The Importance of the Basic Communication Course in the First-Year Experience: Implications for Retention

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Cover Page Footnote
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Research Article

The Importance of the Basic Communication Course in the First-Year Experience: Implications for Retention

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Abstract

This study examines the basic communication course (BCC) as it relates to students' first academic year at a university. Specifically, we compared students completing both a first-year experience (FYE) course and BCC against students completing only an FYE course. Data was collected over two cohorts of students and after analytical procedures, we found that there is an association between courses taken (both a FYE course and BCC or just a FYE course) and retention at the university. Additionally, the results revealed that the combination of both a FYE course and BCC during the first-year fostered emotional support and classroom connectedness, which previous research suggests improves students' integration into the larger academic community (see Dwyer, Bingham, Carlson, Prisbell, Cruz, & Fus, 2004; Titsworth, McKenna, Mazer, & Quinlan, 2013). Ultimately, this research provides implications for the integral role the BCC plays in the first-year.
Introduction

Today, the basic communication course (BCC) is a well-established fixture in the first-year college curriculum. This foundational course is often the only formal training in communication that students receive during their post-secondary education (Morreale et al., 2010). Despite students' relatively limited exposure to communication studies, organizations continue to emphasize the relationship and importance of the skills taught in the BCC to the workplace (see Hansen & Hansen, 2007; Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Robles, 2012). Morreale and Pearson (2008) argued that communication is critical to students’ future personal and professional success. Today many professional organizations are emphasizing critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and small group communication as essential skills for employability. Emphasizing the importance of communication skills, an article featured by LinkedIn, argues that effective communication is essential for organizational goals, employee morale, and teamwork (Senapati, 2016). Effective communication skills, such as argumentation, extemporaneous speaking, audience analysis, and establishing credibility, among others, are argued by Hooker and Simonds (2015) as core competencies taught in the BCC. Given that a goal of the BCC is to prepare students with effective communication skills, which can help students throughout college and in the workplace, it is essential to strengthen the disciplinary conversations and research about the relationship of the BCC in the first-year experience (FYE)—especially if the BCC is the only communication course students will take during their college career.

Student experiences in foundational courses are intertwined with instructional behaviors that influence the classroom environment. Specifically, the BCC has been identified as a course that increases students’ perceptions of instructor rapport, peer connectedness, teacher credibility, teacher immediacy, and student motivation (Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019; Titsworth et al., 2010). Forwarding possible explanations for the relationship among these instructor behaviors and student learning outcomes in the BCC, Emotional Response Theory (ERT), argues that the relationships among instructor communication and student responses are mediated by the “emotional responses of students to instructor messages” (Horan et al., 2012). Moreover, ERT has established connections between students' emotional responses in the classroom and responses that enhance or hurt student and teacher connections, as well as student learning (Frymier & Houser, 2018). Likewise, classroom connectedness fosters a sense of community and belonging, and the BCC often integrates
opportunities for increased connectedness between and among students. Thus, this study compared BCC and First-year Seminar (FYS) to explore emotional response theory (emotional support and emotion work) and classroom connectedness in relation to student retention. In particular, this study sought to better understand the potential integral role of the BCC during a student’s first college year.

This study presents an analysis of student retention after participating in both FYS and BCC or only the BCC in the students’ first semester. In what follows, we highlight the importance of considering the BCC as an integral course in FYE and present a literature review on FYS, BCC, ERT, and classroom connectedness as they relate to student retention and success. All in all, the current study seeks to contribute to our understanding about the BCC as a worthy course in a student’s FYE.

First-Year Experience

Many colleges and universities have organized an FYE course, which can encompass a myriad of activities, including opportunities for community building through learning communities, service-learning projects, writing across the curriculum, and even communication across the curriculum (Mintz, 2017). According to Purdie and Rosser (2011), many universities have adopted specific FYE courses, be it a seminar on a particular topic of interest, an intensive writing course, and/or course organized around a university theme or initiative (e.g., civic engagement or social justice). Often FYE courses have low course sizes and take a student-centered approach that requires small group interaction in order to meet course objectives (Severiens et al., 2015). These courses are often offered in the fall for students entering the university, and sometimes are part of a sequence to develop a full year FYE program. Research has shown that FYE courses lead to higher student perceptions of fitting in on campus, social connectedness, and enjoyment of the college learning environment (Severiens et al., 2015). In fact, FYE courses were identified as a predictor of student success and as a high impact practice for first-year college experiences within post-secondary education (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Although FYE courses help students transition to college life, there are also academic benefits.

Success in foundational courses can serve as a predictor of future student success. Foraker (2011) examined the relationship between success in various foundational courses and matriculation rates through the university. In this research, Foraker (2011) identified four courses (a first-year experience course, a foundational
English course, and two foundational Communication courses) that served as predictors of student retention from first to second year enrollment. Additionally, Flanders (2015) found that students who completed foundational courses were more likely to persist than other students who did not complete the foundational courses in their first-year. Although academics are only one of many challenges first-year students may experience (Moody, 2019), it seems apparent that student success in their first-year in foundational courses, which teach skills that will be used throughout an academic career and beyond, have a potential influence on retention and matriculation. For the purposes of this study, we compared the BCC with a First-year Seminar (FYS) which focused on introducing students to academic writing (e.g., analytical, reflective, creative). Taken together, these courses, as well as additional foundational courses, help to develop students’ knowledge and academic skills during their first-year.

**Basic Communication Course**

As a foundational communication course, the BCC is identified as one of the courses required for most undergraduate students to graduate (Morreale et al., 2010). Approximately half of all U.S. universities have a BCC with public speaking as the primary content area (Sidelinger et al., 2015). However, within the last decade the BCC has evolved at many universities to also include instruction for other aspects of communication, both theoretical and practical (e.g., critical inquiry, intercultural, interpersonal, or small group communication) (Morreale et al., 2016). The BCC also affords students a myriad of opportunities to learn presentation styles (e.g., Ted Talks, social issue, celebratory, or narrative speeches) and opportunities to enroll in diverse course structures (e.g., face-to-face, online, hybrid, large lecture), which speaks to flexible delivery methods. As a result, students gain skills in giving public presentations, navigating communication interactions with friends and in work-groups, as well as learn how to become critical consumers of information.

The BCC serves to educate students about how both the content and context of messages influence the communicative spaces and interaction. In doing so, the BCC provides an interactive environment for students to learn about their own communication behaviors and apply skills to different communication interactions they may encounter in the future. Given the interactive nature of the BCC and the fact that it necessitates communication between students themselves and between students and instructors, we believe this course is in a unique position in the FYE.
Worley and Worley (2006) asserted that the communication content and competencies taught and learned by students in the BCC are highly compatible with FYE goals. For example, BCC instructors frequently require students to engage in instructional discussion experiences with an explicit reading expectation that encourages higher order learning and deeper probing of the content (Simonds et al., 2015). This type of experience is well-aligned with the goal of FYE courses to prepare students for college level academic learning. In particular, we see this course as positively supporting first-generation or reticent students, helping create a sense of community, and preparing students for success later in college (Ishitani, 2016; Worley & Worley, 2006). Further, it is a course that provides foundational skills students will need to succeed in the college environment and beyond, such as skills like delivery, critical thinking, and argumentation, which can support student learning across their education (see Ruiz-Mesa & Broeckleman-Post, 2018 for discussions about transferable skills in the BCC). Most importantly, we argue that the BCC may enhance the FYE as this course facilitates emotional support through ERT and connections as a part of the larger university community which we believe will have implications for university retention (Sideling & Frisby, 2019; Titsworth et al., 2010). Based on the above literature we forward the following hypothesis:

H1: There will be a significant difference related to retention between students who complete both FYS and BCC as compared students who only complete FYS.

**Emotional Response Theory**

ERT posits the certain communication behaviors undertaken by an instructor can influence student emotions in the classroom (Mottet et al., 2006). Theoretically, this theory argues that the relationships among instructor communication and student responses are mediated by the “emotional responses of students to instructor messages” (Horan et al., 2012, p. 211). The theory further discusses two broad emotional processes that are linked to either positive or negative outcomes: emotional support and emotion work (Mottet et al, 2006). In short, students develop emotional valences towards their instructor, activities, and the classroom environment, which can create positive or negative reactions toward learning (Honeycutt et al., 2008; Mottet et al., 2006). Mottet and Beebe (2002) found positive support that students’ feelings of pleasure were predictive of increased cognitive and
affective learning. If student success in foundational courses is a predictor of retention and matriculation (Foraker, 2011), it is plausible that students’ emotional responses may be a motivator of their behavior and in this way related to their academic goals (e.g., success in a course or graduation). Taken together, we argue students' feelings of emotional support or emotion work with instructors may greatly influence student success, retention, and matriculation at the university. To better explore ERT we outline the two broad emotional processes connected to this theory.

First, emotional support processes are those that foster desirable outcomes, such as decreased emotional stress and feelings of supportiveness (Titsworth et al., 2013). Through communication, emotional support can be conveyed by messages in which students ascribe either a positive or negative assessment of their relationship with the message sender (Titsworth et al., 2013). If a student perceives higher levels of emotion work with an instructor then they may also perceive lower levels of emotional support (Mazer et al., 2014). Within the BCC, students are encouraged to work collaboratively with both peers and instructors. Many instructors make great efforts to assure that the classroom environment within these courses is open, welcoming, and affirming (Sidelinger et al., 2012). Students are often provided space to feel heard through their speeches and their contributions to group discussions are valued through positive affirmation by the instructor. We believe that in developing interpersonal relationships in the BCC, students can learn coping skills, decrease their emotional stress, and gain supportive relationships. Additionally, collaborative problem-solving skills are often a topic of conversation in the BCC which helps students learn how to communicate through complex problems (Beall, 1993). Obviously, these types of skills and interactions serve students in their FYE as they continue their academic journey to reach their goals in college.

Second, emotional work which is broadly defined as masking real or presenting inauthentic emotions, though not necessarily a negative activity, can cause increased stress and lead to negative feelings about a particular person or situation (Titsworth et al., 2014). The obvious example of this would be the “surface level acting” required of a student who is fearful of public speaking, as they attempt to appear enthusiastic about their particular topic (Hochschild, 2012). This inherent cognitive dissonance between the fear of public speaking and desire to do well in the class often leads to some level of emotional distress or emotion work (Bodie, 2010). Although this distress, if maintained at a manageable level, may be a motivating factor, if not properly managed by the instructor could be detrimental emotionally to student performance.
Again, the BCC is uniquely positioned to help students manage and, ultimately, overcome these types of negative emotions in the classroom (Burleson, 2009). Instructors of the BCC can provide tips and training for dealing with fears associated with public communication (e.g., communication apprehension), or with instructing challenging discussions topics (e.g., identity or a current political debate). And through fostering a safe and open environment, instructors can provide a place for students to be themselves and explore ideas that may challenge or complicate their worldviews and understandings about human experiences. We believe it is important to examine ERT in relation to FYS and BCC as these instructors play a pivotal role in not only navigating emotional support to students in their first-year, but in managing negative feelings and anxieties (i.e., communication apprehension, college apprehension) in the classroom, which has implications for retention.

H2: There will be a significant difference in emotional support for students who complete both FYS and BCC compared to students who just complete FYS.

H3: There will be a significant difference in emotional work for students who complete both FYS compared to students who just complete FYS.

H4: There will be a significant difference in emotional support for students who retain at the university.

H5: There will be a significant difference in emotional work for students who retain at the university.

Classroom Connectedness

Classroom connectedness can best be understood as feelings of comfort and confidence with peers in the classroom. Historically, classroom climate research examined the student-instructor relationship in the college classroom; however, student-student relationships also have important influences on student learning outcomes and retention (Dwyer, 2009). Gillen et al. (2011) noted “the most highly rated item on a questionnaire related to the social elements of a classroom was related to individuals choosing who they sit with, highlighting the perceived
importance of social elements such as friendship and support” in the classroom (p. 75). This study also found that the attitude instructors convey towards interactions and their ability to foster “mutual respect” influences how students feel about the importance of their peer relationships in the classroom (Gillen et al., 2011). These findings highlight how emotional support from the instructor has an influence on peer relationships in the classroom, further supporting the importance of peer relationships enhancing the classroom climate and overall first-year experience. Additionally, research has shown student-to-student connectedness can mediate many instructor misbehaviors, such as derisiveness and apathy (Sidelinger et al., 2011). Based on the aforementioned research, it is clear that peer connectedness plays an important role in fostering a supportive classroom framework and climate, but how FYS or a BCC contribute to this and student retention requires further examination.

As such, Dwyer (2009) developed a student-student classroom connectedness scale based on various historically supported constructs (supportive climate, cohesiveness, belongingness, social support, and classroom community). She ultimately defines a connected classroom as “reflecting a strong within-group bond that frees students to express themselves in communication with others” (Dwyer et al., 2009, p. 267). In subsequent studies, student-to-student connectedness has mediated the relationship between interaction in the classroom and student involvement (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Noting this and understanding that one of the goals of the FYE is to foster a sense of community and belonging and that the BCC often integrates opportunities for increased connectedness, it stands to reason that both FYS and BCC should serve as an opportunity for such connections to be made between and among students. By the very nature of the BCC, instructors need to facilitate the making of peer-to-peer connections and articulate the importance of these connections to build a community of respect. Once established, peer-to-peer connections can help students cope with many of the stresses of the classroom (i.e., emotional work) or experience positive collaboration (i.e., emotional support). This classroom connectedness with peers leads to integration within the larger academic community, which as previously mentioned has been correlated with various desirable outcomes.

H₀: There will be a significant difference in classroom connectedness for students who complete both FYS and compared to students who just complete FYS.
H: There will be a significant difference in peer connectedness for students who retain at the university.

Methods

Participants and Target Class

Participants in this study included 671 first-year students enrolled in a FYS course at a private Midwestern university. Data was collected over two years to showcase reliability and to diversify the sample population. Participants included 359 women and 310 men. The average age of participants was 18.27 years ($SD = 0.66$). First generation students accounted for 28% of the population. Additionally, 45% of the students participated in a NCAA athletics. Ethnic makeup of participants is as follows: Caucasian (73.6%), African American (7.9%), Bi-racial/Mixed (6.0%), Latino/Latina (4.8%), Other (4.0%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (2.7%).

Participants were asked to identify which class(es) they were enrolled in their first semester, both FYS and BCC ($n = 372$) or just FYS ($n = 283$). Participants reported an average of 20 students in their respective section of the course ($SD = 4.02$). Approximately 63% ($n = 423$) of students reported having a female instructor while the remainder ($n = 247$) reported having a male instructor. When questioned about classroom operations, more participants reported a discussion-oriented format ($n = 521$) than a lecture-oriented format ($n = 148$), which is typical for a FYE course.

Finally, in support of this research, the university where the research was collected obtained retention information that could be connected with student identification numbers; 66.8% ($n = 448$) of students were retained whereas 33.2% ($n = 223$) did not return to the university after their first-year.

Procedures and Measures

Approval of the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university in which the research was collected. Participants were recruited in the FYS course, a course that is part of the general education requirement at the university. It may be important to note that currently at the institution the BCC is not part of the FYE; however, students were recruited from these classes as part of a larger institutional research project (examining retention). Students were invited to complete the survey midway through the semester. Once invited students completed an electronic survey; students first provided informed consent electronically.
following IRB guidelines and then answered items on demographic measures, questions about their courses, and two scales used to assess variables. The following section presents the measures used in this study.

**Classroom emotions.** Titsworth et al.’s (2010) classroom emotions scale (CES) was used to measure student perceptions of ERT or emotional processes in the classroom. For the purpose of this project, the scale was used to assess two dimensions: *emotional support* (e.g., “I get the emotional help and support I need from my instructor”), and *emotion work* (e.g., “Interacting with this instructor requires a lot of emotional energy”). Each item was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Mazer et al. (2014) obtained an alpha reliability coefficient of .82 and .68 for this instrument. Cronbach’s (1951) alpha estimates for the current study are .64 and .75 for emotional support and emotion work, respectively.

**Classroom connectedness.** The Connectedness Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) (Dwyer et. al., 2004) was used to measure student perceptions of peer connectedness within the classroom. This 18-item instrument, which assesses perceptions of supportiveness and cooperation between classmates, is measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Sample survey items included, “I feel a sense of security in my class”, and “the students in my class are non-judgmental with each other.” Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients of .93 and .94 have been reported for the 18-item summed scale (Dwyer et al., 2004; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Prisbell et al., 2009; Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Cronbach’s (1951) alpha for this study is .95, which is slightly higher than those reported in the literature.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze participants’ responses to various survey items, the data was entered into SPSS, and a series of *t*-tests were run to determine if differences in responses existed between students who were enrolled in both FYS and BCC compared to just FYS and based on retention. Beyond that, other demographic grouping variables were tested for differences. In what follows, we will briefly discuss the findings and then will enter into a larger discussion about the implications of this research.

**Results**

$H_1$ predicted that there would be a significant difference related to retention between students who complete both FYS and BCC compared to those that
complete just FYS. This is supported; there was a significant difference between the groups $t(667) = 2.657, p = .008$, with the scores for FYS and BCC ($M = 1.37, SD = .48$) being higher than those for FYS ($M = 1.27, SD = .44$). There was a significant positive difference between students who retained at the university who were completing both FYS and BCC in their first semester compared to those that were completing just FYS.

In terms of ERT, $H_2$ predicted there would be a significant difference in emotional support for students who complete both FYS and BCC compared to students who just complete FYS. This is supported; there was a significant difference between groups $t(653) = 4.266, p = .000$, with the scores for emotional support for students completing FYS and BCC ($M = 27.46, SD = 3.53$) being more than those for FYS ($M = 26.31, SD = 3.21$). Students perceived more emotional support in the FYS and BCC compared to students just completing FYS. $H_3$ predicted emotional work would be negatively related to students who complete both FYS and BCC as compared to students who just complete FYS. This is supported; there was a significant difference between groups $t(653) = 2.060, p = .040$, with the scores for FYS and BCC ($M = 8.99, SD = 3.12$) being lower than those for FYS ($M = 9.45, SD = 2.51$). Students completing both FYS and BCC reported less emotional work as compared to students who just complete FYS.

In relation to retention, $H_4$ predicted there would be a significant difference in emotional support for students who retain at the university. $H_5$ predicted there would be a significant difference in emotional work for students who retain at the university. There was no significance found for either of these hypotheses, suggesting emotional support and emotion work may not relate to retention at the university.

$H_6$ predicted classroom connectedness would be positively related to students who complete both FYS and BCC compared to students who just complete FYS. This is supported; there was a significant difference between groups $t(665) = 3.027, p = .003$, with the scores for FYS and BCC ($M = 70.89, SD = 11.41$) being higher than those for FYS ($M = 68.46, SD = 9.27$). Students report more classroom connectedness when completing both FYS and BCC as compared to just FYS. However, in relation to retention, $H_7$ predicted there would be a significant difference in peer connectedness for students who retain at the university. This hypothesis was not supported; there was no significant difference between classroom connectedness and retention, signifying peer connectedness in the classroom may not relate to retention at the university.
Discussion

This study sought to examine the BCC and FYE as they relate to the first-year student experience as well as understand how emotion work, emotional support, and classroom connectedness influence student retention. Three ideas can be extracted from these results. First, emotional support and classroom connectedness are different for students who are completing both FYS and BCC as compared to students only completing FYS. Second, emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness are not factors related to retention. Finally, there is a significant difference in retention for students who complete both FYS and BCC during their first semester as compared to students who are only completing FYS. This is essential to positioning the BCC as an integral part of the FYE. These results indicate that classroom communication dynamics may not be tied to first-year student retention and suggests there are other extraneous factors for researchers to consider. Overall, we believe these findings have important implications for why the BCC serves as a vital component in the FYE.

First, the results of this research revealed that emotional support and classroom connectedness are significantly different for students who are completing both FYS and BCC as compared to students just completing FYS. For students, the combination of FYS and BCC results in increased emotional support and less emotion work. Prior research suggests when students experience increased emotional support and less emotion work, they are more likely to experience a positive valence of their learning (Titsworth et al., 2013). Research has also established emotional support as positively related to affect, motivation, and other learning indicators (Mottet & Beebe, 2002; Mottet et al., 2006; Titsworth et al., 2013). Mazer et al. (2014) argued, “classroom emotional support reflects the extent to which students perceive that their instructor is available and able to provide emotional support about topics that are directly and indirectly related to school” (p. 151). This means that the increased emotional support obtained through taking FYS and BCC simultaneously can enhance students’ learning and learning outcomes. Through previous research and the results of this study, there is now compelling evidence that students who take both a FYS and BCC course during their first-year may benefit beyond the individual classroom learning environments by learning how to be a learner and communicator in college, which could be used throughout their education. Put another way, students who take BCC and FYS courses may be provided with a more
supportive and connective learning environment, which allow students to explore, grow, and be a vulnerable learner in the classroom.

Additionally, students who completed both FYS and BCC courses reported increased classroom connectedness compared to their peers completing only FYS. These findings suggest the BCC provides students not only with skills to succeed academically and socially in the college environment, but also has implications for student integration into the larger campus community. When students have a sense of belonging, a supportive classroom climate influences their cohesiveness to peers and builds a community that enhances their academic experience (Dwyer et al., 2004). As previously mentioned, research highlights that students who are connected in their classrooms report increased levels of participation and are willing to openly talk in class (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). In essence, we believe both FYS in combination with BCC create a “sense of belonging” for students, which enriches their first-year in college. This experience is enhanced through the combination of these courses in the FYE and not just completing a singular FYS course.

Second, it is important to note that emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness are not mitigating factors for retention. This may be surprising because students completing both courses reported increased emotional support and connection in the classroom; however, retention is not always directly connected to the academic classroom experiences (e.g., student motivation or academic preparedness). Retention on university campuses may be connected to other experiences such as financial constraints, family challenges, or personal traumas, among other experiences (Moody, 2019). Another important factor contributing to student retention, may be when students declare and complete the introductory course for their major (Flanders, 2019). If students enroll in and successfully complete the introductory course for their major during their first-year, they may be more likely to re-enroll the following year. There may also need to be a more holistic approach to advising that brings all university stakeholders into the conversation to support student retention (Schwebel et al., 2008). Although it is possible that faculty who teach the BCC and/or FYS may provide more emotional support and peer connections in the classroom, they may lack the proper training to fully address factors influencing retention.

As we consider factors influencing retention, it is important to acknowledge the role faculty may perform in effectively communicating content, assessments, and emotional support in the college classroom and how these instructional strategies may impact students overall experience at the university. In this way, faculty who are
more effective at communicating in the classroom environment could contribute to creating a space for students to experience less emotional work and positive emotional support. Simonds et al. (2015) argued that instructors need teacher training to address how to “plan, facilitate, and assess instructional discussion,” but further that these training programs are critical to how students in engage in the classroom environment (p. 32). Extending this argument to first-year courses like the BCC or FYE, we believe there is a strong reasoning that instructors may need specialized training to help prepare first-year students for college whether it be in terms of academics or life events. Taken as a whole, we believe instructors may need to be trained to teach first-year students to assist with retention efforts and access campus retention resources. Lastly, it is worthy of mentioning that other support staff on campus may be better suited to support factors influencing student retention (e.g., health crises, personal traumas, etc.), which are outside the scope of instructional behaviors in the classroom. In this way, we envision campus retention efforts as a collaborative endeavor.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, this study found that students enrolled in both FYS (writing intensive) and BCC (communication intensive) were significantly more likely to retain at the university. We believe that the BCC complements FYS, which enhances FYE as both courses facilitate emotional support and connections. Students are learning foundational skills in the BCC that are important for their success in college, and the skills learned across FYS and BCC are enhancing their experience at college. For example, through classroom discussion, students’ voices are heard and they feel connected, which we believe helps them grow into successful members of the university community. As prior research suggests, if these students are successful in these foundational courses, they are more likely to retain from year one to year two and then are more likely to graduate (Foraker, 2011). Hence, the implications of this study are instrumental in a time when many universities are grasping to increase retention and enrollment numbers. We argue administrators need to recognize the important role of sequencing in the FYE in regards to foundational courses similar to FYS and BCC. Most importantly, prior research has established the BCC is one of the courses required for most undergraduate students to graduate (Morreale et al., 2010), yet it is not always considered part of the FYE and may be taken later in a student’s schooling. The results of this study help to provide a justification for the BCC in FYE curriculum, as it was identified as a predictor of retention.
Ultimately, the results of this study position the BCC as integral in the larger framework of an FYS curriculum, as the combination of BCC and FYS increase emotional support, classroom connectedness, and retention at the university. This presents important implications for basic course directors and administrators. Complementing our results, Worley and Worley (2006), also strongly advocate for the symbiotic relationship between the BCC and FYS courses in a FYE curriculum. Based on content taught and competencies (or skills acquired by students) like public speaking, critical thinking, relationship building and self-reflexivity, to name a few, a BCC can serve the needs of an FYE curriculum (see Worley & Worley 2006; “National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition,” 2019). If universities are at all concerned about student retention and matriculation to earn a degree (especially in a timely manner), the results of this providing a glimmer of encouragement and further situate the BCC as crucial for student success in college.

Limitations and Future Directions

We argue this research study calls for continued research to expand our understanding of factors that may influence retention beyond classroom behaviors, student experiences, and course sequencing. Although the current results are meaningful to understanding the importance of BCC and FYS course sequencing in the FYE, there are limitations that should be considered. First, data was collected for the study after the midpoint in the course, and there are potential factors that could have changed by the end of the first-year first semester. However, it is important to note that our retention data was from first to second year retention and not just after the first semester. Additionally, students were completing both FYS and BCC during the same semester, so we do not know how completing the courses through the first-year (or one course a semester) would compare or change the results (see Flanders, 2017 for discussion of the influence of course sequencing on retention). For example, if students took FYS in the fall and BCC in the spring it is unclear if we would find similar results in relation to retention. Finally, researchers could include a third group of students taking FYS in the fall and BCC in the spring to see the implications and effects of sequencing on retention.

Another important limitation of this research connects to potential institutional factors and the timing of when this research data was collected. Much like the larger grand narratives occurring at universities across the U.S. regarding retention and
finances, the university from which this data was collected has also experienced a decline in first to second year retention. The retention decline spearheaded an initiative on campus to collect data regarding student experiences and retention. Therefore, it is possible students were attuned to this conversation and already thinking about whether or not to enroll the following semester.

Future research should explore students completing one course of FYE a semester and that impact on retention, emotional support, emotion work, and classroom connectedness. Further, research is needed to examine the relationship between student enrollment in the major gateway courses and retention as well as matriculation through to graduation. It is possible that students who are indecisive about their major or receiving pressure from the family to choose a degree program may be at a greater risk of withdrawing from the university. Future research should explore the likelihood for students to enroll from term to term if they have a declared major or not, especially during the first two years. Subsequent studies should explore variables beyond ERT and classroom connectedness to help identify additional challenges students face in the first-year that influence retention. Finally, we believe it may be valuable for researchers to survey advisors’ experiences mentoring students through the first to second year enrollment process. Often as close mentors to students during their education, they may have insight into other university systems or structures as well as student experiences that are impeding students from matriculating through to graduation.

Overall, this research advocates for the importance of integrating the BCC in the FYE as a means to set students up for success in the larger academic community and to increase first to second year retention as well as matriculation to graduation. Through these findings, we argue that students who complete both FYS and BCC in their first semester are more likely to retain as compared to students who just complete FYS in their first semester. Additionally, it is through the emotional support and peer connections in both of these courses that students develop skills that encourage and foster first-year student experiences which we argue may lead to retention and matriculation at the university. The BCC is a vital component to a university’s curriculum; however, it is essential the BCC is integrated into the FYE curriculum, so it can be situated as a course pivotal to first-year academic student success and acclimation to broader university life. Through integrating skills acquired through the BCC, universities provide incoming students with the interpersonal, instigative, and critical thinking skills that compliment FYS courses and are necessary for their successful integration and retention at a university.
References


The Basic Course Forum

This feature is designed to invite scholars and basic course practitioners to propose and debate specific key questions of concern related to the basic course.

The focus for Volume 32 highlights best practices for recruiting to and/or from the basic course. Essays address best practices for recruiting undergraduate communication majors from the basic course; how to attract graduate students to teaching opportunities in the basic course; strategies for recruiting and nurturing a pipeline of future basic course directors; and ideas for how to entice senior faculty interest in teaching the basic course to bring them back to disciplinary roots.