

Student Perceptions of the Purpose of First Year Seminars

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ABSTRACT

First Year Seminars (FYS) are an integral part of the First Year Experience (FYE) that is part of many college and university curriculums and degree programs. They are in place to help with retention-and help at-risk groups succeed; making them more important than other first semester or year courses (Potts & Schultz, 2008). Paying attention to what students think is important when determining success and efficiency of programs that involve them. However, studies on FYS programs are often lacking in student perceptions. Students often feel that their individual opinion does not matter at the institutional level (Soiferman, 2017).

The goal of this project was to determine what students believed the purpose of FYS to be at the University of Wyoming. Surveys were distributed to Fall 2018 FYS students and interviews were held with upperclassmen. Looking at the surveys from the current first year students, their perception of purpose was categorized using key words that were used in the responses. Interview responses were sorted into classes and then categorized using the same key words as the survey responses. Understanding students' perception of the purpose could help improve FYS at the University of Wyoming.

INTRODUCTION

First Year Seminars (FYS) are an integral part of the First Year Experience (FYE) that is part of many college and university curriculums and degree programs. They are in place to help with retention and help at-risk groups succeed, making them even more important than other first semester or year courses (Potts & Schultz, 2008). The University of Wyoming implemented a new type of FYS starting in the Fall 2015 semester. The purpose of the FYS at the University of Wyoming is to help students transition from high school to college in both the academic setting and the general community, foster relationships between the students and the instructor, as well as among their peers, and see growth in learning objectives. These learning objectives are all related to critical thinking and include accessing diverse information, separating facts from inferences and relevant from irrelevant information, evaluating credibility, recognizing and synthesizing multiple perspectives, analyzing assumptions and evaluating the relevance of contexts, and communicating ideas clearly. FYS are an important part of the University curriculum and research should be done regularly to see if the goals are being met.

Undergraduate researchers took a closer look at the current state of the FYS at the University of Wyoming in hopes of determining trends that exist between students, specifically in the Fall 2018 FYS courses as well as in upperclassmen who had previously taken an FYS course. I specifically investigated student perceptions of the purpose of first year seminars, while my peers delved into other trends. Student perceptions of the purpose were hypothesized to vary, and only occasionally touch on the accepted purpose of FYS according to the University of Wyoming. In knowing how students perceive the purpose of FYS courses, changes to both the curriculum and how the students are told about FYS could be suggested. This could lead to a better FYE, which in turn would help with overall student success and retention rates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First Year Seminars (FYS) are an integral part of the First Year Experience (FYE) that is part of many college and university curriculums and degree programs. They are in place to help with retention and help at-risk groups succeed, making them even more important than other first semester or year courses (Potts & Schultz, 2008). Often these courses are set without any input from the students that will be taking them, and standardized course curriculums are laid out for all FYS even if they are about different topics. Many studies focus on the effectiveness of the FYS through learning outcomes and student retention, but there are a limited number of studies that examine student expectations and perceptions. Every institution needs to maintain standards within FYS curriculum to ensure educational goals are met. Yet, it is beneficial when creating curriculum that institutions pay attention to what the students think. In one study at the University of Winnipeg, students' responses to surveys suggested that they feel like their opinions and perspectives do not matter at the university level. Comparing the university to a business and the students to consumers, the business often neglects the consumers. The consumers feel like they cannot express their opinions and this sometimes hinders the consumers (students) success (Soiferman, 2017). This is an extreme version of the issue, but student feedback is an important part of making the FYS better; listening to what students say and working towards change together is important. One of the main things a university could do is understand the students' perceptions of the purpose of FYS and the benefits they expect to receive from it.

The success of FYS is often due to various aspects of the course, including assignments, type of instruction, and class dynamics. Understanding the perceptions of both instructors and students is important when evaluating the effectiveness of the course. A group in the

Netherlands took it upon themselves to delve into both instructor and student perceptions. In a study specifically looking at instructors' perceptions of what affects seminar success, the researchers determined that course development and the goals and content of the course play a vital role in how they are perceived (Bok et al, 2013). Student perceptions of the purpose of the FYS might be influenced by what is relayed to them by the instructor. The instructors want ownership over the course and to have clear goals and content, but if these goals are not relayed to students, there could be a disconnect between what the students take away and what the instructors want them to learn. A year prior to delving into teachers' perceptions, the same researchers from the Netherlands looked at students' perceptions. One of the main themes from this study is that course schedule and alignment affect seminar learning in the students' opinions. Course schedule is about how time is used to teach the content, and alignment is how well the content of the course is dispersed using different methods. Students felt that if course wasn't taught efficiently, it wasn't something to be valued (Jaarsma et al, 2012). This ties in to what they found with instructors a year later. As mentioned previously, instructors felt the objectives and material of a FYS needed to be clear for the course to be successful. Both studies emphasize that there needs to be concrete structure that makes sense and a goal that is being worked towards for FYS to be effective. In this way, what students think is important relates to what instructors think is important. Thus, there needs to be communication between the student body and the university for the a FYS to reach its full potential. Understanding student perceptions and seeing how they correlate to instructor and university perceptions is important. Blackhurst and Pearson (1996) looked at how students perceived the goals in a freshman seminar that were emphasized by faculty and student affairs professionals. What they found is that faculty emphasized the goals less than student affairs professionals. Though this is an older study, they

brought up that there is sometimes a disconnect within the university in how things are relayed to students.

As far back as 1966, student perceptions of introductory seminars were studied, although this was followed by a nearly thirty-year gap in any research on the subject. It was found in a study performed in 1966 and published in 1968 that though the courses do not always line up with what students say was ideal, the students still benefited from the seminar (Lichtenstein & Yuker, 1968). As mentioned previously, universities make decisions based off of what they think is best for the students. Yet the question still stands if the FYS would benefit from incorporating student ideas. Reid, Reynolds, and Perkins-Auman (2014) attempted to define FYS, by researching what FYS meant to faculty and students at three separate institutions. Improved retention rates are the ultimate goal for many FYS courses, but the means of getting there can be diverse. Some courses focus on life skills, while others focus more on how to be academically successful, and some blend the two. In this study, students did not have many expectations for the course; to them it was just a class they should take. Faculty, on the other hand, had more concrete expectations of the FYS, but they tended to perceive it as “a different type of learning experience”. None of these institutions had FYS courses as a mandatory requirement in the first year. By observing how the FYS functioned at these three institutions, Reid, Reynolds, and Perkins-Auman (2014) were able to formulate a better concept of the basic structure and function of the FYS. Asking for students’ thoughts on the FYS and how it affected their FYE is important, even if there does not appear to be any clear positive or negative perception. While FYS curriculum is still based on the institution’s education goals, and often only the basic structure will remain between institutions, understanding the student’s opinions of FYS will help make the programs more effective at achieving those goals in the long run.

As mentioned previously, there are not many groups that have specifically looked at what students think the purpose of FYS is, but there are studies that look at what students think of different types of FYS and other aspects of the FYE. When developing FYS and FYE, it is important for research improve the understanding of students' thoughts and ideas regarding the programs. One study looked specifically at what was identified as the purpose of research as an undergraduate, leading to the potential incorporation of it in a FYS setting. They received responses from all year levels indicating that improving critical thinking and research skills were at the heart of undergraduate research (Carey, Manarin & McGrath, 2016). Including all undergraduate year levels in the study was beneficial, as they could determine if perception varied based on a student's level of academic experience. This same concept can be applied when researching student perceptions of the purpose of FYS at the University of Wyoming by performing the research across all undergraduate year levels.

In another study looking at students' expectations of living-learning communities, it was found that the expectations were multifaceted and often not simple. Examples of these expectations included the level of engagement with specific academic content, the features of the educational environment, and the formation of relationships in the community. Many students responded with more than one of these expectations. Very few had little to no expectations for the community (Eiselein, Priest, & Saucier, 2016). Another study looked at overall experiences of second year students in comparison to when they were first year students, and the various types of support they need changes as they go through their post-secondary education. This is significant because it emphasizes again the importance of looking at all years throughout college and not just focusing on the first-year students (Sterling, 2018). This continues to support the

idea that getting student responses to experiences and expectations is important in developing better support and curriculum, both for first year students and for their education beyond.

Though not much research has been done specifically on student perceptions of First Year Seminar courses, the current research supports that student opinions and ideas are important. At the University of Wyoming, much could be learned by investigating the perceptions of students. Through this research, there is the opportunity to look at how closely student perceptions of the purpose compare to the actual purpose of FYS at the University of Wyoming, as well as FYS in general. With this knowledge, changes could be made to FYS if deemed necessary. It could also be found that there is no need for revision yet because the FYS or certain aspects of the FYS are effective. As students and education evolve, this research should be done so that the FYS can also change concurrently.

METHODS

Surveys:

In the Fall 2018 semester, surveys were distributed during the first week of class to current first year seminar students (See Appendix A for the survey questions). These pre-surveys helped define later questions in both interviews and surveys. Approximately 900 students were surveyed at this time.

Interviews:

Later in the semester, upperclassmen who had previously taken a FYS course were interviewed (See Appendix B for interview questions). These upperclassmen were randomly chosen and were part of the sophomore, junior, and senior standing populations. 29 students

were interviewed at this time, nine were sophomores, eight were juniors, and twelve were seniors.

Response Analysis:

The responses from both the pre-survey and the interviews were categorized based on key words. These key words can be seen in Table 1 and helped generalize responses. For example, if a response mentioned adapting to college or becoming acclimated to college, it would be categorized under “Transition”. The responses were double-counted, meaning if a response fit into more than one category, it counted for both. The responses were grouped based on year level and then were combined for overall upperclassmen and overall student responses. The counting of responses and chart production were done in Microsoft Excel.

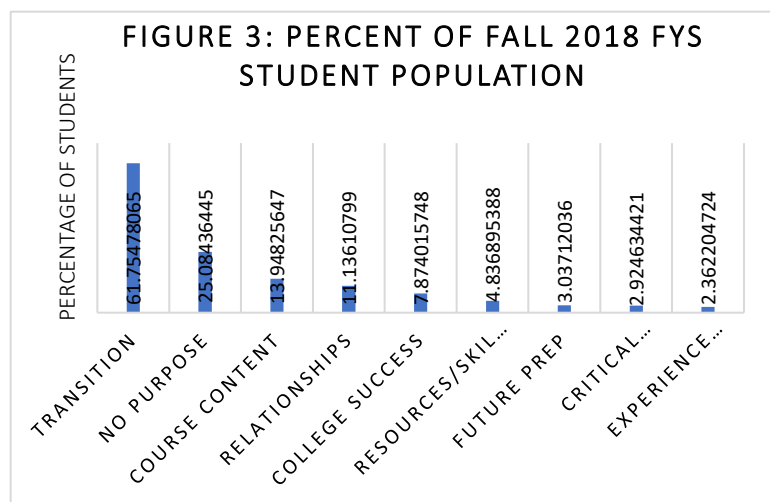
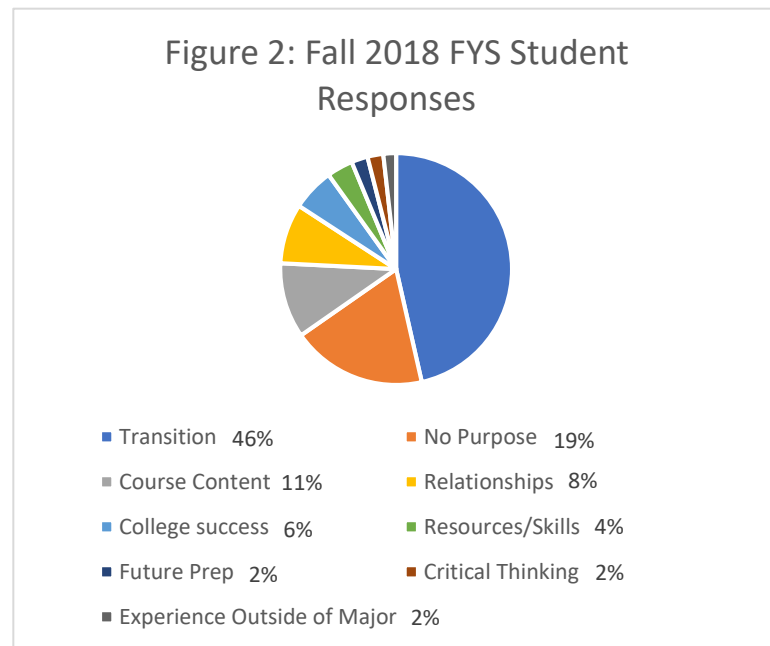
Table 1: Response Categories
Transition
No Purpose
Course Content
Future Prep
Resources/Skills
Experience Outside Major
Relationships
College Success
Involvement
Weed-out
Critical Thinking

RESULTS

Based on the responses from the survey given to Fall 2018 FYS students, “Transition” had the highest number of occurrences and the majority of students recognized it as being part of the purpose. The next greatest percentage of students fell into the “No Purpose” category, which indicated they either did not think there was a purpose, they did not know the purpose, or they only knew they were required to take the course. These are depicted in Figures 1-3.

Figure 1: Fall 2018 FYS Student Responses

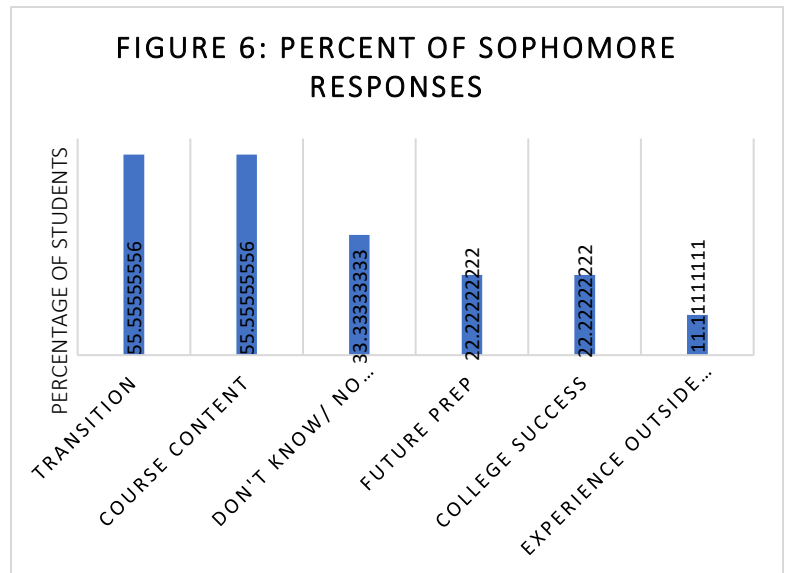
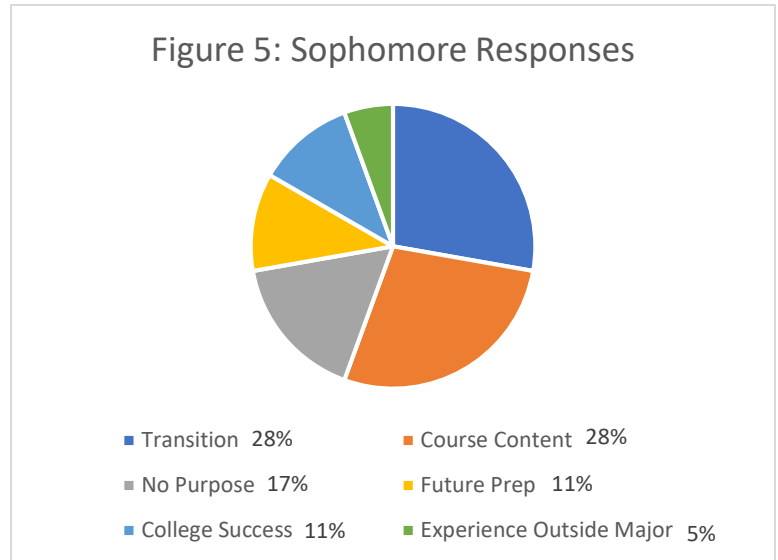
Categories	Responses
Transition	549
No Purpose	223
Course Content	124
Relationships	99
College Success	70
Resources/Skills	43
Future Prep	27
Critical Thinking	26
Experience Outside of Major	21
TOTAL RESPONSES	1179
TOTAL POPULATION	889



Figures 1-3: Charts depict number of responses and the percentage of total responses as well as percentage of the population for Fall 2018 FYS students.

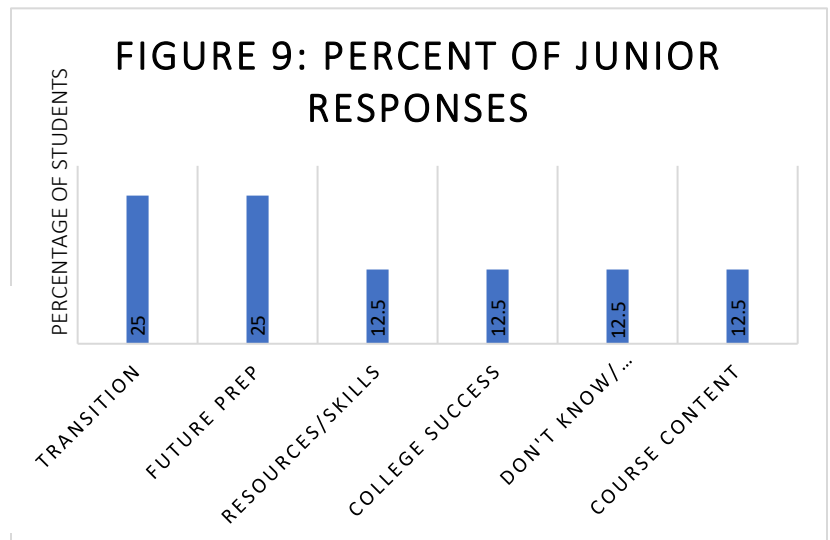
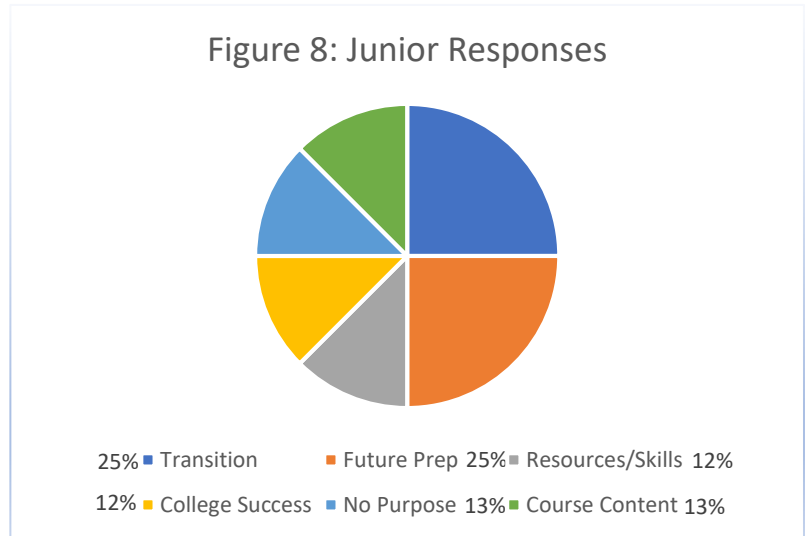
From the interviews given to the upperclassmen, responses were divided based on year level before being analyzed collectively. It was found that for all year levels “Transition” was the category with the highest percentage. The categories after “Transition” then varied depending on year level and can be seen in Figures 4-6 for sophomores, Figures 7-9 for juniors, and Figures 10-12 for seniors.

Figure 4: Sophomore Student Responses	
Categories	Responses
Transition	5
Course Content	5
No Purpose	3
Future Prep	2
College Success	2
Experience Outside Major	1
TOTAL RESPONSES	18
TOTAL POPULATION	9



Figures 4-6: Charts depict number of responses and the percentage of total responses as well as percentage of the population for sophomore students.

Figure 7: Junior Student Responses	
Categories	Responses
Transition	2
Future Prep	2
Resources/Skills	1
College Success	1
No Purpose	1
Course Content	1
TOTAL RESPONSES	8
TOTAL POPULATION	8



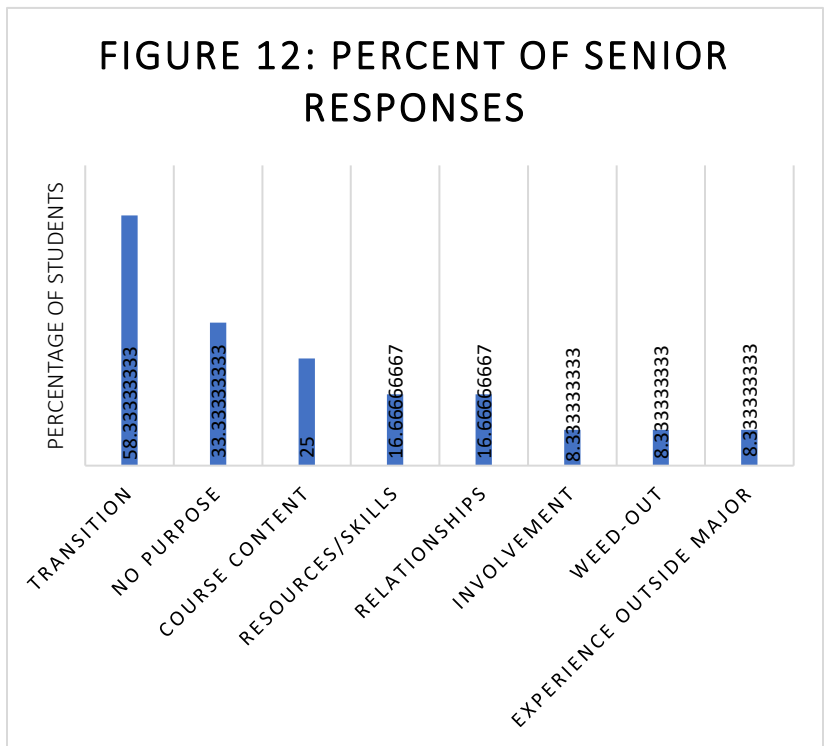
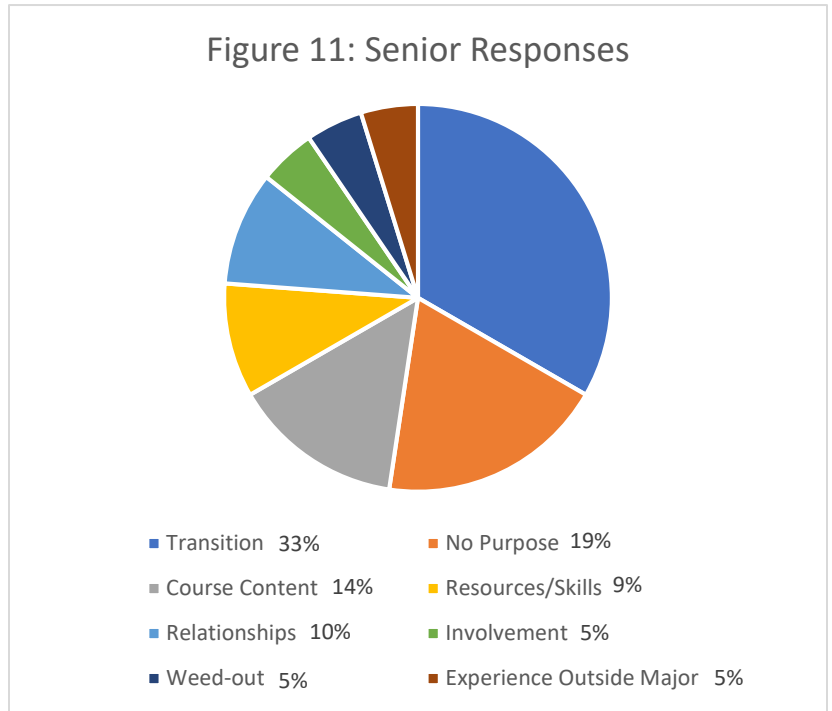
Figures 7-9: Charts depict number of responses and the percentage of total responses as well as percentage of the population for junior students.

When analyzing overall upperclassmen perceptions, the responses from all upperclassmen were put together. “Transition” was the category with the most responses, followed by “Course Content” and then “No Purpose”. This can be seen in Figures 13-15

Finally, overall student perceptions were analyzed. This included all first-year students taking an FYS in the Fall 2018 semester and all upperclassmen. Transition had the highest percentage of occurrences, followed by “No Purpose”. Figures 16-18 show these results.

Figure 10: Senior Student Responses

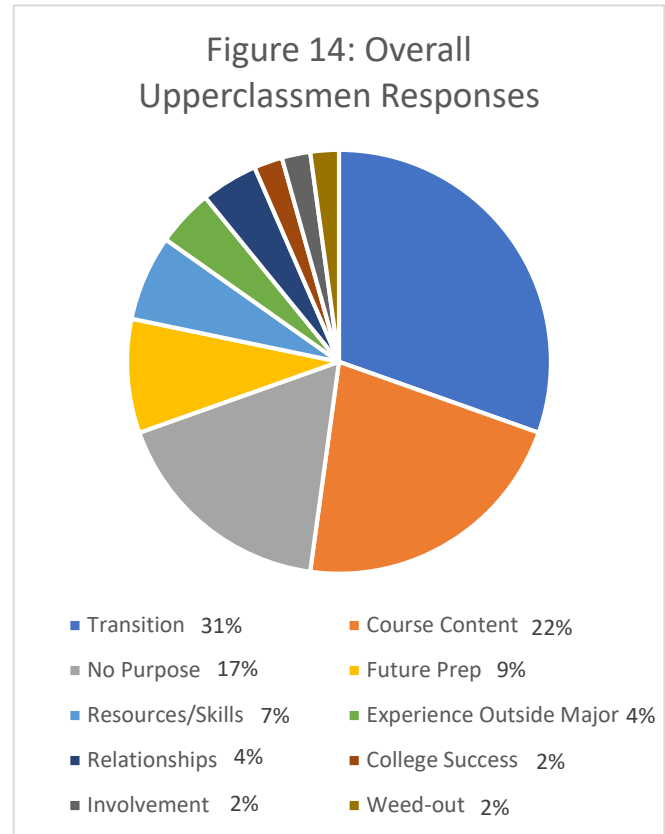
Categories	Responses
Transition	7
No Purpose	4
Course Content	3
Resources/Skills	2
Relationships	2
Involvement	1
Weed-out	1
Experience Outside Major	1
TOTAL RESPONSES	21
TOTAL POPULATION	12



Figures 10-12: Charts depict number of responses and the percentage of total responses as well as percentage of the population for senior students.

Figure 13: Overall Upperclassmen Responses

Categories	Responses
Transition	14
Course Content	10
No Purpose	8
Future Prep	4
Resources/Skills	3
Experience Outside Major	2
Relationships	2
College Success	1
Involvement	1
Weed-out	1
TOTAL RESPONSES	46
TOTAL POPULATION	29



Figures 13-15: Charts depict number of responses and the percentage of total responses as well as percentage of the population for all upperclassmen students.

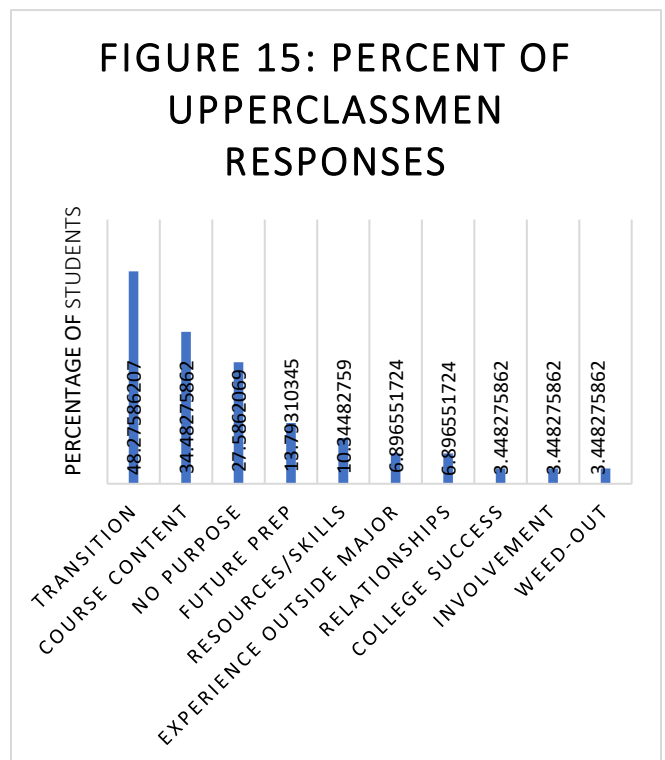
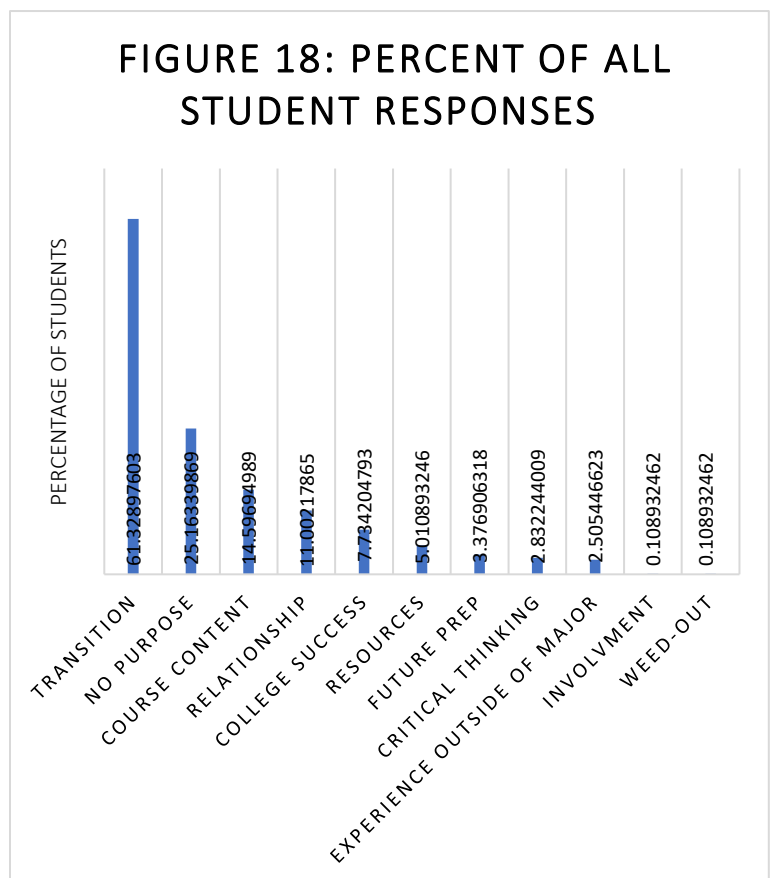
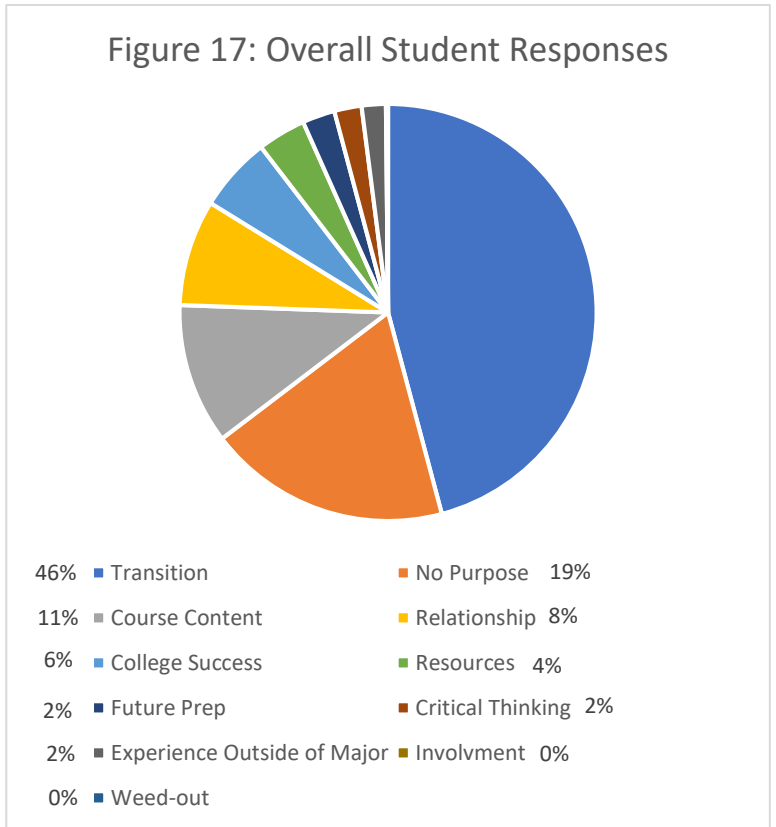


Figure 16: Student Responses	
Categories	Responses
Transition	563
No Purpose	231
Course Content	134
Relationship	101
College Success	71
Resources	46
Future Prep	31
Critical Thinking	26
Experience Outside Major	23
Involvement	1
Weed-out	1
TOTAL RESPONSES	1228
TOTAL POPULATION	918



Figures 16-18: Charts depict number of responses and the percentage of total responses as well as percentage of the population for all students.

DISCUSSION

All of the parts of the purpose of FYS at the University of Wyoming were acknowledged, just to varying degrees. Transition was mentioned the most, followed by relationship development, and then critical thinking. Transition was consistently the most acknowledged amongst all year levels. Critical thinking was only mentioned among the Fall 2018 FYS students, however there was no specific mention of learning objectives. That was the main difference between the Fall 2018 FYS students and the upperclassmen. The reason for this difference is unclear as proper questions were not asked, and it is not reasonable to make speculation at this point in the research. Transition being the most acknowledged purpose could be from how the course is introduced to incoming students, but again, proper questions were not asked to delve into this.

Moving forward, it is important to recognize limitations of current research. In this project, though pre- and post-surveys were distributed, only the pre-surveys were used. This is due to the fact that the post-surveys did not ask about the purpose at all. A comparison between pre- and post-surveys could not be done. Another limitation is not asking how students found out about the purpose. This is an important piece of information as it could help define why there are differences between year levels. Furthermore, upperclassmen were not pulled from each FYS offered. They were picked randomly, but as the population size is much smaller than the Fall 2018 students, it could skew the data. Ideally, there would be a post-survey asking what the student believes to be the purpose of FYS, in both pre- and post-surveys as well as interviews there would be a question asking how they found out about the purpose, and more upperclassmen would be interviewed from a wider variety of FYS courses. Semesterly investigation would also be beneficial. As FYS courses are not only offered in the Fall semester, it would be advised that

the Spring FYS students also be surveyed. This again is to help define differences and similarities and why they exist.

Another area that would be beneficial to investigate is how the perceptions of the purpose affect other aspects of the FYS. Correlations could be made with learning objectives, engagement, or how beneficial students think the course is. This would probably need to be done course by course as to not have the confounding variables of topics of the course and instructor differences. The combination of better research methods and new related areas to investigate could help understand the FYS at the University of Wyoming better and eventually improve the course as time goes on.

With this research and the potential research in the future on the topic of student perceptions of the purpose, changes could be advised. It is important to understand student perceptions in conjunction with other areas of FYS to see if there is any need to make changes. Another key aspect of why it is advised to do yearly surveys is to understand how students are changing over time. As elementary and secondary education evolve, students will do the same and universities need to take that into consideration when deciding to make changes. There is much more to investigate and learn about First Year Seminars at the University of Wyoming, and as time goes on more research will need to be done and these topics will change and evolve along with the students who are taking the courses.

APPENIX A

Survey distributed to students at the beginning of the Fall 2018 semester.

FYS – 2018-2019

Student Pre Survey

FYS Course number _____

By completing this survey you are consenting to participate in a study on the FYS experience. Your information is anonymous.

Please indicate whether or not

you consent to participate in this survey.

_____ Yes, I consent to participate in this survey

_____ No I do not consent to participate in this survey

Student Pre-survey

What do you know about the purpose of taking an FYS course?

Why did you choose this particular FYS course?

How interested are you in this course compared to your other courses?

How much time do you think you will spend doing homework for this course?

Did you participate in a summer bridge program?

What do you think your biggest challenges will be as a freshman?

What are you most nervous about as you start your college experience?

What are you most excited about as you start your college experience?

Do you know what you want to do when you finish college?

What is your definition of critical thinking?

How confident are you in meeting each of the following learning objectives?: (on a scale of

1-5 for each)

1. Access diverse information through focused research, active discussion, and collaboration with peers
2. Separate facts from inferences and relevant from irrelevant information, and explain the limitations of information
3. Evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and reliability of conclusions drawn from information
4. Recognize and synthesize multiple perspectives to develop innovative viewpoints
5. Analyze one's own and others' assumptions and evaluate the relevance of contexts when presenting a position
6. Communicate ideas in writing using appropriate documentation

APPENIX B

Questions the upperclassmen were asked in the Fall 2018 semester about their FYS.

1. Name, major now and is it different than when you were a freshman (if it did how or why), class standing, FYS
2. How did you end up in this FYS?
3. What stood out to you about your FYS course?
4. What went well in the FYS course?
5. What could be improved about that FYS course?
6. In general, how would you compare this to other courses during your freshman year?
7. What did you see as the purpose of your FYS course?

8. What were your biggest challenges as a freshman?
 - a. How did you overcome those challenges?
 - b. Is there anything that might have helped more?

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