

First-Year Seminars and African American Students: Exploring Retention and Academic Performance

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Higher education scholars point to first-year seminars as means of increasing persistence from the first to second year (Jajairam, 2016). This quantitative study sought to uncover the impact of a first-year seminar course on the retention and academic performance of African American students past their first year at one urban university in the Northeast region of the United States. There was no statistical difference in the persistence of those students who chose to participate in the seminar versus their peers who did not. In addition, there was no statistical significance with regard to the gender of the students electing to participate in first-year seminars versus those who did not. However, there was a statistically significant difference with respect to GPA when comparing those students who elected to participate in a first-year seminar versus those who did not. More specifically, those who participated in a first-year seminar had a higher undergraduate GPA than those who did not.

Keywords: first-year seminar, freshman seminar, student success, retention, African American, persistence

While a variety of complicating considerations influence the retention and academic performance of African American students in higher education, a few salient points provide the necessary context and scope of these influences. American colleges and universities have historically “structured their curricula, student services, and campus environment based on a White middle-class norm” (Fidler & Goodwin, 1994, p. 34). This is a complex consideration in that higher education practitioners are aware that studying students from diverse backgrounds is necessary to discover ways to best support them in and outside the classroom. Thus, it seems that more robust studies of how to support underrepresented populations on campus are needed

to move the needle forward in ensuring that students have the tools necessary to persist, regardless of their identity. Once the support resources influencing student persistence are identified from a more comprehensive lens, higher education practitioners are able to assess and revise their curricula, services, and campus environments to meet the needs of their diverse stakeholders (Tinto, 2006).

Retention statistics vary from institution to institution. However, the attrition rates of African American students attending PWIs have remained consistent over time (Harper, 2015). African American students have often been identified as a more vulnerable population with regard to attrition (Fidler & Godwin, 1994). Yet, African American students are more likely to be successful in their first year at a PWI if they have the opportunity for a variety of academic and social interactions with students from diverse backgrounds. If this is the case, then higher education leaders are presented with an opportunity to identify ways to support this population of students. Considering this and the need to focus on student retention to sustain institutional health, programs that support first-year students starting at orientation and continuing into the first semester in a seminar or “College 101” course are essential practices for supporting persistence to the second year as well as academic performance (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Since attrition continues to be a topic of concern for contemporary campuses, finding best practices and strategies for sustaining and improving student persistence continues to be salient. The discussion around first-year seminars and student persistence has been developing and gaining momentum, especially in the past three decades. Higher education leaders such as John Gardner have continued this discourse of connecting student success and first-year seminars, specifically as they relate to persistence (see Upcraft et al., 2005). First-year seminars continue to be studied at different types of institutions and generally yield similar results in that they are recommended as a tool to support student persistence past the first year at a college or university. In 2006, Porter and Swing published an article citing a variety of studies that pointed to first-year seminars having a positive impact on student persistence from the first to the second year of college. According to their research, this result remained consistent across a variety of categories, including gender, race, and academic standing (Porter & Swing, 2006). A review of relevant research found that similar studies exploring the association between participation in first-year seminars and an increase in student persistence continue to be added to the body of literature. Jenkins-Guarnieri et al. (2015) suggested that participation in first-year seminars can be associated with increased persistence past the first year of college regardless of student characteristics such as first-generation status, prior academic performance, race, and gender. The results of their study also noted that participation in first-year seminars yielded an increase in academic success, meaning that students

are in good academic standing (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015). Thus, higher education professionals seeking to improve student persistence from the first to the second year turn to interventions and key retention strategies, such as first-year seminars.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the retention and academic performance of African American students who participated in a first-year seminar course and persisted past the first year of college compared to those who did not participate in the course. For students to persist to their sophomore year, they must achieve academic success as measured by GPA. This study defined academic success as “academic achievement . . . persistence and retention” (York et al., 2015, p. 2). It focused specifically on African American students at a private, urban four-year PWI in the Northeast region of the United States. Further exploration of this topic is particularly salient as African American college student persistence to degree completion is significantly lower than that of White students (Gloria et al., 1999). In addition, the persistence to degree completion for African American students at this university is significantly lower compared with all other groups of students (College Results Online, 2014).

Research Questions

The researchers for this study took the following into consideration when developing the research questions. The participants for this study either opted into or decided not to register for a first-year seminar at a small, private, urban four-year PWI in Pennsylvania. The structure of the seminars was similar in that they provided guidance about transitioning to college life and adjusting to the academic and cocurricular expectations of college. However, each course explored different themes or topics, which in some way incorporated core materials around adjustment and success strategies. In addition, there is a body of literature on student success and persistence for African American males but very little on African American female students (Harper, 2005, 2015; Harper & Harris, 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). So, the researchers chose to add this as a topic of exploration to see whether there were any significant differences across gender. The researchers sought to understand whether there was an impact on the retention of African American students who participated in this type of course. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. Is there a difference in the first-to-second-year retention rate for African American students who chose to participate in a first-year seminar course and those who chose not to participate?

2. Is there a difference in the first-semester GPA for African American students who chose to participate in a first-year seminar course compared to those who chose not to participate?
3. Is there a difference in the first-to-second-year retention rate of African American male students who chose to participate in a first-year seminar course and those who chose not to participate?
4. Is there a difference in the first-to-second-year retention rate of African American female students who chose to participate in a first-year seminar course and those who chose not to participate?

Theoretical Framework

This study applied several theories to the exploration of the research questions. It is, however, important to understand the context of the university for this study before making connections to the theories and frameworks guiding the research. The study was conducted at a small, private, urban four-year PWI in Pennsylvania with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,700 students. More than 50% of the students reside in Pennsylvania. The student body represents 49 states and is 71% White and 29% students of color, including international students. Approximately 13.5% of the undergraduate population identifies as Black or African American¹. The male undergraduate student population is approximately 44%, and the female population is 56%. The non-minority retention rate from the first to second year is approximately 83.6% for a five-year average compared to 73.4% for minority students. For a five-year average, the male minority first-to-second-year retention rate is 72%, and the female rate is 74.6%. These are salient demographics and retention data that better provide an overview of the university and the student population.

It is also valuable to understand the structure of the first-year seminar courses. These courses are optional for all first-year students but strongly encouraged. The format differs based on the faculty or administrators facilitating them; however, the core elements of the courses focus on helping students adapt to college life in and outside of the classroom. Topics of discussion include but are not limited to campus history, time management, goal setting, note-taking, study skills, test-taking,

¹ The researchers recognize that language is important to an individual, especially when the language refers to a person's identity. It is important to acknowledge that some individuals identify as Black and prefer that term while others prefer to use the identity of African American. The researchers struggled with language use in order to be as inclusive as possible, particularly when describing personal demographic characteristics. The research site for this study uses a nationally accepted common application for admissions as well as one specific to the university. Both applications use the terms *Black* and *African American* as one possible demographic category versus separate identities. The researchers want to acknowledge the use of both Black and African American in the literature and elected to use African American throughout the study for consistency.

academic integrity, and getting involved outside the classroom. In addition to these core items, the faculty and administrators facilitating the first-year seminars may select themes or topics for the course that relate to academic areas, such as nursing, or interest areas for students, such as service or leadership. Overall, the first-year seminars are grounded in theoretical frameworks from which they were created by the administrative team in the Academic Success division. It is salient to note current research indicates the type of first-year seminar that has the greatest impact on persistence is the academic-related seminar (Young, 2020).

The theories discussed build on one another and provide a particular lens through which to view the study. Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement identified the importance of student engagement to promote development and focused on three areas of involvement: academics, faculty, and student organizations. The current study focused on the academic and faculty aspects of the theory. With regard to academics, Astin's work focused on the practice of actively engaging in academic work. Much of the foundation and core curriculum of first-year seminars center around academic success strategies that support students as they engage in academic exercises like asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking as well as topic-based engaged discussion. The other aspect of Astin's (1985) theory related to student-faculty engagement directly links to first-year seminars, as faculty are often the instructors for these early courses. Through participation in first-year seminars, students engage with faculty who share their research interests and expertise.

Colleges and universities support this initiative in different ways. Some institutions offer the first-year seminar as an optional course that is encouraged but not mandated, and others require all first-year students to select one of a variety of seminars available. For the purposes of this study, the institution encouraged but did not require students to register for a first-year seminar. Of note, some majors in this institution require their students to enroll in a first-year seminar; however, this curricular requirement is not applied in a consistent way across the institution. Those students who decided not to register for first-year seminars were not exposed to the additional benefits and support provided by this strategy. Having the opportunity for a deeper engagement with faculty promotes student growth and development and increases their involvement in the fabric of the campus.

In addition, Tinto's student integration theory (1987) proposed that student persistence was more likely when social and academic involvement were brought together. Topics discussed throughout first-year seminars often link academic themes with student support services, including student involvement in the campus via cocurricular and extracurricular activities. Tinto's (1975) institutional departure model highlighted the transition to the first year of college as a critical factor in

student success. In particular, separation from life in high school to collegiate life requires learning a new culture and making new relationships to be successful and persist to sophomore year and beyond. Two main elements are present in this model: the academic system and the social system. Pertinent to this study, the social system includes student interactions with faculty. Students' commitment to return to college is due, in part, to social interactions with faculty. In essence, it is critical that students engage with the social and academic systems of college life. Tinto's work indicated that social integration in college systems might positively affect persistence. This notion has been echoed by a variety of researchers for more than 40 years, indicating that informal peer interactions lead to friendships, which may ultimately encourage student persistence vis à vis these support networks (Cope, 1971; Jones, 1962; Koutsoubakis, 1999). Thus, these models provide a lens through which to understand and investigate the impact of first-year seminars on African American students.

Literature on First-Year Seminars and Student Success

STUDENT SUCCESS: FIRST-TO-SECOND-YEAR PERSISTENCE

Approaches to maintaining student persistence from the first to second year, in general, are relevant for understanding how to increase African American student persistence in particular. Higher education scholars and researchers Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) published two volumes synthesizing the impacts of college on students. Most notable for this study is the considerable amount of data in the 2005 publication indicating that first-year seminars increase first-to-second-year persistence for undergraduate students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although first-year seminars can be found at approximately 95% of U.S. four-year institutions, the seminars vary in structure and execution. The characteristics that vary most in these seminars include frequency and duration of meeting times, pedagogy, content, grading process, credit hours, and whether the course is optional or mandated by the institution. The most common element of the seminars is a recurring meeting time with a consistent instructor focused on new students, specifically undergraduate students. In this study, the seminars discussed are all related to first-year undergraduate students. The underlying purpose of all first-year seminars in higher education literature focused on academic performance, notably GPA, and persistence through academic and social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The first-year seminars referred to in this study are consistent with the literature in that they focus on new undergraduate students, occur at the same time each week with consistent instructors, and focus on topics relevant to the transition to college life. However, much of the literature noted that first-year seminars are required of all new students; however, the institution in this study does not require registration for the seminars, encouraging participation instead.

EXPLORING FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR RESEARCH AND IMPACT

A large portion of the early literature on first-year seminars did not acknowledge that participants in first-year seminars were more likely to be motivated academically, which may have affected the results. It is salient to note that universities differ in their approach to students being required to participate in a first-year seminar. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte conducted a study in which they explored optional participation in first-year seminars as it related to student persistence (Davis-Underwood & Lee, 1994).

Many studies have explored first-year seminars as they relate to student success, specifically to persistence from the first to the second year of college. Culver and Bowman (2020) conducted a large, longitudinal and multi-institutional study on first-year seminars and college student success. The results of their particular study showed no significant impact on retention and graduation, regardless of the first-year seminar focus, academic success topics, or student success/adjustment to the university (Culver & Bowman, 2020). However, the researchers noted that academic-focused first-year seminars yielded slightly higher retention and success rates than those centered around student success topics. One result of particular interest to this study was the finding that first-year seminars seem to promote better grades and higher satisfaction among African American students (Culver & Bowman, 2020).

The literature has sometimes referred to first-year seminars as high-impact practices (HIPs). They are widely recognized in higher education as suggested methods of encouraging and increasing student persistence and retention, ultimately influencing student success. George Kuh (2008), a prominent higher education researcher and author, published a series of recommended teaching and learning practices that have been extensively verified to benefit all students, including those from underrepresented populations. There are a variety of suggested practices included in Kuh's list of HIPs, including first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, e-portfolios, service learning/community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses/projects. However, the HIP most pertinent to this research is what Kuh (2008) referred to as "first-year seminars and experiences" (p. 21). The most important aspects of effective first-year seminar experiences include small groups of students engaging with faculty or staff frequently and a combination of academic and practical skill sets. Brownell and Swaner (2012) added to this by outlining the following outcomes of participating in a first-year seminar course: persistence, graduation rates, short-term impact on grades, commitment to social justice/multicultural awareness, academic and campus engagement, and faculty and peer interaction.

As much as the data point to the benefits of this recommended practice, other data have suggested that access to HIPs, such as a first-year seminar, is limited to only a small portion of the larger student population. This notion is confirmed by the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, which asserted that "these active and engaged forms of learning have served only a fraction of students" (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, 2007, p. 5). This is a relevant point as other research has suggested that students who reap the most significant benefits from HIPs are often from underrepresented populations. For example, Finley and McNair (2013) found that access to HIPs by underserved or underrepresented populations is lower than for those from traditionally advantaged backgrounds, such as Caucasian students, non-first-generation students, and those who did not transfer from school to school. Specifically, the researchers noted that of the more than 25,000 students surveyed, the average number of HIPs in which African American students participated was 1.29, while their Caucasian peers participated in an average of 1.38, and students who were not first-generation college students averaged 1.45 HIPs (Finley & McNair, 2013). Thus, the data point to disadvantages based on access to tested and accepted practices that influence student success, most notably academic success leading to persistence and, ultimately, retention to graduation.

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION

The importance of a college education has become increasingly significant during the past few decades. In some cases, researchers assert that a college education has replaced a high school diploma with regard to its significance (Immerwahr, 2000). Based on this notion, studying academic success at the collegiate level may prove to be critical in understanding how to create a healthy financial future for American citizens. The journey to finding a career or job that provides enough money to live a comfortable and productive life begins with preparing students with the necessary skills for success.

While public opinion appears to place significance on completing college, participation rates of African American students are lower than overall participation rates nationally (Immerwahr, 2000). This is also true for this study in that the persistence to degree completion for African American students at the Northeastern U.S. university being studied is significantly lower than those of all other groups (College Results Online, 2014). For the 2014 academic year, African American students made up only 13.2% of the overall student population. This included a total of 46 women and 32 men who identified as African American. Focusing on African American student retention and their successful completion of coursework is becoming more significant to higher education as these students are entering college at higher rates than the current majority population (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Exploring the success of underrepresented student populations has been an elevated topic in contemporary higher education, in addition to further investigation of student success as a whole. The Education Trust, a national advocacy organization focused on underrepresented students, conducted a study of 676 private and public nonprofit colleges and universities throughout the United States. One particularly notable finding was that African American students had a 40.9% college completion rate within six years, the lowest graduation rate of all ethnic groups (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Conversely, their White peers had a completion rate of 63.2% within six years. Along these lines, the American Council on Education compiled data from a longitudinal study, which showed that African American students had lower rates of persistence and higher rates of dropping out of school than the other racial and ethnic groups studied (Espinosa et al., 2019). The study also explored the gender gap regarding enrollment for African American male and female students. In July 2019, research published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center asserted that African American students who started their undergraduate career in the fall of 2017 across all institution types had the lowest persistence rate of 66.2% compared with peers identifying as Asian, White, and Hispanic. African American students also had the lowest persistence rate at four-year private, nonprofit institutions, calculated at 79.6% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). These data suggest room for innovation and improvement in student retention and graduation rates. Investigating ways in which higher education practices may enhance African American student success may provide insights into future practical applications.

Although there is a large body of literature regarding academic performance being a primary predictor of college graduation, there is little focused literature on the impact of the first-semester GPA on graduation rates, specifically for underrepresented populations. A study by Gershenfeld et al. (2016) explored the role of the first-semester GPA in predicting graduation rates for underrepresented students. The results indicate that first-semester GPA is an important early predictor of college graduation. Specifically, students with a first-semester GPA between 2.0 and 2.33 were less likely to persist to graduation. For this particular study, the researchers found that African American students with higher first-semester GPAs were more likely to persist to graduation than their White or Hispanic peers (Gershenfeld et al., 2016).

Research Design

This study sought to find a relationship between participation in the first-year seminar and performance with regard to first-semester GPA and persistence to the second year of college. We also examined retention differences between men and women. Because there was a comparison of two groups, they are segmented into two groups under each subcategory—specifically, women who elected to participate in a first-year seminar versus those who did not and men who elected to participate versus those who did not.

The research conducted in this study is quantitative in nature, and the researchers chose a causal-comparative design for the study. This means the researchers determined “the cause for or the consequences of differences between groups of people” (Fraenkel et al., 2015, p. 364). As indicated earlier, the study endeavored to compare persistence to the sophomore year and GPA among students participating in a first-year seminar course and those who do not participate in a first-year seminar, in addition to examining possible differences between men and women in these categories.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The study used existing archival data collected from the Office of Institutional Research and the Enrollment Services Office to explore the possible impact of African American students’ participation in first-year seminars. Archival data included: participation in first-year seminars for students in each fall semester from 2014 through 2018, student GPAs, retention from the first to second year, and gender and race-related demographic data. It also included high school GPAs and available SAT scores of the participants in this study to mitigate subject characteristic threats and ensure that the groups being compared had similar academic backgrounds. Specifically, data for African American students 18 years of age or older who enrolled as first-time, full-time freshmen in the fall semester from 2014 to 2018 were requested for review. Students who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

This was a quantitative research study that analyzed data collected from university databases for African American first-year student records from the fall semesters of 2014 to 2018. The total number of students in the data set was 459. Within this data set, the first category explored was retention to the second year of college for African American students who participated in a first-year seminar alongside their peers who did not participate in a first-year seminar. The second category explored was the GPAs of African American students who participated in a first-year seminar alongside their peers who did not participate in a first-year seminar. The third category explored was the retention rate of African American male students who participated in a first-year seminar course alongside their peers who did not participate in the seminar. The fourth category explored was African American female students who participated in a first-year seminar alongside their peers who did not participate in a seminar. Each data set was reviewed regarding retention from the fall of the first college year to the fall of the sophomore year.

Because the two groups were compared several times, the best statistical test to use for this purpose was a t-test. The t-test is commonly used for exploring how significant the differences between groups are and specifically allows a researcher to know

whether those means or averages could have occurred by chance. The t-test is also the most frequently used test in causal-comparative studies such as this research study (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Within the total sample of 459, there were 261 women and 198 men. The mean high school GPA for this sample was 3.3, and the mean SAT score was 977. SAT scores were unavailable for 25 students. Table 1 provides a demographic overview of the study participants.

Table 1. *Demographics of the Research Study Sample*

Gender	No participation (n = 129)	Participation (n = 330)	Total sample (N = 459)
% male	58.9%	37.0%	43.1%
% female	41.1%	63.0%	56.9%

Results

DIFFERENCE IN RETENTION RATE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

The first research question guiding this study explored whether there was a difference in the first-to-second-year retention rate between African American students who participated in a first-year seminar course and African American students who did not. From the sample (n = 459), 326 students persisted from the fall of the first college year to the fall of sophomore year; 133 students were not retained. There was no statistically significant in the retention rate between African American students who participated in a first-year seminar course and those who did not (see Table 2).
 [insert Table 2 here]

Table 2. *Group Differences for Retention Between Students Who Did and Did Not Participate in a First-Year Seminar*

Retention	No participation		Participation		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
	.70	.46	.72	.45	-.37	457	.71

DIFFERENCE IN FIRST-YEAR GPA FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

The second research question guiding this study explored whether there was a difference in the first-semester GPA between African American students who participated in a first-year seminar course and African American students who did not participate in a first-year seminar. The mean undergraduate GPA (UGGPA) for African American students who participated in the first-year seminar was 2.75 compared to 2.49 for those who did not participate. African American students who participated in a first-year seminar course had statistically significant higher UGGPAs than those who did not participate in a first-year seminar course (Table 3).

Table 3. *Group Differences in Undergraduate First-Semester GPA Between Students Who Did and Did Not Participate in a First-Year Seminar*

GPA	No participation		Participation		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	2.5	.91	2.8	.92	-2.7	454	0.01

DIFFERENCE IN RETENTION RATE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS

The third research question guiding this study explored whether there was a difference in the retention rate of African American male students who participated in a first-year seminar course and those who did not. Of the 198 African American males who entered the university between fall 2014 and fall 2018, 122 participated in a first-year seminar, and 135 persisted to the fall of their sophomore year. There was no significant difference in the retention rate of African American male students who participated in a first-year seminar course and those who did not (Table 4).

Table 4. *Group Differences for Retention Between Male Students Who Did and Did Not Participate in a First-Year Seminar*

Retention	No participation		Participation		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	.67	.47	.70	.47	-.26	196	.80

DIFFERENCE IN RETENTION RATE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS

The fourth research question guiding this study explored whether there was a difference in the retention rate of African American female students who participated in a first-year seminar course and those who did not. Of the 261 African American females who entered the university between fall 2014 and fall 2018, 208 participated in a first-year seminar course, and 191 were retained to the fall of their sophomore year. There was no significant difference in the retention rate of African American female students who participated in a first-year seminar course compared to those who did not (Table 5).

Table 5. *Group Differences for Retention Between Female Students Who Did and Did Not Participate in a First-Year Seminar*

Retention	No participation		Participation		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	.74	.45	.73	.44	.07	259	.94

Discussion

African American students from this study who participated in a first-year seminar had a higher UG GPA than their peers who did not participate in a first-year seminar. The data showed no statistical significance in the overall retention of this sample of African American students. Nor did it find any gender-based retention patterns related to first-year seminar participation.

Based on the literature available, a researcher might expect that there would be statistical significance in retention rates for students who participated in a first-year seminar. However, the hypothesis around this was tested and did not result in a statistically significant retention rate for the African American students who participated in a first-year seminar versus their peers who did not. Although the body of literature in this area generally contradicts this outcome, there are definitely literature and data pointing to discrepancies with access to this type of engaged learning for underrepresented populations (Finley & McNair, 2013). If there are significantly lower numbers of African American students taking these courses and engaging in HIPs and experiences, then a researcher could conclude that perhaps these data cannot be fully compared to the larger body of higher education literature. During the early iterations of first-year seminars in the United States until the addition of women and people of color, these institutions served and primarily used White men as the subjects of their studies. Perhaps there is a greater question here with regard to equity and access to HIPs, as well as an issue of addressing the difficulty that African

American students face in acclimating to the college environment, which is often at PWIs. An additional consideration could be to explore further the ways in which higher education makes intentional efforts to assist African American students in adjusting to the college environment while focusing on equity in an attempt to provide the appropriate support structure. Perhaps another approach might be to explore the work from the University of South Carolina (USC), starting in the 1970s. When USC implemented its first-year seminar course, University 101, it was a unique offering nationally. The university saw University 101 as an opportunity to respond to support African American students by designing activities and strategies to meet their needs and nurture persistence toward graduation. Institutional leaders saw a need and met it with purposeful planning and execution (Fleming, 1984).

There was no statistical difference in the retention rate from the fall of the first college year to the fall of the sophomore year for this sample. The literature did not provide a clear notion of whether there was a relationship between gender and retention for students who took the course. However, several points help us make sense of the data. First, studies have found that African American students have lower rates of persistence and higher dropout rates than students of other races and ethnic groups (Espinosa et al., 2019). Also, a gender gap exists among African American students who attend colleges and universities. African American women make up more than 60% of all African American students participating in higher education. Yet, the researchers were unable to account for the differences in participation rates in first-year seminars for male and female students based on the limited data available. However, the researchers considered the literature about college attendance provided by Espinosa et al. (2019) and noted that more than 60% of the students who participated in the first-year seminar in this study were female, and more than half of the total African American student population for this study was female. In this way, the current findings reflect previous literature on the topic of gender.

Overall, higher education literature on race is more expansive regarding male students than female students, often exploring the persistence and success rates of African American students through a deficit lens. The available literature is limited regarding the support practices that positively influence the success of African American students. It is also important to consider that fewer African American students as a whole, as well as fewer male students, may contribute to limited data and literature available on the topic.

In addition to the three stated hypotheses, the study explored possible differences in first-semester GPAs between African American students who participated in a first-year seminar course and peers who did not. This is the only hypothesis to result in a statistically significant finding, which aligns with findings from a previous study

(Culver & Bowman, 2020). Culver and Bowman (2020) found that first-year seminars seem to promote better grades and higher satisfaction among African American students. A 2012 study conducted at a mid-sized private institution in the Northeast linked an increase in GPA to first-year seminars with a particular theme. Students who took social-emotional competence-themed seminars earned higher GPAs in the four semesters after completion than students who enrolled in other types of first-year seminars (Wang et al., 2012). The current study compared all students enrolled in a first-year seminar offered at this university regardless of the seminar's theme or focus. The study provided a foundation for exploring the link between first-year seminars and GPA, as well as the long-term impact of an increased GPA on student persistence.

Most first-year seminar courses focus on a variety of topics that nurture and support academic success, evident in GPAs for the purposes of this study. These topics often include goal setting, time management, note-taking, test-taking, study skills, and academic integrity. It is easy to see that focusing on these themes supports academic success, as reflected in the literature. This particular finding is of great interest as it holds promise for future research. Perhaps the linkage between first-year seminar completion and increased GPA could be explored more fully, both the quantitative and qualitative aspects. It also warrants further investigation of any ways in which first-semester GPA supports and predicts persistence and graduation, especially for underrepresented populations such as African American college students. The literature affirms that academic performance is a primary predictor of college graduation (Gershenfeld et al., 2016). This premise is particularly interesting when considering student retention. Although this study showed that first-year seminar completion was not a significant indicator of retention, researchers could assert that a focus on academic success initiatives within a first-year seminar could ultimately lead to retention, as increased GPAs indicate a greater likelihood that students will persist in college. Furthermore, recent studies exploring the GPAs of underrepresented students revealed that underrepresented students' first-semester GPAs had a significant impact on their persistence to graduation (Gershenfeld et al., 2016). These findings encourage future exploration of first-semester GPAs and African American student persistence, not just to sophomore year but beyond to graduation. It is clear that GPA is a significant factor in student academic success and, ultimately, retention. Although the findings varied for each hypothesis explored in this study, the link between African American students' first-year seminar completion and increased GPAs is notable and significant for informing future higher education practice.

The link between increased first-semester GPA and first-year seminar participation is consistent with the work of several authors and experts, including Kuh (2008), Gardner (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Culver and Bowman (2020), and Gershenfeld et al. (2016). Although each of these authors

suggested this result to be true in general without specific reference to race, Culver and Bowman (2020), as well as Gershenfeld et al. (2016), provided context around whether this finding was true for African American students. Thus, there was a definite overlap in the findings of this study with those of other researchers. However, the findings regarding retention to the sophomore year were not statistically significant, which contradicts previous research (e.g., Gershenfeld et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2008). In particular, Gershenfeld et al. (2016) and Kuh (2008) reflected on this result being a finding not just for the overall college student population but specifically for underrepresented students. However, the results of this study did not show any statistical significance in retention to the sophomore year for African American students who participated in first-year seminars.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

An area of future practice is providing first-year seminars to every new student from underrepresented populations entering college, not just those who select one or who are encouraged to do so. Based on this particular study, the researchers assert that implementing first-year seminars for all incoming students—specifically, minority populations—should assist in increasing first-semester GPAs. Other researchers have also noted that first-semester GPA is an important early predictor of college graduation (Gershenfeld et al., 2016). Based on these data, using first-year seminars to increase the GPA of African American students might ultimately support persistence efforts. The fact that this study explored a first-year seminar program that was encouraged and not required is a key limitation.

Within the context of encouraging the broad implementation of first-year seminar participation for African American students, higher education administrators might consider carefully selecting seminar themes prior to implementation. Wang et al. (2012) argued the social-emotional competence-based theme or curriculum undergirding their first-year seminar resulted in students achieving higher GPAs than students participating in seminars focusing on other themes. Providing carefully constructed first-year seminars that are specifically designed to meet the needs of diverse populations could be one way of preparing the future college student in America. Grawe (2018) presented data regarding declining graduation rates and trends predicting increased diverse student populations. These assertions, taken together, provide the groundwork for intentional first-year seminar creation and implementation designed to promote academic success and persistence for African American student populations.

There are a variety of additional areas of exploration around this topic. A first-year seminar provides the opportunity to help students adapt to college life and personal

responsibilities. It may be noteworthy to study the student's most significant learning outcome from the course. Is the course theme or course content, learning about campus support services and adjustment issues, the most transformational component supporting academic success and persistence? Another perspective could examine if a first-year seminar develops a sense of belonging and self-actualization as students may struggle to find their place in a new environment. Does the sense of camaraderie among class members solidify one's membership in a new community?

Conclusion

During the past 10 to 20 years, higher education institutions have faced increased pressure to provide substantive evidence that they are meeting learning objectives while simultaneously ensuring fiscal sustainability in a climate in which fewer undergraduate students are entering college, students are growing increasingly diverse, and retention is on a downward slope. The study yielded data conveying that African American students who participated in a first-year seminar had higher GPAs than their peers who did not participate in the seminar. This finding is important because it may provide a blueprint for future practice and research. It is worth noting that GPA is an essential predictor of student persistence in other studies and that some research points to the first-semester GPA as being an early predictor of graduation rates for underrepresented populations. Understanding how these elements connect and strategies for increasing first-semester GPA are worth serious consideration and may have a critical impact on higher education.

Although participation in first-year seminars did not indicate an increase in persistence to sophomore year, elements of their participation affected students' GPA, which the literature points to as an indicator of long-term student persistence toward graduation. If that is the case, then a more in-depth review of first-year seminar structures, formats, assignments, themes, and assessments could provide clues for creating the kind of supportive spaces that nurture the success of underrepresented student populations as they navigate collegiate life.

The current landscape of higher education offers a great opportunity for knowledge expansion and strategic development of systems and models that support the college student of the future. If demographic experts are correct, then African American students are likely to grow in number at colleges and universities throughout the country. Simultaneously, the importance of retention will likely increase as fewer students graduate from high school. These practices and support systems point to the importance of exploring the strategies that increase African American student retention and academic success. Retaining African American students versus recruiting more students from a smaller available pool of college-eligible students will affect the sustainability of institutions moving forward (Tinto, 2006). More effective

efforts in retaining students of color, specifically African American students, will answer a question about how higher education practitioners design services, models, and curriculums with equity in mind. Perhaps this is a call to all higher education practitioners to assess how we endeavor to effectively support and promote retention and academic success for all students regardless of their backgrounds, advantages, or abilities.

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