



First-Year Experience Course Impact on Undergraduate International Student Retention and Graduation

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Abstract

As institutions look to improve student retention through first-year experience (FYE) courses, some have implemented courses targeted specifically to the international population. A quantitative comparison of international students who took an FYE course with international students who did not take an FYE course was completed to analyze the differences in retention and graduation rates between the two groups. International freshmen who participated in the FYE course were retained and graduated at significantly higher rates than international freshmen who did not take the course. Aspects of the course that likely led to student retention and graduation are discussed.

Keywords: *international students, first-year experience course, FYE course, retention, graduation*

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Introduction

As American universities experience decreasing enrollments and prepare for smaller high school graduating classes, institutions have implemented various initiatives to improve the retention of their current students (Field, 2018). A recent complicating factor has been the COVID-19 pandemic. College enrollments across the United States decreased by 2.5% in the fall 2020 semester (St. Amour, 2020), with declines in new international students a key contributor.

In the face of decreasing enrollments due to long- and short-term factors, one way that institutions are attempting to improve retention is through improvement of their first-year experience (FYE) programs (Field, 2018). The first-year initiatives at many 4-year institutions include an FYE course (Barefoot, 2003). These courses aim to assist students in their transition to the institution and cover topics to support new student

success. Since most research on education curricula is based on studies of domestic students (Glass, 2012), additional research is needed to understand the effect of FYE courses on international students.

According to Andrade (2009), “Diverse student populations such as international students or ethnic, cultural, or linguistic minorities have unique adjustment needs that may not be met by conventional first-year or retention programming” (p. 485). This study examines a regional public university’s FYE course for new international students that seeks to address these unique adjustment needs. The FYE course is offered through the university’s international office and utilizes partnerships with other campus offices to customize the learning opportunities for new international students. The impact of the course on students is measured through retention and graduation data from the university.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Although first-year seminar courses date back to the 19th century, modern first-year seminars are based on the template created at the University of South Carolina under John Gardner in the 1970s (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). Since then, institutions have implemented their own forms of the first-year courses. These courses may focus on orienting new students to the university, some are discipline-specific and taught by faculty members, and others are a combination of orientation and discipline-specific activities (Upcraft et al., 2005). While some researchers believed that a goal of first-year seminars should be to “teach newcomers about the campus culture” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 314), Upcraft et al. (2005) asserted that institutions should:

Develop first-year seminars that have academic integrity, and address issues that are related to first-year student success. They must include elements commensurate with the norm of academic credibility on campus, reflect the needs of entering students, include significant academic content, and be assessed to determine their relationship to first-year student academic success. (p. 519)

While there are differences in the specific implementation of first-year seminars at different institutions, Barefoot (2000) summarizes the overall objectives found in most seminars:

- Increasing student-to-student interaction
- Increasing faculty-to-student interaction, especially out of class
- Increasing student involvement and time on campus
- Linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum
- Increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement
- Assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college (p. 14)

Each institution typically designs their own FYE courses to reflect the specific needs of their student population, and students typically give positive evaluations of such courses (Yan & Sendall, 2016).

Course Implementation and Effectiveness

Multiple studies have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of first-year seminars, as well as to identify which types of seminars are most beneficial to students. These studies reported mixed results. Porter and Swing (2006) surveyed students who took first-year seminar courses from over 60 institutions about their intentions to persist. Their results indicated that students in first-year seminars that focused on study skills and health education had a greater intention to persist than first-year students who did not take those seminars. Corella (2010) also studied the attitudes and academic success of students who took first-year seminars at nine different institutions. Although approximately half of the student respondents in the study felt that their first-year seminar course did not assist in their transition to college, the findings suggest that

course participation helped students improve their grade point average. Conversely, the study by Carstens (2000) showed that completion of a first-year seminar course had a positive impact on students' reported academic outcomes, experiences, and attitudes. Students who took the course also completed significantly higher credit hours 3 years after initial college enrollment than students who did not take the course (Carstens, 2000). The study by Schnell and Doetkott (2003) found that students who took a first-year seminar course had greater retention over a 4-year period than students who did not take the seminar. Ryan and Glenn (2004) studied the effectiveness of different types of first-year seminars, comparing strategy-based seminars focused on academic skills with socialization-focused seminars concentrated on helping students adapt to the campus culture. Students who took the strategy-based seminar were more likely to be retained for 1 year than students who took the socialization-focused seminar. This was the case for both more and less academically capable freshmen. Not all studies showed effectiveness of FYE seminars; the study by Purdie and Rosser (2011) found that participating in that type of seminar did not have any effect on students' first-seminar GPA nor did it influence retention positively or negatively.

International Student Needs

International students are an important subset of students on college campuses who have their own specific needs and skills that they bring to the university communities. Challenges international students experience are often ascribed to their proficiency with English language and adjusting to American culture (Andrade, 2006), but may also be related to international students needing to learn different academic skills (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018). Adjustment to American culture has been studied with a focus on acculturative stress (Koo et al., 2021) and belonging (Chen & Zhou, 2019). Acculturative stress was found to be associated with adjustment difficulties but negatively associated with greater social connectedness and English proficiency (Koo et al., 2021).

However, even with those difficulties, international students “report greater academic challenge, interact more with faculty members, engage more in diversity-related activities, perceive the campus environment to be supportive, and report greater gains in personal and social development, practical competence, and general education” (Kuh et al., 2007). Difficulty with the English language may lead to the greater academic challenge that these students report. International students in both their first year and senior year reported greater participation in diversity-related activities as the percentage of international students on campus increased (Zhao et al., 2005). The gains in personal and social development are likely because “living in a foreign land presents continual challenges to virtually every aspect of one’s personhood,” (Zhao et al., 2005). To support international students in their transition to American colleges and universities, institutions should provide ongoing resources and workshops after the initial orientation program (Montgomery, 2017); FYE courses may qualify as an ongoing workshop. Topics of support for international students include academic support, health and wellness support, and social and cultural support (Smith, 2016). FYE courses also provide an opportunity to teach new international students academic skills that will assist them in their transition to the American higher education system, such as expressing opinions; paraphrasing and summarizing; and evaluation (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018).

In order to assist new international students in their transition at American institutions, FYE seminars specifically for international students have been created at numerous universities but they are not yet widespread. A recent study found that out of 200 U.S. universities and colleges using the International Student Support Services Index, only 17% utilized a bridge or integration class specifically for new international students (Madden-Dent et al., 2019). Case studies from three institutions showed that undergraduate international students felt that their FYE course assisted them in their adjustment to their American university (Andrade, 2009; Laverick, 2018), and international students specifically became more familiar with academic resources, improved their English language skills, and gained a better understanding of American culture through the FYE course (Yan & Sendall, 2016). One institution created an FYE seminar

for international graduate students who had not previously received a degree from an American institution (Shane et al., 2020). Of these studies, none focused on international student retention. One study noted that retention data was inconclusive and needed more study (Andrade, 2009).

The following is an example of an FYE course that was designed to address the needs of new international students, based on the theoretical foundations previously discussed. This adds to existing literature by describing the impact on retention and graduation that an FYE course can have when it is targeted to international students.

Method

Setting

The international office at a regional public university in the southwestern United States has developed an in-person FYE course for international students who are in their initial year of study at an American institution. It is a one-credit course and is highly encouraged—but not mandatory—for international students studying in the United States for the first time. Due to the difficulty of the course of study, new international students studying computer science were enrolled in the FYE course if they did not have a class conflict. Students could drop the class, but most who were automatically enrolled decided to remain in the course.

The classes meet twice per week over the first 8 weeks of the semester, as new international students need additional support programs at the start of their university experience (Koo et al., 2021). Each week in the course features 1 day where the students from all sections of the course met and 1 day where each class section met on their own. Two to three classes are taught each fall semester, with class sizes normally between 20 and 30 students. Each class is taught by a staff member in the university's international office. The course curriculum focuses on academic resources at the university; academic integrity; academic/study skills; health and relationships; immigration policy compliance and American law; American culture; and student involvement. These topics inform students of academic skills and resources to be successful, as suggested by Tinto (2012). The curriculum topics are taught to the collected class by a series of guest speakers from around the university. The topics and university offices the speakers came from did not vary throughout the life of the course. The class sections then meet later in the week and the international office staff lead the students in lessons and activities based on what they learned from the guest lecturers. This format allows international students to become familiar with different offices and resources at the university and easily interact with representatives from other departments. Thus, students could become academically and socially integrated in the university, as suggested by Tinto (1993), through interaction with individuals from throughout the institution.

Besides quizzes and in-class activities, students were required to complete three activities outside of class, as well as one project that required them to interview an American student. The outside activities required students to engage in a social activity, a university activity, and an activity or event in the local community. The goal of these activities is to encourage international students to take a more active role in their engagement outside of the classroom. Based on Astin's (1985 and 1993) work, students who are more involved and engaged in their university experience are more likely to be retained. Additionally, international students have reported they desire more opportunities to socially engage with domestic students and other international students (Steinmetz & Marshall, 2021).

Participants

International students were defined as individuals enrolled in academic credit at an accredited higher education institution in the United States on a temporary visa. Full-time undergraduate students are defined as students taking a minimum of 12 credit hours of courses in a semester. A total of 329 full-time undergraduate

international students who took the FYE course during the fall semesters between 2013 and 2019 were counted and compared against 1,307 full-time undergraduate international students from the same cohort who did not take the FYE course. Participants were further delineated by their cohort assignment in the university system. For full-time undergraduate students, the university categorizes them as first-time, full-time freshmen if they transfer fewer than 12 credits to the institution or if their high-school graduation year is the same as the cohort year; transfer students are students who transfer at least 12 credit hours to the institution.

Procedure

Class rosters of students in the international student FYE course were collected for the fall semesters from 2013 through 2019. The overall international student cohorts for the corresponding semesters were then collected and all non-degree-seeking international students were removed from the data. Retention and graduation data were then collected from both international students who took the FYE course as well as those who did not. The provost and the Institutional Research and Analysis office at the investigators' institution approved the study.

Results and Discussion

Retention is defined as continuous enrollment, and the enrollment data was collected through the university's database. Combined results of new international freshmen from the 2013–2019 fall semester cohorts who took the FYE course and new international freshmen from the same cohorts who did not are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Retention Rates of International Freshmen in FYE Course and non-FYE Participants*

Retention	Number of retained FYE participants	Percent of participants retained	Number of retained non-participants	Percent of non-participants retained	<i>p</i>
One Semester	195	95.6%	653	87.1%	<.001
Two Semesters	181	88.7%	547	73.2%	<.001

Combined results of new international transfer students from the 2013–2019 fall semester cohorts who took the FYE course and new international transfer students from the same cohorts who did not are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Retention Rates of International Transfer Students in FYE Course and non-FYE Participants*

Retention	Number of retained FYE participants	Percent of participants retained	Number of retained non-participants	Percent of non-participants retained	<i>p</i>
One Semester	122	96.8%	533	95.3%	.46
Two Semesters	116	92.1%	449	80.3%	.00174

Comparisons between the students who took the course and those who did not were made through chi-square analysis. The results in Table 1 indicate that the one-semester retention rate of the international freshmen who took the course was greater than the one-semester retention rate of the comparison group who did not take the course, and that the two-semester retention rate of the freshmen who took the course was significantly greater than the two-semester retention rate of the comparison group. The results in Table 2 indicate that there is no significant difference between the one semester retention rates of new international transfer students who took

the FYE course and the comparison group of new international transfer students who did not. However, the results also indicate that the two-semester retention rate for new international transfer students who took the course to be greater than the two-semester retention rate of the comparison group.

Graduation data was collected through the university's database. Only 4-year graduation data was collected and analyzed for this study. Combined results of new international students, both freshmen and transfer students, from the 2013–2016 fall semester cohorts who took the FYE course and new international students from the same cohorts who did not are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *4-Year Graduation Rates of International Students in FYE Course and non-FYE Participants*

Cohort	Number of graduated FYE participants	Percent of participants graduated	Number of graduated non-participants	Percent of non-participants graduated	<i>p</i>
Freshmen	64	83.1%	102	25.5%	<.001
Transfer	81	80.2%	194	72.9%	.068

The results in Table 3 indicate that the 4-year graduation rate for new international freshmen who took the FYE course was significantly greater than the same rate for the comparison group. The results also indicate that there was no significant difference between the graduation rates between new international transfer students who took the course and the comparison group who did not.

Since the majority of both freshmen and transfer students who took the FYE seminar were Chinese, the retention of Chinese versus students of other nationalities is compared in Table 4. The data comes from the fall 2013 through fall 2019 freshmen and transfer student cohorts.

Table 4. *FYE Course Retention Comparison Based on Nationality*

Cohort and terms retained	Number of retained FYE participants	Percent of participants retained	Number of retained non-participants	Percent of non-participants retained	<i>p</i>
Chinese Students					
Freshmen					
One Semester	177	96.0%	278	90.0%	.013
Two Semesters	109	88.9%	244	79.0%	.00356
Transfer					
One Semester	109	98.2%	190	96.4%	.38
Two Semesters	104	93.7%	128	65.0%	<.001
Students of Other Nationalities					
Freshmen					
One Semester	4	80.0%	373	85.2%	.75
Two Semesters	4	80.0%	303	69.2%	.6
Transfer					
One Semester	13	86.7%	343	94.8%	.18
Two Semesters	12	80.0%	321	88.7%	.31

The results in Table 4 indicate that there was a significant difference in the retention rates for Chinese freshmen students who took the FYE course compared to those who did not. Additionally, although there was not a significant difference in one semester retention for Chinese transfer students, there was a significant difference for two-semester retention when comparing Chinese students who took the FYE course and those who did not. There was no significant difference in retention rates for new international students of other nationalities who took the FYE course compared to those who did not. However, there was a much smaller number of students from other nationalities who took the FYE course, so the significance of the course would be much more difficult to establish with that group.

The graduation data of Chinese students compared to students of other nationalities who did or did not participate in the FYE seminar is compared in Table 5. The data comes from the Fall 2013–Fall 2016 freshmen and transfer cohorts.

Table 5. *FYE Course 4-Year Graduation Comparison by Nationality*

Cohort	Number of graduated FYE participants	Percent of participants graduated	Number of graduated non-participants	Percent of non-participants graduated	<i>p</i>
Chinese Students					
Freshmen	61	83.6%	36	46.2%	<.001
Transfer	76	86.4%	51	79.7%	.27
Students of Other Nationalities					
Freshmen	3	60.0%	66	20.5%	.008
Transfer	7	46.7%	143	70.8%	.2

The results in Table 5 indicate that the FYE course had a significant impact on the 4-year graduation rate of international freshmen students, regardless of their nationality. There was no determined significance of the course on international transfer students, regardless of nationality.

Based on the chi-square analysis, the FYE course had a positive impact on the retention and graduation rates of international freshmen. While there was not a significant positive effect on international transfer students who took the course, there was no demonstrated negative effect of their enrollment in the class. This study demonstrates that a first-year course specifically tailored to international students can lead to improved retention and graduation rates of international freshmen. The difference in 4-year graduation rates between international freshmen who took the course and those who did not is especially significant (Table 3). It is highly likely that the skills that the students developed in the course helped them to not only persist in the near term but stay successful and graduate on time in the long term. It is also possible that the course helped decrease the acculturative stress of new international students, as the level of acculturative stress at the beginning of the academic year is related to student satisfaction at the end of the year (Koo et al., 2021). Increasing student satisfaction may have also been a factor for improved retention rates.

The format of the course is likely the most important factor leading to students' improved retention and graduation. The topics covered in the course correspond to some of the topics that have been found in previous studies to improve student success, specifically academic skills and health. Teaching these topics provided international students with new information that they may not have easily acquired otherwise. Greater information availability can provide social capital to international students, increasing their sense of belonging at an institution (Chen & Zhou, 2019).

Creating a format with guest speakers is unique and was a recommendation for practice from previous research (Yan & Sendall, 2016; Shane et al., 2020). Having guest speakers in the course each week provides international students with the opportunity to engage with members of campus offices they may not have interacted with otherwise. This also provides students with the opportunity to ask questions of the speakers and glean their expertise directly. Prior to the guest speaker's arrival, students are assigned to write questions for the speaker that may be asked anonymously in the class. This provides students with a confidential opportunity to ask questions that they may otherwise be too shy or embarrassed to ask. This may be especially helpful for students from cultures where asking questions in class is not normalized. By having the second class period each week as a subset of the combined class sections, smaller groups of students can interact more purposefully with the material and have more direct interaction with each instructor. These class periods are opportunities for students to improve their academic skills in a Western context, which also likely helps improve their academic performance (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018).

The assignments require students to interact in the campus and community and have a meaningful discussion with at least one American student. Implementing activities outside the classroom and in the community are recommended for FYE courses for international students (Yan & Sendall, 2016). The assignments, guest speakers, and instructor support (from staff who understand the difficulties that international students face) provide a strong structure of support for new international students. This is all accomplished in 8 weeks as a one-credit course. It is especially notable that the course is only one credit, as the more time that students spend on the first-year course the less time they have left to spend on their other classes. It is a concern that new international students may spend too much time in courses to prepare them for the American university setting that they are not left with sufficient time to be successful in their regular courses.

New international transfer students may not find the course as beneficial as international freshmen because they already have experience in a university, even if it was not at an American institution. They may already have developed better academic skills and have greater familiarity with university services, in general, that help them to be more prepared for their studies at their new institution.

Most international students who took the FYE course were Chinese, and the course was demonstrated to be beneficial for the retention (Table 4) and graduation (Table 5) of freshmen Chinese students. Academic and social challenges for Chinese students studying at American universities are well documented. Academic difficulties that Chinese students have faced include lack of understanding of course syllabi, engaging in course discussions, and the American classroom culture (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020). Social difficulties for Chinese students studying abroad include difficulty creating cross-cultural friendships, loneliness, and language difficulties (Henze & Zhu, 2012). These challenges are directly addressed by the FYE course curriculum. Chinese students are taught about the importance of syllabi; are guided through in-class discussions that help them develop their language skills and learn about American classroom culture; and are assigned opportunities to engage with domestic students and the greater campus community.

Limitations

Since the majority of international students who took the FYE seminar were Chinese, the course's effectiveness for international students from other countries needs additional data to determine. International office staff who oversee the course may wish to prioritize recruiting international freshmen students from other countries to enroll in the seminar.

Although it has been demonstrated to be successful for Chinese international students, the FYE seminar has not been mandatory for new international students due to various contributing factors. These include a limited pool of potential instructors, difficulty in acquiring the necessary classroom space, and class time conflicts for some students. It is preferable to maintain the in-person format of the course, as students who

took an FYE course in-person reported that that the course assisted them in their transition to the university at higher rates than students who took the same FYE course online (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020).

Conclusion

An FYE course focused on serving international students can be successful at improving international student retention and graduation rates. As institutions focus on retention efforts in anticipation of continued enrollment declines, more attention should be paid to the nature and efficacy of the FYE courses that they offer. It may be beneficial for institutions to create customized FYE courses for different student populations to specifically prepare them for university coursework and culture.

The impetus for this FYE course for international students came from the university's international office; it was not something that was borne out of a central goal of the institution but from a recognized need by staff members who worked closely with the international student population. The international office developed the course independently from the university's FYE course that is offered to domestic students. Part of the reason for the course's success is most likely due to the effectiveness of the international office staff members in teaching and understanding international students' needs; individuals who can effectively teach individuals from different cultures will likely be the most adept at teaching these courses. Although the international office implemented the course independently, the course would not be successful without collaboration from other campus offices to provide their time and expertise to students directly.

When evaluating FYE courses, university leaders should identify what the most effective aspects of their institution's courses are to maximize the benefit to the students in the course. There are multiple aspects of the course that likely led to its success. First, the course had a strong focus on academic skills that students need to be able to succeed in college (Tinto, 2012; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018). Second, course instructors partnered with representatives from campus services and offices to provide direct contact for international students in class. Third, the course curriculum required international students to engage with events, activities, or initiatives that forced them to engage with the campus and surrounding community in ways that they may not have done so otherwise. Doing so makes the students more engaged outside the classroom and thus more likely to be retained at the institution (Astin, 1993). Fourth, the course provided adequate class time for discussion of students' experiences at the university. Discussions may focus on outcomes from assigned extracurricular activities or may be led by students based on issues that they are currently facing, such as issues related to acculturative stress (Koo et al., 2021) or belonging (Chen & Zhou, 2019). Discussions helped students talk about their academic and social integration at the university and guided them to become more involved in the social and intellectual communities (Tinto, 1993) at the institution.

The course in this study is an 8-week, one-credit course. While it is a short course, it has reaped significant benefits in retention and graduation rates. Improving new international student retention may not be an issue of providing more information or opportunities but prioritizing the most important information or opportunities for students. It is important to remember that the FYE course is a supplement to the courses international students are taking at our institutions. New undergraduate international students are already dealing with significant adjustment issues inside and outside the classroom. An FYE course that requires too much of a workload may be more of a hindrance to success than helpful.

For institutions that are interested in implementing an FYE course for new international students, we suggest focusing the course on international freshmen to maximize course effectiveness. Institutions should customize their courses to fit the specific needs of the international students that they are serving. By providing a targeted FYE course, institutions can help set new international students up for success for their entire undergraduate careers.

Topics for future research should include the effects of a first-year course for international graduate students on their retention and graduation, the development of an FYE course focused on transfer students, and the impact of FYE seminars on international students from countries other than China.

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