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## Social Integration and Student Proactivity: Precursors to Improved Academic Outcomes in a First-Year Experience Basic Communication Course

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*Research Article*

# **Social Integration and Student Proactivity: Precursors to Improved Academic Outcomes in a First-Year Experience Basic Communication Course**

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## **Abstract**

*Based on interactionist theory, we longitudinally examined first-year experience basic communication courses for students' social integration and academic outcomes. Participants completed measures of proactivity, instructor rapport, classroom connectedness, participation, self-regulated and peer learning, and likelihood to persist in college. Results reveal that students' perceptions of proactivity, instructor rapport, and peer connectedness all increased over the course of a semester. Instructor rapport predicted self-regulated learning, participation, and likelihood to persist. Connectedness predicted participation. Student proactivity predicted likelihood to persist. Generally, results suggest social integration (i.e., rapport and connectedness) and proactivity are important to student success.*

*Keywords basic communication course, interactionist theory, personal proactivity, instructor rapport, classroom connectedness, self-regulated and peer learning, college persistence*

Bean (2005) said that social and academic factors are the primary components of a students' likelihood to persist in college. Social factors include feeling connected with peers and with instructors (Milem & Berger, 1997), and lead to perceptions of affiliation within the campus community (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008). It is important these connections are created early in a student's college experience. One way in which this may occur early is in the basic communication course (BCC). The BCC is included in many general education programs in the U.S. (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). In fact, Beebe (2013) claimed that the course is taught to over 1.3 million college students each year. Given this significant impact, the BCC is an important point of entry for students, but also an important point of intervention to assist first-year students in making academic and social connections in the campus community, and to increase persistence, retention, and even graduation rates. Valenzano, Wallace, and Morreale (2014) stated that the basic communication course "must be tended to with care, so we can continue to serve the needs of our students, colleagues, and communities, well into the next century" (p. 363).

Basic college courses, such as the BCC, are often included in the first-year experience (FYE) or learning communities for first-year students. Goodman and Pascarella (2006) called FYE courses "ubiquitous" and as being united in a common goal of increasing academic success and persistence (p. 26). FYE courses produce positive results for students ranging from greater engagement and satisfaction to persistence from first year to second year and degree attainment (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Pittendrigh, Borkowski, Swinford, & Plumb, 2016; Porter & Swing, 2006). Further, students in FYE courses seem to improve social and communicative opportunities with both faculty and peers (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). These results are even more pronounced for at-risk students (Pittendrigh et al., 2016). However, in a critique of FYE research, Goodman and Pascarella (2006) argued that more longitudinal and causal research was needed. In the instructional communication realm, scholars have continuously called for more research on the importance of the basic course (Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Morreale, Valenzano, & Bauer, 2017; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017; Sellnow & Martin, 2010). Therefore, this study addresses each of these calls for additional research. Specifically, we examined longitudinal data in a 1-credit hour BCC that was designed as a FYE.

### **Interactionalist Theory in the Basic Course**

Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory emerged out of a theoretical synthesis of research on student persistence. In an effort to better understand and further the breadth of research considering factors affecting college students dropping out, Tinto offered a model to understand students' individual and varying backgrounds. These backgrounds (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status) give rise to varying types, and levels, of commitments to goals in higher education. Tinto argued initial commitment upon entry to college was associated with students' positive or negative experiences in academic and social integration. Successful integrations generally increased commitment while failed integrations generally decreased commitment (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Tinto, 1975). Based on a review of the retention literature, Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory outlines academic and social integration as predictors of student persistence. Academic integration includes identifying with a major, study habits, grades, preparedness, and attitudes toward learning (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2006). Social integration includes commitment, enjoyment, satisfaction, and personal contact with students and with faculty. Relevant to this study, however, are the social factors which are considered a key component of student success (Allen et al., 2006; Tinto, 1975).

Braxton et al. (2008) stated instructors were critical in creating feelings of social integration for students. Students who get "face time" with faculty and peers and were engaged with faculty reported that their college education was enriched (Allen et al., 2006; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Students' in-class interaction with instructors is positively associated with students' affective learning, motivation, and grades (Frymier, 2005). Goldman and Brann (2016) argued the instructor also plays a role in allowing students to develop relationships and social connections with each other. Because the BCC is often dominated by first-year students (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010), and Tinto (1997) positioned the classroom as "the center of educational activity structure of institutions of higher education" (p. 599), Tinto's theory lends a particularly apt frame for examining student integration in the BCC given the instructor's role in socially integrating students and the probable impact on student outcomes (e.g., persistence).

The BCC takes on many forms (e.g., public speaking, hybrid; Morreale et al., 2010). Regardless of the form it takes, it introduces students to the communication major, communication faculty, and communication skills (Darling, 2010; Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). These courses are typically smaller (enrollment caps at

36 students or less), allow for students to have greater interaction with faculty and peers, and are typically skills based (i.e., speeches and written assignments rather than exams) to help prepare students academically and professionally (Morreale et al., 2016). Engleberg (2016) identified core communication competencies for BCC students including self-presentation and monitoring, adapting to others, effective listening, and expressing messages, all of which are skills that may provide students with interpersonal competencies to better socially integrate on campus. Thus, using Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory as a framework for FYE students enrolled in a 1-hour BCC, we investigated the effects of students' proactivity (i.e., academic) and instructor rapport and student-to-student connectedness (i.e., social) as critical factors in understanding student outcomes.

### **Student Proactivity**

Proactive personality refers to an individual's tendency to take initiative in life (Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, & Shalhoop, 2006). Proactive personality centers on the idea that the context is determined by both the person influencing the situation and the situation influencing the person (Bowers, 1973). Proactive personality can be defined as a "relatively stable tendency to effective environmental change" (Batemen & Crant, 1993, p. 104). Proactive individuals are not passively constrained by situational forces but instead adaptively respond to their environments, and previous research indicates proactive personality is a significant predictor of career success (Brown et al., 2006). Crant (2000) stated that "proactive people identify opportunities and act on them, show initiative, and persevere until meaningful change occurs" (p. 439). Hence, proactivity is the degree to which individuals prepare themselves for future events. Proactivity is an important consideration in higher education because students' academic success is, in part, dependent on their own initiative (Kirby, Kirby, & Lewis, 2002).

Proactivity aligns with the academic integration side of interactionist theory. For example, Bakker, Tims, and Derks (2012) reported that proactive employees are more likely to ask for help and feedback from peers, proactively ask for autonomy, and follow employment training. Similarly, Tinto (1997) stated that greater involvement in the life of the college leads to greater acquisition of knowledge and skills. Kickul and Kickul (2006) stated proactive students are goal-oriented, have positive feelings toward a class, an internal locus of control, high self-esteem, and a sense of importance in a class. Endo and Harpel (1982) found students who reported

involvement with their instructors also demonstrated higher levels of learning gain. Milem and Berger (1997) advocated early for involvement with faculty since it has a positive influence on student persistence.

### **Instructor Rapport**

Rapport is a perception about a relationship with the instructor; positive rapport is characterized as trusting, enjoyable, connected, and mutual (Frisby & Martin, 2010) and can be developed very early in the classroom (Lammers, Gillaspay, & Hancock, 2017). As teaching is an inherently rapport-intensive profession (Jorgenson, 1992), it has been related to a host of positive student outcomes including motivation, affect, participation, out of class communication, decreased apprehension, student use of campus resources, and multiple indicators of both perceived and actual cognitive learning (see Frisby & Buckner, 2017 for a review).

Reason, Terezini, and Domingo (2006) argued that rapport with students should ideally begin during a student's first year at college. Indeed, building rapport early can influence students' academic outcomes later in their collegiate career. Rapport can also influence the overall classroom climate helping to build connectedness between students (Frisby & Martin, 2010). These social interactions with both the rapport building instructor and the peers can lead to feelings of social integration and affect students in the short term. However, other outcomes, such as self-regulated learning, peer learning, and likelihood to persist, have been overlooked in rapport research (Frisby & Buckner, 2017). Yet, the potential for rapport having long-term effects for students is strong. For example, Carson (1996) found that even after 30 years, alumni reported a caring relationship with an instructor as critical to their success.

### **Connected Classroom Climate**

A connected classroom climate reflects "student-to-student perceptions of a supportive and cooperative communication environment in the classroom" (Dwyer et al., 2004, p. 267). Student connectedness represents the relational interactions; connected students express themselves freely and openly in nonjudgmental ways that allow strong bonds to exist in the connected classroom. These connected interactions include students praising one another, sharing personal stories, and engaging in general small talk (Dwyer et al., 2004). The classroom can be viewed as a community setting where teaching and learning not only occurs between the instructor and students but also among students (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002).

A connected classroom climate is positively associated with students' affective learning (Johnson, 2009), cognitive learning (Prisbell, Dwyer, Carlson, Bingham, & Cruz, 2009), and self-regulated learning (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Students who connect with a peer are more comfortable asking questions (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010) and seek help from their instructors and classmates outside of class (Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullen, & Nyeste, 2015). In addition, connected students participate more (Frisby & Martin, 2010), text less (Johnson, 2013), engage in civil behaviors (Myers et al., 2016), and feel more comfortable presenting in public speaking courses (Sidelinger, Myers, & McMullen, 2011). Indeed, establishing relationships with peers may act as a form of social integration, and consequently, precursor to student success.

### **Student Outcomes**

**Participation.** Weaver and Qi (2005) wrote, “students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not” (p. 570). Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) referred to students speaking in class by asking and answering questions, making comments, and participating in discussions as class participation. Petress (2006) offered an operational definition of class participation, stating, “optimum class management and effectiveness depends on students being actively engaged, supportive of each other, and civil in their exchanges” (p. 821). Class participation can come in many forms, and Wade (1994) stated that an ideal class discussion happens when almost all students are engaged and interested, learning, and listening attentively to their peer’s comments and suggestions. Students who perceived their instructors and peers as friendly, supportive, responsive, and approachable also reported more in-class participation (Fassinger, 1995, 1997, 2000).

**Self-regulated and peer learning.** Self-regulated and peer learning centers on behaviors and activities that students engage in that indicate learning (Pintrich & Garcia, 1991). Self-regulated learning represents active involvement in one’s own learning outside of the classroom (McCombs & Marzano, 1990). Students who are self-regulated learners can be viewed as involved participants who effectively control their own learning experiences and environments in a variety of ways (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Self-regulated learners are likely to organize and rehearse information to be learned, have positive perceptions about their learning capabilities, and value learning. For example, Schmeichel and Baumeister (2010) reported a positive association between students’ self-regulated learning and cognitive learning.

In addition, Wei, Wang, and Klausner (2012) found self-regulated learners are more likely to attend to class material and less likely to text during class. Overall, self-regulated learning is a proactive, self-initiated action that requires learners to set goals, monitor themselves and their environments, and manage social interactions (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). As noted previously, students who engage in self-regulated learning likely have high commitment to their goals and/or college. Interactionist theory holds that integration through positive experiences of social (or academic) interaction is one of the primary ways that such commitments are increased and renewed.

Peer learning is part of out-of-class involvement and includes working with fellow students to complete assignments or study for exams. Zimmerman (1994) included students' ability to seek academic support and help on campus in the framework of academic self-regulation. Zimmerman stated seeking support and help includes asking peers for assistance with a learning task. Ackermann and Morrow (2007) found positive associations between seeking support from institutional resources (e.g., joining a study group) and students' perceptions of coping with college, developing a sense of belonging, and a negative relationship with feelings of isolation on campus. Peer learning enables students to seek assistance from their peers outside of the classroom, which in turn serves as a foundation for autonomous achievement (Karabenick, 1998). Chen (2002) noted that limited research is available on students' use of peer learning, and instructional communication research typically focuses on students' out-of-class communication with instructors.

**Likelihood to persist.** Scholars have examined a variety of factors that contribute to student persistence in college. For example, student demographics, teaching strategies, social integration, academic preparedness, first year programs, learning communities, and general institutional climate have been identified as factors that influence student retention (e.g., Alexander & Gardner, 2009; Bean 2005; Braxton et al., 2008; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Jamelske, 2009; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Pascarella, Seifert, & Whitt, 2008; Tinto, 1987; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Generally, students who are more prepared, socialized into a community on campus, exposed to effective teaching, and attend a university where the norm is to remain in school are more likely to be retained by the university. The first year is recognized not only as an important, and sometimes challenging, transition for college students (Tinto, 1987), but also as most critical in determining persistence (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Specific instructor behaviors are also important for determining student persistence including immediacy, credibility, and enthusiasm (Wheless, Witt,

Maresh, Bryand, & Schrodt, 2011). Wheelless and colleagues also suggested that future research examine other instructor behaviors. As reviewed above, there is some evidence that a FYE can enhance persistence and institutional commitment. This study answers Wheelless et al.'s (2011) call and examines a communication based, rather than general FYE course, as a source of social integration through instructor rapport and peer connectedness. Taken together, interactionist theory (Tinto, 1975) proffers that positive interactions with instructors and peers fosters social integration and that social integration influences student outcomes. Thus, the following hypothesis is posed:

H: Classroom connectedness, rapport, and student proactivity will predict (a) self-regulated learning, (b) peer learning, (c) participation, and (d) intention to persist.

## Method

Myers (2017) urged instructional scholars to adopt more longitudinal survey designs that take place over the course of a semester. This allows researchers to understand changes in perceptions and processes, and that these changes, even when minor, can affect student outcomes. Thus, this study employed longitudinal surveys to understand variation in rapport, proactivity, and connectedness over time, and how the potential changes in these variables might influence student self-regulated and peer learning, participation, and intention to persist.

## Participants and Procedures

Participants were 224 first-year experience (FYE) students ( $n = 120$  women,  $n = 104$  men,  $M_{\text{age}} = 17.94$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) enrolled in 14 sections of 1-credit communication seminar courses at a Midwestern public university. The numerous sections are taught by part-time communication instructors, university student support staff (e.g., advisors), and communication graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). This communication course is a FYE course with a focus on teaching FYE students how successful communication and relationship development can improve their academic and personal success. Topics include understanding human interactions, managing interpersonal conflict, navigating online communication, and major and career exploration. The class format is discussion and activity based, and students are graded on participation, preparation, and listening/cooperation.

FYE students voluntarily participated in a two-part study approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. FYE students completed the instruments in reference to their communication seminar course and instructor during normal class time during the second week (T1) and the twelfth week (T2) of the Fall semester. The attrition rate was 26%; 57 students from T1 did not complete surveys for T2. At T1, participants reported on the sex of their instructors (95 students reported on female instructors, 72 students reported on male instructors) and perceptions of rapport, student-to-student connectedness, and proactivity. For T2, participants completed rapport, student-to-student connectedness, proactivity, class participation, peer learning and self-regulated learning, and student persistence (see Table 1 for Cronbach's alphas, means, and standard deviations for all instruments). Only students who were present (attended both class sessions) for the data collections and completed both surveys were retained for analyses.

**Table 1**  
***Descriptive Statistics for Quantitative Measures***

<b>Variable</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>	<b>Measure <i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
Proactivity (T1)	.88	88.31	12.99
Proactivity (T2)	.92	90.44	14.21
Instructor Rapport (T1)	.93	45.83	13.68
Instructor Rapport (T2)	.96	48.30	17.26
Classroom Connectedness (T1)	.90	45.51	8.82
Classroom Connectedness (T2)	.93	47.85	9.53
Participation (T2)	.91	17.07	5.31
Self-Regulated Learning (T2)	.79	50.94	10.71
Peer Learning (T2)	.82	11.14	5.11
Student Persistence (T2)	.84	16.46	4.00

### **Instrumentation**

**Proactive personality.** Bateman and Crant's (1993) 17-item Proactive Personality Scale assessed participants' level of proactivity. On a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) participants indicated their agreement on 17 items (e.g., "If I see something I don't like, I fix it"). Sidelinger (2010) reported a .91 reliability coefficient for the measure.

**Classroom connectedness.** The abbreviated Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) measured student-to-student connectedness (Johnson, 2009). Students responded to 13 items (e.g., “The students in this class praise one another”) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Johnson reported a .91 reliability coefficient.

**Instructor rapport.** Frisby and Martin’s (2010) version of the rapport scale was used. Students responded to 11 items (e.g., I enjoy interacting with my instructor) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Frisby and Martin reported a .94 reliability coefficient

**Participation.** Following previous research (Frisby & Martin, 2010), participation was measured using five items from Fassinger’s (1995) participation scale. Students responded to five items (e.g., I contribute to class, I volunteer in class) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*often*). Frisby and Martin reported a .92 reliability coefficient.

**Self-regulation.** The 12-item Metacognitive Self-Regulation Questionnaire (MSRQ; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991) is a subscale that assessed students’ out-of-class behaviors on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 7 (*very true of me*) (e.g., “Before I study new course material thoroughly, I often skim it to see how it is organized”). The subscale offered a previous reliability coefficient of .79 (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010).

**Peer learning.** Also, included in Pintrich et al.’s (1991) Motivated Strategies Learning Questionnaire (MLSQ) is the three-item peer-learning subscale. This subscale also assessed students’ out-of-class behaviors on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 7 (*very true of me*) (e.g., “I try to work with other students from this class to complete the course assignments”). The researchers reported that the subscale yielded a reliability coefficient of .76.

**Student persistence.** Institutional Commitment is a subscale of the 53-item College Persistence Questionnaire (Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009). This 4-item subscale assessed students’ likelihood to persist in college (e.g., “How likely is it that you will re-enroll here next semester”) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Davidson et al. (2009) reported the subscale reliability coefficient at .78.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

First, we compared students who only completed T1 surveys to students who completed both T1 and T2 surveys for any potential differences in their T1 surveys that may have influenced their decision to be retained in the class, continue participation in the study, or be absent on the day on which the T2 survey was distributed. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare the two groups on proactivity, connectedness, likelihood to persist, rapport, peer learning, self-regulated learning, and participation. There were no significant differences between the groups on proactivity  $t(219) = -.60, p = .54$ , connectedness  $t(210) = -1.03, p = .30$ , likelihood to persist  $t(219) = .58, p = .36$ , rapport  $t(215) = -.34, p = .72$ , peer learning  $t(217) = -.42, p = .67$ , self-regulated learning  $t(214) = -.27, p = .78$ , or participation  $t(216) = .84, p = .40$ .

Second, prior to testing the hypotheses, we conducted preliminary analyses to examine potential longitudinal changes in proactivity, rapport, and connectedness. Paired-samples *t*-tests showed students reports of personal proactivity, instructor rapport, and student connectedness significantly increased from T1 to T2 (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
***Descriptive Statistics and Pairwise t-test Results for Proactivity, Rapport, and Connectedness***

Variable	Time 1		Time 2		<i>n</i>	95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>r</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
Proactivity	88.65	13.08	90.45	14.21	165	-3.34, -0.24	.73 <sup>^</sup>	-2.28*	164
Rapport	46.02	13.29	48.48	17.25	163	-4.77, -0.14	.54 <sup>^</sup>	-2.09*	162
Connectedness	45.93	8.89	47.80	9.57	157	-3.08, -0.64	.65 <sup>^</sup>	-3.03**	156

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .005$ , <sup>^</sup>  $p < .0001$

### Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses, we first created change scores for the predictor variables where T1 was subtracted from T2 for proactivity, connectedness, and rapport. A negative change score indicates a decrease and a positive change score indicates and increase from T1 to T2. Four separate regressions were used to test each student

outcome (i.e., self-regulated learning, peer learning, participation, and persistence). The first regression tested the outcome of self-regulated learning. The regression was significant,  $F(151) = 2.85, p = .04$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .24$ . The second model, including T2 variables was significant,  $F(151) = 13.70, p < .001$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .03$ . The only significant predictor of self-regulated learning was the change in rapport from T1 to T2 ( $\beta = .19, p = .02$ ).

The second regression tested the outcome variable of peer learning. The regression revealed a nonsignificant model,  $F(152) = 1.53, p = .20$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .01$ .

The third regression tested student participation as an outcome variable. The regression was significant,  $F(152) = 8.92, p < .001$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .13$ . The only significant predictors of participation were changes in connectedness ( $\beta = .27, p = .001$ ) and rapport from T1 to T2 ( $\beta = .18, p = .02$ ).

The final regression tested persistence as an outcome variable. The regression was significant,  $F(152) = 3.93, p = .01$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .05$ . The only significant predictors of persistence were changes in proactivity ( $\beta = .17, p = .03$ ) and rapport from T1 to T2 ( $\beta = .20, p = .01$ ).

## Discussion

This study longitudinally examined a FYE BCC experience for students as a potential source of social integration to understand the potential influence on desirable student outcomes. Tinto's theory (1975) offers a useful frame for exploring student integration in various capacities—both in the BCC classroom and its probable resulting effect on what occurs outside of the classroom. Overall, the results of this study indicate that social integration and student proactivity in the classroom facilitate students' communication and academic behaviors both in and out of the classroom.

First, rapport led to self-regulated learning. Extant rapport research has already revealed that students who perceive high rapport with instructors use more out of class resources and that they behave differently in the classroom (e.g., participating more; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Sidlinger, Frisby, & Heisler, 2016). These students likely engage in more self-regulated learning behaviors so that they are more prepared in class to have more positive interactions in this high rapport environment. Further, Frisby and Martin (2010) found that these students had higher affect for their teachers. Students may see better academic performance and self-regulated learning as strategies to elicit reciprocated affect or to show their affect for

the course or instructor. Relatedly, Frisby and Myers (2008) found that these students were more motivated. Students may engage in more self-regulated learning as a result of this motivational factor.

Second, connectedness and rapport led to participation. This is consistent with previous research that also showed connections between both rapport and connectedness and participation (e.g., Frisby & Martin, 2010). This study uniquely accounts for how rapport and connectedness may change and how those increases in rapport and connectedness over time, led students to orally participate more. For example, students comfortably engaging in small talk with one another may develop a sense of social integration in the classroom (Dwyer et al., 2004; Frisby & Martin, 2010). Thus, social integration with both peers and instructors, developed a comfortable environment that allowed students to engage in more academic integration.

Surprisingly, proactiveness did not predict participation. Defined as a personality trait that requires students to take initiative (Brown et al., 2006), it seems that some initiative on the student's part would be required to actively and orally participate in a course. It is possible that the level of student proactiveness does not matter if the instructor does not provide ample opportunity for participation. Another explanation may be proactive students need less participation. Howard and Henney (1998) reported the top reasons for participation in descending order: seeking information or clarification, have something to contribute to class, learning by participating, and overall enjoyment in participation. Proactive students may already perceive themselves as involved participants. These involved participants effectively control their own learning experiences in a variety of ways (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Therefore, proactive students may not need to participate in class to actively engage in learning.

Third, student proactivity and instructor rapport predicted FYE students' likelihood to persist in college. Proactivity may serve as an indicator for college readiness. College readiness represents students' level of preparation to succeed in college (Conaway, 2009). Incoming students who understand their purpose and have clear academic goals may be more apt to persist. In support, Bateman and Crant (1993) stated individuals high in proactivity are likely to take action and persevere until their goals are reached. Proactive individuals take personal initiative and take action in their own environment to effect meaningful change (Brown & O'Donnell, 2011). Previous research has indicated a significant association between students' proactive personality and trait motivation (Sidelinger & Banfield, 2007). Therefore,

one can conclude a highly proactive student will also be highly motivated, and in turn, successfully persist in college. It is likely proactive students seek opportunities to achieve goals that allow them to persist in college.

Likewise, perceptions of instructor rapport facilitated student persistence. This finding is highly consistent with interactionist theory, which posits that students need a strong connection to a faculty member to persist and be successful in higher education (Milem & Berger, 1997). This connection to a faculty member may motivate students to perform better academically (Frisby & Martin, 2010), make use of campus resources to boost their academic and emotional well-being (Sidelinger et al., 2016), or provide a source of emotional support when college transitions are particularly challenging (Titsworth, McKenna, Mazer, & Quinlan, 2013). When students have these resources, both inside and outside of the classroom with a high rapport instructor, then students are more capable of coping with adverse events, especially in the basic course (Hosek, Waldbuesser, Mishne, & Frisby, 2018). Successful coping with these events and during college transitions likely improves persistence.

Fourth, none of the independent variables led to peer learning. This outcome may be based on the nature of the course. The pedagogy of the course is participation focused and includes class discussions, activities, and in-class group assignments. Students participate in discussions, activities, and in-class group assignments designed to increase their understanding of how communication choices enhance academic, personal, and social success. Out-of-class assignments and activities facilitate autonomy and time management. For example, students are required to meet with a faculty member in their major or professional in their field of interest for a one-on-one interview. For the specific FYE BCC studied, exams or quizzes were not part of the students' experience, which may have encouraged peer learning. Peer learning typically occurs when students seek each other out to form study groups or complete out-of-class assignments. BCC instructors who want to facilitate peer learning may need to incorporate out of class group assignments or in-class tests to encourage students to form their own study groups.

Practically, much of what seems to help students (e.g., rapport, connectedness, participation) relies primarily on how an instructor structures the classroom. Does the instructor build rapport with students? Does the instructor provide opportunities for open discussion and participation? Does the instructor allow for peers to connect to each other and to learn from each other? Indeed, Goldman and Brann (2015) found that students perceived instructors as responsible for cultivating an

environment where these social interactions can occur. It is critical for colleges to invest in supportive learning environments that emphasize quality teaching and student connectedness in order to successfully engage students in college education and increase their likelihood to persist.

While social integration was a consistent predictor of student outcomes in this study, proactivity, a student individual difference, was also a predictor. Instructors need to gain insight into students' proactivity as they come into the classroom and facilitate proactivity, which our results suggest is malleable over time. If proactive students are more effective at goal setting and seeing self-goals as compatible with course goals (Kickul & Kickul, 2006), then instructors may be able to help students see explicit connections between their own goals and the course goals by practicing greater teacher relevance (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Consistent with previous research that proactivity can be enhanced over time (Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005), our participants also increased in proactivity. Therefore, instructors may utilize strategies to help students become more proactive. Geertshuis, Jung, and Cooper-Thomas (2014) suggested instructors can promote student proactivity by "allowing students to create or develop their own learning strategies, giving them information on where to seek help, and teaching them the importance of networking" (p. 165).

What is most promising about these results is that this was just a 1-credit hour course. Specifically, social integration and student proactivity improved within weeks, and student outcomes were positively influenced. Thus, providing this opportunity to FYE students is a low cost and low energy tactic to help students with self-regulated learning, peer learning, increasing participation, and improving likelihood to persist compared to a full credit course. This study's outcomes offer important implications for teacher training programs. Yet, in general, there is a lack of formalized teacher training in higher education (Maher & Treteault, 1999), and a lack of pedagogical consistency in BCC (Morreale et al., 2006). Communication programs should consider the potential benefits of required teacher training programs. For example, instructors' use of humor and nonverbal immediacy increases students' perceptions of connectedness in public speaking courses (Sidelinger, Frisby, McMullen, & Heisler, 2012). Therefore, if instructors are appropriately trained to engage in effective relational communication in the classroom, they may foster rapport with their students and further develop student-to-student connectedness in the classroom. Dwyer et al. (2004) stated instructors should gauge the connected classroom climate as a semester progresses to determine if appropriate supportive connections exist among students. As the BCC comes under attack at many

institutions and directors seek responses (e.g., Valenzano, 2018), results like this provide support for positive student outcomes (e.g., engagement, learning, and persistence) resulting from BCCs, which are of concern to most university administrators. Indeed, the results of this study highlight the potential usefulness of teacher training programs and bolsters the argument for additional resources for BCC directors to develop, deliver, and assess these critical teacher trainings.

### **Limitation and Future Directions**

The results of this study offer insights into the importance of a BCC being included as part of the FYE. Specifically, there are several possible implications for social and academic integration on student involvement (i.e. in class participation, out of class self-regulated learning and peer learning) and persistence. At this particular institution, the FYE communication course is offered instead of a traditional BCC. The positive results may help basic course directors to advocate for the need for a BCC. It is possible that a 3-credit hour BCC, instead of a 1-credit hour course, would magnify these effects. Thus, future research on the course could reveal a need for a more traditional BCC at this institution. Likewise, future research should consider the implementation of teacher-training programs and consider the influence of those programs on instructors' teaching and pedagogy while also determining if links exist between teacher training and successful student learning outcomes. Additionally, testing the effects of instructor characteristics (e.g., instructor status – part-time, GTA, full-time) on social integration may prove insightful.

Second, communication programs and BCC directors need to consider the implications of offering the BCC in formats other than the traditional face-to-face classroom. Overall, higher education institutions continue to increase online course offerings (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011), and The National Communication Association (NCA, 2012) reported that over 60% of communication programs offered at least one online course to students. Given the rise in popularity of online courses, and in light of this study's results, scholars and BCC directors must consider the possible lost opportunities for instructor-student and student-student interactions in online courses. Students' in-class interaction involvement is positively associated with students' affective learning, motivation, and grades (Frymier, 2005), and Berjerano (2008) argued online courses offer students lower levels of interaction, which, in turn, lead to reduced academic and social integration. Therefore, little or no face-to-face interactions may harm instructor-student rapport and, consequently,

students' likelihood to connect or persist. Therefore, communication programs and BCC directors who adopt an online format for their courses must allow students the opportunity to connect with instructors and peers. This study did not include online courses but as an extension of our findings, future research should address the possibilities for social integration in online versus face-to-face courses.

Third, although previous research argued that the likelihood to persist is the greatest predictor of actual persistence (Wheless et al., 2011), this study is limited by only assessing likelihood to persist. However, the students completing T2 had already persisted at least until that point in the semester. This begs the question: what happened to the students who completed T1 instrument packets but did not complete T2 instrument packets? As noted, these students may have been absent, may have withdrawn from the study without withdrawing from the class or university, or may have withdrawn from the course or the university altogether. Online surveys may capture these. Additionally, future research may collect data at additional points in the semester to utilize these variables to predict potential dropout closer to the point of decision making for the student or may contact and incentivize students who did not persist to complete a T2 survey.

Fourth, although this study was not experimental, the longitudinal design does allow for more arguments to be made regarding causality (as argued in Myers, 2017). Further research should examine additional variables that might explain these outcomes which were not measured in this study. An experimental design with greater control over extraneous variables would allow for stronger arguments about causality regarding the student outcomes of interest here. Finally, a proactive student personality should continue to be studied in instructional communication and BCC research. For example, how does this relate to student initiative to seek help from instructors, practice speeches, or seek tutoring?

### **Conclusion**

Depending on how well students become academically and socially integrated on the college campus will either bolster or diminish their educational commitment (Tinto, 1975) and likelihood of their persistence in college (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Instructors commonly accept responsibility for academic integration of students, but they should also strive to achieve social integration to facilitate student success. Additionally, instructors need to consider, and facilitate, students' personal proactivity as they come into the classroom. Importantly, the positive effects of social integration with instructor and peers through rapport and connectedness,

along with student proactivity, can be achieved in low cost and low energy ways, and in a low time commitment like a 1-credit hour FYE BCC course.

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