



Educating minds and hearts to change the world

**Persistence Rates from the Freshman to Sophomore Year
Among USF Students Enrolled in the Freshman Seminar Series, Fall 2004-2006**

Office of Institutional Research

September 12, 2008

For the past 20 years, nationwide research has increasingly focused on those variables that are associated with retention among college students from their freshman to sophomore year. A growing body of that research, for example, has generally shown a significant difference in retention rates among college students from the freshman to sophomore year associated with enrollment in freshman seminars. In several studies, using different methodologies, and holding possible intervening variables constant, retention rates during the first year of college have often been shown to be higher among students enrolled in freshman seminars than among students not enrolled in freshman seminars (Fidler and Hunter, 1989, Barefoot, 1993, Miller and Janz, 2007). These outcomes have not, however, been universal in the research literature. Some studies have shown no relationship between participation in a freshman seminar and second-year retention (Handel, 2001), while other studies have found no relationship between retention and participation in a freshman seminar unless the seminar was linked to a special cluster course program (Barefoot, 1998). Other studies have examined possible interactive effects, such as pre-college academic preparation. For example, Miller and Janz (2007) found that students of all entering academic ability levels generally benefited from participation in a first-year seminar, and no significant interaction effects were found based on entering academic ability level.

During the 2007-08 academic year, the Office of Institutional Research at USF conducted a study of retention rates from the freshman to the sophomore year among all first-time freshmen in the Fall 2004, 2005, and 2006 cohorts. In Fall 2008, the Office considered an additional variable in the analysis of freshman retention in these cohorts: enrollment in a freshman seminar. The major findings in the freshman seminar analysis were:

- Among those Fall 2004 first-time freshmen who enrolled in a freshman seminar, 88.5 percent continued at USF into their second year, whereas among those first-time freshman who did not enroll in a freshman seminar, 85.7 percent continued at USF into their second year (Table 1)
- Among the Fall 2005 first-time freshmen who enrolled in a freshman seminar, 89.4 percent continued at USF into their second year, whereas among those first-time freshman who did not enroll in a freshman seminar, 82.5 percent continued at USF into their second year (Table 2)
- Among the Fall 2006 first-time freshmen who enrolled in a freshman seminar, 84.6 percent continued at USF into their second year, whereas among those first-time freshman who did not enroll in a freshman seminar, 82.0 percent continued at USF into their second year (Table 3)
- Among all first-time freshmen in the combined Fall 2004 through Fall 2006 cohorts who enrolled in a freshman seminar, 87.3 percent continued at USF into their second year, whereas among those first-time freshmen that did not enroll in a freshman seminar, 83.4 percent continued at USF into their second year (Table 4). Using Chi-Square Analysis, the difference in attrition rates between the two groups was statistically significant ($\chi^2=3.913$, $p<.05$)

Freshman Persistence and Participation in Freshman Seminars: Cohorts 2004, 2005, 2006

Table 1: Comparison of first-year persistence among students who did or did not participate in Freshman Seminars, Fall Cohort 2004

	Participated in Freshman Seminar		Did not participate in Freshman Seminar	
	N	%	N	%
First-Time Freshmen				
Non-continuing	14	11.5%	116	14.3%
Continuing	108	88.5%	694	85.7%
Total	122	100%	810	100%

Table 2: Comparison of first-year persistence among students who did or did not participate in Freshman Seminars, Fall Cohort 2005

	Participated in Freshman Seminar		Did not participate in Freshman Seminar	
	N	%	N	%
First-Time Freshmen				
Non-continuing	14	10.6%	138	17.2%
Continuing	118	89.4%	664	82.8%
Total	132	100%	802	100%

Table 3: Comparison of first-year persistence among students who did or did not participate in Freshman Seminars, Fall Cohort 2006

	Participated in Freshman Seminar		Did not participate in Freshman Seminar	
	N	%	N	%
First-Time Freshmen				
Non-continuing	25	15.4%	165	18.0%
Continuing	137	84.6%	750	82.0%
Total	162	100%	915	100%

Table 4: Comparison of students who did or did not participate in the Freshmen Seminar, Combined Fall Cohorts 2004-2006

	Participated in Freshman Seminar		Did not participate in Freshman Seminar	
	N	%	N	%
First-Time Freshmen				
Non-continuing	53	12.74%	419	16.58%
Continuing	363	87.26%	2108	83.42%
Total	416	100%	2527	100%

p<.05

Overall, we conclude that successful completion of a freshman seminar has a modest relationship to retention, and may serve as one of many contributing factors in helping to explain which freshmen are most likely to continue at USF into a second year. Our research, reported elsewhere, has shown that retention is a complex phenomenon, and that in addition to participation in a freshman seminar:

- Academic performance while at USF is related to retention in that non-continuing students generally obtain a significantly lower mean GPA in their first and second semesters than continuing students.
- A grade of D or lower during the first semester or during both semesters of the freshman year is associated with attrition.
- Withdrawing from a class after Census Date during the first semester is associated with attrition.
- One-year attrition occurs at USF among the less prepared students as well as among those who are better prepared. Attrition occurs among those who do well academically at USF as well as those who do not.
- Possible high school-related predictor variables, such as GPA, did not adequately differentiate between those who continued and those who failed to return.
- Financial and academic reasons are most frequently mentioned by students as reasons for leaving USF.
- Specific measures of student engagement, such as students' evaluation of their entire educational experience during the first year, are positively associated with retention.
- Student participation in a living learning community is positively associated with student retention.
- Specific measures of student satisfaction, such as meeting expectations for a quality education, are positively associated with retention.

In future research, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including logistic regression analysis, we will attempt to establish the relative predictive value of the above variables, and possibly others, in explaining student persistence at USF. This analysis should help to inform various retention strategies currently underway at USF, and strategies planned for the future.

References

- Barefoot, B. *Exploring the Evidence: Reporting the Outcomes of Freshman Seminars*. National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience: University of South Carolina, 1993.
- Barefoot, B. *Exploring the Evidence: Reporting Outcomes of First-Year Seminars, Volume II*. National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience: University of South Carolina, 1998.
- Fidler, P. *National Survey on Freshman Seminar Programs: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations*. National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience. University of South Carolina, 1991.
- Fidler, P. & Hunter, M. How seminars enhance student success. In M. Upcraft, J. Gardner, & Associates (Eds.) *The Freshman Year Experience* (pp. 216-237). San Francisco: Josey Bass, 1989.
- Handel, D. The relative contribution of participating in a first-year seminar on student satisfaction and retention into the sophomore year. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED453724).
- Miller, W. & Janz, J. The retention impact of a first-year seminar on students with varying pre-college academic performance. *The Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 2007, Vol. 19, No.1., pp 47-62.