshman seminar to help these students adjust to college. As the 1980s began, more than 75% of American colleges offered some type of freshman orientation or seminar course (El-Khawas, 1984).

Freshman seminars of the 1990s tend to be small classes (up to 25 students) which are usually worth one to three academic credits, are applied to general education or elective requirements, and are taught by faculty members and student affairs professionals. The modern freshman seminars offer students the opportunity to develop relationships with a single faculty member or administrator who serves as the course instructor and with a group of peers who are experiencing the same fears and anxieties.

Freshman seminars increase students' interaction with faculty and provide opportunities for open discussion on relevant academic issues as well as opportunities for out of class interactions. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have found that when faculty and students talked informally about academic and or personal matters, students' academic work was enhanced and retention was more likely to occur. Studies have also shown that first year students who know a person on campus that they can turn to with a problem are more than twice as likely to return for the sophomore year as those who do not have that person in whom they can confide (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Retention research on freshman seminars has been conducted continuously since 1972 at the University of South Carolina (U.S.C.), home of the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition. New students taking U.S.C.'s well known "101 seminar" have achieved a higher sophomore return rate than nonparticipants for fourteen consecutive years (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). In ten of those years, the differences have been statistically significant (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Dalton College, also utilizing freshman seminars, achieved statistically significant retention rates among first-year students from 1987 - 1991. Of the first year students taking the seminar

over a five-year time period, 69.5 percent achieved a sophomore return rate, significantly (.05) higher than the nonparticipants' return rate of 55.8 percent (Hoff et al, 1996). Kennesaw State College also studied the effects of its elective first year seminar on retention. During the fall of 1985 and 1986, researchers compared 318 participants with a control group of 267 first year nonparticipants. Participants in the seminar recorded significantly (.05) higher retention rates after three quarters and after six quarters (Davis, 1992).

Research has also been conducted to determine if taking a freshman seminar impacts on students' grade point averages. A longitudinal study conducted at the University of South Florida from 1987 through 1990 showed that the academic achievement of freshman seminar participants was .05 significantly higher than that of nonparticipants (87% in good standing vs. 76% in good standing). The study also showed that for all but one cohort (Fall, 1987), the mean grade point average and total credits completed by freshman seminar participants were greater than for nonparticipants (Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994).

Another study conducted at North Greenville College (Silver, 1984) compared students taking a first year seminar to students not taking a first year seminar on retention, grade point average, and hours completed. Participants in the first year seminar had higher grade point averages (2.38 vs. 1.94) after the first term.

Tiller and Simmons (1984) found that a one-credit freshman orientation class at Jefferson Community Colleges showed that participants in the course were more likely to be retained than non-participants (77% vs. 56%). In addition, participants were more likely to have grade point averages of 2.00 or better compared to nonparticipants (68% vs. 56%).

Participation in a freshman seminar appears to have a positive impact on the grade point averages of students taking a seminar. Achieving a higher grade point average may be attributed to several causes. Students taking a freshman seminar may be exposed to discussions on study skills and time management; may have the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with a faculty member; may develop a study group with other students in the course; the students may become more familiar with their college's available resources; and the students may learn about the bureaucratic system and learn how to operate within that system.

The growing interest and concern for new students and their welfare and academic success led to the formal establishment of The National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience at the University of South Carolina in 1986, and later renamed The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition. The Center publishes a quarterly First-Year Experience Newsletter and the Journal of the First-Year Experience. The Center's major goals are collecting and distributing significant information on programs that are having a major impact on new students everywhere. The Center is a major resource of data, research, consultants, and suggestions.

According to the Center's publications, the goals of a freshman seminar are: to promote a positive adjustment and assimilation into the University for freshmen; to help freshmen learn to balance their new freedom with a sense of responsibility; to help freshmen learn and develop a set of adaptive, study, coping, and survival skills; to help freshmen make friends and develop a support group; to improve freshman attitudes toward the teaching/learning process and toward faculty who are responsible for providing this process; to improve relations between faculty and new students; to involve freshmen in the total life of the university; to teach freshmen about the institution's

history, traditions, rules, people, resources, services, and organizations; to have freshmen utilize the library, career center, skills center, and health center; to reduce freshmen's anxiety about written and oral communication and to provide practice opportunities; to provide freshmen with information about heath and wellness issues; to help freshmen discover their new institution, how to fit in, and to develop to their fullest potential (University 101: University of South Carolina's Freshman Seminar Program, 1990, p.5).

Freshman seminars provide many benefits to both new students and to colleges and universities (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Research has shown that participating in a freshman seminar is often positively related to higher academic achievement and higher retention rates (Chapman & Reed, 1987; Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff, & Nelson, 1987; Shanley & Fidler, 1988).

Clustering

Clustering, also known as "linked courses", "freshman interest groups", and "coordinated studies programs" is another step in the evolution of freshman seminars, and another program to help improve first year retention rates. The cluster concept requires grouping two or more courses together so that one group of students will be enrolled together in two or more classes. Tinto and Goodsell Love (1995) explain that the purpose of clustering is that "groups of students, taking two or more classes together, will provide both social and academic support for each other and in doing so, enhance the classroom experience for all" (p. 15). Tinto and Goodsell (1993) found that cluster benefits for students include retention, decreased withdrawals, better grades, and more positive perceptions about college; benefits for faculty include the opportunity to cross

disciplinary lines and collaborate with other faculty members. Clustering helps to bridge the academic community together.

First year clustering creates small supportive environments that encourage academic and social integration for new students. Small clustered classes create a community that exists not just in one class, but in two or more classes. Students become familiar with one another and a sense of community develops. One student described her clustered experience as such:

> In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had a discussion about everything. Now that the cluster is over, it's more difficult because there are different people in each class. There's not so much - oh, I don't know how to say it, except maybe not so much 'togetherness'. In the cluster if we needed help or if we had questions, we could help each other.....Now we're just more on our own. (Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995, p. 82)

Early attempts at clustering have been effective at improving retention of students. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) found that nationwide for students in clusters, "beginning to end-of-quarter retention rates averaged ten to twenty percentage points higher than typical institution averages" (p.63). At Temple University, fewer students have withdrawn from clustered communities compared to students in non-clustered sections of the same course (Levine & Tompkins, 1996, p.2).

Tinto and Goodsell Love's (1995) longitudinal study of LaGuardia Community College's Learning Clusters found nearly a 90 percent end-of-quarter retention rate. They also found that clustered students "outperformed students in the comparison classes, despite having lower grade point averages in high school" (p.62). When the students at LaGuardia Community College were asked about their clustered academic experience they stated that "they preferred the learning communities on the whole and some even wished that they could be longer than just the one semester" (Leonard, 1996, p.14).

Boise State University (BSU) was so concerned with its retention rates of new students in 1993, that the institution made a recommendation to implement a cluster program. BSU defined their cluster as a program "that grouped courses together so that students enrolled in the cluster would have four classes with the same group of students, thereby allowing for the establishment of a sense of community" (Belcheir, 1997, p.5). This new cluster concept began in the fall of 1995 at BSU. In order to evaluate the cluster program, which was comprised of 57 students, a control group of 102 students was formed of similar students who were enrolled in the same course but not taking them together as a group. Two groups were formed to compare First Year Experience Seminar enrollees. One group consisted of student in general education courses and the other group consisted of students not enrolled in a First Year Seminar.

The study at BSU found many positive results. Belcheir (1997) reported that cluster students were more likely to re-enroll the following spring semester and again the following fall semester compared to the control group. In the spring semester, 91% of cluster students returned compared to 78% of the control students. In the following fall semester, 68% of clusters returned compared to 52% of the control students. Another result of the study showed that those students in the cluster had used more campus services and participated in more study groups. And the final result of the study showed that students in the cluster were more likely to work with other students on projects, expressed more satisfaction with services, and had better perceptions about their first semester at Boise State University

Besides the basic concept of clustering academic courses, other combinations of clustering have evolved. Schroeder (1994) contended that residence halls should be utilized to reinforce and enhance classroom learning. The University of Missouri at Columbia's Freshman Interest Group program is an extension and refinement of

programs that began at the University of Oregon and the University of Washington. The University of Missouri at Columbia's cluster program places all the students in the Freshman Interest Group on the same floor of a residence hall. As a result, students all live together and take the same classes together. In their review of the research on residence halls, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1994) found that students in a clustered residence hall environment had significantly higher levels of involvement in activities and more interaction with faculty and peers. They also found that this involvement led to higher levels of retention (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1994).

Another approach to clustering is using themes within the clustered courses. Themes are usually broad concepts selected by the participating faculty of the clustered courses. The use of the theme may vary from professor to professor.

Yet another approach to clusters is the use of a peer advisor. This involves a junior or senior who might have an interest in the theme of the cluster, someone who attends the cluster courses and becomes a tutor for the new students, or someone who lives on the same floor in residence hall with the clustered students.

Tinto (1993) summarizes the concept of clustering as:

> Cluster courses strive to promote both student learning and retention through actively involving students in some cooperative/collaborative fashion that builds both learning and community membership. The transition they seek to bridge is the educational one from passive to active involvement, from spectator to active participant (p. 169).

Summary

After reviewing the literature, the importance of front loading services and programs for new students in the retention process and for achieving academic success has been well researched and documented. The research has shown that the more time, effort, and energy expended on new students early in their academic career, the more

likely they are to do well academically and to return for subsequent semesters of study. Orientation programs, freshman seminars and clustering are three highly successful ways to help new students succeed academically. However, gaps do exist in the literature. Many research studies that examine the grade point averages and retention rates of students in freshman seminars do so without controlling for pre-college or during college characteristics. Other studies are not longitudinal and base the conclusions on one or two semesters of data. Other studies deal only with clustering academic courses together. So the question remains unanswered, how, if at all, does clustering a freshman seminar with an academic course impact on new students' first semester grade point averages and retention rates

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This research study compared the first semester grade point averages, retention rates, and self-reported experiences of students participating in a clustered freshman seminar and English composition course to students enrolled in a nonclustered freshman seminar and English composition course. This study was designed to answer four research questions.

Research Questions

1. Do students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course have a higher first semester grade point average than students who only participate in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition experience
2. Are students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course more likely to enroll for their second semester of college than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition experience

3. What factors do students report that contribute to any differences between the first semester grade point average of students participating in the cluster and students not participating in the cluster
4. What factors do students report that contribute to any differences between the first semester retention rates of students participating in the cluster and students not participating in the cluster

The purpose of any research study guides a researcher's decisions about design, measurement, analysis and reporting (Patton, 1990, p. 150). Patton (1990) offers five purposes that can guide and determine the design of research:

1. **Basic research** - to contribute to fundamental knowledge and theor
2. **Applied research -** to illuminate a societal concern
3. **Summative research -** to determine program effectiveness
4. **Formative research -** to improve a program
5. **Action research -** to solve a specific problem

As this study seeks to provide faculty and administrators of colleges and universities with information to better understand new students' experiences, and to develop programs and policies that may enhance new students' first semester grade point averages and first-to-second semester retention rates, it fits Patton's definition of applied research:

> Under the nature of a problem so that human beings can more effectively control their environment…The purpose of applied research then, is to generate potential solutions to human and societal problems (Patton, 1990, p. 153-154).

And as this study seeks to determine whether the clustered freshman seminar program is effective in helping students achieve academic success as well as retaining new students, it also fits Patton's definition of summative research:

> Summative research serves the purpose of rendering an overall judgement about the effectiveness of a program, policy, or product for the purpose of saying that the idea itself is not effective, and therefore, has the potential of being generalizable to other situations. Summative research tests the effectiveness of some human intervention or action for the purpose of deciding if that program or policy is effective within its limited context and under that conditions it is likely to be effective in other situations or places (Patton, 1990, p. 155)

The research design for this study was formulated based on the purposes, the nature of the research questions, and the available resources. Because this study was concerned with questions of what grade point average students achieved, what factors they believe accounted for that grade point average, how many students enrolled for their second semester of study, and what reasons did they feel accounted for that retention, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were utilized. Patton (1990) states

> Quantitative and qualitative methods involve differing strengths and weaknesses and constitute alternative, but not mutually exclusive, strategies for research. Both can therefore be used in the same study. (p. 14)

Tashakkori and Teddlie utilized the phrase "the dictatorship of the research question, not the method" (1998, p. 20) to stress what is important in framing a study. They argued that the method is secondary to the research question itself.

Datta (1994) has also given five practical reasons for using both methodologies:

- Both methodologies have been used for years
- Many evaluators and researchers have urged using both paradigms
- Funding agencies have supported both paradigms

- Both paradigms have influenced policy
- Much has been taught by both paradigms

Brewer and Hunter (1989) concur with Datta (1994) and Patton (1990):

> The pragmatism of employing multiple research methods to study the same general problem by posing different specific questions has some pragmatic implications for social theory. Rather than being wed to a particular theoretical style and its most compatible method, one might instead combine methods that would encourage or even require integration of different theoretical perspectives to interpret the data. (p. 74)

The Setting for this Study

The site for this study was a small, independent, liberal arts college for men and women located in the northeastern United States. The college's mission, as stated in the undergraduate handbooks is to "educate students in the liberal arts and sciences and in professional fields, with the goal of fostering lifelong commitment to intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic values.

The college offers more than 30 undergraduate majors and 14 masters degree programs, with 110 full-time and 63 part-time faculty members. Ninety-four percent of the full-time faculty have received the highest professional degree in their field. Enrollment figures for 1997-1998 showed 1,459 full-time and 337 part-time undergraduate students. The average class size was 24 with a student/faculty ratio of 13:1.

The 1998-1999 undergraduate cost to attend this College was $19,250. Tuition was $13, 120 and Room and Board was $6,130.

In selecting the setting for this study, the advice of Taylor and Bogdan (1984) was considered. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) state that to negotiate access to students, a researcher must be straight forward, work to win trust, and use friends to pave the way. For this study, the researcher relied upon an Admissions Counselor at the College being studied. This Admissions Counselor helped the researcher forge a contact not only with the new students, but also with the administration of the College. Once the necessary administrators were identified for this study, the researcher contacted the Chief Academic Affairs Officer for permission to conduct this study (Appendix A).

The College's entire entering 1998-1999 incoming freshman class (327 students) served as the sample. The sample can be described as predominantly white, female, full-time, 18-year-old students; residing on campus, and having an average combined SAT score of 1125. Each of these new students was assigned to one of two groups based on whether they were enrolled in a clustered section of the freshman seminar and English composition course (5 sections, n=90) or whether they were not (13 sections, n=237).

The Nature of the Cluster Experience

Five out of eighteen sections of the freshman seminar were clustered with an English composition course. Because a different professor taught each section, the courses varied considerably in format and style. However, the five professors of the clustered freshman seminars shared an interactive, participatory style of teaching and learning, placed an emphasis on speaking, writing and thinking skills, and believed in an

integration of academic and social opportunities for the students. A brief description of the various courses follows.

Clustered Section One was taught by two male professors. The freshman seminar professor admitted that there was not much formal planning with the English composition professor concerning the clustered courses. He stated that their two offices were across the hall from one another and they talked informally. However, he noted that if a problem arose with a student, the two professors would sit down and formally discuss the student. The freshman seminar professor credited a lack of time as being the number one reason that more clustered professors did not work together. He cited a high teaching load, committee responsibility, and advisement as major time commitments. However, some integration of activities between the two classes and professors occurred. Both faculty members took the new students on a walking tour of the downtown area. The two professors also jointly attended an AIDS awareness presentation, and drug and alcohol programs with their students. Together, the two men took their students to see a school play and to hear a distinguished lecture series speaker.

The freshman seminar professor's approach to teaching was a lot of group activities and absolutely no lectures. He utilized round table discussions where two or three students would be in charge of leading the discussion. They were responsible for choosing the essay and facilitating the discussion for that day. He also utilized outside speakers to talk about diversity, drugs and alcohol, and career counseling. And he asked the students to do oral presentation on the subject of violence.

The class assignment that the freshman seminar professor enjoyed most was having his students break into four small groups. Throughout the semester, they had to design an alternative high school for the next century, including developing a curriculum and designing the facility (complete with blueprints). Then they were required to present their findings to the class.

When asked about his perceptions of clustering the freshman seminar with academic courses, the professor responded by saying that it has been reasonable effective. He felt that the clustering helped students who might be having academic difficulty because there were two professors looking out for the student. And he felt that students were forming strong bonds through orientation, freshman seminar, and the English class. His main concern was that release time be given to the faculty doing the clustered section in order to prepare more thoroughly and to have more integration with the English department.

Clustered Section Two was taught by a female freshman seminar professor and a male English professor. The freshman seminar professor indicated that she knew that some planning with the English composition professor should have happened, but that it did not occur. She blamed this lack of planning on a last minute personnel change. The person she was originally paired with left the college, and she was then paired with a first time, first year, faculty member. He was "so overwhelmed with mastering his teaching schedule, that we didn't have time to plan". She stated that they did talk informally by the copy machine and in the halls but they had not formally sat down and made any lesson plans. She described her method of teaching the freshman seminar as a form of

empowerment. In the beginning of the semester, she helped students clarify what the course was about and what to expect from the college experience. Then, after a few weeks, she moved to the role of a facilitator and eventually allowed the students to run the course. She said, "I tell the students that they, and they alone, can sink the ship or make it sail. I give the responsibility back to them. It is a form of student empowerment." She considers herself a role model that demonstrates openness, communication and collaboration. One activity that she developed for her section was a three part, sequenced project. She asked the students to pick a topic, write a problem statement and define a question. Next, the students went into the community, interviewed one individual or one organization that was interested in that specific topic. Then the students had to develop a six to eight page persuasive paper, and finally, the students made an oral presentation to the class on their findings.

This freshman seminar professor's perceptions of clustering the course was that it "is a good idea and that students are really supported". She believes that students do not feel as lost in clustered sections and they form a more immediate bond with each other. Her own personal experiences have been "quite rewarding". She met her clustered students during orientation. Her clustered group of students also formed their own orientation group. So in effect, the clustering began during orientation, before classes. The freshman seminar professor spent community day of orientation with her students cleaning an alternative downtown school facility. For her, "it was a great way to meet my students….I was just wearing jeans, a tee-shirt, and working right along side of them." She concluded by saying that in her opinion, the success of this course depends

on the faculty teaching it. She feels that the faculty need to "buy into the concept of interdisciplinary collaboration and must be creative, flexible and open".

Clustered Section Three was taught by two male professors. This was the second year that the freshman seminar professor had been linked. He and the English instructor met before the semester began to compare syllabi and then continued to meet throughout the semester to discuss the progress of the students. While no integration of academic assignments had occurred, there was an integration of social activities between the two classes. The two professors took their students to the planetarium and then out to dinner. The freshman seminar professor also hosted an end-of-the-semester brunch for the new students and the English professor. The freshman seminar professor's approach to teaching was summarized as "student-centered" and "active". He collaborated with the students on issues such as attendance policy, criteria for grades, and content of several open agenda class periods during the semester. He also spent a lot of time in active learning mode by doing role-plays, mini-case studies, and exercises. He even made the students journal an activity based event: completing surveys, writing autobiographical reflections, approaching a reading from a certain perspective. He also had students form small teams to teach class so that they could own the learning process. His favorite activities included scavenger hunts, career visioning, and creating life maps.

His perception of clustering freshman seminars with academic classes was "they are an excellent idea in concept". He knew of some professors who collaborated extensively with their partners and he wished he had spent more time doing that.

Clustered Section Four was taught by two female professors. The freshman seminar professor admitted that she had not collaborated with her English counterpart at all with the exception of creating some library assignments for the new students. She had taken her students to a soccer game, to the philharmonic symphony, and to a cornfield maze. She wished for more integration but believed that her English counterpart was overwhelmed because she was a first year professor. The freshman seminar professor's philosophy of teaching was a "hands-on", active, conversation-style approach. She listened to what the students' interests were and then tried to integrate those topics into her seminar. Because she believed that technology is so important for students to learn, she tried to incorporate that into her classroom. She assigned students to small groups in the beginning of the semester, gave them a topic, and had them use the computer and its resources (databases, internet, world wide web) to research the topic. Toward the end of the semester, the students were then expected to give an oral presentation on their findings.

This freshman seminar professor believed that clustering the two courses is "an excellent idea". However, she also felt that it was important to get the right faculty to teach it. She felt that a professor's personality, willingness to commit to the program, and the ability to relate to students is vital to the program's success.

Clustered section Five was also taught by two female professors. This freshman seminar professor stated that the level of collaboration with her English counterpart "varied widely". She had taught the clustered section for five years. This year she worked with her English counterpart in that they communicated their lesson plans, topics

to be covered, and even decided to use the same book. They also integrated both academic and social opportunities for students. For example, the two professors took the students on a walking tour of the downtown area. The English professor asked the students to write an article for the school newspaper about the town, while the freshman seminar professor asked the student to give an oral presentation on their findings and to write a research paper on the historic town that they visited. Because these two classes were not only clustered, but were scheduled back-to-back, the two professors have showed a movie over the two time periods and then led a joint discussion on the movie. The philosophy of this freshman seminar professor was that she "absolutely does not lecture". She facilitated discussions, provided rules for the discussions, and had students work in small groups on activities. For the first two to three weeks of class, she picked the topics and essays the students read, but afterwards, she empowered the students and allowed theme to choose their own readings. She also believes that clustering is a "good idea" and that it works better than just taking five different classes. She believes that the students "truly benefit from being in two classes together" and that "they form a tighter community that provides them with academics and emotional support".

While the five clustered sections of the freshman seminar differed in the level of clustered activities, content, and methodology, they also displayed similar characteristics. The five professors were committed to the clustering concept, even if they did not have as much time as they would have liked to achieve it. All the professors were also committed to teaching the new students critical thinking skills and providing the students with experiences and opportunities to interact in and out of the classroom with faculty.

Quantitative Analysis

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) suggest that quantitative studies "give us a very firm foundation for describing and analyzing what 'is', and offer some insight into 'why' it is the way it is" (p.85). The first two research questions in this study were quantitative in nature. The first research question asked

- Do students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course have a higher first semester grade point average than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition experience

And the second research question asked

- Are students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course more likely to enroll for their second semester of college than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition experience

While the purpose of this analysis was to ascertain the differences in grade point average and retention between students in the clustered and nonclustered groups, any such assessment needs to call into account the possibility that the two groups of students might differ in regards to other factors as well….factors that might, in turn, affect grade point average and retention. Previous research has suggested that both grades and persistence in college are related to students' pre-college characteristics (gender, parents' education, SAT scores, previous academic success) and to various aspects of their college experiences (residence, choice of major, contact with faculty, academic involvement, and

social participation) to the extent that students in the clustered and nonclustered groups differ in regard to these attributes. Any analysis which failed to call into account these compositional differences in the groups would be misleading. Accordingly, in addition to the bivariate assessments of the relationships of course format to grade point averages and retention, multivariate analyses of these relationships were carried out, adjusting for the effects of those pre-college and during college characteristics.

Data Collection

Two methods of data collection were utilized to obtain information for the quantitative part of this study. At the beginning of the fall 1998 semester, the researcher worked with the Registrar's office and the Office of Institutional Research to gather information about the "pre-college" characteristics of all students in the freshman class (n=327). The Registrar's office provided the researcher with a list of each student's high school GPA, SAT scores, gender, age, ethnicity, and major. Then, at the beginning of the spring 1999 semester, the researcher worked with the previously referred offices to determine the first semester grade point average and enrollment status of all new students participating in the study.

The second method of collecting quantitative data occurred near the end of the fall 1998 semester. A questionnaire (Appendix C) was used to gather information on first year students' parents' educational level and "during college" experiences. The questionnaire was brief and took approximately twenty minutes to complete. Students completed the questionnaire in every one of the eighteen sections of the freshman seminar. Because participation was voluntary, and because some students were absent

on the day of the survey, response rates varied among the sections from a low of 47% to 100% of those enrolled. For the clustered sections, the response rate was 87%; for the nonclustered sections, it was 72%.

Measuring the Variables

The independent variable for this study was the freshman seminar format (FORMAT). All entering new students were either assigned to a cluster in which the freshman seminar and English course were linked or to a nonclustered freshman seminar in which the two courses were not linked. FORMAT was coded as 0 = not linked and 1 = linked. Students in the clustered sections were linked together as a cohort for the freshman seminar as well as an English composition class. A total of 90 students were included in the clustered subset; 237 were in the nonclustered subset.

The first dependent variable in this study was the first semester grade point average (FGPA). To measure FGPA, the Registrar's office provided the researcher with a list of the new students' first semester grade point averages. These ranged from 1.07 to 4.00 with a mean of 2.97 and a standard deviation of .66.

The second dependent variable in this study was the first-to-second semester retention of new students. Retention (RETEN) was measured by determining the status of each student in the beginning of the second semester of academic study. RETEN was coded as 1 = enrolled in the college for a second semester of study or 0 = not enrolled in the college for the second semester of study.

Data on the students' pre-college and during college characteristics that were expected to be associated with grade point average and retention were obtained as

possible control variables. Pre-college attributes obtained from the Registrar's records were gender, SAT scores, high school grade point average, and ethnicity.

Gender (SEX) was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. Combining both the Math and Verbal SAT scores created the total SAT score (TOTSAT). High school grade point average (HSGPA) was coded on a 100 percentile ranking. Only twenty-four students reported that they were other than "white" and only ten of these were in the clustered format. This small number of cases was deemed to be insufficient for analysis purposes. The level of parental education was gathered from the student questionnaire. Based on the response for both mother and father's level of education, the parental level of education (MOM-EDU and DAD-EDU) as coded from 1 to 6 with "less than a high school diploma" = 1, "high school diploma" = 2, "some college" = 3, "bachelors degree" = 4, "masters degree" = 5, to "doctorate/professional degree" = 6.

Information on other during college experiences were obtained from the questionnaire completed by the students near the end of the first semester. Residence (RESIDE) was coded as 0 = on campus and 1 = off campus. Twenty-five different student majors (MAJOR) were indicated on the college records of the first year students included in this study. This variable, like race, was removed from the study because the number of cases for each major was deemed too small for any comparison.

Several variables measured the extent of faculty contact. The number of times students indicated that they met with their advisors (ADVISOR) during the fall semester was coded on a continuum from "none" = 1 to "1-2 times" = 2, "3-4 times" = 3, "4-5 times" = 4, and "more than 6 times" = 5. How often a student visited a faculty member

during office hours of the fall semester (FACULTY) was coded on the same continuum from “none” = 1 to “more than 6 times” = 5.

Students’ academic involvement was measured by several factors. These included the number of credits (CREDITS) in which a student was enrolled (between 12 and 18). The number of hours a student reported studying outside of class per week (STUDYTIM) ranged from 0 – 50 hours. The number of times students indicated participating in a study group (STUDYGRP) was coded as 1 = no times, 2 = 1 – 2 times, 3 = 3 – 4 times, and 4 = 5+ times.

Involvement in the social life of the institution was assessed by two variables. Participation in clubs and organizations (CLUBS) was coded on a continuum from “none” = 1 to “more than 4” = 4. The actual number of close friends a student reported having at college (FRIENDS) ranged from 0 through 25.

Data Analysis

Data for the quantitative section were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The quantitative section of the analysis focused on analyzing the relationships of freshman seminar format (clustered/not clustered) to first semester grade point average (FGPA) and retention (RETEN) into the second semester, using both bivariate and multivariate models. However, prior to a consideration of these associations, two sets of relationships were examined. First, differences in composition of the clustered and nonclustered groups in regard to pre-college variables (gender, high school grades, SAT scores, and parents’ level of educational level) were explored to

determine whether student selection to enroll in one of the other format was selective for any of these factors.

Second, the relationships of freshman seminar format to the during college experience variables (college residence, number of credits, frequency of contact with advisor and other faculty members, study time, participation in a study group, number of friends, and campus club involvement) were analyzed to ascertain whether participating in the clustered format was associated with differing campus experiences.

Finally, the overall and the net relationships of freshman seminar format to first semester grade point average and retention were analyzed, adjusting statistically for the effects of the pre-college and during college experience variables.

Setwise multiple regression analysis was used to assess the relationship of course format (clustered/not clustered) on students' first semester grade point average, adjusting for the effects of any of the pre-college characteristics and/or college experiences found to be confounded with format. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (1989), "the primary goal of regression analysis is usually to investigate the relationship between a dependent variable and several independent variables" (p. 124). They further state that as a preliminary step, the researcher determines how strong the relationship is between the dependent and independent variables; then one assesses the importance of each of the independent variables to the relationship. Taking regression one step further, they explain:

> Regression can be used to investigate the relationship between a dependent variable and some independent variables with the effect of other independent variables statistically eliminated. Researchers often use regression to perform what is essentially a covariate analysis in which they ask if some critical variables

> adds anything to a prediction equation for a dependent variable after other independent variables (covariates) have already entered the equation. (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989, p. 124)

Because retention, the second dependent variable, was measured as a dichotomy (students returned or did not return), logistical regression was utilized. While logit analysis is similar to ordinary least squared (OLS) multiple regression, it is also different in its ability to utilize a dichotomous dependent variable. Hair, Jr. et al (1995) explain the main concept of logit analysis:

> To understand the effects of the independent variables more fully, logit analysis does not predict just whether an event occurred or not (one or zero), but instead predicts the probability of an event. In this manner, the dependent variable can be any value between zero and one. This also means that the predicted value must be bounded to fall within the range of zero and one. This is one aspect of logit regression that makes regression analysis invalid in these situations. To define a relationship bounded by zero and one, logit analysis uses an assumed relationship between the independent and dependent variable that resembles an S-shaped curve. At very low levels of the independent variable, the probability approaches zero. As the independent variable increases, the probability increases up the curve. But then the slope starts decreasing so that at any level of the independent variable, the probability will approach one but never exceed it (p. 130).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research permits the use of observation by the researcher and the accumulation of data in depth and detail. Because the third and fourth research questions dealt with how students understood their cluster or noncluster experience, and how that experience influenced their grade point average and retention, a phenomenological approach was utilized.

A phenomenological study "describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). Furthermore, phenomenology argues that people's perception of their experience *are* their reality. According to Patton (1990), "There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means" (p.69). This research study's purposes and questions are consistent with Maxwell's (1996) focus on qualitative research. He states, " qualitative researchers need to ask questions about the *meaning* of events and activities to the people involved" (p. 59). In order to find out *what* influenced the students to return (or not to return), students were interviewed in a focus-group setting.

According to Seidman (1991), "The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to evaluate as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meanings they make of that experience" (p. 3). Although interviewing is a method used in many types of qualitative research, it is the best way to

conduct phenomenological research. Interviewing allows researchers to understand the meanings that people give to their own experiences.

Open-ended interviews allow the participants to identify the factors most relevant to his or her response, rather than choosing between research-determined options (Patton, 1990). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1990), open-ended interviewing "allows the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference than from one structured by pre-arranged questions" (p. 3). This type of interviewing allows participants to respond to ways which are meaningful to them.

Data Collection

The data collection occurred during the 1998 fall semester and beginning of 1999 spring semester. Focus group interviews were the primary method of data collection for the qualitative part of the study. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) note an important benefit to using focus groups:

> Participants can 'feed off each other' as they respond; a response that may not occur to a person in an individual interview may be stimulated by something someone else said in the focus group. Focus group members can support or disagree with one another, creating more energy and thus more data (p. 74).

Berg (1998) also writes about the power of using focus groups:

> Focus groups are extremely dynamic. Interactions among and between group members stimulate discussions in which one group member reacts to comments made by another. This dynamic has been called "synergistic group effect". I allows one participant to draw form another or to brainstorm collectively with other members of the group. A far larger number of ideas, issues, topics, and even solutions to a problem can be generated through group discussions than through individual conversations. It is this group energy that distinguishes focus group interviews from individual interviews (p. 101).

The focus groups occurred in mid-November. This time was selected because the participants' first semester ended the first week in December. If the interviews had taken place any later in the semester, the students would likely have been too busy worrying about and studying for finals, and would not have had time to participate in the interview process. These focus group interviews were conducted on the college campus, in a meeting room in the Student Union Building.

Sampling

Qualitative research may focus on small samples, even single cases (n=1), selected purposefully. According to Patton (1990), "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth….the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 169). Patton (1990) has identified 16 types of purposeful sampling.

For this study, *stratified purposeful sampling* has been used. Stratified purposeful sampling "illustrates characteristics of particular subgroups of interest and facilitates comparisons" (Patton, 1990, p. 182). A total of four focus group interviews were conducted and stratified so that two focus groups consisted only of clustered students and two focus groups that consisted of only nonclustered students. Each focus group was further stratified to contained ten full-time, first-year students, enrolled for twelve or more credits. The freshman seminar professors, who selected the students, were asked to further stratify the sample so that it included students of varying academic achievement based on mid-semester grades, varying ethnicities, and gender.

The focus group interview process began with the researcher explaining the study, its purposes and methods. After the explanation, the researcher obtained signed consent forms from all participants prior to the start of the interview (Appendix B). Issues of confidentiality were discussed, and permission to tape the interview was obtained from all participants. The researcher utilized an open-ended interview protocol (Figure 3.1), although it was necessary to use follow-up questions to explore unanticipated but relevant issues brought up by the participants (Patton, 1990). At the conclusion of each focus group interview, the researcher gave students the opportunity to meet with her individually. This allowed students the opportunity to share thoughts, ideas, or experiences that they may not have felt comfortable discussing in front of the entire group.

All interview questions were designed to reduce researcher bias (Patton, 1990). The open-ended nature of the questions was intended "to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data" (Patton, 1990, p. 295). Patton (1990) further asserts that questions should be posed to put the participants in an active, not passive stance, and that by setting the stage, giving background or examples through interjection of presuppositions, questions can increase the richness of the data. Further, Patton (1990) stresses the importance of asking clear questions, posing singular rather than multiple-part questions, and using the language of the participants to establish rapport.

Using Patton's (1990) guidelines, the interview protocol consisted of questions that stemmed from salient issues in the literature review and in the retention models. The

focus group interviews began with questions which explored the participants' first semester collegiate experiences, including academic and social involvement issues. The final set of questions addressed students' perceptions about the freshman seminars and the cluster experience.

Figure 3.1

The Protocol Objective:

To identify what factors, if any, impact on first-year students' retention.

Introduction/Icebreaker

1. Have there been any experiences (positive or negative) that have impacted on your academic career? If prompting is required: faculty interactions and relationships, peer groups, social activities, academic life

Freshman Seminars

2. What do you like about your Freshman Seminar
3. How might the Freshman Seminar be improved
4. How, if at all, has the Freshman Seminar impacted on your academic experience
5.

Questions for clustered group of students only:

Cluster

6. What do you like about your clustered experience
7. How might the cluster experience be improved
8. How, if at all, has the clustered experience impacted on your academic collegiate experience

Is there anything else you'd like to say that we haven't discussed? I'll also be available after this interview is over to talk to people individually

Effective interviewing requires the development of strong, trusting relationships with participants (Patton, 1990). Several strategies were used to build rapport between participants and the researcher. Before the interviews began, the researcher assured participants of their anonymity. She explained how the Registrar's office was providing a list of information to her, and how she was not going to use any names. She also assured the participants that they were free to decline to answer any question that they did not wish to answer, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and the tapes of these focus group interviews would be destroyed upon her graduation. In addition to verbally explaining the process, she reiterated the same information in the informed consent forms signed by each student before beginning the interview. During the interview process, she emphasized the importance of their experiences and perceptions.

The researcher also established rapport with the participants through her interview style. How she asked her questions and how she listened to their responses was critical. Patton (1990) defined rapport as "I respect the people being interviewed, so what they say is important because of who is saying it. I want to convey to them that their knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and feelings are important. Yet I will not judge them for the content of what they are saying to me" (p. 317).

Finally, the researcher's experience in conducting interviews, doing some counseling, and working in the student affairs field all assisted her in establishing rapport. Her work with interviewing and counseling students had taught her how to ask appropriate questions, how to pay attention to body language and nonverbal cues, and

how to listen respectfully. Her work in the field of student affairs provided her with the interest in the students' answers. The researcher believes that these factors helped her establish rapport with the first year students.

Generalizability in Qualitative Reseach

Generalizability is a concern when using qualitative research methods. According to Maxwell (1996), many qualitative researchers often study a small number of people or sites, using purposive rather than probability sampling, and rarely make claims about the generalizability of the findings. However, Maxwell did define two types of generalizability: internal and external. Internal generalizability "refers to the generalizability of a conclusion within the setting or group studied, whereas external generalizability refers to its generalizability beyond that setting or group" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 97). Internal generalizability is what Cook and Campbell (1979) call *statistical conclusion validity* in quantitative research. Maxwell (1996) explains the concept by stating, "The descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity of the conclusions all depend on their internal generalizability to the case as a whole" (p. 97).

So can qualitative studies ever be generalized beyond the setting or individuals studied? Maxwell believes this generalizability can occur and offers reasons why.

1. Qualitative studies have "face generalizability", which means that there is no obvious reason not to believe that the results apply more generally.
2. The generalizability of qualitative studies is usually based, not on explicit sampling of some defined population to which the results can be extended,

but on the development of a theory that can be extended to other cases (Becker, 1991; Yin, 1994).

3. Hammersley (1992, p. 189-191) and Weiss (1994, p. 26-29) list a number of features that lend plausibility to generalizations from case studies or nonrandom samples, including respondents' own assessments of generalizability, the similarity of dynamics and constraints to other situations, the presumed depth or universality of the phenomenon studied and collaboration from other studies.

(Maxwell, 1996, p. 97-98).

Patton (1990) offered yet another opinion on generalizability when he wrote:

> Unlike the usual meaning of the term generalization, an extrapolation clearly connotes that one has gone beyond the narrow confines of the data to think about other applications of the findings. Extrapolations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. Extrapolations are logical, thoughtful, and problem oriented rather than statistical and probabilistic. (Patton, 1990, p. 489).

Before reporting the clustered and nonclustered students' comments and observations from the four focus groups, these issues must be addressed. Maxwell's concerns are similar to those of Erickson (1992), who states that a qualitative researcher must:

1. Identify the full range of variation in the organization of interaction in whatever setting, network or community one is studying
2. Establish the typicality and atypicality (relative frequency of occurrence of various event types and modes of interactional organization (and of particular

> instances of these) across the full range of diversity in social relations to be found in the setting, network or community
>
> (Erickson, 1992, p. 206)

To answer to these two issues, the clustered focus group interviews were comprised of 13 students, 2 men and 11 women. Of these 13 students, one was African American and one was Asian American. Their final grade point averages ranged from 1.73 to 3.80. The nonclustered focus group interviews were comprised of 23 students, 7 men and 16 women. Of these 23 students, one was African American and one was Hispanic. The nonclustered students participating in the focus group had first semester grade point averages that ranged from 1.34 to 4.00. Because of the variability in the participants in the focus groups, findings of the qualitative study can be generalized or extrapolated in the sense suggested by Patton (1990).

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the qualitative aspect was ongoing throughout the study as this allowed the researcher to further explore issues or points raised by early participants with later participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Once all focus group interviews were completed, the audio tapes were then transcribed. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) note that in focus group interviews, speakers are sometimes difficult to identify. To prevent this from occurring, the researcher asked a colleague to attend the interviews and to also make observations and take notes. This allowed the researcher to facilitate the focus group interview while the colleague took observational notes. Notes

also taken by the researcher of her impressions of the interview, the participants, and other observations derived from the interview were incorporated into the data analysis.

Once transcription was completed, the research had three analytic options: memos, categorizing strategies (coding), and contextualizing strategies (Maxwell, 1996). For this study, the categorizing strategy used was coding. The goal of coding is to "rearrange the data into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts" (Strauss, 1987, p.29). Codes used in this study included: academic involvement, social involvement, faculty interactions, peer interactions, and cluster-specific experiences.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the validity and reliability of any qualitative study rests on the researcher's ability and integrity. They also state that a researcher must answer this question when analyzing the data: What techniques and methods were used to ensure the integrity, validity and accuracy of the finding?. To answer this question, Patton (1990) suggests "searching for rival explanations, explaining negative cases, triangulation, and keeping data in context" (p. 472). In analyzing the data, the researcher shared her findings with colleagues (known as peer debriefing). In addition, the data were shared with the researcher's thesis advisor and officials at the College where the study took place.

Triangulation, according to Vogt (1993) is "using more than one method to study the same thing" (p. 234). Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation:

1. **Data triangulation** – use of a variety of data sources in a study
2. **Investigator triangulation** – the use of several different researchers

3. **Theory triangulation** – the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data
4. **Methodological triangulation** – use of multiple methods to study a single problem

(Patton, 1990, p. 187)

In this research study, the researcher utilized data, theory, and methodological triangulation. Using **data triangulation**, the researcher gathered:

- Demographic information from Institutional Records
- Experiential information from student questionnaire
- Experiential information from students in the focus groups

The researcher utilized several different theories in developing the purposes, research questions, and design of this research study. Using **theory triangulation**, the researcher studied:

- Astin's I-E-O model
- Astin's theory of involvement
- Tinto's theory of student departure
- Upcraft and Gardner's model of the first year experience

And the researcher utilized **methodological triangulation** in designing this study:

- Quantitative methods
- Qualitative methods

Credibility is another important component of qualitative research. Patton (1990) states that credibility is established by answering the question: What does the researcher

bring to the study in terms of qualifications, experience, and perspective? Patton believes that to establish credibility of qualitative research, the researcher must make clear her qualifications. The researcher's scholarship and professional experiences reflect a longstanding commitment to first year students. She has studied under Dr. M. Lee Upcraft, Assistant Vice-President, *Emeritus*, for Student Affairs, Affiliate Professor *Emeritus* of Higher Education, and renowned scholar on the first year experience. She has collaborated with him on a publication addressing student development theory in reference to new students. In addition, the researcher has worked closely with him on developing a freshman seminar for the College of Education at the Pennsylvania State University. In conjunction with establishing a freshman seminar for the College of Education, she had to conduct focus group interviews with second year students. She has also completed courses on both quantitative and qualitative methodology and read extensively on the topic of the first year experience.

Another qualification is the researcher's five years' experience in the field of student affairs administration, which she believes has shaped both her values and the ways in which she understands the experiences of college students. While earning her master's degree in student personnel administration/counseling, she served as a Hall Director for an all-female freshman residence hall. After graduating, her first professional position was the Director of New Students in Newburgh, NY. This position provided her with a great deal of experience in the areas of orientation, freshman seminars, and academic advising of new students.

Chapter 4

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Chapter four focuses on the outcomes of this study regarding the first two research questions:

- Do students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course have a higher first semester grade point average than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition experience
- Are students who are enrolled in a clustered section of a freshman seminar and English composition course more likely to enroll for their second semester of college than students who only participated in the freshman seminar without the clustered English composition course

This chapter begins with a consideration of the association of the students' pre-college characteristics and their "during college" experiences to course format (clustered or nonclustered). It continues with an analysis of the relationship between the course format and students' grade point averages, and concludes with a discussion and analysis of the retention rates.

The students who participated in this research study were not randomly assigned to a freshman seminar format (clustered first year seminar versus nonclustered first year seminar). Instead, the new students selected the type of format in which they wished to

participate. The first step in the research process sought to determine if the composition of the two freshman seminar formats differed in terms of pre-college and during college characteristics.

The pre-college characteristics of students in the clustered and nonclustered first year seminar format were compared and tested for statistical significance using t-tests for the difference between two independent sample means. In addition, bivariate correlations between each characteristic and course format (0 = nonclustered; 1 = clustered) are reported (Table 4.1). None of the relationships even approached statistical significance at the .05 level (probabilities ranged from .475 to .925). Thus, even though the students were not randomly assigned to the two course format groups, there is no indication that the groups differed in composition in regard to the pre-college characteristics of gender, high school grades, SAT scores, or parents' educational levels.

Table 4.1 Comparison of Pre-College Characteristics of Clustered and Nonclustered First Year Seminar Format Groups

Pre-College Characteristics	Clustered Format (N=90)[a]	Nonclusted Format (N=237)	t-value	Probability	r-value
	--- Mean Scores ---				
Gender (1=male)[b]	.21	.25	.715	.475	-.500
High School GPA	86.62	86.69	.095	.925	-.014
SAT scores	1102.14	1100.64	-.100	.920	-.018
Mother's education	3.53	3.56	.252	.801	-.034
Father's education	3.72	3.70	-.098	.922	.007

[a] Number of cases varies from the total due to missing data

[b] Mean scores for gender = proportion of males

Similar comparisons were made between the clustered and nonclustered groups concerning the "during college" variables defined previously. Of the eight variables considered here, only two were significantly associated with course format. Students in the clustered courses reported significantly more close friends at college (7.22 vs. 5.75) and a significantly greater number of interactions with faculty members. For none of the other during college experience variables (place of residence, number of credits, frequency of interaction with advisor, hours spent studying, time spent participating in a study group or number of clubs) were there significant differences between the during college experiences of the two course format groups. For a summary of these results, see Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Comparison of the "During College" Experiences of Clustered and Nonclustered First Year Seminar Format Groups

During-College Characteristics	Clustered Format (N=90)	Nonclusted Format (N=237)	t-value	Probability	r-value
	--- Mean Scores ---				
Place of Residence (1 = off campus)	.13	.10	-.660	.510	.037
# of credits attempted	14.74	14.93	1.009	.315	-.061
Times met with academic advisor	2.10	2.05	-.606	.546	.029
Times met with a faculty member	3.04	2.71	-2.281	.023	.146*
Hours per week student studied	16.12	15.88	.182	.856	-.009
Participation in a stud group	2.32	2.24	-.524	.601	.051
# of close friends	7.22	5.75	-2.871	.005	.214**
# of clubs student belongs to	1.92	1.92	.005	.996	-.012

*< .05 **< .01

First Semester GPA and Course Format

The second part of this chapter examines the impact of the freshman seminar format on new students' first semester grade point average. A bivariate analysis of the relationship of the freshman seminar format to first semester grade point average found no significant difference between the two groups of students (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Grade Point Averages of All First Year Students by Format

FORMAT	MEAN	N	t-value	P	r-value
Cluster	3.00	90	-.397	.692	.012
Noncluster	2.96	237			

Setwise hierarchical regression was then utilized to examine the separate or net contribution of pre-college characteristics, format, and during college experiences to the regression model. First, the model begins with set one, the pre-college variables being entered as independent variables. Next, the freshman seminar format variable was incorporated into the model. Finally, the during college variables were added. Table 4.4 shows the result of this hierarchical setwise regression model.

Table 4.4 Hierarchical Setwise Regression for First Semester GPA

	Bivariate r-values	Set 1			Set 2			Set 3		
		B	Beta	Sig.	B	Beta	Sig.	B	Beta	Sig.
Gender	-.220*	-.225	-.167	.004	-.224	-.166	.004	-.229	-.170	.004
High School GPA	.483**	.040	.375	.000	.404	.375	.000	.040	.363	.000
Total SAT Score	.334**	.000	.123	.071	.000	.123	.071	.000	.113	.102
Mother's Education	.158	.066	.130	.039	.066	.130	.039	.068	.134	.035
Father's Education	.122	.004	.009	.892	.004	.008	.895	.002	-.005	.931
Format	.012				.019	.016	.779	.017	.021	.763
Place of Residence	-.182*							-.177	-.095	.111
Number of credits	.161							.004	.008	.894
Times met with Advisor	.040							.056	.061	.288
Times met with Faculty	-.028							-.030	-.056	.343
Hours of study per week	.159							.003	.043	.485
Study Group	-.002							-.020	-.038	.525
Number of close friends	.016							.009	.055	.342
Number of clubs	.155							.102	.110	.061
Constant			-1.338*			-1.349*			-1.473*	
R^2			.280***			.281***			.318***	

* <.05 **<.01 ***<.001

Of the six pre-college characteristics, only father's education failed to reach significance in its relationship to first semester grade point average in the bivariate analysis. High school grade point average was the most powerful predictor of first semester GPA ($r = .483$, $p<.001$), followed by SAT scores ($r = .334$, $p<.001$). Females had significantly higher grades than males, and mother's education was moderately but positively and significantly related to grade point average. The entire set of pre-college variables considered together accounted for approximately 28% of the total variation in first semester GPAs. When all six of these variables were entered simultaneously into the regression equation, the net effect of SAT score failed to reach statistical significance ($p=.071$), largely due to its strong, positive interrelationship with high school grade point average ($r = .542$) also included in the equation. For all other interrelationships among the independent variables, see Appendix D.

Adding first year seminar course format to the regression increased R^2 by only about .001, an increase that was not statistically significant, further supporting the previous bivariate analysis which suggested that format had no statistical impact on students' grades.

When Set Three, the "during college" variables, was added to the model, no new significance in the variables was reported. The number of clubs and organizations a student belonged to approached significance at the .05 level but fell short. The overall model accounted for 32% of all variance.

Retention and Course Format

The final part of this chapter examines the retention rates of the new students in the two freshman seminar formats. Retention was defined as students re-enrolling for the second semester of study. The bivariate analysis of the retention rates in the clustered and nonclustered first year seminar format found no significant difference between the two groups. The crosstabs results are summarized in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Retention Rates of Clustered and Nonclustered Students for Spring 1999

	Returned	Did Not Return
Clustered	91.1%	8.9%
Nonclustered	94.1%	5.9%

chi-square = .510; df = 1; p = .332

Next, logistic regression was utilized to determine the probability of different sets of variables impacting on new students' retention for the spring semester. The model was again organized into three sets of variables (pre-college characteristics, freshman seminar format, during college experiences). These three sets of variables were entered in successive stages as predictors of second semester retention (see Table 4.6).

The logistic regression of pre-college characteristics (Set 1) on regression revealed a negative coefficient for gender. This indicated that women were more likely than men to return for a second semester of study. Gender was the only logit coefficient to reach statistical significance (.01) in this analysis.

The freshman seminar format (Set 2) was added for a second run to determine its impact of probability on second semester retention of new students. After adding the

format variable to the model, the pre-college characteristic logit coefficients remained the same. Gender continued to be the only variable that remained significant (.01).

G^2 is a likelihood-ratio, goodness-of-fit statistic that tests the improvement in fit between two logistic regression models (Simonoff, 1998). The G^2 indicated that the introduction of the freshman seminar format variable did not improve the explanatory power of Set 2 over Set 1 concerning new students' retention rates. In Set 2, G^2 was only .01, with 6 degrees of freedom.

In the third phase of the analysis, "during college" variables (Set 3) were added to the model. The addition of the during college variables produced several changes in the model's logit coefficients. Gender remained negative (women more likely than men to return) but dropped from a significance level of .01 to .06. The final model also showed a positive and statistically significant (.01) logit coefficient for the number of clubs and organizations to which a student belonged. The more clubs and organizations a student belonged to, the more likely she/he was to return. Additionally, the logit coefficient for first semester grade point average was positively and statistically significant (.05). The higher a student's grade point average, the more likely he or she was to return.

The introduction of the during college experience variables significantly improved the goodness-of-fit over Set 2. G^2 for Set 3 was 24.341, significant at .01, and had 15 degrees of freedom. An examination of the final set of variables revealed that gender, club involvement, and grade point average were important factors affecting retention.

Table 4.6 Logistic Regression on Retention

	Set 1			Set 2			Set 3		
	B	Exp (B)	Sig.	B	Exp (B)	Sig.	B	Exp(B)	Sig.
Gender	-1.867	.155	.007	-1.867	.155	.006	-1.736	.176	.058
High School GPA	-.003	.997	.963	-.003	.997	.965	-.078	.925	.483
Total SAT Score	-.002	.998	.586	-.002	.998	.589	-.002	.998	.708
Mother's Education	.069	1.071	.833	.070	1.072	.831	-.010	.701	.363
Father's Education	.076	1.079	.792	.077	1.078	.790	-.355	.990	.978
Format				.074	1.077	.918	-.461	.630	.592
Place of Residence							1.823	6.193	.263
Number of credits							.305	1.357	.333
Times met with Advisor							-.137	.872	.821
Times met with Faculty							.643	1.901	.210
Hours of study per week							.022	1.022	.673
Study Group							.613	1.845	.203
Number of close friends							-.017	.983	.897
Number of clubs							2.490	12.062	.003
FGPA							1.210	3.346.	.044
Constant	5.507			5.447			-2.701		
-2 Log Likelihood	80.139			80.129			55.788		
Model Chi-square	9.075			9.086			33.426**		
G^2				.01			24.341**		

*<.05 **<.01

Conclusions

This chapter addressed questions concerning first semester grade point average and retention rates of students in clustered and nonclustered sections of freshman seminars. The study failed to show any statistical difference between the clustered and nonclustered groups of students in their first semester grade point averages or their retention rates in the bivariate case, or when various pre-college characteristics, format, and "during college" characteristics were controlled. While no significant differences were found between the two groups of students, in regards to these variables, several observations are worth discussing.

When analyzing first semester grade point average, the most parsimonious model in this study involved the pre-college variables (gender, high school grade point average, total SAT scores, mother's and father's educational level) found in Set 1. Students' previous academic achievement, high school grade point average and SAT scores, were the two most highly correlated variables with first semester grade point average in college. As previously discussed, high school grade point average was the most powerful predictor of first semester college grade point average in this study. This finding concurred with the literature on high school achievement affecting college academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While the pre-college variables impacted students' college grade point averages most significantly, this research study failed to show that freshman seminar format or during college experiences significantly impacted on first semester grade point average.

When analyzing the retention research, the during college experience variables of Set 3 revealed the most significance in the model. The variable gender remained consistently significant throughout all three sets. Women were more likely than men to return for a second semester of study. First semester grade point average was also found to be significantly related to the retention of new students. This finding was also consistent with the literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). One final observation was that the number of clubs and organizations to which a student belonged was significantly (.01 level) associated with retention. The more involved the students were, the more likely they were to return for another semester of study. This finding also concurred with Astin's (1997) theory of student involvement. The findings and implications for practice are discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Chapter five focuses on the outcomes of this study regarding the third and fourth research questions:

- What factors do students report that contribute to any differences between the first semester grade point averages of students participating in the cluster and first year students not participating in the cluster

- What factors do students report that contribute to the first-to-second semester retention rates of students participating in the cluster and first year students not participating in the cluster

This chapter begins with a discussion of the freshmen seminar course by clustered and nonclustered students. Next, the discussion will focus on clustered and nonclustered students' perceptions of faculty, followed by a discussion of clustered and nonclustered students' thoughts about faculty contact both inside and outside the classroom. The chapter will continue with a discussion of the cluster experience and then a summary of the similarities and differences between the two groups of students. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings of the two research questions.

The Freshman Seminar

Clustered Students' Observations

The students who were clustered together reported enjoying the benefits of their freshman seminar. Students liked the freshman seminar because it was small and informal, utilized different teaching methods, taught them academic survival skills, and provided opportunities for their professors to get to know them.

Students recognized that because of the informal nature and structure of the freshman seminar, they had developed close, personal bonds with the other students in the class. Students' thoughts about the class structure and the other students in the class are reflected below:

> *The class is so informal. It's easy to open up and share feelings. It's like how you would talk to your closest friends.*
>
> *It's an opportunity to meet a lot of new people. It's a place to sit and compare stories with other new students.*
>
> *It's like a social class. I have done things outside the class with the professor and other students.*
>
> *I have a lot of tough courses and this one takes the pressure off. It's a place where I can go to learn in a relaxed, pressure-free environment, surrounded by friends.*
>
> *The freshman seminar got us off campus, showed us there was an outside world beyond the walls of the college. Can you imagine ever doing something like that in a regular class?*

Because the freshman seminar was not taught as a traditional lecture course, students were exposed to a variety of teaching styles. Since the freshman seminar was not discipline specific, opportunities existed for the students and faculty to discuss a

multitude of different topics. The students reflected on the different ways they were learning, as well as the different topics they were learning:

> *The fact that we discuss different things that we would never discuss in other classes, like homesickness and diversity is good. Hearing the other students' perspectives really enhances the class experience.*
>
> *I like how we discuss different topics and we hear about other students' points of view.*
>
> *I like how it is not as structured as my regular classes.*
>
> *I like seeing two sides to learning. In freshman seminar it's more relaxed and casual but we are still learning through our discussions. But in English it's a whole different thing. There, the professor is more uptight, more formal, more structured, and all lecture.*

Students also felt that they had gained valuable academic skills from participating in the freshman seminar. They repeatedly discussed how their oral speaking skills had improved due to the numerous presentations they had to give. They also remarked that the freshman seminar course taught them to be more critical thinkers and that they learned how to support their arguments. Their thoughts are reflected below:

> *My freshman seminar has given me great oral speaking skills. I was really afraid to speak in front of the class but because I know everyone, including the professor, it is so much easier. Now I feel comfortable when I have to make presentations in freshman seminar and my other classes. I also feel like it is okay to be opinionated and to share my views.*
>
> *Sometimes I struggle with the language barrier but I have so much more confidence now because of all the talking and presenting we do in class. The oral presentations in freshman seminar have given me practice and more confidence to talk more in my other classes.*
>
> *The freshman seminar makes you more critical of yourself; you have to think more about who you are, what you believe in, and what decisions and values are important to you. It's also taught me to be a more critical thinker.*

> *It's taught me how to form opinions and how to back them up. I now know that in my other classes how to give supportive reasons for my argument instead of just stating it without backing it up. It's definitely taught me to be a more critical thinker.*
>
> *You get great feedback and you get to hear the true opinions of other students, not just what you think the professors want to hear. It helps to know that other people are just like you and feeling the same way you are, whether you are happy or stressed.*

Other students remarked that the freshman seminar required a lot of writing and researching. And some students reported learning how to do research, as well as doing a lot of writing helped prepare them for writing papers in other courses.

> *Freshman seminar has taught me how to be a better writer. I didn't expect so much writing but we do a lot. And I mean a lot.*
>
> *We've learned a lot about technology, computers, and the internet. That's helped me do more research and better research for my other classes.*

Students in the clustered freshman seminar were virtually unanimous in their positive comments about the freshman seminar. Of the forty comments recorded, onl one comment was negative. Put another way, of the thirteen clustered students interviewed in a focus group, only one student made one negative comment concerning the freshman seminar.

Nonclustered Students' Observations

Many nonclustered students reported that the freshman seminar course helped them to adjust to college life. The new students felt unsure about beginning college life and did not know what to expect when they arrived. However, they believed that the freshman seminar course helped them deal with their fears and helped them "fit in" to their new life.

I like the course because when I came to college I didn't know what to expect and this class really helped me with the expectations of college work. It was also really nice to be able to take a class with just freshmen. It wasn't mixed with upperclassmen. It was a good way to get to know other freshmen and new people.

This class was a great icebreaker to college for me and helped me start fitting in right away.

This class has really helped me. It has really made me fit into college life.

Besides helping them to adjust to their new life, students also found the relaxed and informal structure of the class to be enjoyable and different from what they were accustomed to in high school and in other college classes.

I like the class because it is really informal. There's a good mix of discussion and lecture.

I like the nonstandard, loose, laid back curriculum of the course. It makes me think in new ways.

The stress management discussion and exercises have helped me tremendously. I do the techniques we learned in class every night before going to bed and they really help me and my outlook.

This course is so different academically from anything I ever took in high school or college. But it's cool! And it's very humbling to hear so many other opinions and views in my class.

When asked what they liked best about their freshman seminar, nonclustered students overwhelmingly reported the class discussions. The students felt that the topics of the discussions were worthwhile and informative. Students also believed that their minds had been opened to a variety of issues.

I like the discussions we have. We've had a lot of good speakers come in and talk to us about the gay alliance, stress management, and things like that. We talk and react to issues.

The issues we talk about really open your mind. So far we have talked about abortion, sexual harassment, and sexual orientation.

I like all the class discussions. I think it gives shy people a chance to open up and talk who normally would just sit back and listen.

I really like the class discussions. They have opened my mind and broadened my perspective. I like learning about different cultures and the diversity stuff. I come from a very small hometown so it has been good for me to learn how to accept different cultures.

While some students enjoyed the freshman seminar course, other students felt that the seminar was a "waste of time" and did not see any value in the course.

I say just get rid of it, totally. It's boring, boring, boring. All we do is sit around and discuss issues. ho cares?

This class is such a waste of my time.

Some nonclustered students recognized the value of the freshman seminar in regards to their academic work. Most students said that the writing component of the freshman seminar has helped them with their writing in other courses.

I think this class has helped me with my writing in all my other classes. I'm not a good writer and used to be really scared. Now I don't worry as much about writing because this class has given me a lot of practice and confidence.

The journal entries have definitely helped me become a more focused writer. I think that I now write more concisely which is an improvement from my writing in high school.

Plus it helped me in my other classes because of all the writing we must do.

While some students cited improved writing as a benefit of the freshman seminar, other students remarked that learning about resources and technology improved their academic skills.

The class was a really good way to learn about what resources the campus has to offer. Like the library. That tour was so helpful and it really made a big difference to me and on my ability to do better research for classes.

I also feel like the class has helped me academically. By just taking that one trip to the library, I learned so much about it....much more than had I had to try and

> *figure it out on my own. I know I wouldn't have done that. So I guess I feel more comfortable doing research and using what is available to me.*

Once again, while some nonclustered students believed that they gained valuable academic skills that will help them in other courses, other students were not as positive. When asked if the freshman seminar had influenced their academic experience, several students reported dissatisfaction. Some students felt that the assignments were tedious and time consuming. These students did not see any value to the course nor did they feel that they gained any skills.

> *I think the freshman seminar has been more of a hindrance on my academics than a help. I would rather be spending more time on fun activities or on class stuff for my major than on freshman seminar. I'm always reading essays and writing for this class, and it isn't even an important class. I need more time for the classes in my major.*

> *I think this class has a negative impact on my academics. It takes time away from my other important classes. It is hard to fit in other classes outside your major and here we are stuck taking this course that doesn't mean anything. I don't need this. I wish it were a zero credit course so we could take something else.*

> *I feel like the freshman seminar gets in the way. It's not important to have it last all semester. I think it should only be fore a few weeks in the beginning of the semester because it does help you get to know new students. But now, as we are going into finals, it is just getting in my way. I don't have a final in the class but yet I still have to go to it. It just shouldn't be all semester.*

Overall, the reaction of students participating in the nonclustered freshman seminar focus group interviews were more positive than negative about the freshman seminar experience. Of the fifty-eight comments made, thirty-two were positive and twenty-six were negative. Put another way, of the twenty-three students participating in the nonclustered experience, five people made exclusively negative comments, thirteen

people made exclusively positive comments, and five students made both positive and negative comments.

Students' Perceptions of Faculty

Clustered Students' Observations

Clustered students valued and appreciated the personalized attention that the received from their freshman seminar professors. These students felt they had someone who cared about them, who took the time to get to know them, were willing to sit and talk to the new students, and who were willing to spend time with them outside of class. Here are students' thoughts in regards to how easy it was to talk to their freshman seminar professors:

> *My freshman seminar professor is really cool. She has already stayed after class with me for a half-hour just talking to me about anything and everything.*
>
> *My freshman seminar teacher always has her door open which is great because I don't feel like I am interrupting or intruding on her time.*
>
> *My freshman seminar professor is great! She really helped me when I was terribly homesick. She saw that I was having a hard time and told me to come see her. When I told her what was going on, I just started crying. But she was great. She gave me a big hug and told me it would get easier. It's nice knowing that she cared about me.*

Other students were impressed and surprised that their freshman seminar professors knew them by name. This name recognition was obviously important to the new students. It made the students feel like they mattered:

> *My professor will actually say hi to us in the halls or on campus whenever he sees us, and he calls us by name.*

> *My freshman seminar professor knows me by name. I mean, in almost all of my other classes, I don't think the professors have a clue as to who I am, let alone know my name.*

Overall, students in the clustered experience had a highly positive perception of their faculty. Of the twenty comments made, all were positive.

Nonclustered Students' Observations

The students participating in the nonclustered freshman seminar had mostl positive things to say about their course instructors. These students, like their clustered counterparts, appreciated the effort made by professors to get to know the students b name, and to learn something about them.

> *My freshman seminar professor tries to get to know everyone in class. He asks us how we are doing and how our classes are going. One of our assignments was to make a poster describing our life story. He looked at all of these and mentioned different things from the posters to us. It was obvious that he really read them and remembered things about us. And he knew our names by the end of the first week. That really impressed me. Also, he tries to go to a lot of our outside activities that we participate in. It's almost like he is a parent away from home for us.*

> *Even though my freshman seminar teacher is in the theater department and I am a business major, he has a "come to me anytime you need something" attitude and that really meant a lot to me. He's been really good about connecting with all of us, regardless of our majors.*

> *I think all of my professors are open and willing to talk whenever you need help. I definitely feel comfortable approaching anyone of them, especially my freshman seminar professor. He's just an emotional guy, a great big teddy bear.*

> *I think it's neat that all the teachers will give out their home phone numbers. They say that we shouldn't hesitate to call them and you can tell that they really mean it.*

> *I have a lot of contact with my freshman seminar teacher. He's awesome and cool. He really makes an effort to get to know you. He cares about how we are*

> *doing....all aspects of our life. He wants to know about our other classes, our social life. You can tell he means it when he says he wants to meet with us and talk.*

While most of the students had positive things to say about their freshman seminar profressors, other students had some negative things to say. Some students felt that the professors were not making the effort to get to know them, nor did they feel comfortable talking to the professors.

> *Most of my professors just seem too busy and preoccupied to talk to them. I'm sure if I asked my freshman seminar professor he would talk to me. But why bother? I don't have anything to say to him.*

> *If I call my freshman seminar teacher she makes me feel bad for doing it. It's like her mother is dying or something and I am interrupting her. I just always feel like I am wasting her time.*

> *My freshman seminar professor is a nice guy but yet he doesn't seem like he is into it. He doesn't seem like he has any desire to talk to us after class is over.*

Overall, students in the nonclustered experience had generally positive perceptions of their freshman seminar faculty. Of the twenty-two comments made, eighteen were positive. Of the twenty-three nonclustered students who participated in the focus groups, eighteen were exclusively positive, four were exclusively negative, and one had no comment.

Faculty Contact

Clustered Students' Observations

Clustered students were impressed that the freshman seminar professors took the time to socialize with them outside of class. By engaging in out-of-class activities with

faculty members, it allowed the students to see a different side to the faculty. These social events humanized the freshman seminar professors for the students.

> *Our freshman seminar teacher took us to a soccer game. It's like we're all just good friends. A group of us are even going to ask her if she wants to have coffee with us next week. Since we always hang out and talk over coffee we thought we'd ask her to join us.*
>
> *We all went out to dinner and to a movie with our freshman seminar professor and had a blast. It's just awesome how she has taken the time to get to know us individually and to show us how much she cares. And she let's us call her by her first name...it's like she wants to be on the same level as her students and not be elevated to teacher status.*
>
> *Our freshman seminar instructor took us on a tour of the downtown and then we went out to dinner. It was neat to see him as just a regular guy. He was a lot more normal than I thought. And all during dinner, he would talk to us, asked us questions, and picked on us. It was so much fun. He really knows me best of all my teachers.*

Students' thoughts and feelings concerning their interaction with the freshman seminar professors have already been noted. However, the students also have a few comments about their clustered English composition professors:

> *Our English composition professor is great. She asks us to make at least two appointments during the semester to meet with her. For our first paper, we must also meet with her to talk about it. It really helps to hear her point of view on things. And I really appreciated her giving us her home phone number and email.*
>
> *I agree, my English professor is just unbelievable. People actually fight in rushing to make appointments with her. She just loves to chitchat and really wants to get to know us. And then how she remembers things about us. And it just isn't her. Our freshman seminar professor is the same way. There is such genuine interest to get to know us and talk to us. It's a neat feeling.*
>
> *I really feel like my freshman seminar and English professors know me best. With my other professors, I am not even sure they know my name.*

I totally agree that my freshman seminar and English teachers know me best.

Of the thirteen students who made positive comments about their contact with faculty outside the classroom, 11 made positive comments about their freshman seminar instructor, 4 made positive comments about their English composition professors.

Nonclustered Students' Observations

The nonclustered students, like the clustered students, also liked the activities the freshman seminar professors did with them outside of class.

> *He has taken us out to dinner and to the movies and you can tell that he looks forward to these outings.*
>
> *My freshman seminar teacher is willing to do a lot of fun things with us outside of class. She has taken us out to dinner and has also played laser tag with us. She wants us to enjoy the class and not to get bored.*

Of the twenty-one comments made by nonclustered participants concerning the freshman seminar, 17 were positive and four were negative. Of the 23 nonclustered students, eleven reported positive contact with freshman seminar instructors, four reported negative contact with freshman seminar professors, six reported positive contact with other faculty, and two made no comments.

The Cluster Experience

Comments made by clustered students participating in the focus group interviews revealed their perceptions of several benefits of their experience. Specifically, students believed that they experienced different styles of teaching, learned differently in their clustered courses, and developed a strong peer support group.

Teaching and Learning

Being in a clustered environment allowed the students to have an in depth and integrated academic experience. Being clustered in two academic courses provided some continuity, especially through discussions that began in one course and continued into the other one. Students remarked that they liked having discussions, and appreciated the different viewpoints of their friends as well as the two professors.

> *I liked how we had more discussions in our two courses. If we want to, we can carry a topic through two different classes. That way, we get two professors' opinions. Plus our discussions are more detailed and more in-depth than if we just had one discussion in just one class. It really expands our options.*

> *Being able to continue discussions throughout the whole week. Remember when we started this whole debate in freshman seminar and when we kept talking about it in English composition the professor got mad at us?*

> *I like having more open discussions in our linked courses. I feel comfortable, safe and not afraid to speak up with my small group. I like seeing the same people every single day. It's a constant and I like that.*

Other students remarked that they liked the academic support they received from other students in the clustered classes. Students felt that they had people to turn to when they needed help in understanding a concept discussed in class, or if they needed notes from a class, or just finding people to work with on class projects.

> *Getting to exchange ideas and discussions between the two classes. It really increases your level of support....you know, just making sure you understand the assignment, or if you missed something in your notes, or trying to study for a test.*
>
> *The linking of the two classes makes it easier to work with people on other projects. We are already comfortable with one another and know each other better.*

Students also felt that they gained more than one perspective from the differing teaching styles of their linked professors.

> *I think I have been exposed to more ways of learning and teaching through the linked experience. I see how two different professors handle things but I also see how us students react to the different types of classes. I think the linked experience has just taught me how to be more open, more observant, and more tolerant.*
>
> *I like being able to see two sides of people...in freshman seminar they are open, willing to talk, say whatever is on their mind, and then in English, they are more serious, structured, and restrained.*

Of the thirteen students who participated in the cluster focus group, seven students made twelve positive comments about the different teaching styles of the faculty, and the different learning styles of the students, and six made no comments.

Peer Support

The second theme to emerge from the clustered students' focus group interviews was the concept of peer support. Being in the cluster of courses allowed the new students to form close social bonds almost immediately upon arriving at the institution. Clustered students met the other members of their cluster during orientation. The cluster of students bonded during orientation as a group, and then continued the experience in the fall semester while enrolled in the freshman seminar and the English composition courses.

I'm a really shy guy but the fact that I met everyone the first day I got here was cool. I spent all this time with my orientation group and then the first day of classes they were all there in seminar, and then again on the second day in English. That made all the difference for me. I wasn't stressed about making new friends because I had class everyday of the week with people I knew and who knew me.

The fact that we are all friends and have been since orientation is the best thing. It's nice to see familiar faces every single day; it's a good crutch in the beginning of the semester when you are just overwhelmed with so many new things.

The best thing is getting that connection with a group of people right away, at orientation, and then continuing it during the semester. It's definitely a good thing for the first semester, since everyone is so new and so scared.

Other students were glad that they were going to be in classes with the same group of people. The students felt that by being with the same group of people, they knew each other better, and that their bonds with each other were stronger and closer than "the average student."

Because my freshman seminar and English composition course are linked, I know the same group of people. It's nice because it is just so relaxed and we are all really comfortable around the professors.

We get to know people a lot better. Since we are together as a class more than the average student, we can form better opinions of each other, we form stronger friendships, and who we really are comes out. The whole peer assessment thing is good too since there is an element of trust and understanding among us.

It's a chance to see the same people four times a week and really get close to one another.

The clustered students also felt that by seeing each other every day, a sense of trust developed among their group. This trust carried into the classroom where the students were more willing to talk and share their feelings.

Getting really close to one group of people has been great. I know and trust my group so I am willing to open up and talk to them, and share my feelings. Then when they tell me that they are feeling the same way, I know I am not alone. And

> *because I know and trust them, I also know I can talk to them about academic stuff and that my ideas will be respected and not ridiculed.*
>
> *Getting to really, really know people and having them get to know you. It's about forming close relationships with both the new students and the faculty. I think a sense of trust has happened from working in so many small groups together. The freshman seminar and English professors are always mixing us up to make sure that we are all getting to know each other.*

The bonding that occurred in these clusters was so strong, that students were sad when thinking how the experience would end at the end of the semester, and how other new students were not having the same experience.

> *It just doesn't seem right that not everyone is having this incredible experience. I almost feel sorry for those who are missing out on it.*
>
> *I am going to be really sad when this semester is over. There will be no more close groups every day in the same classes. I am really going to miss that. I just love knowing I will see all these people everyday. It's something I count on and look forward to.*
>
> *I know when I talk to my friends at other colleges, they just don't understand this freshman seminar. They ask me what it is, like they think it is some stupid thing. But when I tell them about it, they get really envious. They are jealous that I know so many more people in my classes than they do, that my professors not only know my name but something about me, and that I have adjusted so much better and quicker than they did.*
>
> *I am just so thankful for the opportunity to have taken this class and to meet these people. Even though class will end, I know I will still have that bond with the people in my class. It's been a wonderful outlet. And I start next semester knowing that my opinions do matter and that I won't be ridiculed for what I have to say.*

Of the thirteen students who participated in the cluster experience, ten students made seventeen positive comments concerning the peer support system in the cluster and three students made no comments.

Conclusions on the Clustered Academic Experience

The clustered students reported that they enjoyed the small, intimate, informal structure of the freshman seminar course. They liked the fact that they met each other during their first few days on campus during orientation, and that their bond was developed and made stronger throughout the semester by having two classes together. They felt that by getting to know each other so well, they trusted each other more, and therefore, felt more comfortable in academic situations, such as giving presentations or debating issues. They felt that their clustered faculty members cared about them and knew them as individuals. They liked that the professors knew them by name and knew something about them. And they enjoyed doing things with the faculty members outside of class.

While most of the students enjoyed the clustered experience, they did have some suggestions to make the experience even better. One suggestion was to make the linked courses more integrated. Two students remarked that at times it didn't seem like the experience was interrelated.

> *At times it seems like the two professors don't meet. I don't always feel like the two courses are linked or connected at all. In fact, there are days where they are just two courses, totally unrelated. I would like to see more common topics.*

Another suggestion was to link more than one class. Two students suggested that all of their classes during the fall semester be linked, while another student suggested that the linked experience be tied into the residence life experience.

> *I think maybe they should try linking all five of our classes together for the first semester. Why not try putting us all together for every class? Of course we might drive our professors crazy.*

Or wait a minute, do you think they could try putting us all in the same residence hall too? Then some of us might not be stuck in the upperclass dorm.

Conclusions about the Nonclustered Freshman Seminar

The students in the nonclustered freshman seminars seemed to have a more positive than negative opinion about their freshman seminar experience and their seminar professors. When asked how they could make the freshman seminar experience better, they offered several suggestions. The most common concern from the students dealt with the issue of standardization, followed by the issue of classifying the course as "writing intensive", and concluded with students wanting more interaction and making the seminar more major-specific. When discussing the issue of standardization, students offered these thoughts:

I think the biggest issue is just making things more standard. It should be all the same for the students. And if professors don't want to teach the course, then don't! It's obvious that some don't want to be teaching it.

I agree that the course should be more standardized. My professor requires so many more papers than other freshman seminars, but at least we don't have to keep a journal. The teacher tries to make it too much like English class, but it isn't English. They really need to get all the instructors together and agree on what everyone will teach.

I also think it needs to be more standardized. It's hard to be in a class that is so relaxed and informal and then BAM, you have to write this large serious paper for a grade, but it's not fair, because not everyone in freshman seminar has to write the big paper.

They need to make more standard guidelines. It's not fair because I had to pay a lot more for books for my freshman seminar than other people in different sections did.

Another concern of some students was that they were being asked to do a lot of writing in the freshman seminar but that the course was not classified as "writing intensive". The students reflected on this suggestion:

> *I think they should make the freshman seminar a "writing intensive" course. With as much writing as we do for it, the class should be reclassified.*

> *I am taking two writing intensive courses and this freshman seminar is more work than the two writing intensive courses combined. They should definitely give this class a "writing intensive" classification.*

> *Our class has done a lot of writing...10 essays worth of writing. To me, that seems like a waste of time. When in life will I have to write 10 essays in 3 months?*

Some of the nonclustered students also seemed to want interaction with other groups of new students. While they never compared themselves or mentioned the clustered section of students, they did suggest similar types of activities found in the cluster:

> *I think some interactions between different freshman seminar classes would be really good. It could be combining the two classes for some larger group discussions or even getting together out of class to do some fun activities. It would be another way to meet more people.*

> *I also think that there should be some collaboration between other freshman seminar sections. It would be more fun to do things with other classes.*

> *We haven't left the classroom yet to do anything fun or outside of class. This class is so irritating. Other classes are going out and doing fun things.*

And other students felt that freshman seminars should be geared more toward specific majors and careers.

The freshman seminars should be more major specific. I mean, I am a biology major and when I got here, I didn't know how to write a bio lab report. That would have been a good thing to learn in this seminar.

I would change the focus of the class. I would have more opportunities to learn about jobs and careers.

Freshman seminar should be more focused on those who are undecided. There should be a lot more done to teach us about the different majors offered here and what we can do as careers with these majors.

Other students felt that the course needed to be changed in length of time and that it should not be mandatory for all new students.

The freshman seminar should only have been for a month. A semester is too long. I have already adjusted so what is the point in continuing with this course?

The course should be optional. Let the students make their own decisions based on their situation. If you think you can adjust on your own, then do it. Don't force the well-adjusted ones to take this course.

Discussion of the Similarities and Differences Between the Two Groups

Similarities

On the whole, both clustered and nonclustered students had generally positive reactions to their classroom experiences, but clustered students were more positive than nonclustered students. Students in both the clustered and nonclustered sections of the freshman seminar shared several common themes during their focus group interviews. Both groups of students liked the informal, laid-back style in which the seminar was taught, both groups of students liked being known by name, and both liked feeling connected to a faculty member.

Students in both the clustered and nonclustered freshman seminars reported satisfaction with the style in which the seminar was taught. Both sets of students enjoyed the more informal and relaxed atmosphere of the class, the use of different teaching methods in which material was presented (discussions and not just lectures), and the variety of activities used in the seminar.

The final similarity noted between the two groups of students was the desire of the students to be known by their professors. It was important to the students that professors knew them by name and knew something about them. Students were impressed with the faculty who took the time to get to know them and who did things with them outside the traditional, formal classroom.

Differences

While similarities did exist between the two groups of students, four differences also existed:

- Satisfaction with the freshman seminar
- Perceived peer support
- Perception of the facult
- Contact with the faculty outside of class

While both groups of students were generally positive about their freshman seminar experience, students in the clustered first year seminars reported more positive thoughts and satisfaction with the seminar experience than did nonclustered students. A higher level of satisfaction was reflected in the clustered students' observations and comments, when they discussed both the academic worth and social value of the course.

Clustered students reported 39 positive and one negative comments compared to the nonclustered students who made 32 positive comments and twenty-six negative comments.

The clustered students also expressed slightly more thoughts and remarks of having close, personal bonds with other members in their classes compared to the nonclustered group of students. This closeness could possibly be attributed to the fact that they began their bonding during the first few days of orientation. While the nonclustered students did talk about knowing everyone in their seminar course, they did not refer to the group as “bonding”, “feeling really close to”, or “knowing something about everyone” as did the clustered students.

The third difference between the two groups of students was the way they perceived their professors. While both groups were generally positive about the way the perceived their professors, clustered students reported slightly more positive feelings concerning the faculty. Overall, clustered students reported feeling slightly more comfortable in talking to their freshman seminar and English professors, and reported that their seminar professors were more approachable than did those of the nonclustered students.

The final difference was that students in the clustered sections of the freshman seminar reported slightly more positive feelings about their interactions with the facult outside of class than nonclustered students did.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to analyze the new students' thoughts and observations on what factors they believed influenced their first semester grade point average and retention into the second semester, and how, if at all, the two groups of students differed. While both groups were generally positive about their experiences, clustered students' comments were more positive (99%) compared to the comments made by the nonclustered students (66%). Furthermore, of the clustered students participating in the focus groups, 98% of them spoke positively compared to the nonclustered students who spoke in the focus group. Of the nonclustered students, 70% spoke made positive comments, 19% made negative comments, 7% had mixed comments, and 4% did not speak. The implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Academic achievement and retention of new students are serious concerns for colleges and universities. Front loading programs, such as orientation, academic advising, first year seminars, and clustering, have proven successful for new students (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Frost, 1991; Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995). Another step in the evolution of front loading is clustering freshman seminars with academic courses. Yet little is known as to how clustering freshman seminars with academic courses affects new students.

This study examined a clustered and nonclustered freshman seminar program at one institution. The study focused on the similarities and differences between five clustered sections and thirteen nonclustered sections of freshman seminars. Using both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, the study tested regression models of the effects of the freshman seminar format, adjusting for the pre-college and during college characteristics on students' grade point averages and retention rates. In addition, the study examined new students' perceptions of what they believed affected their grade point average and retention.

This chapter summarizes the most important results from this study. These results are then discussed in terms of their implications for further research and practice in higher education.

Applying Astin's (1993) I-E-O theory and Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure to this research study, and building upon previous studies concerning freshman seminars and clustering (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Belcheir, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993), it was anticipated that higher grade point averages and retention rates would be found among students in the clustered sections of the freshman seminar. However, this was not the case for either grade point average or retention.

Quantitative Findings

Academic Achievement

The relationship between academic achievement and freshman seminar format was assessed using bivariate and multivariate analyses. As noted in Table 4.4, no statistical difference existed in the first semester grade point average between the students in the clustered and the nonclustered sections of the freshman seminar of this research study. The multivariate regression model , controlling for pre-college and during college variables did find that some other variables were significant predictors of academic achievement, which were consistent with previous literature. The first significant

predictor, consistent with the literature, was high school grade point average, which was the strongest positive predictor of college grade point average. This finding concurs with the academic achievement literature (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Second, gender was also a positive predictor of grade point average in this study. The women tended to do better academically than the men, which is consistent with Astin's (1993) findings.

Other findings in this study which were not significant, nor consistent with previous literature on academic achievement included a *student's place of residence.* While the literature shows that students living on campus are more likely to do better academically and more likely to persist to graduation compared to those students who commute (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), this study found no such relationship. While the literature shows that the *number of times a student interacted with faculty or an academic advisor,* may "indirectly influence intellectual growth by influencing students' level of involvement in academic or intellectual experiences" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 149), this study found no such relationship. While the literature also shows that *the hours a student studies per week* is positively related to higher academic achievement (Larose, 1991), this study found no such relationship. And while research studies have shown that participating in a study group positively influences grade point average (Astin, 1993), this study found no such relationship.

The results of these bivariate and multivariate analyses indicated that participation in a clustered freshman seminar did not influence on first semester grade point average, even when controlling for pre-college and during college experiences. This is not

consistent with the literature that showed that clustering does positively influence on students' academic achievement (Tokuno & Campbell, 1992; Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995).

Retention

The relationship between retention and freshman seminar format was assessed using both bivariate and multivariate analyses. As noted in Table 4.6, there was no statistically significant difference between the retention rates of those students in clustered freshman seminars and those students in the nonclustered freshman seminars. However, when the logistical regression model was run, some other variables were significant predictors of retention, which were consistent with the literature. Specifically, gender (being female), club involvement (the more clubs and organizations belonged to, the more likely to be retained), and first semester grade point average (the higher the grade point average, the more likely to be retained) were significant factors positivel affecting retention. These quantitative results support the literature, which states the more involved students are, the more likely they are to succeed and that first semester grade point average directly affects first year retention (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

Other findings in this study which were not significant, nor consistent with previous literature included a *student's place of residence*. While the literature shows that students who live on campus are more likely to persist to graduation compared to those students who commute (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), this study found no such relationship. The literature also shows that the *more times a student meets with a faculty member or an academic advisor*, the better that student's retention for subsequent

semesters of study (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, this study showed no such relationship. And while *the number of close friends student report having*, positivel influences their decision to stay in college (Astin, 1993), this study did not find any such relationship.

Summary of Quantitative Findings

Overall, the data did not show a statistically significant difference between the clustered and non-clustered students for either grade point average or retention in this study. These findings are inconsistent with what other researchers have found when studying clusters (Belcheir, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993; Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995; Tokuno & Campbell, 1992).

How does one explain the fact that these results, by and large, are inconsistent with previous research findings? There may be several possibilities. First, these results could be accounted for by the size of the institution. Previous studies have focused on cluster programs at large institutions (Belcheir, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995). At large institutions, the contrast between the clustered experience and all other in-class and out-of-class experiences may result in differences not apparent in smaller institutions where small classes and more meaningful contact with faculty are the norm for all classes, not just clustered courses.

Second, in this study, the freshman seminar course was part of the cluster. In previous studies, the clustered courses did not include a freshman seminar. Since studies have shown that freshman seminars are associated with higher grades and retention

(Upcraft & Gardner, 1989), it is possible that since both groups were enrolled in a freshman seminar, the unique effect of clustering courses was diminished or eliminated.

Third, in the other studies (**add cite…double check**), there was a unifying theme in the clustered courses; in this study, there was no such theme. It is possible that the influence of clustering may be due to the unifying themes in the course content, rather than simply clustering students without a unifying theme. It is possible that this lack of a unifying theme diminished the unique influence of the cluster in this study.

Fourth, the time at which grade and retention data were collected may have affected the results. It is possible that differences in grades and retention might not become apparent until after the second or subsequent semesters. In this study, the data were collected after the first semester, which could account for the lack of differences between the grades and retention of clustered and nonclustered students.

Or in spite of all the other variables which could have affected these results, it is entirely possible that the lack of differences in grade point average and retention for the first semester is because the cluster experience, at this institution, offered in these ways, had no relationship to these outcomes.

Qualitative Findings

Academic Achievement

When listening to the voices of the new students, differences did exist between clustered and nonclustered students' perceptions of what factors influenced upon their grade point average. Clustered students believed that their freshman seminar experience had positively influenced on their academic achievement in two ways. Students believed that they had gained valuable academic skills that could be used in other courses (public speaking, forming and supporting opinions, and writing). And students also remarked how they were exposed to a variety of teaching methods and styles.

While most of the nonclustered students recognized the benefits of the freshman seminar on their academic achievement, it appears that a few nonclustered students did not believe that the freshman seminar had a positive effect on their academic achievement. In fact, four of the nonclustered students felt so strongly that they reported that the freshman seminar was a "waste of time". Some other nonclustered students felt that the course was taking too much time away from their other courses and could not see how the skills they were learning in the freshman seminar could be applied to other courses.

Retention

Neither group of students mentioned any specific classroom experiences that affected their decision to return for a second semester of study. However, more students

in the clustered experience cited having a close group of friends, having more meaningful relationships with faculty members, and learning valuable academic skills. Using Tinto's model of student departure (1993), it appeared that clustered students had better integrated into both the social and academic aspects of the institution. The nonclustered students did not report having as many "close and personal" friendships as did the clustered students. Nor did the nonclustered students report having as many positive interactions with faculty members outside the classroom.

How does one explain the more positive perceptions of students in the cluster, compared to those not clustered? There may be several possibilities. First, clustered students began meeting with each other and becoming friends during the first day of orientation, whereas nonclustered students had to wait until the first day of class to meet each other. It is possible that the opportunity for clustered students to get to know each other during orientation affected their attitudes toward one another, and toward the cluster experience.

Second, the freshman seminar course content and methodology varied across sections. Professors used different books and reading material, gave different assignments, and had different grading criteria. It is possible that there were differences between the sections offered to clustered students and those offered to nonclustered students, and these differences might have contributed to differences in their perceptions.

Third, the teaching effectiveness and teaching methodologies of freshman seminar professors varied across sections. There were differences in pedagogy, teaching methods, commitment, and time spent outside the classroom with students. It is possible that these

differences, as they might have varied between clustered and nonclustered sections might have contributed to differences in their perceptions.

Fourth, faculty volunteered to teach clustered courses, while faculty who taught nonclustered courses did not. In other words, the motivation of those faculty who taught clustered courses may have been greater than those who taught nonclustered sections, because clustered faculty were "self-selected". It is possible that this "self-selection" ma have contributed to differences in perceptions between clustered and nonclustered students.

Or, in spite of all these other variables which could have contributed to differences in perceptions, it is also entirely possible that clustered students felt more positively about their experience compared to nonclustered students because of the unique influence of the cluster experience.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study offer some implications for higher education administrators. Many institutions devote considerable resources to helping new students make a successful transition to college by front loading programs during orientation, the first semester, and/or the first year of college. While front loading programs in the first semester have shown to be successful in most cases, new programs are constantly being developed and evaluated. The results of this study, although mixed, suggest that clustered freshman seminars may have *some* positive effects on the college experiences of

new students, but do not appear to influence first semester grades or retention into the second semester.

When analyzing the implications of this study, it should be remembered that the quantitative study included all students in both the clustered and non-clustered freshman seminars, therefore the findings apply to the whole freshman class. In the qualitative study, stratified purposeful sampling was used, in order to insure the inclusion of students by gender, race/ethnicity, and varying academic achievement. As pointed out in chapter 3, while it is not possible to generalize (in the quantitative sense) the comments of focus group students to the entire population of first year students, it is appropriate to extrapolate (i.e., generalize in the qualitative sense) beyond the individuals studied. According to Patton (1991), extrapolations are modest speculations on the likel applicability of findings to other subjects under similar but not identical conditions, and logical, thoughtful, and problem oriented rather than statistical and probabilistic. Therefore, in considering the implications of the findings of this study for policy and practice, the quantitative data can be generalized to all first year students. The qualitative data is generalized or extrapolated from the focus group participants to all first year students in ways that are logical and thoughtful, and suggestive of implications.

The quantitative analyses yielded no significant differences in grade point averages and retention between the clustered and nonclustered students, even when taking into account other pre-college and during college variables which are known to affect these outcomes. However, while students who participated in focus groups had generall positive perceptions about their freshman seminar, clustered students had more positive

perceptions about their experience than did similar nonclustered students, and were more likely to believe that the cluster experience was having an influence on their academic success, even though this belief was not consistent with the findings of the quantitative study. While the quantitative results showed no relationship between the number of hours spent with faculty and subsequent grades and retention, both groups reported having positive contacts with faculty, the clustered students reported having slightly more meaningful contact with faculty. Further, the clustered students reported being slightl more involved in their learning and feeling slightly more supported by their classmates, all of which previous literature has shown to be associated with higher grades and retention. Given these mixed results, what are the implications for policy and practice What do these results suggest to an institution that is considering clustering a freshman seminar with another course

Clearly, if academic achievement and retention after the first semester are the *only* reasons that a small, four-year institution is considering the cluster option, then it is clear that clustering, when done in ways described in this study, may not be useful, because no differences were found between clustered and nonclustered students on these outcomes.

However, if academic achievement and retention are but one of many reasons that an institution is considering the cluster option, then the cluster experience may well be a viable option for many reasons. First, clustered students perceive that they were more involved in the classroom and were more "active learners" than the nonclustered students. Through their experiences of selecting some of the reading material, being responsible for leading class discussions, and being an active participant in class discussions, clustered

students were more likely to become active learners in the freshman seminar classroom. Furthermore, more of the clustered students commented on the benefits of the small group discussions and projects, the student presentations, the peer evaluations of presentations and projects, and the student-developed activities than did the nonclustered students.

Tinto (1993) believed that classrooms "are the very heart of the academic community" (p.132). By allowing the clustered students to be more active learners and to create their own learning opportunities in the freshman seminar, they became the heartbeat of the classroom. This concept also concurred with Tinto's theory that greater academic involvement is associated with a more positive learning environment. So when clustered students took more responsibility for their learning, and more activel participated in the classroom compared to nonclustered students, they increased the likelihood that they were more involved in the learning process.

The clustering of the freshman seminar contributed to students perceiving a safer environment to begin their academic career. For these students, a "safe environment" meant that they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas in a classroom without being judged. They were not afraid of sharing their feelings in class, and they felt supported by their peers. In contrast, the nonclustered students made no reference to a strong peer support system. By feeling safe in the classroom, students are more likely to take an active role in the learning process. As Tinto states:

> For new students, engagement in the community of the classroom becomes a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the larger academic and social communities of the college. (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo, 1993).

Second, clustered students volunteered more information than nonclustered students about gaining academic skills. Clustered students reported that they learned how to develop oral presentation skills, overcame shyness to deliver the presentation, formed both verbal and written opinions, and learned how to write clearly and concisely. While nonclustered students mentioned how their writing skills improved, they did not talk about their oral presentation skills, or overcoming their fear of public speaking, Fewer comments were made by the nonclustered students about what skills they gained as a result of the freshman seminar.

Tinto (1993) again supported the concept of learning skills. He reported, "The greater students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills" (p.130). The clustered environment provided students with a comfortable and safe setting for students to learn and practice new academic skills.

Third, clustered students reported feeling more supported by their peers even though in the quantitative analysis, the number of close friends did not predict grade point average or retention. Astin (1993) reported that the "student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). A variety of ways existed for students to form close, personal bonds (academic or social). More clustered students than nonclustered reported that they have worked on group projects, made presentations, tutored one another, studied together, did homework together, and discussed hot topics or course content. Socially, clustered

students were more likely to report that they lived together, eaten together, participated in the same clubs and activities, or just socialized together. The clustered environment provided at least two classes for the same set of students to take together. This gave the students an opportunity to get to know each other better, to trust each other, and to help each other. Over time, these close friendships could directly influence a student's decision to return or leave the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Fourth, while both groups of students reported positive relationships with faculty, clustered students reported slightly more meaningful relationships with faculty, compared to nonclustered students. Tinto (1993) reported that "academic and social involvement with peers and faculty impacts upon persistence directly and indirectly" (p. 132). Even though there was no statistical difference between clustered and nonclustered students in regards to the amount of hours spent with faculty, clustered students made more positive remarks concerning their interaction with faculty than did nonclustered students. Clustered students talked slightly more than nonclustered students about how they interacted with the faculty. Examples of how the clustered students reported interacting more with the faculty included: talking to faculty members outside of class, having lunch or dinner with a faculty member, being a guest in a faculty member's home, and attending social events together.

Both Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) stated the importance of students feeling connected to an institution both academically and socially. Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discussed the importance of contact with faculty both in and out of the classroom. Having a meaningful relationship with a faculty member, and feeling like the

faculty member knows and cares about the student, will also positively influence on a student's decision to stay or leave.

Fifth, clustered students reported more participation in campus life than nonclustered students. The quantitative findings revealed that clustered students were more involved in clubs and activities than nonclustered students. The research shows that the more involved students are in the life of the institution, the more likely they will sta and the better they will do academically (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

To summarize, while this study showed that there were positive outcomes associated with both clustered and nonclustered groups, those outcomes did not include grade point average or retention into the second semester of study. Further, this stud showed that generally speaking, the clustered group was more positive about their experiences than the nonclustered group.

So an institution considering a cluster option must weigh these results in the light of the reasons for clustering, and make judgments accordingly. If a small, four-year institution is interested solely in improving grades and retention of first year students in the first semester, then the results of this study would argue against clustering. If, however, an institution is interested in enhancing other positive outcomes (such as active learning, more meaningful relationships with faculty, etc.), then clustering may be a viable option, based on the findings of this study. Clearly, additional research on the impact of clustering the first year seminar with other courses must be done before unequivocal support can be given to clustering. However, strong positive feedback from

the focus group participants suggests that clustering may be a useful means for enriching the first year student experience.

This study provides some guidance for an institution in considering how to improve the first year experience. It is clear that both the clustered and non-clustered groups believe the institution should s*tandardize the content of the freshman seminars,* regardless of whether or not it is clustered.. Nonclustered students mentioned that at times inconsistencies existed between the sections in regards to assignments and readings. They felt that the goals, objectives, assignments, and philosophies must be similar to give all students the same experience.

Second, *encourage faculty to engage in relationships with students outside the classroom* in both clustered and non-clustered formats. Research demonstrates that students who interact with faculty show greater gains in cognitive growth, persistence, educational attainment, and knowledge acquisition (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Third, *encourage active learning* in both clustered and non-clustered formats. Clustered students who were responsible for planning and leading class discussions felt they had a more active learning experience. Research shows that the more active students are in their learning process, the more they will learn.

Fourth, in regard to the cluster experience, the clustered group felt the institution should *standardize the content and format of the clusters*. They spoke of differing assignments, depending on the cluster. They also remarked that at times, little interaction was occurring between the two clustered courses and professors while at other times,

discussions, projects and activities did cut across the two classroom boundaries. man also said they wished professors had collaborated more in the planning process. To create a truly clustered environment, collaboration and communication among the faculty teaching the sections is essential.

Fifth, *cluster by an academic theme.* Several studies done on clustering discuss how one academic theme is chosen and then utilized throughout the cluster of courses. This use of a theme ties the academic courses together through the use of content, shared readings and discussions, and academic assignments. Using one theme throughout several courses is a tangible way for students to explore one topic is greater detail and depth.

Sixth, *continue to* a*ssess both clustered and non-clustered freshman seminars*. If institutions are going to invest time, money and effort into front-loading efforts such as clustered and nonclustered freshman seminars, the institution should know if the desired outcomes are being achieved. While this study suggests that clustering has some advantages over non-clustering, further assessments are necessary to allow for an unequivocal conclusion in this regard.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study was an exploratory project that examined factors that influenced new students' grade point averages and retention rates in relationship to their participation in a

clustered or nonclustered freshman seminar. The findings and the limitations imposed b the methodology and population suggest a number of additional research projects.

1. *Conduct a follow-up study to the institution studied in fall, 1998*. The current stud was only conducted over one semester and found no statistical significance in grade point averages or retention rates between the two groups of students. However, several variables (number of close friends, contact with faculty, and level of involvement) suggest the possibility of a positive relationship to grades and retention over a longer period of time.
2. *Conduct another research study that includes a control group of students who were neither clustered or enrolled in a freshman seminar,* since one did not exist in this study. Because every new student was required to take a freshman seminar, there was no way to determine the full influence of the institution's front loading efforts on new students' grade point averages and retention rates. Future research studies might include a sample of students taking a clustered freshman seminar, students taking a nonclustered seminar, and students not taking any seminar.
3. *Replicate this research study on campuses that differ from the original institution.* Because this study was conducted at a small, independent college, it may be inappropriate to generalize the findings to other colleges and universities. More extensive research utilizing a greater variety of colleges and universities, might offer more generalizable results. Variations in the influence of clustering by an institution's size, Carnegie classification, mission, and geographic location should be addressed.

4. *Replicate this study using a different sample of students*. This research study onl examined predominantly traditional-aged (18 year-old), Caucasian students beginning college immediately after graduating from high school. A future research study could include a wider range of students that is representative of all races, ethnicities, and ages.

5. *Conduct studies that incorporate more pre-college and during college variables into the research*. Astin, who created the I-E-O model and on which this current study is based, admits, "a key problem is to specify the relevant outcomes, input, and environmental variables that are to be studied" (1993, p. 7). Due to limited data, this research study only utilized five pre-college and eight during college variables. Future studies may incorporate more variables that are associated with student success.

6. *Conduct follow-up interviews with students who did not return for a second semester of study*. Conducting qualitative interviews with students to find out wh they did not return, would provide additional information and depth to the study. Questions for nonreturning students may include issues of student satisfaction with the academic components of the institution, the social aspects of the institution, and personal issues (such as financial aid). Asking for their specific feedback on clustered and non-clustered freshman seminars might also be appropriate. In addition to talking to those students who did not return, it would also be interesting to interview students who did return for another semester of study to find out what factors influenced their decision to return.

Conclusions

This study attempted to answer the overall question of what influence does clustering freshman seminars with academic courses makes on students' academic grade point average and retention rates. Previous research has suggested that freshman seminars positively affect grade point average and retention rates of new students, and that clustering academic courses provides positive long term benefits for new students (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Belcheir, 1997). This study did not confirm these findings. So does clustering freshman seminars with an academic course have an influence on new students' first year experience? Analyzing the statistical results of this study would indicate that no difference existed between the two groups of students. But listening to the voices of the students would indicate that while both groups had a positive first year experience, the clustered group had a slightly more positive experience. The students in this study made comments about their first year experience that can be directly tied to Astin's (1997) theory of student involvement and Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure.

Astin's (1997) student involvement theory stated that the more involved students were, they more they learned. Clustered students reported more positive feelings about their freshman seminar and English composition experience, felt that they were more active learners in class, formed a more meaningful peer support group during orientation that continued throughout the semester, and felt more integrated both academically and socially than nonclustered students.

While the number, names, and look of freshman year programs have grown dramatically over the years, the purpose has remained the same: to help new students adjust academically and socially to their new environment. Institutions, according to Tinto (1993) “have the responsibility to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life” (p. 204). Clustering freshman seminars with academic courses appears to be a positive step in the process of integrating new students into the academic and social environments of their new institution.

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Appendix A

LETTER TO CHIEF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS OFFICER

August 1, 1998
424 Waupelanie Drive
Apartment B-22
State College, PA 16801

Dear Provost,

Many colleges and universities are concerned about retention rates, especially those of new students. As your institution offers a program for new students, the freshman seminar, I am seeking your permission to conduct a research project on your campus. The goal of my dissertation is determine if there is a difference in grade point averages and retention rates of those students who take a clustered freshman seminar compared to those students who take a nonclustered freshman seminar. My hope is to discover information that can be of assistance to campus administrators to create learning experiences and opportunities that will positively impact on new students' retention rates.

The nature of my dissertation study is best supported by both qualitative and quantitative methods. To achieve this, I will need to conduct focus groups with new students, as well as look at institutional records. To do this, I would need your assistance with the following:

- Written permission to conduct this research project on your campus
- Support from your Registrar's office in the gathering of demographic and academic information on the new students
- Support from the freshman seminar faculty in distributing and collecting the Student Questionnaire on During College Experiences

The information collected will be confidential, as my dissertation will not identify any student by name. Nor will my study mention your institution's name, as per your request.

My intention is to conduct the focus groups in mid-November. To begin this research process, I would like to speak with you as soon as possible to confirm that I may proceed on your campus. If permission is granted, the Pennsylvania State University Office of Regulatory Compliance requires written confirmation. Should you have any questions about my research project, please feel free to contact Dr. M. Lee Upcraft, committee chair and research advisor at (814) 865-6346 or me, at (814) 861-6131.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Crissman
Doctoral Candidate
The Pennsylvania State University

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH STUDY
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Title of project: The impact of clustering First Year Seminars and English Composition courses on the first semester grade point averages and first-to-second semester retention rates of new students

Investigator: Jennifer L. Crissman
Center for the Study of Higher Education
403 South Allen Street, Suite 104
University Park, PA 16801-5252
Phone: (814) 863-0852
E-mail: jxc51@psu.edu

1. Explanation of the study:

The study in which you will be participating is part of research intended to further the understanding of how First Year Seminars impact on new students' grade point averages and retention. The results of this study may help college administrators improve first year programs for new students.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire near the end of the fall 1998 semester, that should not take more than fifteen minutes to complete. In addition, you may be interviewed in a focus group format for approximately one hour near the end of the fall 1998 semester. These questions will ask you to describe your first semester experience. In addition, the Registrar will provide the Researcher with background information about the participants (SAT scores, high school GPAs, gender and major). This information will be provided in such a way that the researcher will not have students' names or social security numbers. In no way will the Researcher be able to determine the identity of the participants.

This study will involve the use of audio tape recording of the focus group interviews. The investigator will be the only person who has access to the audiotapes. These tapes will be destroyed after the investigator completes the doctoral dissertation and graduates from the university.

2. Your rights as a research participant:

You may ask any questions about the research procedure, and these questions will be answered. Please contact Jennifer Crissman at (814) 863-0852 or jxc51@psu.edu if you have additional questions or concerns pertaining to this study.

Your participation in this research is confidential. Only the investigator will have access to your identity and to information that can be associated with your identity. If this research is presented at professional association meetings and/or published in professional journals, no personally identifying information will be disclosed. Pseudonyms will be used to make sure your participation remains confidential.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to stop participating in the research at any time, or to decline any specific questions without penalty.

3. Informed consent to participate in the research.

Participant:

I agree to participate in an investigation on the impact of First Year Seminars on first year students' grade point averages and first-to-second semester retention rates.

I understand the information given to me, and I have received answers to any questions may have had about the research procedure. In addition, I understand and agree to the conditions of this study as described.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, I have no physical or mental illness or difficulties that would increase the risk to me of participation in this study.

I understand that I will receive no compensation for participating in this research.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and that I may withdraw from this study at any time by notifying the investigator.

I am 18 years of age or older.

I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

_____ _____

Signature Date

Researcher:

I certify that the informed consent procedure has been followed, and that I have answered any questions from the participant above as fully as possible.

_____ _____

Signature Date

Appendix C

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT DURING COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

Please circle one:

1. Place of residence
   a. On campus
   b. Off campus

2. Father's highest educational level
   a. Less than High School diploma
   b. High school diploma
   c. Some college
   d. Bachelor's degree
   e. Master's degree
   f. Doctorate/Professional degree

3. Mother's highest educational level
   a. Less than High School diploma
   b. High school diploma
   c. Some college
   d. Bachelor's degree
   e. Master's degree
   f. Doctorate/Professional degree

4. During this fall semester, how many credits are you taking? _____

5. Number of times you met with your academic advisor this semester _____
   a. None
   b. 1 - 2
   c. 3 - 4
   d. 4 - 5
   e. 6 +

6. How often have you visited a faculty member this semester during his/her office hours?

a. None
b. 1 - 2
c. 3 - 4
d. 4 - 5
e. 6 +

7. Approximate number of hours you study per week outside of class _____

8. How often have you participated in any type of study group this fall semester

a. None
b. 1 - 2
c. 3 - 4
d. 5 +

9. Have you participated in any volunteer or community service activities this fall semester?

a. Yes
b. No

10. How many campus clubs or organizations do you belong to?

a. None
b. 1-2
c. 3-4
d. More than 4

11. Number of close friends I have here at college _____

12. 6-digit identification number _____

Appendix D

TABLE OF INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Gender		-.188**	.046	.092	.022	-.050	-.060	-.148*	-.033	-.070	-.146*	-.018	-.006	.011	-.220**
2. H.S. GPA			.542***	.070	.101	-.014	-.149*	.224***	-.054	-.042	.177**	-.019	-.122	.014	.486***
3. Total SAT scores				.113	.170**	-.018	-.125	.243***	-.089	.015	.085	-.038	-.033	.074	.334***
4. Mom's Education					.449***	-.034	.005	.008	-.079	.069	.080	-.042	-.024	.096	.158*
5. Dad's Education						-.007	-.083	.121	-.038	-.015	.109	-.063	-.070	.044	.122
6. Format							.037	-.061	.029	.146*	-.009	.051	.214**	-.012	.012
7. Residence								-.053	-.052	.061	-.056	.207**	-.087	-.220**	-.182**
8. Credits									-.108	.042	.177**	-.027	-.032	.151*	.161*
9. Meeting w/Advisor										.042	.153*	.028	-.005	.056	.040
10. Meeting w/Faculty											.266***	.145*	.033	.118	-.028
11. Hours of Study												.176**	.013	.112	.159*
12. Study Group													.179**	.158*	-.002
13. Friends														.062	.016
14. Clubs															.155*
15. Fall GP															

*<.05 **<.01 ***<.001

VITA

Jennifer Lynne Crissman

Education

D.Ed.	1999	The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, Higher Education
M.S.	1993	Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, Counseling and Student Personnel Administration
B.S.	1991	Millersville University, Millersville, Pennsylvania, Elementary Education

Professional Experience

The Pennsylvania State University

Graduate Research Assistant. College of Education, 1998 - 1999

Graduate Research Assistant.Center for the Study of Higher Education. 1996-1998

Teaching Assistant. Higher Education. 1997

Mount Saint Mary College

Director of New Students. Dean of Students Office. July 1993 - July 1996

Publications

Upcraft, M.L. & Crissman, J.L. (in press). "What we know about students and how they learn". In M. Stuart Hunter and Associates' Solid Foundations: Building Success for Instructor Training and Development. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition.

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