Supporting Student Success

by

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Attrition rates for first year students enrolled in community colleges remains high and results in poor first to second year retention and overall poor retention. The average national attrition rate remains averages 38% resulting in poor retention and completion rates for students enrolling in community colleges (NCES, 2019). To address the issue of retention colleges have consistently engaged in a variety of efforts to increase retention. In recent years, such efforts have increasingly turned toward the use of first year experience courses to increase student retention.

This study was conducted during the pilot offering of a first year experience course, SEM 105, in the fall semester of 2019. Specifically, this study explores the impact that completing a first year experience course has on student perceptions of feeling prepared, empowered, and supported. During the semester, students were exposed to institutional resources and the college environment as core components of the course curriculum. Using an embedded pre and post survey and focus group, student perceptions of feeling supported in the community college setting were evaluated.

Central to understanding perceptions of the college environment is to allow students to identify any barriers that they find as either real or potential impediments to their successful completion of courses and programs. This dissertation is situated in the viewpoint that there is a need to reform the present systems to better meet the needs of students to identify and remove existing institutional barriers. Gaining an understanding of student perceptions of institutional

supports may provide a means to remove institutional barriers and affect substantive and positive

change to increase student retention and success.

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Preface

I have been very fortunate throughout the process of completing the EdD program at the University of Pittsburgh to have had the support of many people. Though it is impossible to individually thank everyone who has encouraged me during this journey, it is important for me to offer my sincere gratitude to all of my colleagues, friends, and family who have encouraged and supported me during this process. While I cannot thank everyone individually, there are a few people who I would like to express my gratitude to who were essential to me successfully completing this program and dissertation.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to the members of my committee for helping me to grow as a researcher. In particular, I would like to thank my advisor and dissertation chair, Dr. M. Najeeb Shafiq for his mentorship during the time that I was enrolled in the EdD program at the University of Pittsburgh. His consistent support and encouragement allowed me to navigate the program and to understand the nuances and complexities central to this project. His guidance, suggestions, and insight allowed this study to become something that is beyond what I could have ever imagined.

Likewise, Dr. Lori Delale-O'Connor shared her expertise and insight assisting me to broaden my perspective something that resonates in both my dissertation and my daily practice. I am thankful for the opportunity to have worked with her as part of my committee as well as during the program something that has helped to widen my overall perspective. The same is true of Dr. Brenda Trettel who generously lent her vision and understanding to this dissertation. I am thankful for her contributions to this study as well as to her mentorship in our shared place of practice. She has been steadfast in her support and for that I am eternally grateful.

Though impossible to do so individually, I would like to acknowledge and thank all members of the college community who contributed their ideas, creative energy, and constructive criticism to aid in the development of SEM 105. The same is true of the students who were enrolled in the pilot sections of the course in the fall 2019. Thank you for your honest feedback and insight into the course design and approach. The course would not be what it is today without your insight and contributions.

In particular, I am thankful to have had the opportunity to work with Dr. Kelli Maxwell and Sara Conroy to design and develop SEM 105 and the associated structures. I am fortunate to have worked with both on this project and have been consistently impressed with the creativity, passion, and expertise that you have both shared during this process. Working with you both has been inspiring and I am grateful for your steadfast dedication to develop this course and your encouragement and support as I worked to complete this study. I am truly fortunate to have shared this journey with you.

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1.0 Introduction

The issue of retention for students enrolled in courses and programs is a topic of importance in all post-secondary institutions. For community colleges, attrition rates for first year students continue to remain high resulting in poor first to second year retention and poor retention rates overall. Markedly, over a decade ago in 2008 a four year study of 9,200 community college students enrolled for the first time in courses found that there existed "an average attrition rate of approximately 41% from first to second year" (Fike, 2008, p. 68).

Eight years later, the National Center for Education Statistics determined the national average attrition rate in 2016 was 38% for degree seeking first time enrolled students (NCES, 2019). In comparison to national trends, my place of practice, The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) had a higher attrition rate in 2015 of 45% for full time first time enrolled students from first to second year (PA Board of Education, 2015, p. 59). By 2017-2018 the attrition rate increased even more significantly to 50.3% (CCAC, Fall to Fall, 2019).

High attrition rates for full time first time enrolled students is a significant issue in my daily practice at The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC). The impact of high attrition rates is multifold and impacts all stakeholders (students, faculty, administration, staff, and the community at large). As a result, students are negatively impacted in a variety of ways including financial losses the potential decrease in future opportunities that successfully earning credits, certifications, or a degree holds. That is, students who pay out of pocket or who use financial aid eligibility when they enroll in a course or program suffer a monetary loss if they do not successfully complete the courses or programs they are enrolled in. Students receiving federal or state financial aid who do not complete enrolled courses or programs ultimately decrease eligibility and

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opportunities for future enrollment in post-secondary programs. Additionally, students who do not complete courses or programs decrease future professional opportunities and earning potential in fields where college level credentials are necessary for employment and advancement.

The losses are similar for other stakeholders within the college and the community that it serves. For example, faculty, staff, and administration are negatively impacted by poor retention and similarly incur losses financially including lost revenue and funding and ultimately decreases in courses and programs. The same is true of the surrounding community due to a loss of graduates who have the skills needed and necessary to continue to support a robust and vibrant local and regional economy. In short, poor retention in courses and programs negatively impacts all stakeholders within the community college and surrounding community.

Because of such factors, at the Community College of Allegheny County, the successful completion of courses and programs by students is of great importance and concern for all stakeholders. As a community college the primary mission of CCAC is "to provide affordable access to high quality career and transfer education delivered in a diverse, caring, and innovative learning environment" to prepare students to "succeed in a complex global society" (CCAC, College Mission, 2020). Reflective of the core mission statement of the college, the vision of the college is to advance individual and community success "through our commitment to learning, innovation, and positive social change" (CCAC, College Mission, 2020). To do so, the college strives to "become a global learning community that stands on the pillars of proactive, intentional access, inclusion, diversity, social justice and respect, to positively impact the vitality of the region" (CCAC, College Mission, 2020). Central to doing so is the commitment to increasing college completion, academic success, and equity by supporting students to reach their individual goals (CCAC, College Mission, 2020). To fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the college,

CCAC is dedicated to developing "an approach to enrollment management that eliminates all institutional barriers to access and places every student on an intentional pathway to success" (CCAC, Strategic Plan, 2020).

With an open enrollment policy and a student population that reflects the overall characteristics of the community college setting, the majority of first time newly enrolled students at CCAC are non-traditional or first-generation college students. Specifically, non-traditional students are those who are defined as not going to school solely on a full-time basis, who often work full or part time and have additional demands on their time including raising or assisting in raising of a family, or are older or returning adults (Fike & Fike, 2008; Travers,2016). Additionally, such students are often first-generation students who likely lack family support, lack technology or transportation, and are unprepared academically for the rigors of college level work (Betts, 2014).

To date, a prevailing theme in the literature focusing on community college retention has typically characterized non-traditional or first generation students as "at-risk" and therefore more likely to drop-out and not complete courses and programs once admitted to a community college (Betts, 2014; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Lee & Choi, 2011). Rather than viewing students as being "at-risk," studies have started to challenge the notion of the deficiencies of students focusing instead on the insufficiencies of the institutions they attend in providing the framework to ensure student success (Barhoum, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Lane, 2018; Lyon & Denner, 2019; Reynolds et al, 2019).

This study reflects that viewpoint in that my belief is that there exists a need to reform the present system to better meet the needs of students. Rather, I share the emergent theme in more recent literature that the perspective of students must be understood in order to identify "the

confluence of institutional barriers" that set students back that are based in the system rather than the student (Borhoum, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Kezar & Kitchen, 2019; Lane, 2018; Lyon & Denner, 2019, p. 25). Only by doing so can substantive and meaningful changes begin to take place that hold the possibility of genuinely supporting student success in the community college setting.

It is therefore the onus of the institution to create an environment that encourages and empowers student success as Tinto and Pusser argue as part of fostering a "model of institutional action" (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 5). To do so, requires institutions like CCAC to create a framework to support students by constructing policies that allow for more effective responses to the needs of students that prepare, support, and empower students to ameliorate existing barriers, rather than approaching such efforts from the lens of a "deficiency" of the student as developmental sequences fundamentally do (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

For CCAC, doing so represents the achievement of strategic goals that include developing learning environments, encouraging curricular redesign and faculty innovation, connecting students to a supportive environment to improve and encourage student success (CCAC, Strategic Plan, 2020). This study aligns with such goals and seeks to leverage the commitment of the college to remove institutional barriers to affect positive and substantive change via the development of a first year experience course that embodies the strategic goals of the college.

1.1 Background

Like other post-secondary institutions, my place of practice, The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) provides a variety of institutional resources designed to assist in

helping students to fully realize our mission and vision of access and opportunity. Doing so reflects the effort to fulfill the strategic objective of the college that includes providing access to affordable and high-quality education within an innovative learning environment. As part of doing so, one of the pillars of the strategic plan of the college is to provide students with the motivation and support to achieve their individual goals by increasing college completion, academic success, and equity (CCAC, Strategic Plan, 2020).

To carry out such goals, part of the strategic plan of the college includes efforts to "scale up initiatives" that "have been shown to increase student engagement, persistence, and success" (CCAC, Strategic Plan, 2020). Accordingly, to date, the college has continually worked to provide a variety of supports to assist students to be successful in courses and programs including tutoring, counseling, registration and advising. In addition, Learning Assistance Centers (LAC) provide students with opportunities for assistance ranging from reading, writing, and a Math Café. To further support students, success coaches work to provide students with one on one assistance and support once enrolled in courses and programs. Together, existing institutional supports are designed and made available as part of the larger effort of the college to decrease the barriers that exist for students to increase retention and completion college wide.

In addition to the array of institutional supports available for students on campus, and online (i.e. Smarthinking), the college also participates in national efforts to better support students as a member of Achieving the Dream (ATD). Notably, in 2008, CCAC was selected as one of six colleges in Pennsylvania to become a member of the national Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative. In particular, the primary focus of the more than two hundred ATD institutions is to help more low income and minoritized students to succeed in the post-secondary environment by providing opportunities via programs that support career, personal, and academic success. To

fulfill their mission, ATD engages in continual assessment of learning outcomes for courses and programs and institutional effectiveness at the institutional and national level (CCAC, ATD, 2020).

As part of ongoing institutional assessment, ATD research focused on high attrition rates at the college with a goal of addressing the barriers that first time newly enrolled students face as well as overall lack of retention. To that end, ATD research at CCAC concluded that though a variety of institutional supports and resources are available for students, in comparison to other post-secondary institutions, CCAC lacked some of the more recent supports that are found at similar institutions. That is, while a majority of two and four year post-secondary institutions have increasingly turned toward First Year Experience (FYE) courses to assist students to transition to the college environment and to increase retention, CCAC had yet to do so.

Concentrating on the findings of the Community College Research Center (CCRC), ATD members identified that the results of the 2012 Center for Community College Engagement (CSSE) survey highlighted that 84% of respondents offered some form of a student success or first year experience course as part of trying to increase student persistence (Karp et al, 2015). Accordingly, researchers at the Community College Research Center concluded in two working papers that first year experience or student success courses do hold the possibility of assisting students to transition to college and in turn be successful in completing courses and programs (Karp et al, 2012; Karp et al, 2015). What is key, however, is that such courses focus on active engagement and participation of students to assist them to gain the academic and other skills needed for long term success in the community college setting (Karp et al, 2015). In fact, by 2019 nearly 95% of colleges offer some form of First Year Experience (known as first year seminars, college success courses, etc) courses to "help students become more academically prepared and

emotionally engaged in ways that will encourage them to remain in college" (Reynolds, 2019, p. 104).

Encouraged by the growing evidence of the value of such courses identified by the institutional assessment conducted by ATD, a workgroup headed by Dr. Kelli Maxwell was created at CCAC to design and pilot a first year experience course that ultimately resulted in the creation of College Seminar 105 (SEM 105). Ultimately the decision was made to ensure that the workgroup and effort to create a first year experience course would be faculty driven and in addition to myself included professors Sara Conroy, Amie Erickson, Alex Tongchinsub, and Librarian Christopher Galuzzo. Though faculty led the overall effort, the entire college community lent their collective talent, energy, ideas, and contributions to create a first year experience course, SEM 105 at CCAC. While impossible to mention every stakeholder who participated, it is worth noting that there were significant contributions from every area of the college including Information Technology Services (ITS), Advisement and Registration, Counseling, Financial Aid, Student Success Coaches, and the college Administration. At various times during the development of the course and associated materials, contributions and feedback was provided and incorporated as part of the design process though the workgroup guided and curated such contributions.

One of the first decisions for the workgroup was to evaluate an existing course, SDS 102, Student Academic Success, to determine if the course aligned with the concepts commonly associated with first year experience courses. It was quickly determined that the course did not due to the fact that it was intertwined within the developmental course sequence and was focused on students who were either in the sequence (testing into two or more developmental topics) or for those students who were experiencing academic setbacks (probation or suspension). As a one

credit course those required to complete the course were students either in academic jeopardy or in the developmental sequence and revolved around study skills and student academic success strategies. As a result, the course excluded the remainder of the student body and did not reflect the overall scope of a typical first year seminar. Accordingly, the decision was made to develop a new two credit course that would be required for the majority of incoming newly enrolled students that focused on the scope of topics more commonly found in a first year experience course.

As part of the effort to build support within the college community and to encourage stakeholders to actively participate in the development of the course, a series of informational sessions were conducted system wide. For instance, the proposal and preliminary research supporting the development of a first year experience course was presented at several professional development sessions system wide to both introduce the concept of the course and to elicit contributions and feedback. Thereafter, information and discussions were conducted during advising in service sessions and in the fall of 2019 formal presentations, in conjunction with the team members of Achieving the Dream, were conducted at each of the campus locations as part of the fall orientation programs.

In each instance, feedback was elicited from the college community to ensure that all stakeholders were given the chance to participate and contribute to the development of the course. In short, such efforts were part of working to build a model of institutional action that involves the entire college community to create an effective educational environment that supports student success (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2012; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Using the feedback from the college community and the research conducted to date on first year experience courses as the guiding concepts, it was decided that the course should revolve around active student engagement to foster long-term gains for students enrolled in the course. As

the authors of White Paper No. 81 and No. 49 concluded, students who are actively engaged in first year experience courses are more likely to have long term gains that better help to support them as they progress into future courses and programs (Karp et al, 2012; Karp et al, 2015). As part of doing so, familiarizing students with institutional supports is essential to ensure that they have the knowledge of the resources available to support them.

Guided by such research, the workgroup determined that the curriculum would revolve around students being active participants in the class via a variety of instructional techniques including discussions, journaling, hands on work with student planning and other software, and hands on active engagement with technology essential to student success in the college environment. As a result, it was determined that a two-credit course would allow for the scope of content necessary to achieve the learning objectives in a meaningful way. Additionally, the group decided that the course should emphasize "seat-time" and be offered twice per week for full semesters (14 or 16 weeks). The purpose of doing so was to ensure that connections could be fostered between faculty and students, something the research to date concludes is a critical part of building a sense of connection for newly enrolled students to the college community. The use of online sections was therefore intentionally limited by the group to students who are only enrolled in fully online sections.

Such structures embody the characteristics of first year experience courses that impact students over the long term as advocated by the research to date. In particular, the literature collectively concludes that courses that emphasize active learning and that focus on building connections between students, faculty, and the college community hold long term benefits for students (Hatch et al, 2018; Karp et al, 2015; Karp et al, 2012; Reynolds, 2019). To do so requires the use of a broad range of instruction and the avoidance of assigning "busy work" to students.

Instead, successful courses build a sense of community, social connections, and focus on active learning strategies to assist students to learn how to problem solve and to be well versed on the college environment for long term gains to be achieved (Hatch et al, 2018; Karp et al, 2015; Karp et al, 2012; Reynolds, 2019).   As part of doing so, Karp et al suggests embedding institutional supports into the course as part of a student-centered approach that prepares students for future application if the need arises (Karp et al, 2015).

Guided by such concepts, the curriculum of the course created at CCAC is rooted in a student-centered approach to encourage active learning and engagement to help students to transition into the college environment and help them to learn strategies to overcome any barriers that might arise as they work toward the completion of courses and programs. Accordingly, the course design includes the use of a variety of instructional techniques including the use of what Karp et al terms "worked examples" to help students to learn to successfully navigate the college environment (Karp et al, 2015, p. 5).

Likewise, one of the overarching goals of the course is to familiarize students with the variety of institutional resources that exist to support them in their effort to complete courses and programs at the community college. To that end, enrolled students create a Career Plan, an Academic Plan, and a Resource Plan to achieve the outcome of increasing student perceptions that they are supported, empowered, and prepared to move forward into future classes and to complete the programs they are enrolled in.

Such plans are designed to provide students with a series of resources that can continue to be used once the course has been completed to assist them as they move forward in their educational journey at the college. To assist in doing so during the semester, a Library Guide was created by a member of the workgroup, Librarian Christopher Galuzzo, that provides students with

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access to a robust and diverse array of materials on the listed topics in the course. By design, the Library Guide remains accessible to students once they complete the course to ensure they can continue to have access to the resources to provide continued support as they work to complete future courses or programs.

In short, as students work to complete SEM 105 the curriculum revolves around the completion of three interconnected plans, the Career, Academic, and Resource plan, with emphasis on increasing the knowledge that students have of institutional resources to increase the probability that students will rely on such resources to assist them to successfully complete courses and ultimately programs. In particular, the focus is on increasing student knowledge and perceptions about institutional supports and the role they play in supporting student success.

1.2 Study Context

The study context therefore was a pilot offering of SEM 105 in the fall 2019 semester at the Community College of Allegheny County. The study was grounded in the theoretical foundation of epistemology with a focus on ascertaining a belief held regarding the scope of knowledge that students entering college level classes hold surrounding institutional supports (Twining et al, 2017). My inquiry design was improvement science. My aim was to provide a means to understand how to more effectively support first year students to increase retention and completion in courses and programs.

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the perceptions that students have regarding their level of preparedness, empowerment, and support when newly enrolling in courses at the community college. As Bryk argues, improvement science enabled me to involve participants who

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are "improvers seeking to generate strong evidence about how to achieve better outcomes more reliably" (Bryk, 2015, p. 9).

As a member of the workgroup that worked to design and deploy the course and the associated faculty training required for any future faculty teaching the course, I piloted one of the two sections and continued to work within the workgroup during the semester to measure how well the course curriculum met the stated course objectives. Following the proscribed governance process at our college, I created an experimental course (per the governance process at CCAC) to serve as the foundation to pilot SEM105. The course outline for the experimental course was created collaboratively by the workgroup and reflected the overall focus on active learning and engagement to facilitate long term gains advanced in the body of research (Karp et al, 2012; Karp et al, 2015). Thus, though I served as the sponsor of the experimental course that provided the opportunity for the pilot, the content and curriculum of the course was reflective of the collaboration of the workgroup and college community previously discussed.

Once approved, the experimental course served as the structure for the pilot sections offered in the fall of 2019. In addition to the section of the pilot that I taught, my colleague and fellow workgroup member Professor Sara Conroy taught a second section based on the same experimental course outline and proposal.

Specifically, the Learning Objectives of the course require students to apply independent learning strategies required for success in academic courses at the college level; develop an understanding of college culture, expectations, and procedures; demonstrate effective communication skills in order to interact respectfully and productively in a diverse learning environment; identify interests and resources related to career and transfer options; apply problem-solving strategies to manage issues that impact school performance; and demonstrate information

literacy using appropriate technological tools and resources necessary for academic success (CCAC, 2019).   For this reason, listed topics emphasize active learning strategies to introduce students to the community college environment.   In addition to topics typical to a first year experience course like time-management and goal setting, the final approved common course outline for SEM 105 includes a variety of topics to help students develop problem solving techniques and strategies for future use (Appendix A). In particular, listed topics demonstrate the emphasis on familiarizing students with institutional resources and to building connections to the college community.

To cover the listed topics and meet the learning objectives using a student-centered approach the sequence of the course ultimately was designed to introduce topics in the course deemed essential with a two week "Quick Start." The first two weeks of the course introduce the students to technology with hands on instruction in a computer lab to assist students to ensure that they can access the course Blackboard site, email, and that their net ID is set up and working. The workgroup decided that this was critical to ensure that students were provided both instruction and the opportunity to work with the systems that are core to all classes college wide. To provide the variety of resources built into the course (i.e. the Library Guide and resources in Blackboard) would only be worthwhile if students are able to access them and become familiar with how use the technology necessary to do so.   The long-term benefit is to also provide students with information and skills necessary to be successful in other courses.

Following the two week "Quick Start" the course is organized thereafter into five additional units of work. The "Quick Start" is followed by "Getting Started at CCAC" where topics include introducing students to the college environment, discussions of diversity, and campus resources. Thereafter, Unit 2, "Study Strategies" introduces students to techniques, strategies, and

institutional resources. Students then begin to complete their Career Plan in Unit 3 and begin to work with the Student Planning Software of the college to either confirm their existing plan or to explore other career options. In Unit 4 students build off of the Career Plan to complete their Academic Plan using the Student Planning Software to explore courses and program requirements. Part of completing the plan, purposefully timed to coincide with the registration cycle for the next semester, is to connect with student advisors or transfer counselors. Finally, using the foundations of both existing plans, students create a Resource Plan in the last unit of the course. The Resource Plan is designed to be a comprehensive plan that students can carry forward with them as they continue to work to complete courses and programs.

To ensure consistency in the way that such topics were covered with the pilot sections, we both followed the proscribed sequence designed by the workgroup as part of the effort to evaluate the design of the sequence of the curriculum. We also worked collaboratively during the semester sharing the same course materials, timeline, and collaborated to engage in continual assessment of the course as the semester progressed. In addition, we met on a weekly basis to discuss the progress of the course and used the variety of embedded assessment materials to assess and make adjustments in the course as the semester continued.

As part of doing so, we administered a pre survey the first week of the course to gauge student perceptions of the college and institutional resources. Doing so assisted us to make what we believed to be necessary adjustments to ensure we were able to meet the learning objectives of the course listed on approved course outline. Additionally, constant collaboration allowed for the ability to consistently assess the learning objectives, student perceptions of the curriculum, overall course structure and approach, and the emphasis on institutional resources.

1.3 Participants

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what impact the completion of SEM 105 had on increasing student knowledge and perceptions that they are institutionally supported within the college environment. Answering this question could help faculty and administration to gain a better understanding of student perceptions of institutional supports as a means to increase student retention.

Using a qualitative measure embedded into the course materials for the initial pilot first year experience course increased the understanding of student perceptions of the efficacy of institutional resources. By gaining insight into student perceptions of institutional resources as part of the first year experience course, it allows for an evaluation of the role that such resources might play in increasing student retention for first to second year students in the community college setting.

Students enrolled in SEM 105 are those students at CCAC who have enrolled for 9 or more credit hours. Students who have completed a first year experience (or equivalent course) at a previous institution, dual enrolled (still enrolled in high school and taking classes concurrently), are enrolled in a workforce development certificate (i.e. welding, mechanics), or enrolled in Allied Health programs (Nursing, Radiology, etc), or who have successfully completed 15 credit hours at another post-secondary institution are exempt. Students who are first time enrollment are otherwise be required to complete SEM 105 to be eligible to continue to enroll in courses once they reach the threshold of 9 credit hours. The participants for the survey were the students enrolled in the two sections of SEM 105 piloted in the fall semester of 2019. Each section had a maximum enrollment of 25 total students. As the instructor for one of the sections, I worked

collaboratively with my colleague Professor Conroy who taught the second section to pilot the course that we both helped to create as part of the SEM 105 workgroup.

Two surveys, a pre and post survey, were embedded into the course materials and were administered in each pilot section of the course during a scheduled class period. The data obtained from the pre and post survey allowed for the collection of data to engage in a retrospective study of student perceptions of institutional supports.

In addition to the pre and post survey, additional data on student perceptions of the efficacy of completion of the course was obtained using additional embedded survey materials as well as an end of semester focus group discussion. Particular attention in the group sessions was paid to attempting to ascertain student perceptions of feeling prepared, supported, and empowered at the conclusion of the course.

All data was obtained from instruments embedded into the course materials and designed to provide data to allow for faculty and the workgroup to engage in authentic assessment of the achievement of learning outcomes by enrolled students.

1.4 Instrumentation and Protocols

The design of the study centered on the use of a pre and post course survey embedded into the course materials in the first year experience course, SEM 105. The survey gauged student confidence using a 5 point Likert scale (not at all confident, slightly confident, somewhat confident, moderately confident, very confident) focusing on student perceptions of support and knowing what to do in the post-secondary environment as newly enrolled community college students.

The survey was embedded into the course materials for the pilot administration of SEM 105 in the fall of 2019 and was administered at the end of the course. Specifically, SEM 105 is a course that ran for the first time in the fall semester of 2019 that will scale up in fall 2020 and will be required for the majority of first year students at the community college. The survey was embedded into the course materials as a self-assessment for students to complete to gauge their perceptions as they begin the course and then as they are about to conclude the course.

As an embedded assessment instrument, the confidence survey provided data on how well students who completed the course reached the learning outcomes of the course. In addition, for the purposes of this study, the survey data allowed for the ability to gauge the perceptions of students over time to try to determine if the course emphasis on gaining greater understanding of such resources and the role they play in supporting student efforts to complete courses and programs to determine if students feel more prepared, supported, and empowered at the completion of the course.

Additional insight was gathered via the use of an end of semester focus group. The focus group allowed for the ability to gain a greater depth and breadth of understanding of student perspectives after completing the course. Questions permit an evaluation of student perceptions of their feelings surrounding their participation in the course with specific attention on learning if students feel more prepared, empowered, and supported at the conclusion of the course.

The assessment of student opinions provided insight into how well the learning outcomes were being met with specific attention to eliciting student perceptions on institutional supports. Gaining such data will assist in better meeting the overarching goal of the first year experience course to move beyond just revising the existing institutional approach to informing students about existing resources and create a revised approach consisting of several points of contact to scaffold

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and embed institutional resources. As a member of the workgroup that has designed and will now pilot the course, I wanted to explore how tailoring and embedding supports for students might serve to more effectively support learners beyond traditional institutional supports.

Specifically, my goal was to investigate the ways that supports can be effectively embedded into the content of a classroom to increase student perceptions about their level of preparedness, support, and empowerment to try to positively impact attrition in courses and programs. Though numerous existing institutional supports are available to support students, new students often do not have a working knowledge of what supports exist or how to access them. Additionally, students often stigmatize the use of institutional supports as something that demonstrates inadequacy or weakness rather than understanding how such resources can increase the probability of successfully completing courses and programs. To that end, I wanted to explore how tailoring and embedding institutional supports for students enrolled in courses and programs could more effectively support learners beyond existing traditional institutional supports to better prepare, support, and empower new students.

2.0 Literature Review

Student retention in courses and programs is an issue in higher education that impacts outcomes for stakeholders including students, faculty, institutions of higher education, and the community. High attrition rates among full time first time enrolled students is a subject that is of universal concern for all post-secondary institutions. For community colleges, poor retention from fall to spring and fall to fall remain high nationwide for first time enrolled students. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the national average attrition rate for first time enrolled students was 38% in 2018 (NCES, 2019).

Students who attempt but do not successfully complete courses experience setbacks including financial, academic progress, and potential losses of future professional advancement. Other stakeholders including the faculty and the college are similarly impacted as decreased retention and completion of courses and programs negatively impacts the stability of courses, programs, and the institution. Decreases in retention negatively impact the institution otherwise with losses of revenue and funding that further decrease the ability of the college to provide supports to help students to successfully complete their studies.

For the community, a lack of student retention and completion translates into fewer graduates who can bring their human capital into the region and professions to contribute to the viability of the area and economy. In short, all stakeholders are impacted negatively when students do not successfully complete programs and courses.

2.1 Problem of practice

The topic of interest for my problem of practice centers on high attrition rates for first-time full-time community college students. As part of the mission to provide affordable and flexible options for students, community colleges, including my institution The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC), have broadened course offerings to include traditional face to face courses, hybrid courses (60% on campus and 40% online), and to fully online courses to provide greater flexibility, affordability, and access to courses and programs (Beckford, 2015; Cochran, 2014; Huntingdon-Klein, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2011; Robichaud, 2016; Rovai, 2010:Travers, 2016; Wladis, 2015).

Though the increase of modalities in course offerings has proven a popular option for students and colleges, the various choices available to students have produced less than impressive success and retention rates. For instance, the average attrition rate for first time full time enrolled students at The Community College of Allegheny County is 45% from first to second year (PA Board of Education, 2015, p. 59).

As part of my daily practice, my interest for this study centered on the identification of how my current institution, The Community College of Allegheny County, could increase retention and success in our courses and programs. Particularly, I was interested in the role that institutional supports play in retention and success of our students and how we might move toward creating innovative and embedded resources that increase retention and success in our courses and programs. Specific attention was focused on how embedding such resources into a first year experience course might increase retention and student success in programs and courses to ensure that we can fulfill our mission to provide high quality, affordable, and quality education.

The topic represents an important in my daily practice due to the mission of our college to offer courses to provide the opportunity for students to enroll in and complete courses and programs at my current institution, The Community College of Allegheny County. As a faculty member who teaches courses and a department head attempting to meet the needs of students, the lack of completion of course and programs is of critical concern in my daily practice.

Assisting students to successfully complete courses is central to my roles as both an educator and department head. Student success is core to our mission as an institution of higher education to provide affordable, flexible, and quality educational opportunities to students seeking a post-secondary education. With this in mind, the mission, vision, and goals of CCAC include the delivery of high-quality programs including the delivery of instruction via innovative uses of technology to create an innovative learning environment (CCAC, Mission, 2016).

Though institutions like CCAC are meeting that mission statement to offer courses that are flexible and part of creating an innovative learning environment, the fact that student retention is decreasing is not reflective of achieving the goal to provide quality educational opportunities to students seeking a post-secondary education. With a mission two-fold of providing access and opportunity, the latter is diminished when students do not complete their program of study. To investigate the problem of high attrition rates in courses and programs, a review of the relevant literature was undertaken with an emphasis on the themes of interventions, retention, the performance gap, stakeholder perspectives, and first year experience courses.

2.2 Interventions

In the variety of articles examined for this study, the pattern of research concluded that students who enroll in courses in the community college setting drop out of courses due to a lack of interventions and institutional support. Though post-secondary institutions like CCAC offer such supports and resources, students do not take full advantage of or often are unaware that such resources exist to assist them to be successful in courses and programs.   Moreover, traditional supports like writing centers, tutoring, advising, and counseling are often not individualized nor comprehensive in scope resulting in fewer benefits or impact for students (Kezar & Ktichen, 2019; Lyon & Denner, 2019)

To better meet student needs, Fike and Fike assert that institutions should ensure that supports are "tailored" to the particular institution to ensure that they can meet the "unique needs of the institutions and its students (Fike & Fike, 2008, p. 68). As the authors detail, students enrolled in the community college setting are unique in comparison to their peers at four-year institutions often due to open admissions policies. That is, students are often non-traditional students meaning they often are older, returning adults, or hold full or part-time employment and have other demands on their time (Fike & Fike, 2008). Many students are not "college ready" resulting in many requiring developmental courses or other supports to increase fundamental academic skills (Fike & Fike, 2008).

The authors concluded that the completion of developmental courses (reading in particular) is an important indicator for student retention due to the additional supports that students receive in such classes (Fike & Fike, 2008). Additionally, the authors argue that open admission policies and the different motivations students have for taking courses further increases attrition rates for students. Because students enter for various reasons (to complete a program, to earn credits to

transfer, to increase credentials) based on open admission policies, students are often less likely to continue in their students absent of supports to encourage completion (Fike & Fike, 2008).

Like Fike and Fike, Hatch and Garcia concluded that community college students are unique in comparison to their four-year institution counterparts due to the various roles that community colleges play and open enrollment policies (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). In particular, the authors argue that newly enrolled students confront "pitfalls" and other "institutional processes" that negatively impact student retention in the first few weeks of entering an institution (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Significant to student retention is student engagement including orientations, social support, and academic support (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). The authors suggest that student persistence is increased by collective engagement efforts by colleges that build connections to create academic and social networks for students (Hatch & Garcia, 2017).

In both studies, the authors focused on interventions that were applicable to all first time full time enrolled students in the community college setting. To further support students and foster engagement, Bonet and Walters demonstrated the success at Kingsboro Community College in the creation of learning communities to provide institutional interventions and supports on a continual basis (Bonet & Walters, 2016). At Kingsboro, students were placed into learning communities or cohorts (often termed block scheduling at the community college level) based on either discipline-specific programs or level-based on placement testing or English proficiency. Analyzing enrollment and outcome data from students enrolled in learning communities in psychology and sociology courses (in both traditional on campus face to face and online courses), the authors concluded that such measures result in higher retention and improved grades in all courses no matter the modality (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

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Such efforts reflect establishing what Tinto and Pusser characterize as a "model of institutional action" that create conditions within colleges that foster an environment that supports student success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 5). Burkholder et al agree concluding that the creation of a comprehensive "culture of retention and persistence" is needed, including providing interventions including adequate levels of support to students, including internal (academic based) and external factors (outside demands and barriers), and faculty engagement (Burkholder, 2013). Similarly, Teranishi and Bezbatchenko place emphasis on the importance of institutions actively providing interventions that focus on efforts to diminish barriers that impact marginalized groups as part of the national college completion agenda (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015). As this preliminary review of literature demonstrated, a variety of interventions or institutional supports are needed including orientations and embedded supports to create an environment that assists students to complete courses and programs.

2.3 Retention

In short, the body of literature surveyed proposed a variety of intervention strategies to improve retention among first time full time enrolled students in the community college setting. To do so, Feldmen asserts that it is first necessary to identify the factors that predict students who are more likely to drop out and who will not complete courses or programs in the community college setting.

Notably, Feldmen argues that the four main factors that can help to predict retention are enrollment status (full time or part time), age, ethnicity, and GPA (Feldmen, 2004). According to Feldmen, students who are enrolled part time in a community college are more likely to drop out

than their full-time counterparts.   Similarly, students who are under the age 25 are less likely to complete courses and programs. The same is true of minoritized students who are more likely to drop out of community college programs and courses than their counterparts (Feldmen, 2014).

Though enrollment status, age, and ethnicity are all important predictors of persistence, for Feldmen GPA is the most important predictor of retention among community college students. In fact, the author concluded that "the single strongest predictor of retention was high school GPA. Each one-point increase in high school GPA was associated with a decrease in drop rate by a factor of .46" in the study conducted using data from Niagara Community College (Feldmen, 2014, p. 511). The author concludes that by identifying at-risk students early in the process of enrollment institutional interventions can be used to better support students to decrease dropout rates among community college students.

Like Feldman, Goldrick-Rab argues that student characteristics including age, enrollment status, socioeconomic status, and a lack of academic preparedness represent all negatively impact student success rates in the community college setting (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Still, the author believes that rather than focusing on student "deficiencies" as predictors of retention in community colleges it might be more useful to focus on the policies that are created by community colleges to support student success. In particular, the author asserts that a more effective approach would be to craft more effective responses at multiple levels to create policies that positively serve students in the community college setting (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

The author concludes that "among those institutional policies deserving more careful analysis are learning communities, first year support service programs, and adult literacy programs" (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 457). Though a great deal of research to date has been conducted on increasing student retention, Goldrick-Rab believes that much work remains to be

completed though what is clear from her research is that there exists a need for a "multifaceted approach that is flexible enough to accommodate the variety of student needs and ambitious enough to create meaningful change (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 459).

Kezar and Kitchen echo that call asserting that there exists a need to construct interventions that are comprehensive and system wide (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019). Thus, the authors argue that existing supports fall short because they are not intertwined in a meaningful way to provide support for students across the system. Though colleges have created various supports including first year experience courses, the authors conclude that the lack of a system wide series of aligned structures results in a continued failure to fully meet the needs of students.

As a result, rather than assisting students to be successful, existing supports represent multiple institutional and structural barriers that impede student progress and in particular stop underrepresented students from being successful in the community college setting (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019). Accordingly, the authors argue in favor of creating structures that are system wide and comprehensive from curriculum to supports external to the classroom (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019).

In short, the authors collectively concluded that only by providing comprehensive, multi-faceted, and individualized network of support can college truly begin to increase retention rates among first time enrolled students. Further, such supports would serve to begin to assist students to close the performance gap that results in a lack of completion of courses and in turn to higher drop-out rates among newly enrolled students.

2.4 The Performance Gap

The performance gap is an issue that is of great significance for first time enrolled students in the community college setting. According to Betts, students who work more than 20 hours per week, lack family support, hold a GED or equivalence rather than a high school diploma, lack transportation, are first generation college students, have family responsibilities, or are required to complete developmental (formerly known as remedial) courses are the least likely to complete courses and programs (Betts, 2014).

To increase student retention among community college students Betts asserts that there is a need to create a variety of institutional supports including individualized attention in the form of individualized instruction plans, advisors, tutors, and employing specific strategies to close the performance gap (Betts, 2014).   Surveying such efforts in the North Carolina Community college system, Betts details how early initiatives increased retention in the first semester such efforts were employed (spring) resulting in a commitment to increasing such initiatives for health science students in particular to ensure that the gains achieved continue in the long term (Betts, 2010).

Bonet and Walters echo such conclusions as they surveyed students in colleges in New York State including Kingsboro Community College and detailed the success that embedded supports and learning communities have had to increase retention among non-traditional or first generation students (Bonet & Walters, 2016).   Such initiatives have provided, as the authors demonstrate, the emotional and academic support that students benefit from especially those who must complete developmental courses or who are not prepared academically for college-level work (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

For Barhoum, developmental courses represent one of the most significant structural barriers that decrease student success in the community college setting (Barhoum, 2018).

According to the author, the traditional use of placement testing and developmental courses disadvantage students, particularly minoritized students (Barhoum, 2018). In fact, Barhoum concludes that "many hopeful college students, with dreams of employment and life enrichment, have had their lives significantly altered for the worse because of these traditional, and in some cases discriminatory, practices that implement academic segregation" (Barhoum, 2018, p. 19).

Focusing on developmental writing courses, the author surveyed community college faculty nationwide to ascertain the structural deficiencies of existing developmental sequences. The resulting data revealed that such sequences represented barriers to student success primarily due to the length of the sequence and the lack of individualized support for enrolled students (Barhoum, 2018).

In response to such findings, the author concludes that decreasing the length of the developmental sequence coupled with a commitment to writing centers and mandatory tutoring could alter existing systems to better meet the needs of enrolled students. Specifically, Barhoum argues that tutoring and other institutional supports are fundamental to help to foster "the building of relationships with peers and other academically-focused individuals" is an important part of increasing the chances of student success (Barhoum, 2018, p. 21).

The focus of Barhoum and others on the developmental sequence as a structural barrier that decreases student success in the community college is an important aspect for consideration when exploring factors that impact student retention. Though of critical importance, in depth analysis and discussion of developmental courses and associated issues are outside of the scope of this study. Still, such structural barriers speak to the overall deficiencies of existing systems and the need to focus on building more effective and responsive systems to better foster student success.

As Beaver and Weinbaum (2012) assert, a high capacity educational institution is necessary to build an effective educational setting. Building student capacity, and to close the performance gap, requires institutions to create an effective educational environment that supports student achievement. Thus, to build capacity requires institutions to focus on human capital, social capital, program coherence and resources (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2012). Though the authors studied such trends in a total of eleven elementary and secondary institutions in Pennsylvania, the importance of creating an effective educational environment is applicable to post-secondary institutions. To determine capacity, the authors conducted on average five to six in-person interviews at each institution to assess the understanding and application of No Child Left Behind standards. Accordingly, Muilenburg and Berge reach similar conclusions in their study of distance education at every level (K-12, higher education, and professional development) further demonstrating the critical importance of creating a setting that can best overcome the barriers that students encounter when attempting online courses (Muilenburg & Berge, 2001).

Osborn similarly investigated the causes of attrition, or barriers, to student completion of courses concluding that factors like environment directly impact dropout rates for non-traditional students (Osborn, 2001). For Osborn characteristics like institutional environment, student characteristics, and faculty perceptions are all important forces that influence the drop-out rate of students in courses at four-year institutions (Osborn, 2001). Anderson et al similarly focused on the role of the institutional environment and the impact that it has on first-generation students with a focus on defining the concept of access (Anderson, et al, 2015). Such emphasis reflects the overall effort to evaluate the role that perspectives, student, faculty, and administration, play in student attrition rates all courses and programs.

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2.5 Perspectives

The various perspectives of stakeholders at every level of education is a critical factor that shapes the overall character of post-secondary education. Student, faculty, and administration all play a role in determining the educational environment and in turn the success or lack of success for students enrolled in online programs and courses.

After surveying just over 50,000 students enrolled in ten community colleges nationwide, Sutton learned the top ten challenges identified by students as barriers to completion of courses and programs (Sutton, 2019). Specific barriers ranged from issues with parking, balancing work and demands of college life, faculty, registering for classes, expenses, modality, and academic experience (Sutton, 2019). For students, the lack of academic preparedness, developing a class schedule that balanced with other demands (work and family responsibilities), and lack of skills like time management, a lack of study skills, and a lack of motivation all represented obstacles to student success in the community college setting (Sutton, 2019).

To overcome such obstacles, the author suggests the need for systematic and thoughtful interventions designed to specifically address the barriers that students have identified that are part of structures within institutions. To that end, innovation is needed on the whole to ensure that students receive the institutional support necessary to ensure access and in turn success in the community college setting (Sutton, 2019).

Lyon and Denner similarly believe that gaining better insight into student perceptions can allow for a better understanding of the "lived experiences" of students (Lyon & Denner, 2019). Focusing on students enrolled in computer science programs designed for transfer to a four year institution, the authors interviewed students from fourteen community colleges to gain insight into their perspectives on the barriers that they identify to completion of programs and courses.

Using the metaphor of the board game "Chutes & Ladders" the authors survey the convoluted path that students often follow as they attempt to complete courses and programs in the community college setting. As students encounter setbacks (chutes) and shortcuts (ladders) they wind through a exacerbating system that discourages completion (Lyon & Denner, 2019). According to the student interviews conducted by the authors, the perceptions that students have of the process is one that is not conducive to their success. Specifically, barriers identified by students included poor advising, limitations of courses, ineffective instruction, classes that would not transfer, and disadvantages of being limited in the courses that could be retaken to improve grades and overall GPA for transfer (Lyon & Denner, 2019). The authors conclude that possible interventions might include targeted counseling, improved instruction (due to the critical role faculty play), greater flexibility for working students, and consideration of accommodation for grade forgiveness and course repeats to allow students to improve overall GPA standing to in turn increase the possibility of transfer to a four year institution (Lyon & Denner, 2019). Accordingly, the authors argue in favor of greater access to targeted support and ease of entry and reentry to allow students to continue to make progress rather than to push students out of the existing system (Lyon & Denner, 2019).

Similarly focusing on the concept of accessibility, Anderson et al concentrated on the attempt to define the concept of "what is access?" The authors question if four-year institutions, community colleges, and for-profit institutions, are equipped to deal with the complexity of needs of first generation, and minoritized students who are increasing in numbers due to government initiatives. The authors conclude that equity and quality in admissions and access should be integrated as core concepts in post-secondary education to help to address the performance gap among first generation students (Anderson, et al, 2015).

For Dobbs et al a survey of students both enrolled in traditional and online courses at a four-year institution enrolled in a Criminal Justice Program in the Southwestern United States reveled that all students argued that online courses are a greater challenge though the quality was equivalent. Some variations were found in the results depending on age groups (Dobbs et al, 2017). For Adnan and Boz, faculty teaching mathematics at a university in Turkey reached similar conclusions. The authors concluded that in the discipline of mathematics, the faculty who were surveyed determined that a blended approach results in greater success for students enrolled in online courses (Adnan & Boz, 2015).

In short, no matter the modality, a multiplicity of barriers exist for students exists when entering a community college for the first time. Additionally, other stakeholders including faculty similarly struggle to meet the needs of students in the rapidly changing educational environment. One approach to better meet the needs of students that has increasingly grown in use among post-secondary institutions is the use of a first year experience (FYE) course (also called student success, seminar, freshman seminar).

2.6 First Year Experience Courses

Student retention is an issue of importance in post- secondary education. The pattern of research to date demonstrates emergent factors including how the lack of engagement, a lack of academic skills, inadequate access to necessary technology, the performance gap, stakeholder perspectives, and alienation may contribute to the high drop-out rates in traditional and online courses and what interventions have proven useful to ameliorate such barriers.

First year experience or student success courses have over time become an increasingly popular approach adopted by post-secondary institutions to increase "college-readiness" and thereby increase retention. Such courses vary in overall approach and format though they by in large share the common characteristics of providing students with an introduction to college life, an orientation to the campus and associated resources, the creation of learning communities, and to presenting information and strategies to improve study skills and time management (Hatch et al, 2018; Karp et al, 2015; Karp et al, 2012;Reynolds, 2019). In short, the design of such courses revolve around the effort to provide students with "skills, knowledge, and support networks for successful college-going in response to the call for increased college completion (Hatch et al, 2018, p. 116)

As community colleges work to mitigate such obstacles Hatch et al argue that the creation of learning communities, success programs, and first year experience courses are growing in popularity as a means to better equip students to be successful in courses and programs (Hatch et al, 2018). According to the authors, the study of multiple student success courses reveals that such courses are most impactful when students have the chance to apply what they are learning as part of the course (Hatch et al, 2018). While there are short term gains, the authors caution that long-term gains remain difficult to discern and conclude that additional research over time is needed to measure the long term impact of completion of such courses (Hatch et al, 2018).

Laverick concurs that first year experience courses are increasingly a common way for colleges to try to address the challenges that new students face and to better prepare them emotionally and socially to be successful in courses and program (Laverick, 2018). In particular, Laverick surveyed the impact of a FYE in assisting international students to become better acclimated to the college community. Similar to Hatch, Laverick concluded that some short-term

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gains can be discerned but that the long term gains remain in need of further study and assessment (Laverick, 2018).

Hatch and Bohlig echo such concerns as they indicate that the effectiveness of such initiatives is measured largely via studies focusing on single institutions (Hatch & Bohlig, 2015). Moreover, the authors identify that less attention has been paid overall to the study of the efficacy of such courses in the community college setting in comparison to four-year institutions (Hatch & Bohlig, 2015). To better understand the long term impact of such courses requires more attention to the study of typology of approach and to attempt to identify the programmatic features that will result in long term student success (Hatch & Bohlig, 2015).

Hatch et al further advanced such analysis in the subsequent study that focused on analysis of the objectives of such courses and how what the authors identify as curricular choices interact with students to produce, or inhibit, the desired results of such courses (Hatch et al, 2018). In fact, that authors argue that by design first year experience courses are based on the idea that they will inherently benefit students. By focusing on what the authors characterize as the "lived result" can the "tensions in program design and course implementation" can be fully evaluated (Hatch et al, 2018, p. 118).

For Reynolds et al, the popularity of first year experience (FYE) courses is demonstrated in the fact that nearly 95% of post-secondary institutions have some form of an FYE (learning community, FYE, success course) intended to increase student retention (Reynolds et al, 2019). While there exists what the authors characterize as "enthusiasm" for such courses, more attention to design is needed to ensure such courses reach intended learning outcomes. Specifically, the authors conclude that a "one-size-fits all" approach is not useful after a study conducted at a mid-size private post-secondary institution and argue instead of the necessity to pay more careful

attention to learning outcomes to ensure they best provide students with the tools needed to be successful moving forward (Reynolds, et al, 2019).

To that end, the authors conclude that such courses have a great potential to close the performance gap for incoming students but that only by carefully constructing curriculum and learning objectives reflective of the needs of the student body can the full benefits of completing such a course be reached (Reynolds et al, 2019). Part of doing so according to Karp et al is to recognize that pedagogies that use strategies that serve to involve and engage students using technique including guided engagement, interaction, and constructive learning will result in long term impact than passive learning approaches (Karp et al, 2015).   Using active learning strategies that allow for "authentic opportunities for practice and reflection" by students is part of guiding students to "take control of their learning" and essential for long term gains in any first year experience course (Karp et al, 2015, p. 6). Accordingly, moving away from a typical "information-focused structure" where students are given massive amounts of information toward an in depth learning experience based on active engagement will yield lasting impacts more likely to increase student retention (Karp et al, 2015).

In sum, while first year experience courses have grown in popularity at both four-year institutions and community colleges, the long-term impact of participation in such courses remains to be fully determined.   In the body of literature surveyed, the authors collectively conclude that there is value in such courses and that additional study of FYE courses is needed to better determine the impact that they have on students including student perceptions of their ability to succeed (Hatch et al, 2018; Hatch & Bohlig, 2015; Laverick, 2018; Reynolds, et al, 2019). To better understand such courses, therefore, requires more attention to the actual experiences and

perceptions of both students and faculty who together provide insight into "lived result" of such efforts in the community college setting.

In short, the growth of first year experience courses nationwide reflects the overall effort to increase college completion by trying to assist students to transition to become "college ready" via a first semester or first year success course. Such courses represent an attempt to provide early intervention to increase retention and to address the performance gap of newly enrolled first-time students to decrease attrition rates and assist students to reach completion of programs and courses. To effectively do so, as the body of research conducted to date demonstrates, requires that such courses meet the needs of the students in a way that is meaningful for the needs of the particular student body rather than a one size fits all cookie cutter approach.

3.0 Study Purpose

The purpose of the survey was to gauge the perceptions that students have of feeling supported and knowing what to do if they need help as they work to complete courses and programs. This study focused on examining what impact that completing the newly created first year experience course, SEM 105 had on student perceptions and knowledge of institutional supports. Participants in the study were students enrolled in SEM 105 for the first two pilot sections offered in the fall semester of 2019 at the South Campus of The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC).

Specifically, the study explored what impact that completion of the course had on the key inquiry question: Do students who complete SEM 105 feel more prepared, empowered, and supported than when they began the course?

Additionally, sub questions were explored including:

1. Prior to attempting SEM 105, do students feel prepared, empowered, and supported when they enroll in courses at CCAC?

2. Prior to attempting SEM 105, do new students who enroll in courses have a meaningful understanding of what institutional supports are provided to assist them?

3. Prior to attempting SEM 105, do newly enrolled students understand how to access the institutional resources that exist to assist them? And when to do so?

To do so, the researcher collected data from two pilot sections of SEM 105 in the fall 2019 semester in the form of an embedded pre and post confidence survey and focus group conducted at the end of the semester. At the conclusion of the semester, the researcher collected the data, explored the results, analyzed the data, and drew conclusions based on the data collected to assess

the impact of completion of the course on student perceptions of being supported, empowered, and prepared in the college environment.

3.1 Data Collection

Data for the study was collected in the form of a pre and post confidence survey and a focus group conducted at the end of the semester. The confidence survey (Appendix B) was intentionally designed to be part of the course materials of SEM 105. The format selected was purposeful to allow students to respond to the survey in a very straight forward and familiar way (checking the appropriate box). A paper survey was used to ensure that all students could readily participate especially given the timing of the survey, the first week of the course. The overall effort was to ensure that the survey was not overwhelming and allowed students to complete the survey without any constraints (technological or otherwise) to attempt to foster a level of comfort while they did so. To ensure consistency, the same format was used for the post survey administered the final week of the course.

When administered, students were introduced to the survey as a means of them to self-assess their confidence level in key areas but also to assist the instructors teaching the course as part of the pilot. In fact, students were informed that the course they were enrolled in was a pilot section and that their candid feedback was value as part of improving the course in future iterations.

The same was true of the focus groups conducted the final day of each class (Appendix C). Emphasis was placed on ensuring that students felt comfortable and that their candid responses were valued as part of improving the course for future iterations. To ensure that students felt some level of comfort neither instructor attended the focus group sessions something that was a

purposeful decision to encourage students to feel comfortable with their observations about the course, content, and instruction.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis procedure for the pre and post confidence survey used a response scale (not at all confident, slightly confident, somewhat confident, moderately confident, very confident) to determine the frequency of each response among students enrolled in the pilot offerings of SEM 105. By using a descriptive response scale, the frequency of each response in the survey administered to students provided a measure of student perceptions of feeling supported and knowing what to do when they begin classes. Responses were then correlated to a Likert scale of 1 to 5(1 not at all to 5 very confident) to determine the averages for the pre and post survey responses to identify any increase or decrease in student confidence when comparing student responses at the beginning and end of the course.

The data analysis procedure for the focus group discussion used was to determine emergent themes and frequency of each response among those participating in the discussion. A reflective dialogue codebook was created based on participant responses to measure student perceptions of feeling prepared, empowered, and supported at the conclusion of SEM 105.

Prior to administering the measures, my expectation was that some students would indicate an awareness of the existence of institutional supports and what to do when they begin classes but that it will not be a majority of students in the enrolled pilot sections. Feeling supported and feeling confident about what to do to be successful is something that is important for all students to know and something that most faculty assume to be true. If a student does not know, it is important

finding to allow for meaningful changes in the way that support is introduced to students can be made as part of the curriculum for the first year experience course.

Once the student surveys were administered and the focus groups were completed, data collection focused on reducing data to allow for analysis of the inquiry questions. Data reduction focused on the framework of the inquiry questions while also allowing for the identification of themes. Using a mixture of both allowed for the use of a proscribed framework but still allow for impressions and themes to be identified that may not be anticipated in advance (Creswell, 2007). The themes were then drawn from the descriptive provided by participants in survey responses. Coding was based on the frequency of response and themes that emerged as the survey responses related to the inquiry questions of the study to determine if students felt prepared, empowered and supported. Frequency of response were also be coded to discern if themes emerged surrounding the understanding, access, and appropriate use of institutional resources.

The identification of themes of survey responses allowed for the ability to ascertain the perceptions of students that the survey questions attempted to elicit (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). As McClellan et al observe, it is important to systematically organize data allowing for the iterative process as opposed to imposing restraints by working within too rigid a framework (McClellan et al, 2003)

Responses were analyzed based on a comparison of frequency of response and themes that emerge in the post course survey that was administered. Data was also analyzed to determine if student perceptions of feeling prepared, empowered, and supported and knowledge of institutional resources improve after completing SEM 105 to gauge if the learning outcomes of the course are met. An important part of analyzing the coded survey results was to try to take all measures possible to ensure that the information being utilized is credible. To ensure credibility, the criteria

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for data analysis revolved around the criteria proposed by Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle as summarized by Cresswell (Cresswell, 2007).

To that end, data analysis focused on ensuring accurate interpretations of participant responses is constructed to ensure that the study is credible. Authenticity was reflected in the variety of voices that are included in the study based on the diversity of students enrolled in SEM 105. Integrity was ensured by a self-critical approach to ensure that all aspects of the research undertaken are critically appraised (Cresswell, 2007).

3.3 Stakeholders

Student retention in courses and programs is an issue that impacts outcomes for a large number of stakeholders including students, faculty, institutions of higher education, and the community. Students who do not successfully complete courses that they attempt experience set-backs including financial, academic progress, and potential future professional advancement.

Other stakeholders including the faculty and the college are similarly impacted as decreased retention and completion of courses and programs negatively impacts the stability of courses, programs, and the institution. For the community, a lack of student retention and completion translates into fewer graduates who can bring their human capital into the region and professions to contribute to the viability of the area and economy.

Providing institutional resources to support student success to complete courses and programs is of benefit to all stakeholders. As a whole, students, faculty, administration, and staff benefit from increasing student confidence that in turn increases the likelihood of successful completion of courses and programs. Similarly, such success in turn is of benefit to the larger

community as enrolled students' complete courses and programs that allows those students to contribute to the region economically and otherwise.

3.4 Acknowledgement of Limitations

The limitations of the proposed survey rested in the number of participants who completed the survey. The initial pilot of the course consisted of two sections with total enrollment set at 20 and 24 students for each section. Because all students enrolled did not complete the pre and post survey, the number of respondents decreased for the post survey leading to a smaller amount of data to analyze. The reduction therefore increased the possibility of negatively impacting authenticity by reducing the number and diversity of student voices that respond to the survey (Cresswell, 2007).

Another concern centered around what Cresswell characterized as the "rubric of community." Specifically, the concern surrounded the context of the survey administration as part of the embedded curriculum (Creswell, 2007). As an embedded required component of the course curriculum, the survey held no value and was not a graded element. As a result, concerns exist surrounding the trustworthiness of responses given that there is was not a value attached like a grade to encourage respondents to ensure they are accurate and truthful in responses. Similarly, given the topics, concerns existed as to whether respondents may indicate competency or confidence levels that do not align with their actual levels or knowledge. The sampling therefore overall could have been impacted negatively if the respondents did not approach the survey from a perspective of being frank in responses or rush to complete the survey as a means to get the survey completed without regard to meaningful responses.

To try to minimize the identified limitations the course introduction included a discussion of the survey and the ways that ensuring meaningful and trustworthy responses would serve to help students as they worked thereafter to complete the course and future courses. A discussion of self-assessment, a principle interwoven into the course curriculum, was used to identify the use of the survey as a means to gauge progress in achieving the course outcomes to increase the knowledge of participating students in how such techniques will prove useful as they move forward in future classes. Identification of how completion of the survey might serve as a resource for self-assessment is one technique that was used to try to ameliorate the limitations acknowledged.

4.0 Data Analysis

The objective of this study was to gain an understanding of how the completion of a first year experience course, SEM 105, impacted the knowledge and perceptions that students have of institutional supports designed to increase retention. In this research project, the focus was on determining if the emphasis of the course materials on increasing student awareness and knowledge of institutional supports resulted students feeling more prepared, supported, and empowered at the completion of the course to overcome barriers to completion of their programs and courses.

The study used a qualitative measure embedded into the course materials to investigate the impact of completing the first year experience course, SEM 105, on student perceptions of the effectiveness of institutional resources in supporting their success at the community college. By surveying students enrolled in SEM 105 at the beginning and end of the fall 2019 semester, information was collected to gauge the familiarity and understanding that students have of institutional supports as a means to increase student retention.

A pre and post survey was administered to two pilot sections of SEM 105 in the fall 2019 semester to obtain a qualitative measure of student perceptions and knowledge of institutional supports at the beginning and end of the course. Additional qualitative data was collected at the end of the semester from two focus groups. The use of focus groups allowed students to share their thoughts on the experience of completing the course giving the firsthand opportunity to identify their perceptions on the efficacy, or lack thereof, of institutional resources to overcome any identified barriers. The focus groups also provided valuable insight into how students view their overall transition into and experience within the community college environment.

4.1 Demographic Data

Study participants consisted of students enrolled in two pilot sections of a first year experience course, SEM 105. The setting was a large community college in an urban setting with the majority of students enrolled in their first semester at the post-secondary level.

The study participants were drawn from two pilot sections of SEM 105 conducted in the fall 2020 semester. Students registered into the sections were predominantly enrolled in the developmental sequence and were placed into SEM 105 in lieu of the requirement to complete an existing course, SDS 102. Some of the students in the sections were just beginning their degree program while others were satisfying the existing requirement to either repeat SDS 102 or complete it because it was never completed.

As a course, SDS 102, was required for all students who tested into the majority of or entire developmental sequence (math, reading, and writing) as well as students who were in academic jeopardy including students on academic probation or suspension. Over time, the course evolved into a quasi-student success course but lacked consistent instruction and measurable learning outcomes. Based on institutional research conducted by Achieving the Dream (ATD), the effort to create a course to replace SDS 102 evolved over time into SEM 105.

The study participants largely reflected the fact, as Fike and Fike argue, that many students entering the community college setting are not "college ready" (Betts, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008). In response, colleges have built developmental sequences based on placement testing or other criteria (i.e. high school GPA or successful completion of AP courses) to serve as the fundamental institutional resources and supports to increase the essential academic skills of students and to attempt to increase overall retention (Fike & Fike, 2008). Reflective of national and existing methodology, the Community College of Allegheny County relies on a developmental sequence

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of courses to assist students to become college ready in reading, writing, math, and "techniques for becoming a successful college student" (SDS 102, 2008). Doing so is part of the overall effort to support students academically, foster student engagement, and to ultimately increase retention. Such efforts reinforce the identification of the critical need that Hatch and Garcia observe is necessary to help newly enrolled students to avoid pitfalls common to newly enrolled community college students (Hatch & Garcia, 2017).

As part of such efforts, research was conducted by Achieving the Dream (ATD), to explore how well the college was meeting such goals with existing resources and supports. As part of their findings, the ATD team concluded that the existing course, SDS 102, was limited in the fact that only students who tested into the development sequence or those who were experiencing academic setbacks were required to complete the course. Accordingly, only students who tested into the developmental sequence or were in academic distress were required to complete SDS 102 thereby excluding the remainder of the student body. Moreover, the inability to measure learning outcomes did not allow for the course to be assessed. That coupled with inconsistent instruction produced the recommendation to create a first year experience course, eventually titled SEM 105, reflective of national trends in post-secondary education.

Though envisioned and constructed to serve the entire student body, the pilot sections of SEM 105 were populated by students who primarily were enrolled in the developmental sequence something that represents an important factor when evaluating the impact of the course. That is, by design the course will be required for all students who are enrolled full time or who reach twelve credits of work at the college and is not intended as a course exclusively for those in the developmental sequence or in academic jeopardy. Rather, the intent of the course is to prepare

and empower all students to be successful in the college environment and to assist them to identify and overcome barriers to the completion of courses and programs.

Nevertheless, students enrolled in the pilot sections were representative of the diversity of the student body enrolling in the community college including both non-traditional first-generation students to traditional full-time students. In a demographic survey conducted as part of the focus group session, students self-identified as 57.69% female, 38.46% male, and 3.85% declining to respond. In regard to self-identification of race and ethnicity, 30.77% of the enrolled students indicated African American, 7.69% Asian, and 61.54% White. Some 88.46% of the respondents indicated English as their first language with 3.85% indicating ESL and 7.69% Nepali. When asked to identify their place of birth, 92.31% of students indicated the United States as their country of birth while the remaining 7.69% identified their place of birth as Nepal.

When asked to identify the highest level of education achieved by their parents, 53.8% of the enrolled students indicating having a parent who either completed or attended "some college" while 23.07% of participants completed or attended high school. The remaining 23.07% of students indicated that they did not know the highest level of education for their parents when responding to the demographic survey conducted as part of the focus groups. Thus, 46.14% of the enrolled students were first-generation college students with one half of that total, 23.07%, unable to identify the level of education of one or both of their parents as is indicated in the results indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 Focus Group Composition by Educational and Demographic Characteristics

Baseline characteristic	Full sample	
		%
Gender		
Female	15	57.69
Male	10	38.46
No Response	1	3.85
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	8	30.77
Asian	2	7.69
White	16	61.54
Highest educational level of parent		
College/some college	14	53.80
High school	6	23.07
Unknown	6	23.07
Language		
English	23	88.46
ESL	1	3.85
Nepali	2	7.69
Country of birth		
Nepal	2	7.69
United States	24	92.31

In sum, the demographics of the two pilot sections reflect the larger student body at CCAC that in academic year 2018-2019 was comprised of 54% women and 46% men with the average student age of 26. During that same academic year, 31% of the student body was comprised of ethnic minorities with 115 international students with the majority off all students, 67%, enrolled part time with the remainder, 33%, enrolled at a full time status. Reflective of the mission and role of a community college, CCAC provides access and the opportunity for residents of Allegheny County and the surrounding areas to enroll in 160 academic programs or workforce programs (CCAC, At A Glance, 2020).

As is demonstrated in the body of literature reviewed for this study, factors like age, ethnicity, enrollment status, and GPA are all important factors to predict retention and success for

students enrolled in the community college setting (Feldmen, 2014). In particular, students enrolled at a part time status, like the majority of those at CCAC, and who are minoritized students are far more likely to drop out than their counterparts (Feldmen, 2014).

4.2 Findings

For many students, the opportunity to enroll in college is in itself a barrier that can be insurmountable for a variety of reasons including financial, academic, and access hurdles. With an open admissions policy, community colleges like the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) provide access but once enrolled barriers continue to exist that often result in students not completing their courses or ultimately their programs of study.

The focus of SEM 105 is to prepare students to identify and mitigate obstacles by empowering them with the knowledge and means to access institutional supports and resources designed to assist them in their academic journey. Emphasis is therefore placed on identifying and familiarizing students with institutional resources as they build a multipart plan culminating with a resource plan designed to empower students to be successful in the college and future professional environments. In short, the focus of SEM 105 is to build a framework to ensure that students feel more prepared, supported, and empowered to increase student retention to complete courses and programs.

To gauge student perceptions and knowledge of institutional resources, a pre survey was administered during the first week of class to gain insight into the familiarity of students with existing supports and resources. The same survey was conducted during the final week of class to evaluate how well the learning outcomes of the course were met in regard to student understanding

and perceptions of institutional resources. According to the pre survey results, the level of knowledge and confidence to know what resources exist and where to locate them fell on average between somewhat and moderate as is evidenced by the following results in Figure 1.
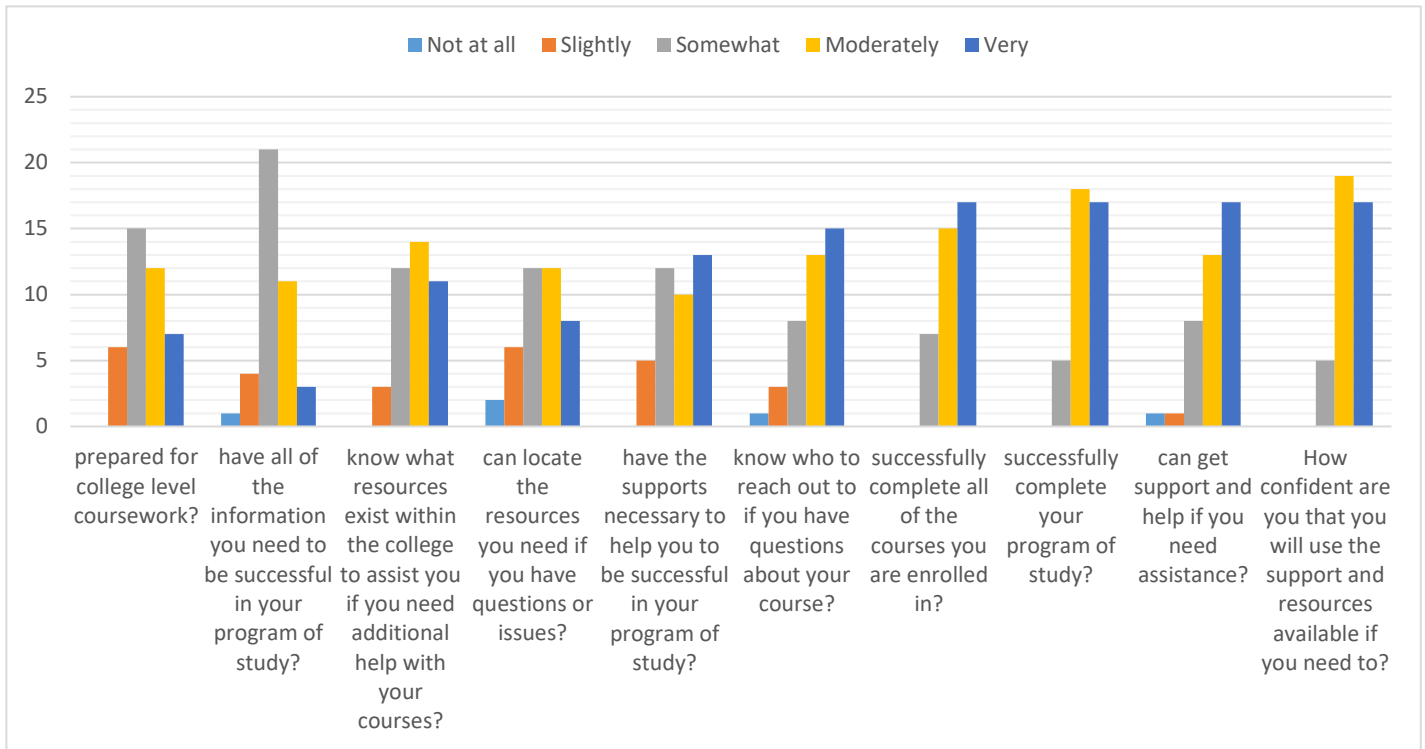
Figure 1 Pre Survey

Note: sample size of 40 total; 1 no response to Q7; 2 responses by one student to Q10.

The pre survey conducted during the first week of class in the fall semester of 2019 was administered to a total of 40 students enrolled in two separate pilot sections of the course. In response to "how confident are you that you are prepared for college level coursework," only 17.5% of the respondents indicated that they were "very confident" in their chances for success. For the remainder of the participants, a majority or 67.5% of students felt that they were "somewhat" or only "moderately" prepared for college level work. Thus, the majority of enrolled

students indicated that they were somewhat or moderately confident in their level of preparedness for coursework at the college level. Such results are not surprising and reflect the pattern of research examined for this study that collectively concludes that community college students unique in comparison to their four-year counterparts.

That is to say, a majority of community college students are non-traditional (i.e. older or returning adults), enrolled at a part-time status, who hold a full or part time job, and who lack fundamental academic skills for college level work (Fike & Fike, 2008; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Travers, 2016). Collectively such factors result, as Hatch and Garcia observe, in numerous barriers for newly enrolled community college students that negatively impact retention particularly in the first few weeks of entering the institution (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Included among such barriers are those created by the institutions themselves by relying on traditional approaches to institutional supports that put the responsibility on the student to identify and seek out help rather than to ensure students are not only aware of such supports but are familiar and comfortable with how to locate and access them to support student success.

When queried about their knowledge of existing institutional supports, 52.5% of enrolled students responded that they were "somewhat" confident that they had the necessary information to successfully complete their program of study. Of the remaining students, only 35% responded that they were moderately or very confident that they could do so while 12.5% were only slightly or not at all confident that they had the information necessary to successfully complete their program. Interestingly, when asked if they were confident that they would successfully complete their program of study in and enrolled courses 42.5% of participants indicated that they were very likely to reach completion. Still, on the same questions, 45% and 37.5 % of respondents were only moderately confident that they would complete their enrolled program of study. Thus, though

a majority of students indicated that they were only somewhat or moderately prepared for college level work, there was an overall higher level of overall confidence indicated when asked about the likelihood of completing their enrolled program of study.

When surveyed regarding their level of confidence in using available supports and resources if needed in a majority of students responded that they were confident that they would with nearly 85% responding that they were either moderately or very confident that they would do. Still, students indicated less confidence in getting support and help if needed when queried. For example, only 75% indicated moderate or very confident in getting support and help if in need of assistance while only 57.5% of respondents indicated that they were moderately or very confident that they had the supports necessary to help them to succeed in their program of study.

When queried about their level of confidence to locate resources to assist them, only 50% of students responded that they were moderately or very confident that they could do so while only 57.5% of students indicated a similar level of confidence in the knowledge that they had of existing institutional supports available for their use. In fact, 30% of students indicated that they were only "somewhat" confident on the same questions of getting support and help if needed, locating such resources, and knowledge of existing supports.

When comparing post survey results conducted the final week of the semester, a smaller number of students, 24 total, completed the survey in comparison to the pre survey completed by 40 students. The smaller number of students reflects both attrition in the course the fact that some students were absent on the day of the administration. The feedback provided in the post survey, as is indicated in Figure 2 indicates a somewhat mixed result in regard to the measure under focus.
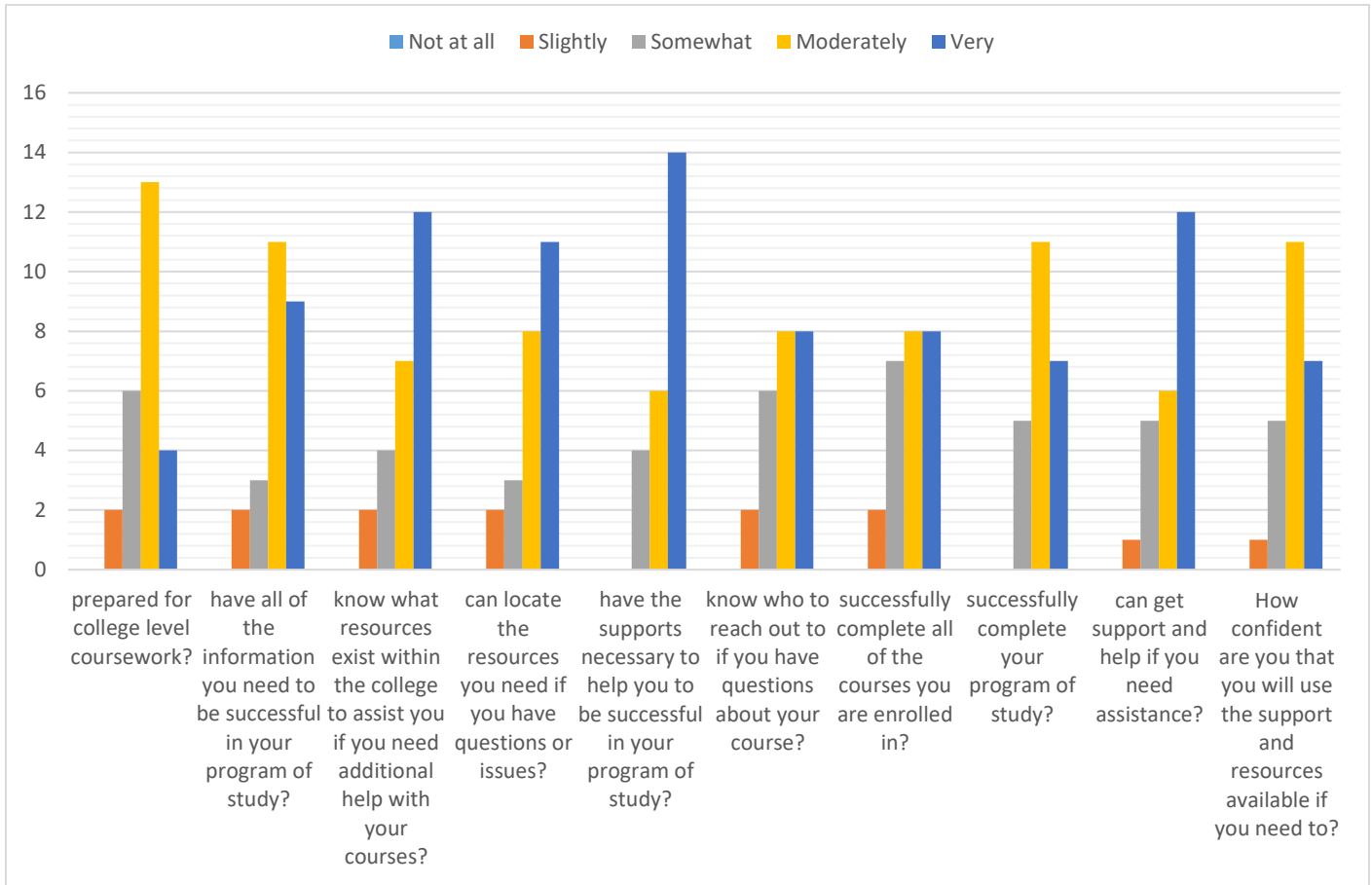
Figure 2 Post Survey

Note: sample size of 24; 1 no response to Q 8

In fact, by taking the responses and converting them to a Likert scale and then averaging the results, a broader estimate of the results is demonstrated including some unexpected conclusions as demonstrated in Table 2.

Specifically, students indicated an increased understanding of resources indicating a greater awareness of the ability to locate resources and an understanding of who to ask or turn to for assistance. Similarly, participants indicated an improved awareness of what institutional resources exist at the college and a greater level of confidence that they have the information necessary to be successful in their program of study.

Though an increase in awareness of resources was indicated, students simultaneously indicated a decrease in confidence that they would use the supports and resources provided if needed to assist them. Moreover, student confidence in their ability to complete their courses and program of study declined although students indicated more confidence in their overall ability to complete college level work as is demonstrated in the following Table.

Table 2 Pre and Post Survey Average

	Question	Pre avg	Post avg	Change
1	How confident are you that you are prepared for college level coursework?	3.50	3.76	0.26
2	How confident are you that you have all of the information you need to be successful in your program of study?	3.27	4.08	0.80
3	How confident are you that you know what resources exist within the college to assist you if you need additional help with your courses?	3.82	4.16	0.33
4	How confident are you that you can locate the resources you need if you have questions or issues?	3.45	4.16	0.71
5	How confident are you that you have the supports necessary to help you to be successful in your program of study?	3.77	4.41	0.64
6	How confident are you that you know who to reach out to if you have questions about your course?	3.95	3.91	-0.03
7	How confident are you that you will successfully complete all of the courses you are enrolled in?	4.25	3.88	-0.37
8	How confident are you that you will successfully complete your program of study?	4.30	4.08	-0.21
9	How confident are you that you can get support and help if you need assistance?	4.10	4.20	0.10
10	How confident are you that you will use the support and resources available if you need to?	4.25	4.00	-0.25

At first glance, the results appear paradoxical in that students indicated a greater awareness of resources while simultaneously signifying less confidence that they would use available institutional resources to assist them should the need arise.

A more in-depth analysis of student responses reveal, however, that the magnitude of changes is uneven and in some responses very small and therefore not reflective of discernable practical change. For instance, student confidence levels about knowing who to ask for help in a course if they have questions did not indicate any discernable change (-.03). Other responses similarly demonstrated very little to no practical change in responses including questions focusing on completion of programs of study (-0.21) and confidence in the use of available institutional resources (-0.25).

Some responses demonstrated greater increases though such increases remained modest including an increase of 0.26 in confidence in the level of preparedness for college level work. Still, students indicated a 0.80 increase in confidence in having the information needed to be successful in their programs of study, the largest change noted when comparing the pre and post survey data.

Taken together, a comparison of the pre and post survey results demonstrate that the overall changes in confidence levels were not dramatically impacted by the completion of the course. Though changes were evident, the magnitude of such changes is less than expected when considering the level of attention given to familiarizing students with institutional resources during the semester in both pilot sections.

Still, when situating such results within the larger body of existing literature, one can surmise therefore that such notions rest in the perceptions that students hold of the use of institutional supports and resources. In fact, such deductions reflect the collective conclusions in the body of literature surveyed that argued that additional study of first year experience courses is needed to better understand the impact of completing such courses on student perceptions of their ability to succeed (Hatch et al, 2018; Hatch & Bohlig, 2015; Laverick, 2018; Reynolds, et al,

2019). In truth, such responses echo the findings in the body of research conducted to date that the reliance on traditional supports is not as effective for students as more individualized or comprehensive supports (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019; Lyon & Denner, 2019).

Adding to that is the necessity as Lyon and Denner assert of working to better ascertain the "lived experiences" of students to enable institutions to better target and tailor supports to increase retention and success in the community college setting (Lyon & Denner, 2019). Insight into the "lived experiences" of students enrolled in the pilot sections of SEM 105, can be found in the themes that emerge from the focus groups conducted the final day of class in the fall of 2019.

To elicit a more in depth understanding of the perceptions of students of their personal experiences in SEM 105 and to determine how well learning outcomes of the course were achieved, focus groups were conducted the final day of each class. Students were given the opportunity during the focus groups to engage in a discussion of their overall perceptions of their experiences in the course and the college during the fall 2019 semester. A review of the comments and discussion that resulted reveals three key themes that bring additional depth of information to the analysis of student perceptions and knowledge of the college environment, institutional resources, and their conclusions about completing the course.

That is, when asked about the perceptions that they held when entering the college, focus group participants identified that they believed that the community college setting was not on par with a four-year post-secondary institution. For instance, one student observed that "you don't have to know everything because it is not as big as a four year college" while another observed that "I was just doing the mentality of the high school." Another indicated feeling the same but then experiencing a change in their notion indicating that "at first it was easy and I kind of underestimated, like, exams, because it was like I'm not going to study but then I learned." In

short, such responses provide insight into the perceptions of students of the community college setting. Such sentiments reflect those prevalent in the body of research centering on the barriers that exist for students entering the community college setting including not being prepared for the demands of the college setting, a lack of study skills, and lack of motivations (Betts, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Lyon & Denner, 2019; Sutton, 2019).

Speaking about the experience they had in SEM 105, one student shared that though the course content was "easy" the contents of the course included "some stuff in here we should already know." Another student added that "I just thought it was gonna be a boring lecture. Yeah. I didn't expect hands-on stuff or any of the conversation" while another concluded that the course assisted them in the fact that "I would say that it got me more used to what it's like here."

Such themes carry into the perceptions that students had of the effectiveness of the course. Speaking to that one student observed that by completing the course, the course materials and institutional time "…got me more used to what it is like to be here." Another interjected that "it should be a requirement for first year students. It prepares you for the rest of your career here" when asked if the course was helpful. For one student, completing their third year at CCAC, the course also proved helpful though the student concluded that "it would have been more helpful" in the first semester rather than their final semester.

Speaking about the emphasis of the course instruction and curriculum on institutional resources, one student revealed some surprise at "all the resources you have access to" as part of the course and the college. Another concluded that participating in the class helpful stating that "the resources on Blackboard. I mean, what this course taught me really helped me." Such reflections demonstrate the importance of creating an environment centered on engagement, the creation of social and academic networks, and to build connections between students and the

college (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Doing so reflects the establishment of a "culture of retention and persistence" as part of the larger effort to diminish existing barriers that impact the national completion agenda for community colleges (Burkholder, 2013; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015).

Such observations demonstrate that the course instruction and curriculum positively impacted student understanding of resources. When probed further on the use of institutional resource in the focus group discussion, the discussion helped to explain the pre and post survey results. That is, in the pre and post survey, a comparison of pre and post survey responses showed an increase in awareness and understanding of institutional resources but a decrease in confidence that such resources would be accessed by students.

When the discussion turned to the topic of knowledge and access to institutional resources in the focus group, some students indicated they had been using various supports including the Learning Assistance Center (LAC, tutoring, the Math Café, transfer counseling, advising, and the library.

Asked if they were aware of such resources, one student indicated that they were surprised at how many were provided indicating "yeah, I didn't expect that much" while at another commented surprise at 'all of the resources you have access to." When probed about visiting or using such supports during the semester, students indicated they had with one student observing that "I've gone to the library there for classes and stuff. And I know there are people around to help you." Another added that they "like the learning commons and the LAC a lot" noting that "she [referencing the instructor] always tells us to go there and they'll be able to help you out with anything."

Notably, a student interjected that the course assisted in learning more about the resources provided by the college stating that the course helped students to learn who to reach out to for help. That is, the student noted that "basically we are finding out who to talk to if you need more help. Places to go. Who you need to talk to for your career, who you need to talk to when you need to schedule classes, who you need to talk to when you just need somebody to talk to."

Still, other students indicated that they had not started to use institutional resources and supports. When probed as to why, one student observed that due to their part time job, they cannot remain on campus after classes stating that "I have a part time job so I never have time to stay in class. Gotta work." Another simply stated that they had not used such supports because they "just haven't got around to it."

When probed as to whether or not they might have found such resources absent of completing the course, some students responded that they felt they would have thought it likely would have taken more time for them to locate such supports. When probed on this question, one student indicated "if no one is going to help you then you find out for yourself. I found the gym right here." Another student added that "somebody tells me where it is and I just forget the second they tell me. I just don't pay attention…I get sidetracked."

Taken together, these "lived experiences" of students provide insight into the perceptions that students have not only of the fact that institutional supports exist but understanding into how they engage, or not, with such resources as is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Focus Group Themes

Topic	Example quote
College perceptions of preparedness	"I was just doing the mentality of the high school" "Nervous" "You don't have to know everything because it's not as big as a four year college." "At first it was easy and I kind of underestimated, like exams, because it was like I'm not going to study but then I learned" "I feel as though the course was easy but some of the stuff in here we should already know."
Perception and knowledge of institutional resources	"I've gone to the library before and the math lab" "I've gone to the library there for classes and stuff. And I know there are people around to help you" "All the resources you have access to" "Yeah. I didn't expect that much" "Like learning commons and the LAC a lot. And she always tells us to go there and they'll be able to help you out with anything." "I have a part time job so I never have time to stay in class. Gotta work." "No. Just haven't gotten around to it" "Basically we're finding who to talk to if you need help. Places to go. Who you need to talk to for your career, who you need to talk to when you need to schedule classes, who you need to talk to when you just need to talk to somebody. Stuff like that. Who to talk to when you need tutoring." "If no one is going to help you then you find out for yourself. I found the gym right here." "Somebody tells me where it is and I just forget the second they tell me. I just don't pay attention…I get sidetracked."

| Perceptions of effectiveness of the course | "The resources on Blackboard. I mean, what this course taught me really helped me. We've discussed how to register for classes, check your grades, calendar"

"All the resources you have access to"

"I would say that it got me more used to what it's like to be here"

"… this is my third semester I'm actually this is my last semester. Last week, I mean if I could offer that opinion as I would have this course, my first semester here, it would have been a lot more helpful."

"…it should be a requirement for first year students. It prepares you for the rest of your career here." |

In short, an analysis of the personal testimony provided by students in the focus groups demonstrates that while students increased in their awareness of institutional supports, they indicated a reluctance or inability to use such resources. No matter the reason, such hesitancy results in students not using the traditional institutional resources to support their success in programs and courses. Such tentativeness is most likely due to the fact that such resources are traditional in construction, a Math Café, Writing Center, Learning Assistance Center, Tutoring, Counseling, and Advising. As the body of literature demonstrates, traditional supports often lack the individualization and comprehensive scope that would be of more benefit to students (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019; Lyon & Denner, 2019). Thus, while the knowledge of institutional resources increased as a result of completing SEM 105, the fact that the willingness to use such resources in the future decreased even nominally is something that will require additional analysis in the chapter that follows.

5.0 Summary

The overarching goal of SEM 105 is to not just inform students about existing institutional supports but to embed them into the course content to create a framework to effectively support learners beyond the first year experience course. To create a setting that supports student success, as Tinto and Pusser argue, requires the creation of a comprehensive environment and culture that empowers students to persist and be retained until programs are completed (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

The purpose of this inquiry was to gain an understanding of what impact the completion of SE 105 had on increasing student knowledge and perceptions of their level of preparedness, empowerment, and support within the community college environment. An analysis of the results of the measures used, a pre and post survey and focus group, has exposed several key findings concentrated around interventions, retention and the performance gap, and student perceptions.

5.1 Interventions

For students enrolled in the pilot sections of SEM 105, particular emphasis was placed in the curriculum on increasing student awareness of the institutional resources provided as part of the traditional array of interventions provided to support student success. Students were provided in depth information regarding the availability, role, and importance of the existing institutional resources. To familiarize students with the resources students were provided information via the course LMS, were asked to visit the various locations to complete the various resource plans, and

had in class discussions and sessions with representatives from the various centers on campus (Counseling, Advising, Student Success Coaches, Library, ITS, etc).

Collectively. and consistently. institutional resources were highlighted to attempt to increase student awareness of the existence and efficacy of such supports as part of their educational journey. Due to the structure of the pilots, a learning community was created to try to increase the connection of students to the college, the institutional supports provided, and the members of the college community including their peers in class and otherwise. Doing so reflected the effort to build a foundation of institutional support on a continual basis, something Bonet and Walters asserted, as an essential component of increasing the effectiveness of such supports (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Moreover, such an approach reflected the effort to build connections for students in both the academic and social realm something Hatch and Garcia argue to be an essential component of student engagement and retention (Hatch & Garcia, 2017).

An analysis of the data collected in the pre survey, post survey, and focus groups, demonstrates that student knowledge and perceptions about institutional resources and support slightly increased as a result of completing SEM 105. Nevertheless, student perceptions of their willingness to use such resources slightly decreased somewhat over the course of the semester as is evidenced in the comparisons of the pre and post survey data.

Some insight into such findings are demonstrated into what Hatch et al term the "lived result" and Lyon and Denner term the "lived experience" of students articulated as part of the focus groups conducted the final day of class (Hatch et al, 2018; Lyon & Denner, 2019). That is to say, the demands placed on students who are non-traditional students external to the college environment represent a significant barrier to the use of traditional institutional resources and supports.

As one student indicated in the focus group, time was an issue because the student could not remain on campus and had to leave immediately for work. For many community college students, this is typical barrier in that they have a variety of demands on their time outside of the classroom including work, family, and other obligations that do not allow them to access and use existing institutional supports. Accordingly, this demonstrates the need to consider how to better tailor and individualize supports and resources for the study body of the particular institution.

As the body of research to date demonstrates, traditional supports that are geared toward traditional students (i.e. full time with few other demands on their time outside of the post-secondary institution) are often not well suited for the community college setting (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019; Fike & Fike, 2008; Lyon & Denner, 2019). For many non-traditional students institutional supports are not accessible because of the lack of time that they have to remain on campus due to full or part time employment and other demands on their time that render them inaccessible (Fike & Fike, 2008). For those students who are already not "college ready" the lack of access to traditional supports only serves to further widen the existing performance gap.

5.2 Retention and the Performance Gap

To date, there exists a great deal of research conducted on the increasing student retention in post-secondary institutions. As the body of literature demonstrates, supporting student success is requires a dedication by institutions to active interventions to create an environment that fosters students success (Feldman, 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). In recent years, post-secondary institutions have increasingly turned to moving from traditional supports to more innovative approaches resulting

in the proliferation of first year experience courses. Such courses, as Reynolds highlights, are offered in some form or another by 95% of post-secondary institutions nationwide (Reynolds, 2019).

At the Community College of Allegheny County, the creation of SEM 105 piloted in the fall semester of 2019 reflects the effort of the institution to move toward a more comprehensive means to prepare, empower, and support students. To fulfill such goals requires a willingness to continue to employ more innovative approaches to assist students to become more prepared academically for college level work and to facilitate more engagement to decrease existing attrition rates.

For such efforts to be successful, as Kezar and Kitchen argue, requires the creation of system wide structures that include curriculum and supports outside of the classroom to create a comprehensive network to support student success (Kezar & Kitchen, 2019).   A review of the results of the data collected in the pilot offering of SEM 105 reflect such need.

Specifically, students indicated that completing SEM 105 increased their knowledge of the institutional supports provided by the college. Students indicated that they felt more prepared for the college environment, were more familiar with institutional resources, and indicated that the course was useful. Still, students expressed trepidation about the prospects of completing their enrolled program of study as is evidenced in the post survey results where only 29.17% of students indicated they were "very" confident they would complete their program of study.

Nevertheless, fewer students indicated that they would confident that they would use the support and resources available to assist them if the need arose. Thus, while institutional supports are provided to assist and support students, there remains a hesitancy reflected the perceptions that

students have the effectiveness of existing institutional resources that reduces the effectiveness that they have in fostering retention.

5.3 Student Perceptions

Though the responses of students indicated an optimism regarding their perceived skills and knowledge of available resources and supports, the survey and focus group results also demonstrate a continued sense of disconnect when it comes to actual utilization of available supports. An analysis of these results, and in particular accounting for the personal testimonials of students provided via the focus group discussions, demonstrates that there remains a barrier for students when it comes to their perceptions of the use of institutional supports provided to assist them to complete their programs.

While some students indicate the use of institutional resources others indicated they had not and when probed further on that question, students indicated various reasons including a lack of time or a lack of motivation access existing supports. Such responses illuminate the need to further explore the existing array of supports to try to determine how to make them more accessible and more attractive to students. Accordingly, attention is needed to evaluating existing supports and to create a network of support and resources from admission to completion that reflects the needs of the study body (Lyons & Denner, 2019; Sutton, 2019).

5.4 Implications for Research

As conducted, this study reflects and is situated among the recent developments in research associated with retention and completion in that the results confirm the need to move beyond existing and traditional supports and to innovate to meet the needs of contemporary students. Thus, this study is situated in the emergent theme that institutions need to work to identify and ameliorate the systemic institutional barriers that encourage attrition rather than retention.

To make substantive and meaningful changes requires institutions to engage in an honest assessment of traditional supports and move toward a multifaceted, individualized, and comprehensive approach that reflects the needs of students in the community college setting. The fact that as colleges we allow such barriers to exist is contrary to our mission, vision, and goals and therefore requires further consideration. Such analysis would be useful to determine if we as an institution are able to identify barriers that have inadvertently been created to ensure we work to correct any institutional deficiencies that might exist. By engaging in self-reflection it might allow us as an institution to ensure we are not creating obstacles and removing any that might exist to better support our students to be successful.

Thus, this study falls within the contemporary literature that calls for institutions to engage in intensive and meaningful self-assessments and to commit to not just revise existing approaches, but to truly innovate in order to create an environment that will foster student success (Borhoum, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Kezar & Kitchen, 2019; Lane, 2018; Lyon & Denner, 2019).

In fact, the results of this study reinforce the need to continue to research and determine the elements necessary to create and administer a successful first year experience course. That is, the design of SEM 105 involved a comprehensive and systematic approach that incorporated best practices based on the body of research to date. Using such foundations, the development of the

class expanded beyond the typical first year experience course with the creation of a complex multi-faceted organization.

The approach of the work group, in concert with the college community, was intentional and systematic and went beyond the course itself. For instance, embedded supports, like the Library Guide (Appendix D) that remains accessible for students after they complete the course, were purposefully intertwined into the LMS (Blackboard) and emphasized as part of the course instruction to ensure that students were not only introduced to institutional resources but to encourage continued use after completion of the class. As a resource, the Library Guide provides students with a single point of access to revisit the course topics and institutional resources. The guide provides resources for each of the course topics, additional materials for student use, and the ability for students to readily connect to members of the college community.

As part of building such connections, a coordinator structure was also created to foster a point of contact for students completing SEM 105 while enrolled and after completing the course (Appendix E). The coordinator structure includes a system wide coordinator who oversees the overall administration of the course and program reviews in conjunction with four campus coordinators (one for each campus within the CCAC system).

Each campus coordinator holds responsibilities including staffing the courses, holding at least two meetings during the semester for all faculty teaching the course at their campus or associated centers, and assessment of the common course assignments (the Career, Academic, and Resource plans). In addition, campus coordinator roles were intentionally structured to be a point of contact for students completing SEM 105 with each coordinator responsible to hold designated office hours for students enrolled in the course. The role of the coordinator at the campus level is designed to create a designated point of contact for students to ensure that they have the

opportunity to create a connection with someone based at their campus location who will remain a point of contact even once a student completes the course.

In addition to serving as a point of contact for students, campus coordinators also provide a point of contact for all faculty teaching the course. As part of doing so, coordinators will hold meetings at least twice per semester where faculty teaching the course will engage in assessment of the course and share and exchange best practices. Coordinators at the campus level will also ensure that the learning objectives of the course are assessed each semester and will also ensure faculty teaching the course are supported during the time that they teach the course.

To support faculty teaching SEM 105 a series of structures were created to provide a framework to ensure consistency of the course as part of the comprehensive organizational framework created as part of the design process. For example, any faculty interested in teaching the course must first complete an extensive training, attend an orientation at the start of each semester, and thereafter participate and attend the meetings scheduled by campus coordinators during the semester.

Prior to teaching the course, all faculty must complete an extensive training (approximately 10 hours) that introduces potential instructors to the background of the course, the supporting research, and the structure and focus of the course and associated structures (Appendix F). The training was created by Professor Sara Conroy (with contributions by Dr. Kelli Maxwell and myself) and is part of the intentional effort to develop a comprehensive approach to the first year experience course.

Any faculty who expresses interest in teaching the course is required to successfully complete the training course to ensure that they are familiar with the intent of the course. The

training therefore focuses on providing an introduction to the course and the expectations for all faculty teaching as well as resources for use once the training is complete.

Central to the training is an exploration of the purpose of a first year experience course, the role of faculty, and expectations for the course and instructors is completed. Thereafter a discussion of course design, developing a syllabus, and assessment is provided. Finally, best practices for teaching SEM 105 are covered and resources are provided for use when teaching the course.

To successfully complete the training, each faculty member must complete the various modules and demonstrate competency on the topics via mini quizzes at the end of each module. Once the modules are successfully completed, a series of acknowledgements must be reviewed and completed demonstrating a commitment to the principles of the overall course design.

Once a faculty member successfully completes the training, they are then provided access to a faculty site housed in the CCAC LMS (Blackboard) where they will continue to have access to a Faculty Guidebook that is part of the initial training (Appendix F). The Faculty Guidebook is designed to provide faculty teaching the course with a consistent resource that they can refer to while teaching the course. In addition, the faculty Blackboard site provides a robust array of resources that will be accessible for all teaching faculty. The site also serves as a point of contact where all faculty teaching the course can interact and collaborate. We also envision that the site will provide an opportunity to share and develop best practices to continue to work to improve the course as it continues to evolve over time to try to best meet the needs of our students.

Beyond the faculty Blackboard site, all teaching faculty are provided access to a "plug and play" LMS site created in Blackboard that can be copied and used when teaching the course (Appendix G). The site provides access to teaching resources, suggested assignments, and the core

assignments (the Career, Academic, and Resource plan) as well as a variety of course materials (Powerpoints, videos, institutional resources) that can be used as provided or with modification.

The creation of the sites in Blackboard, the faculty training requirements and Faculty Guidebook, the Library Guide, and coordinator positions all reflect the effort to construct a comprehensive, systematic, and intentional organization to support faculty to in turn support students completing SEM 105. Rather than just developing a typical first year experience course, the workgroup intentionally built a multi-faceted organization alignment with the goal of creating a "model of institutional action" that fosters student success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p.5).

5.5 Implications for Practice

The study results hold implications for my place of practice in a variety of important ways. As a community college, the mission of the institution is to provide both access and opportunity for those who wish to advance their education. While we certainly fulfill the provision of access, there remains room for improvement to also provide opportunities. That is, with an attrition rate of 45% from fall to fall for newly enrolled students, we are enrolling students into programs and courses but not retaining them.

It is worth mentioning that such numbers do require some qualification in regard to the concept of "completion." Significantly, as an institution of higher education, we provide for a variety of opportunities for students including academic programs, trade based programs, and workforce development. Among our students, 58% of students are enrolled to achieve credits for transfer something that must be accounted for when evaluating retention and completion rates (CCAC, At A Glance, 2020). Students who enroll for transfer purposes often do not reach

completion of a particular program something that is not fully accounted for when considering completion rates. That said, the fact remains that students who are enrolled are not being retained and attrition rates remain significant by any measure.

As an institution, it is therefore critical that we continue to strive to meet the needs of all students and provide the greatest possible opportunity for success for all enrolled students. Part of doing so requires a commitment to the process of building and refining SEM 105 for the long term to allow us to fully meet our strategic goal to "become a global learning community that stands on the pillars of proactive, intentional access, inclusion, diversity, social justice and respect, to positively impact the vitality of the region" (CCAC, Strategic Plan, 2020).

To date, the commitment of the institution is demonstrated in the scope of effort that is embodied in the design, development, and now expansion of SEM 105. The fact that that college has engaged in a three year process of design and development to create not just a first year experience course but a comprehensive structure that includes faculty training and support, embedded and continuing student support, via a systematic, intentional, alignment demonstrates the level of dedication to supporting student success. Given the results of this study, it will be necessary for that commitment to continue to allow for the continued revision of the course and associated structures to strive to meet the needs of students at the college. Students at CCAC, as the literature reflects, have needs unique to the particular environment of CCAC (Hatch et al, 2018; Hatch & Bohlig, 2015; Laverick, 2018; Reynolds, et al, 2019).

That is, while advances were achieved with the initial offering of SEM 105, there remains additional work to be completed to continue to refine the course to best meet the needs of students enrolled at CCAC. The design of the course and associated structures represent a solid foundation

to continue to build upon to begin to encourage systemic changes to work towards the realization of increasing student retention.

Notably, while the data analysis demonstrates that the goal of increasing student perceptions of feeling prepared, empowered, and supported were not significantly impacted in the initial offering of the course, the study results demonstrate how complicated it is to achieve discernable gains. In fact, advances were achieved as students demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of the system once they completed the course.

Such an increase, in itself, certainly represents a positive achievement for students who appear to have gained a different level of understanding of the college environment than what they had when they first entered the course. Rather than being more confident, it can be surmised that students who completed the course felt more informed about the complexities of the college environment. Having a more sophisticated, perhaps even more realistic, understanding of the college environment signifies a positive change that likely will better enable students to navigate the college environment as they continue forward in courses and programs. By learning more about the institution, systems, structures, expectations, and the variety of layers that reflect the characteristics of a college environment, students are better able to navigate through the system rather than feeling overwhelmed.

To continue to build upon such gains, it will be important that there is a continued willingness and commitment to continue to build upon and expand the foundations of SEM 105. To make such a commitment reflects the effort to create an environment that is tailored to the needs of our study body is essential to achieve the strategic goals of our college and create an environment of student success. As part of doing so, additional attention will be needed to continue to assess the existing array of supports and resources and to consider how to innovate them to

create a network system wide that supports students from admission to completion that meets the specific needs of our student body.

Accordingly, it is my hope that SEM 105 represents the beginning, not the end, of a larger and continual process of innovation and change, to ensure that we meet the twenty-first century, and beyond, needs of our student body. To create meaningful change will require a long term commitment to provide students with a truly comprehensive structure of support that is necessary to prepare, empower, and support students to thrive in the community college environment and thereafter in the larger community.

Appendix A Approved Common Course Outline

SEM 105 - College Seminar

Credits: 2

Description

In this course, students explore academic strategies, culture, resources and expectations. Topics include career planning and graduation requirements. Students discover and use current college tools and services as the foundation for creating individualized academic, career and resource plans.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, the student will:

1. Apply independent learning strategies required for success in academic courses at the college level.
2. Describe the major characteristics of college culture, expectations, and procedures.
3. Utilize effective communication skills in order to interact respectfully and productively in a diverse learning environment.
4. Identify interests and resources related to career options through the development of a career plan.
5. Demonstrate knowledge of academic terminology and timing through the development of an academic plan.
6. Apply problem-solving strategies to manage issues that impact school performance through the creation of a resource plan.
7. Demonstrate information literacy using appropriate technological tools and resources necessary for academic success.

Listed Topics

1. College classroom expectations
2. Academic terminology
3. Policies and procedures as outlined in the CCAC Student Handbook
4. Communication in a diverse setting
5. Awareness of cultural differences
6. Alignment of career interests to academic programs
7. Career exploration and online tools
8. Transfer programs and articulation agreements
9. Program requirements
10. Financial literacy
11. Time management
12. Study strategies
13. Active learning techniques
14. Goal-setting
15. Student development resources (career services, advising & registration, financial aid, transfer & personal counseling, supportive services, campus cupboard, etc.)
16. Document sharing
17. Blackboard and MyCCAC portal
18. Academic email use and etiquette

Students who successfully complete this course acquire general knowledge, skills and abilities that align with CCAC's definition of an educated person. Specifically, this course fulfills these General Education Goals:

- Communication
- Technological Competence

Approved By: Dr. Quintin B. Bullock **Date Approved:** 09/26/2019

Appendix B Confidence Survey

Place an X in the corresponding box that best describes your level of confidence.

Question	Not at all confident	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Moderately confident	Very confident
How confident are you that you are prepared for college level coursework?					
How confident are you that you have all of the information you need to be successful in your program of study?					
How confident are you that you know what resources exist within the college to assist you if you need additional help with your courses?					
How confident are you that you can locate the resources you need if you have questions or issues?					
How confident are you that you have the supports necessary to help you to be successful in your program of study?					
How confident are you that you know who to reach out to if you have questions about your course?					
How confident are you that you will successfully complete all of the courses you are enrolled in?					
How confident are you that you will successfully complete your program of study?					
How confident are you that you can get support and help if you need assistance?					
How confident are you that you will use the support and resources available if you need to?					

Appendix C Focus Group Question Protocol

SEM 105 Focus Group Questions

Questions:

Thank you for taking time today to chat with me and to answer a few questions. I would like to hear your thoughts on your experiences in completing Seminar 105. I am also interested to hear about your thoughts on any suggestions or recommendations you might have for this course in the future.

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. You can stop participating at any time or skip any questions. I will be jotting some notes as we speak. I will keep the notes and any transcripts confidential. In fact, all data received from you will be given an ID#. All stored data will have this number on it and not have your name or any individual. I will not associate the information you provide with your name, but it may be possible for someone to think they can identify you.

Given these conditions, do you agree to participate in today's interview? [If YES, continue. If NO, stop and thank them for their time.] I would like to audio-record the conversations to check the accuracy of my notes. Do you agree to this? [If participants agreed to have the focus group recorded, start recording. If not, prepare to take detailed notes.]

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. To begin our discussion, I would like to ask you to think about your experiences in Seminar 105. In particular, would you please reflect on how prepared you felt the first day of class for the upcoming semester?
   - Probe: For Seminar 105?
   - Probe: For your other classes and the semester as a whole?
   - Probe: What were your expectations for this course? The semester?
   - Probe: Do you feel that you were supported as you completed the class? Your classes?

2. Let's now turn our attention to the role that institutional supports or resources play in helping you to be successful here at CCAC. Please describe the institutional resources that you are familiar with here at the college.
   - Probe: Have you used any of the resources you mentioned?
   - Probe: If so, do you believe you did so because of the information in this course?
   - Probe: If not, can you talk about why you have not used such resources?

3. As a student in Seminar 105 would you please reflect on your overall feelings about being part of the class. In particular, would you share your feelings on your sense of belonging in the class?

- Probe: What are some of the ways that felt like you were connected to your peers in Seminar 105?
- Probe: What are some of the ways that you feel like you are connected to the college community overall?
- Probe: (based on the demographic sheet) Thinking about the questions you just answered, do you feel like your identity played any role in your overall experience in the class?

4. Finally, what suggestions or recommendations do you have for Seminar 105?

Demographic Questions:
1. What is gender?
2. What is your race/ethnicity?
3. What is your country of birth?
4. What is the highest level of education of your parents?
5. What language are you most comfortable speaking?

Appendix D Library Guide

Appendix D.1.1 Student Landing Page

College Seminar - Student Resources
Community College of Allegheny County

Resources for Students

Academic Email Use and Etiquette

Academic Terminology

Active Learning Techniques

Alignment of Career Interests to Academic Programs

Awareness of Cultural Differences

Blackboard and MyCCAC

Career Exploration and Online Tools

College Classroom Expectations

Financial Literacy

Information Literacy

Policies & Procedures

Program Requirements

Student Development Resources

Study Strategies

Time Management

Transfer Programs and Articulation Agreements

About

CCAC

COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY

FOUNDED 1966
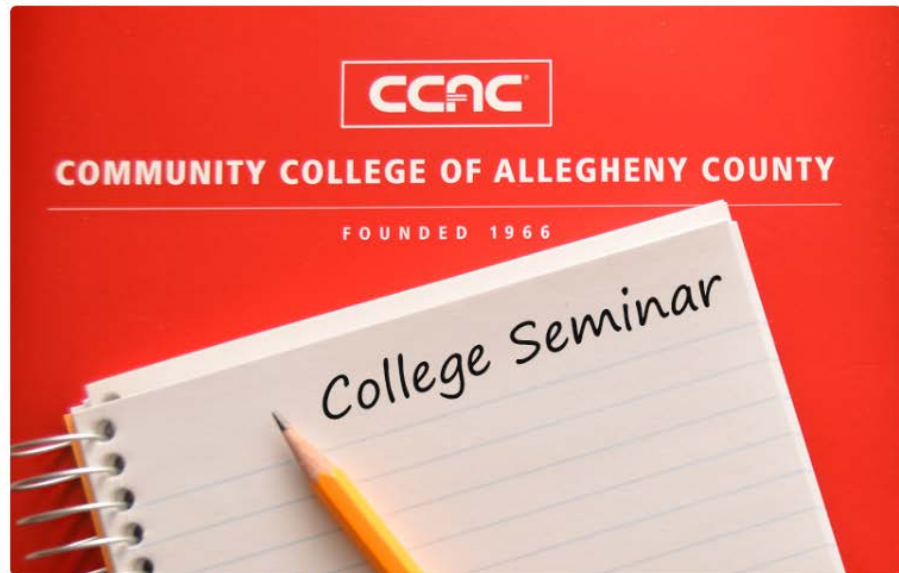
College Seminar

This site includes resources for SEM-105 students.

Appendix D.1.2 General Landing Page

Appendix D.1.3 Weekly Semester Timeline

Appendix D.1.4 Faculty Resources

College Seminar
Teaching Resources

This site includes resources for SEM-105 instructors. The links on left side of the page are based on the list of SEM-105 topics and include **Quick Links** to helpful tools and **Classroom Resources** to help instructors teach course.
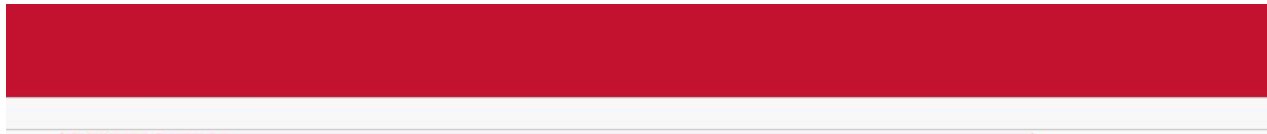
Navigation menu:
- College Seminar
- Semester Timeline
- Faculty Resources
- Student Resources
- Suggest a Resource

Sidebar (Resources for Faculty):
- Resources for Faculty
- OER Textbooks
- Academic Email Use and Etiquette
- Academic Terminology
- Active Learning Techniques
- Alignment of Career Interests to Academic Programs
- Awareness of Cultural Differences
- Blackboard and MyCCAC
- Career Exploration and Online Tools
- College Classroom Expectations
- Communication in a Diverse Setting
- Document Sharing
- Goal-Setting
- Growth Mindset
- Financial Literacy
- Information Literacy
- Policies & Procedures
- Program Requirements
- Student Development Resources
- Study Strategies
- Time Management
- Transfer Programs and Articulation Agreements

Last Updated: Jun 15, 2020 1:00 PM | **URL:** https://libguides.ccac.edu/seminar-faculty | Print Page

Login to LibApps

Appendix E Coordinator Job Postings

Appendix E.1.1 College-wide Coordinator

The college-wide coordinator will be responsible for consistency across the college of SEM105. This coordinator will also be responsible for assessment, program review, training of new faculty, and keeping faculty resources updated.

College Coordinator Job Posting

Position Title: College Seminar (SEM 105) College Coordinator (Non Teaching Assignment)

Department: Academics

Campus: College Wide

Additional Information: **POSTING IS AVAILABLE TO ALL APPLICANTS, HOWEVER PER AFT CONTRACT ARTICLE XXVI COMPENSATION AND FRINGE BENEFITS C. 2, INTERNAL AFT WILL HAVE PRIORITY FOR NON-TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS** One position is available for a SEM105 Campus Coordinator.

Compensation: Course load Reduction/Overage of 2 credits per semester (Work equivalent to XX hours per week/XX hours per semester) Length of Assignment: Fall 2019 through Summer 2020

Job Category: Non-Teaching Assignments

Employment Type: Non-Teaching Assignment Part-Time

Job Slot: N/A

Job Open Date: XXXX

Job Close Date: XXXXX

General Summary: The SEM 105 College Coordinator provides coordination for the scheduling, staffing, assessment, and administration of SEM 105 on their home campus and also provides oversight for all SEM 105 coordinators to ensure consistency of the student experience across the college.

1. Provide oversight to SEM 105 campus coordinators to ensure consistency of the student experience across the college

2. Schedule and chair meetings with the SEM 105 campus coordinators at least twice per semester

3. Coordinate and update course resources for instructors and students

4. Coordinate, implement, and lead the training of SEM 105 instructors across the college prior to the start of every semester

5. Collect annual assessment data from SEM 105 campus coordinators and submit a report annually to the Provost's Office

6. Complete the program review process according to the timing of the program review cycle

7. Maintain a log of dates and start and end times and activities related to this position and submit it to the Provost's Office at the end of the year

Clearances: Current criminal record/child abuse clearances will be required if offered the position and in order to be employed at the College. The three clearances are Pennsylvania Child Abuse History Clearance, Pennsylvania State Police Criminal Records Check, and Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Criminal Background Check. The College has provided instructions on how to obtain these clearances and are available here or by going to http://www.ccac.edu/hr, selecting "HR Forms and Documents" from the left menu and locating the link

Appendix E.1.2 Campus Coordinator

Position Title: College Seminar (SEM 105) Coordinator (Non Teaching Assignment)

Department: Academics

Campus: College Wide

Additional Information: **POSTING IS AVAILABLE TO ALL APPLICANTS, HOWEVER PER AFT CONTRACT ARTICLE XXVI COMPENSATION AND FRINGE BENEFITS C. 2, INTERNAL AFT WILL HAVE PRIORITY FOR NON-TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS** One position is available at each campus.

Compensation: Course load Reduction/Overage of 3 credits per semester (Work equivalent to XX hours per week/XX hours per semester) Length of Assignment: Fall 2019 through Summer 2020

Job Category: Non-Teaching Assignments

Employment Type: Non-Teaching Assignment Part-Time

Job Slot: N/A

Job Open Date: XXXX

Job Close Date: XXXXX

General Summary: The SEM 105 Campus Coordinator provides coordination for the scheduling, staffing, assessment, and administration of SEM 105

Job Duties:

1. Assist the department head in scheduling SEM 105 on the campus and associated centers as per the schedule building timeline

2. Assist the department head with interviewing and staffing SEM105 sections on campus and associated centers

3. Work with SEM 105 instructors on the campus and associated centers to ensure consistency of the student experience across course sections

4. Schedule and chair campus meetings at least twice per semester with SEM 105 instructors on campus and associated centers

5. Attend meetings with the SEM 105 campus and college coordinators at least twice per semester

6. Actively participate in the training of SEM 105 instructors across the college prior to the start of every semester

7. Ensure the implementation of assessment instruments across SEM105 sections on campus and associated centers and submit to SEM 105 College Coordinator

8. Actively contribute to the program review process according to the timing of the program review cycle

9. Assist in meeting the needs of students by scheduling and publicizing two hours of drop in assistance on campus per week for students in SEM 105 sections

10. Maintain a log of dates and start and end times and activities related to this position and submit it to the Provost's Office at the end of the year

Clearances: Current criminal record/child abuse clearances will be required if offered the position and in order to be employed at the College. The three clearances are Pennsylvania Child Abuse History Clearance, Pennsylvania State Police Criminal Records Check, and Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Criminal Background Check. The College has provided instructions on how to obtain these clearances and are available here or by going to http://www.ccac.edu/hr, selecting "HR Forms and Documents" from the left menu and locating the link named "CCAC Instructions on Clearances.

Appendix F Faculty Training

Appendix F.1.1 Faculty Training Landing Page
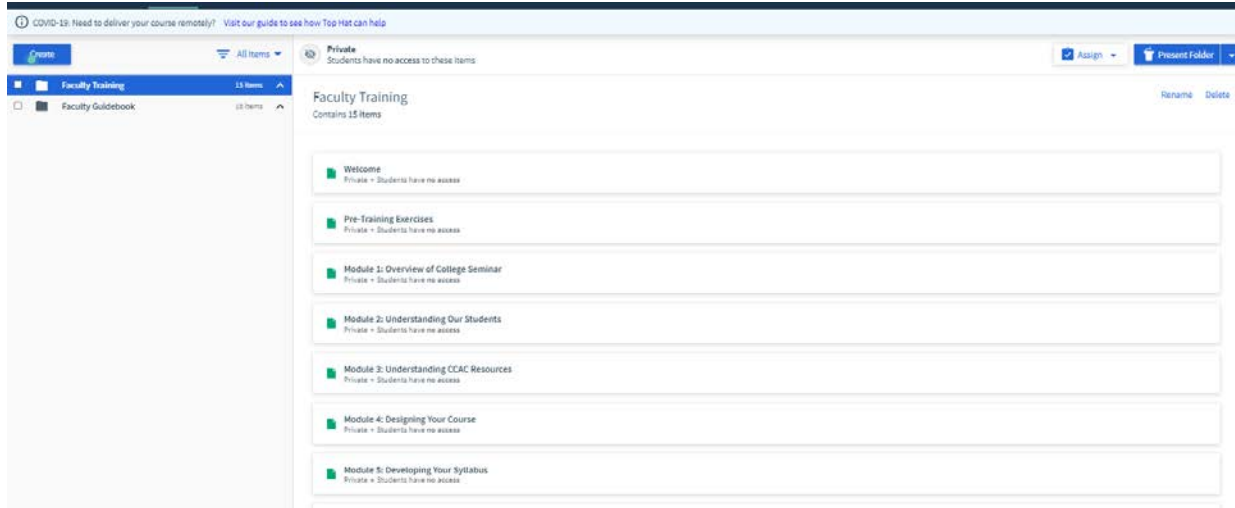
Appendix F.1.2 Faculty Training Guide
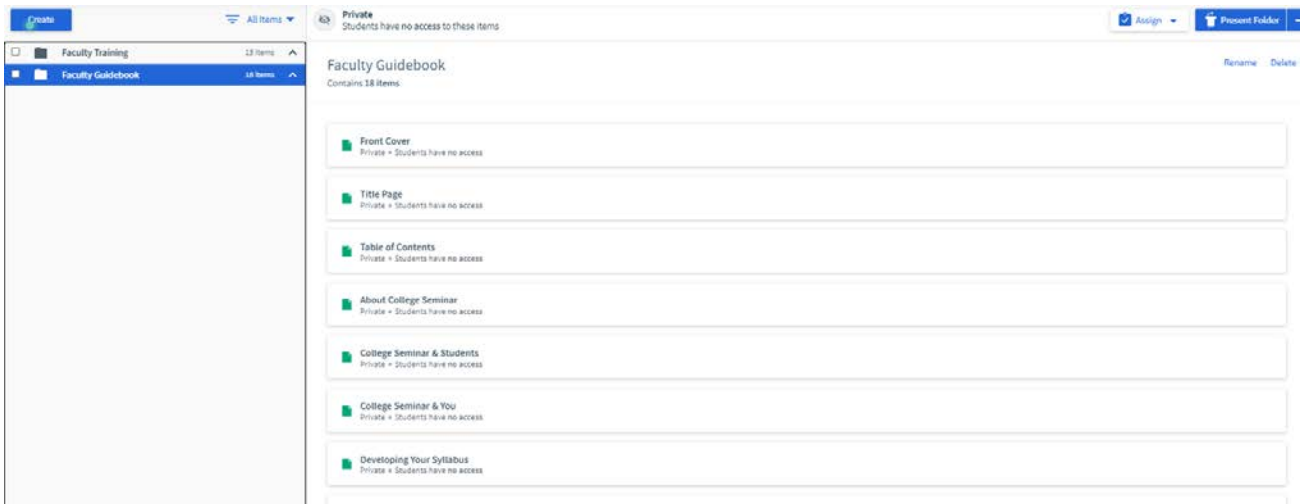
Appendix G "Plug and Play" Faculty Site

Appendix H IRB Approval CCAC

14 April 2020
Laurie Sprankle
1750 Clairton RD
West Mifflin, PA 15222
lsprankle@ccac.edu

RE: Title of Project:

The primary purpose of this correspondence is to inform you that your application submitted to the Community College of Allegheny's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was evaluated in accordance with Federal regulations that govern the ethical and responsible conduct of human subjects in research.

The IRB has determined that your study employs survey that pose no more than minimal risks to the participants and therefore it is approved under the exempt category from further IRB review (45 CFR 46.104) for a period of one year from the date of approval. If your data collection activities extend beyond July 2, 2020, you must resubmit another protocol for review by the IRB. Your protocol approval reference code is CCIRB240120SC.

Although your project is exempt from IRB review, your research activities must be conducted in accordance with the specified methodology identified in your protocol to the CCAC IRB. If you make any change to the approved protocol, you must submit a Request for Modification to your prior submitted and approved protocol.

Please note that the principal purpose of the IRB is to significantly minimize all risks associated with engagement of human beings in research. It is your ethical responsibility to ensure that all human participants in your project are respectfully protected.

Please reference the approved protocol code in all your correspondence pertaining to your research project. If you need additional pieces of information, please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience.

Respectfully,
Jeffrey A. Langstraat (electronic signature)
Jeffrey Langstraat, Ph.D.
Chairperson, CCAC IRB
Email: jlangstraat@ccac.edu
Voice: (412) 237-2638
cc: Kevin Smay, IRB Co-Chair

University of Pittsburgh
Institutional Review Board

APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION (Exempt)

Date:	April 27, 2020
IRB:	STUDY19070149
PI:	Laurie Sprankle
Title:	Supporting Student Success
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None

The Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above referenced study. The study may begin as outlined in the University of Pittsburgh approved application and documents.

Approval Documentation

Review type:	Initial Study
Approval Date:	4/27/2020
Exempt Category:	(4) Secondary research on data or specimens (no consent required)
Determinations:	None
Approved Documents:	• Secondary Data Form , Category: IRB Protocol; • SEM 105 Confidence Survey , Category: Data Collection; • SEM 105 Focus Group Questions, Category: Data Collection; • Sprankle IRB Approval CCAC, Category: External Site Permission Letter

As the Principal Investigator, you are responsible for the conduct of the research and to ensure accurate documentation, protocol compliance, reporting of possibly study-related adverse events and unanticipated problems involving risk to participants or others. The HRPO Reportable Events policy, Chapter 17, is available at http://www.hrpo.pitt.edu/.

Clinical research being conducted in an UPMC facility cannot begin until fiscal approval is received from the UPMC Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Support (OSPARS).

If you have any questions, please contact the University of Pittsburgh IRB Coordinator, Dana DiVirgilio.

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