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# The Hotel College First Year Experience at UNLV: Does it Make a Difference?

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**THE HOTEL COLLEGE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE AT UNLV:  
DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

By

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Bachelor of Business Administration

Northwood University

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the

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William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the fall of 2012, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) introduced a first year experience course to the undergraduate curriculum. The purpose of the course is to improve the transition from high school to college for first-time, full-time students. The course introduces the students to many aspects of university life including such topics as: academic resources, time management, goal setting, strategic learning, studying and test taking, critical thinking, ethics and career exploration, planning and preparation.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the impact that completion of a first year experience course has on the retention rate and grade point average of students in the William F. Harrah's College of Hotel Administration at UNLV. This study was designed to compare grade point averages and retention rates between students who entered the program prior to the creation of the first year experience with students who began the program after its implementation to determine whether there are statistically significant changes. The data evaluated was accessed using the university's data warehouse with the permission and support of UNLV.

Analysis of the student data indicated that there was a positive impact on the retention rate and grade point averages for the students who completed the first year experience course. The study establishes a base line for further research, including substantially longer longitudinal studies within the Hotel College to determine if learning outcomes and retention goals are impacted by the completion of the course.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Historically, the state of Nevada has experienced college retention rates well below the national average. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the six-year graduation rate of students attaining a bachelor's degree in Nevada is 35.8%. This compares to a national average of 55.5% (NCES, 2009). Therefore, Nevada's college student retention rate is 19.7% lower than the national average. According to statistics reported on the Office of Decision Support website at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the university had a six-year graduation rate of 40.6%. This increased to 42.8% in August of 2013. Even after this improvement, UNLV is 12.7% lower than the national average. In other words, although the attainment numbers have increased, there is still much work to be done.

Nevada has recently changed its higher education funding formula. The state used to use an enrollment based model. Now a completion-driven model is used. Therefore, retention has a larger economic impact on the university than in previous years. What this means is that UNLV needs to increase its retention rate in order to maintain the amount of funding it receives from the state. UNLV is also striving to be a Tier 1 research institute. In order for this to happen, the six-year graduation rate needs to improve to 50%. UNLV has developed a Retention, Progression, and Completion initiative with the goal of increasing the current graduation rate. Complete requirements of attaining Carnegie Tier 1 status are reported on a UNLV website at <http://www.unlv.edu/president/tier1/faq>

One of the steps taken at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) to work toward the goal of improving the retention rate among students was to introduce a new

required First Year Experience course to the curriculum in the fall of 2012. The class has been developed to provide skills and tools to improve the transition from high school to college.

Many students face significant changes as they start their college careers. These include such issues as additional freedom in decision-making, as well as academic choices. The goal of this course is to help the student successfully navigate this freedom and make well-informed decisions that help them reach their goals in the new, larger and more complex environment in which they find themselves in college (Heavey & Gianoutsos, 2013). The First Year Experience concentrates on teaching skills to the incoming students that will not only help in the attainment of a college degree, but also in their future lives and careers. In addition to the topics mentioned previously, issues discussed range from basic study skills to educational and career planning. In other words, the First Year Experience program is considered a more holistic approach to education, addressing not only academics but also self-discovery, change, motivation, and personal responsibility (Sherfield, Montgomery & Moody, 2005).

Although new to UNLV, the concept of a First Year Experience is not new to higher education. In the United States, a course of this type is offered on more than 90% of college campuses (Barefoot, 2002; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this quantitative study is to determine the impact that completion of a First Year Experience course has on the retention rate and grade point averages of students in the William H. Harrah Hotel College at UNLV. The Hotel College is the third largest among UNLV's 14 colleges, trailing only Liberal Arts and Business.

This study compares grade point averages and retention rates between students who entered the program prior to the creation of the First Year Experience with students who began the program after the implementation of the First Year Experience to determine whether there are statistically significant changes among student performance and retention.

### **Hypotheses**

*Research Question 1:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following semester at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

*Hypothesis 1:* Students who completed the First Year Experience course were retained to the following semester at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

*Research Question 2:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following year at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

*Hypothesis 2:* Students who completed the First Year Experience course were retained to the following year at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

*Research Question 3:* Were the cumulative grade point averages at the end of the first year higher for students who completed the First Year Experience course compared to those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

*Hypothesis 3:* The cumulative grade point average after the first year for students who completed the First Year Experience was higher than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

### **Importance of Study**

Local assessment of a new and ongoing First Year Experience is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Even though many studies have shown that implementation of similar programs across the nation have increased retention, there are many studies that contradict these findings. The university has allocated a tremendous amount of resources to develop and implement the First Year Experience course and change the general education requirements. Across campus, the types of First Year Experiences vary. Therefore, it is necessary to look at each individual college to determine if the program is meeting the goals set out by the university. All colleges within the university are unique and so it is essential to evaluate each First Year Experience individually by college.

### **Definitions**

Attrition – loss of student enrollment to the next semester or next year as a result of transfers or dropouts (Hagedorn, 2005).

Holistic education - the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community (Miller, 2000).

Grade Point Average – based on a 4.0 scale.

Persistence – continuation at a university until graduation (Hagedorn, 2005).

Retention - a student remaining at a single college or university from one semester to the next (Barefoot, 2004).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

UNLV was founded in 1957. The university had 23,009 undergraduate students enrolled in the fall of 2013. Approximately 70% of the student population attends the university full time. UNLV ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the nation by U.S. News & World Report for top universities by yield, which is the rate accepted students actually enroll in the college. Of the 81% of students accepted by UNLV, 64% enroll, on average. In the years 2011-2012, the university, as a whole, awarded 3,655 Bachelor's degrees. The Hotel College degrees accounted for 18% of those degrees. The Hotel College also had the largest number of international students enrolled in the fall of 2012 with 606. Therefore, about 18% of the students in the Hotel College are from foreign countries. First-year retention rates for first-time freshmen at the university, as a whole, for 2012 was 76.3%. During that same time period, the Hotel College retention rate was 85.3%, thereby exceeding the university by 9%. The Hotel College comprised slightly less than 7% of the new freshmen entering UNLV and 13.2% of the total student enrollment.

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact that the completion of the First Year Experience course, "Hospitality Academic and Personal Development," has on the retention rate and grade point average of students in the Hotel College at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The First Year Experience course was introduced to the Hotel College curriculum in the fall of 2012. It is a two-credit course that is used to emphasize a holistic approach to education. Adoption of a new course requires analysis to determine if perceived benefits are being attained, by both the student and by the university. Namely, this is the comparison of the retention rate of enrollment to the

semester following the course and subsequent semesters compared to the retention rates of freshman before the course was developed. According to Barefoot (2004), the definition used in US higher education for retention is a student remaining at a single college or university from the first to the second year. The study will also compare the overall grade point average for the first year for those who completed the course to those who did not.

### **History**

The First Year Experience model is not a new concept. In the late 1800's, it was decided that students entering college had needs that were specific to that matriculation (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Gordon, 1989; Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Approximately 130 years ago, universities such as Johns Hopkins and Harvard recognized that it was necessary to adopt programs to facilitate the transition from high school to higher education. Throughout the years, orientation courses were introduced (most were not for credit). The first orientation program designed for course credit was in 1911 at Reed College in Oregon (Gordon, 1989). By the middle of the 1900's, over 40% of colleges and universities in the US offered some type of orientation. Moving forward to the 1980's, the introduction of first year courses/seminars/experiences became more the norm than the exception. The National Research Center for the First Year Experience was established at the University of South Carolina in 1987 (Henscheid & Keup, 2011). The center began publishing a peer-refereed journal in 1989, currently known as the *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*. This journal is the only peer-reviewed journal that focuses on the first-year transition (Campbell, Saltonstall, & Buford, 2013). Since the inception of the journal, nearly 250 articles have been

published. A First Year Experience in some form is now offered in more than 90% of colleges and universities across the country (Barefoot, 2002; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004). Throughout the years, the First Year Experience courses/seminars have been researched more than any other topic in the history of higher education (Barefoot, Warnock, Dickson, Richardson, and Roberts, 1998; Cuseo, 2007).

### **Definition**

First year experience courses vary widely across institutions - ranging from highly organized learning communities to basic courses introducing students to college life (Jamelske, 2008). However, there is a central theme in all approaches, i.e., the promotion and cultivation of academic and social skills. It is a holistic approach to higher education. (Miller, 2000). The First Year Experience course focuses not only on academics, but also on learning skills that will benefit a student throughout their lives. These skills include: learning how to learn, managing time efficiently, setting goals, leadership skills, diversity, critical thinking, the importance of community service, and includes specific learning outcomes. These courses have been implemented with the goal of increasing retention, degree completion, and the improvement of student learning (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004; Friedman & Marsh, 2009; Henscheid, 2004).

### **Types of FYE Programs**

The most common types of First Year Experience programs as identified by Barefoot (1992) are:

1. *Extended Orientation Seminar*. Content likely includes introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues.

2. *Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections.*  
Primary focus is on academic theme/discipline, sometimes part of a general education requirement that may also include academic components such as critical thinking and expository writing.
3. *Academic seminars on various topics.* This seminar type also emphasizes the academic theme/discipline concept but topics vary from section to section.
4. *Pre-professional or discipline-linked seminar.* Designed to prepare students for the specific major/discipline that they are enrolled and usually taught within professional schools or specific disciplines.
5. *Basic study skills seminar.* Offered for academically underprepared students.  
The focus is on basic academic skills such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts.

At UNLV, skills and knowledge that students are expected to obtain by graduation are outlined in the University Undergraduate Learning Outcomes (UULOs). The five broad UULOs are as follows: intellectual breadth and lifelong learning, inquiry and critical thinking, communication, global/multicultural knowledge and awareness, and citizenship and ethics (Heavey & Gianoutsos, 2013). In the Hotel College, students are informed of the history of the university, as well as the resources and co-curricular activities that are available on campus.

The First Year Experience in the Hotel College at UNLV is a discipline-linked seminar. It is a two-credit course that consists of an hour of lecture and an hour of discussion groups per week. The lecture is taught by a full-time tenured professor. The class size is between 100-125 students. The discussion groups are comprised of no more

than 25 students and are led by graduate assistants. Industry professionals are frequent guest speakers in the lecture sections with the goal of introducing the students to the hospitality industry.

### **Importance of Student Retention**

Higher retention rates of college students are important to institutions for several reasons. This is especially true under the new Nevada funding formula. Student tuition and fees are financial lifelines to a university (Jamleske, 2008, Webster & Showers, 2011). These tuitions and fees are often augmented through government subsidies for public universities and through private gifts and donations. There is a direct link between the number of students enrolled and the amount of revenue received by the university (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). In addition, low retention rates at public colleges and universities may have institutional funding impacted by state legislators. The loss of one student will cost the university thousands of dollars in lost tuition and fee revenue. In addition, rankings of college and universities are impacted by first-year retention rate as the *U.S. News and World Report* uses this information as a factor in the annual college rankings (Porter & Swing, 2006). Parents read this report to help determine where their children should attend college. The lower the retention rate, the harder universities must work to replace students who have left, which, in turn uses resources that could be used for other needs (Jamelske, 2008). The cost of recruiting new students is 3 to 5 times the cost of retaining students who are already enrolled (Cuseo, 2007). The issue of student retention has created a “retention industry” composed of corporations and consultants marketing products and services to assist institutions increase their retention rates (Barefoot, 2004). Most of the research done so far has concentrated on the student, i.e.:

very little research has been done on the way the First Year Experience is taught and presented and its impact. Barefoot (2004) addresses some very important issues moving into the future. The most significant is the acknowledgement that programs such as First Year Experience have reduced student dropout rates, but have not drastically changed the overall retention rates. The article suggests that future efforts should focus on institutional excellence as defined by student learning and engagement, and that higher retention will be a result of these initiatives.

So far in this paper, only the importance of retention and completion has been discussed. However, there is a larger issue at stake, as well. The United States will need a more technically skilled workforce in the future (Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom, 2004). A high school diploma no longer guarantees employment. According to the Lumina Foundation for Education (2013), by the year 2020 nearly two-thirds of jobs in the United States will require some form of postsecondary education. Those without such education will compete for a shrinking number of low-skilled and low-paid jobs. This is particularly troublesome for the State of Nevada. Presently, the percent of adults (ages 25-64) with a college degree is 30.1% of the state's population. The national average is 39.4% or 9.3% higher than Nevada's average. At the present rate of attainment, this number will only grow to 34.9% by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2013). In addition, the median income of a household with only high school diplomas is \$36,835 while the national average for households with college grads is \$68,728 (United States Census Bureau, 2003). Obviously, households with higher incomes put more money into the economy. This, too, foretells a poor future for Nevada as the state is likely to have to learn to live with less in the future.

## **Historic Rates**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2004), the national retention rate for students returning to the second year was 76.4%. The state of Nevada had a retention rate of 69.5% at that time and the UNLV retention rate was 73.3%. In 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics reported the national retention rate for students returning to the second year was 77.1%. The state of Nevada's retention rate increased to 73.8% in 2010 and the UNLV retention rate increased to 76.4%, matching national retention rates from the study in 2004 but falling far behind 2010 statistics.

## **Factors of Retention**

In 1975, Vincent Tinto was the first to formulate a theory on attrition and retention in higher education. Tinto's theory revolves around a student's ability to integrate academically, as well as socially at a university (Tinto, 1975). Academic preparation is another key element in the theory. Students who are not academically prepared have a higher rate of attrition and have a greater chance of leaving the institution involuntarily (academically dismissed). Institutional fit, a student's feeling of belonging at the institution, is also a major factor that contributes to student persistence. An ACT policy report, *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention* (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004) more recently identified nine broad non-academic categories factors that influence retention (academic goals, achievement motivation, academic self-confidence, academic-related skills, contextual influences, general self-concept, institutional commitment, social involvement, and social support). The authors assert the academic factors (high school grade point average and ACT assessment score) and the above stated non-academic factors must both be

addressed. They also contend that there is not a “one size fits all” retention strategy. Every institution is unique and the most effective programs are specifically designed to meet the individual institutions needs with available resources (Robbins et al., 2004). Additional variables that affect student persistence are categorized as student centered and institutional centered (Upcraft et al., 2005). Student centered variables include: academic preparedness (remedial courses need to be taken in math, reading or writing), age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and first generation college student. Institutional variables include: selectivity, institutional type (two year or four year), the size of the institution, gender composition, racial composition and public vs. private control (Upcraft et al., 2005).

### **Academic Achievement Indicators**

Students who participate in a First Year Experience are more likely to interact with faculty, engage in good classroom practices, are better collaborators with other students and have higher course attendance (Keup & Barefoot, 2005). The same study also states that students who have participated in a First Year Experience feel more connected to the campus community and have a higher probability of building friendships on campus. Numerous studies have suggested that student participation has a positive impact on the following (Cuseo, 2007):

1. Grade point average at the end of the first term or first year of college.
2. Cumulative grade point average attained beyond the first year.
3. Grade point average attained vs. grade point average predicted
4. Total number of first-year students in good academic standings.
5. Total number of first-year courses passed

6. Total number of first-year courses completed with a grade of “C” or higher
7. Percentage of students qualifying for the Dean’s list and Honors programs

In addition to student retention and academic performance, First Year Experience courses provide students with an opportunity to interact with faculty and/or staff; communicate information about the policies, procedures and traditions of the university, and introduce students to campus resources (Jamelske, 2008).

### **Previous Research**

As previously noted, the First Year Experience programs have been widely researched. In this section, examples of the types of research that has been done and the results of those studies are summarized. The studies include those done at specific universities, multiple universities and many different types of programs. In recent years, little research has been published in the *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* on the effects of First Year Experience courses (Campbell et al., 2013, Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). These authors concluded that the academic community believes that First Year Experience programs are effective and backed by empirical research. They also agree that researchers assume that the programs no longer need to be studied. This assumption may not be accurate as shown in some of the studies discussed next.

The University of South Carolina, the home of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, over the period of 16 consecutive years, found that students who participated in the university’s first-year seminar had a higher retention rate to the sophomore year than those who did not participate in the

program (Fidler, 1991). The difference in retention was statistically significant in 11 of those 16 years.

Starke, Harth, & Sirianni (2001) found that the average first-to-second-year retention rate at Ramapo College in New Jersey was significantly higher in the five consecutive years following the implementation of the first-year seminar compared to the three years prior to the course becoming a requirement.

Similar results were found at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (Jackson, 2005), where retention rates were significantly higher for those who participated in the first-year seminar than those who did not. Students also returned to the sophomore year at a higher rate at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, (Miller, Janz & Chen, 2007). California State University-San Marcos found students who enrolled in a first-term seminar had a statistically significant higher continuation rate than those who did not enroll in the course (Sparks, 2005).

Porter and Swing (2006) used a survey of 20,000 first year students and data from 45 four-year institutions to try to determine which aspects of the First Year Experience had the most impact on student retention. All of the institutions in the study used the transition format of the First Year Experience. It was found that study skills and academic engagement and health education had statistically significant impacts on retention to the second year of college (Porter & Swing, 2006).

Contradictory to the above mentioned research, a study at the University of Nevada, Reno found that completion of a subject-based First Year Experience course was not related to persistence or student grade point average (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004). In this study, the authors believe that merely implementing a First Year Experience

course without knowledgeable, supportive staff may not be any more valuable than no program at all. The authors caution institutions to examine First Year Experience courses closely and allow time for the programs to mature. Results in another study that compared a 10-week orientation seminar and an interactive course with the intention of increasing students' understanding of their field of study, found that neither course had significant influence on retention or grade point average (Weissman & Magill, 2008). At the University of Buffalo, it was found that the First Year Experience course impacted only the first semester for retention and grade point average. Beyond the second year, there were not any statistically significant differences. In fact, the study showed that in the semesters after the study, nonparticipants mean grade point average was higher than those participating in the First Year Experience course (Lang, 2007). Similarly, at the University of Memphis, a longitudinal study found that the First Year Experience course did not have an impact beyond the second year of enrollment on retention or grade point average (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2008).

A study done at an unnamed university compared the impact of three transitional programs: Academic Themed Floors (ATF) in the residence hall, Freshmen Interest Groups (FIG) and a First Year Experience two-credit course. The ATF divides floors of the residence by educational theme or discipline, the FIG includes students that live on the same floor and are enrolled in four classes together and the First Year Experience course focuses on topics to help the transition to college. The study found that the ATF and First Year Experience did not impact retention or first semester grade point average. For the participants in the FIG, retention was increased by 18% and grade point average by .009 (Purdie & Rosser, 2011).

A First Year Experience program that began in 1997 at a Midwestern public university was evaluated in 2006 to determine the impact on retention and grade point average after the first year. No positive effect was found for retention for participants. However, the participants did have higher grade point averages than those who did not participate in the First Year Experience (Jamelske, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Retention rates are more important than ever in the global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not only important for the universities financial well-being, but also essential for the United States to continue to be competitive in the global market by producing skilled employees. Overall, the literature review provided background information that will assist in the evaluation of the variables that impact retention rates and academic success in the Hotel College at UNLV. The gap in research exists because of the variability of results from different institutions. The literature showed varied results between institution and program. Each being unique in structure and effectiveness, it is necessary to assess every program individually.

Other research studies on this topic have reported results that are not statistically significant, but still find the results important. After the review of the multiple studies, it clearly shows that different First Year Experience programs yield different results. This is critical in the reasoning for this study. Implementation alone does not constitute success. It is necessary to assess and evaluate each individual program to determine if it meets the goals of the institution and the college. There are many variables that impact the retention and grade point averages, but there must be a beginning. This study is the beginning assessment for the Hotel College at UNLV.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHOD**

### **Restatement of Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this quantitative study is to determine the impact that completion of a First Year Experience course has on the retention rate and grade point average of first-time, full-time students in the William H. Harrah Hotel College at UNLV. This study is designed to compare grade point averages and retention rates between students who entered the program prior to the creation of the First Year Experience with students who began the program after the implementation to determine whether there are statistically significant differences.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study focused on three areas of assessment outlined in the following research questions and hypotheses.

*Research Question 1:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following semester at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

*Hypothesis 1:* Students who completed the First Year Experience course were retained at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

*Research Question 2:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following year at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

*Hypothesis 2:* Students who completed the First Year Experience course were retained at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

*Research Question 3:* Were the cumulative grade point averages at the end of the first year higher for students who completed the First Year Experience course compared to those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

*Hypothesis 3:* The cumulative grade point average after the first year for students who completed the First Year Experience was higher than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

### **Population and Sample**

This study included all first-time, full-time students enrolled at UNLV in the Hotel College in the fall of 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013, instead of random samples. The First Year Experience course was required of all students in the program and was implemented in the fall of 2012. Students entering the Hotel College prior to that time did not complete the course as it was not available. The total number of full-time, first-time students used for the study was 840. The number of students that did not complete the First Year Experience was 506 and 334 did complete the FYE. It was found that not all students that entered the college after the implementation of First Year Experience (2012) completed the course. This gave the researcher the opportunity to compare the retention rates within the years 2012 and 2013 for those who completed the course and those who did not. The total number of students enrolled in the Hotel College in 2012 was 204 with 149 completing the course and 55 who did not. In 2013, a total of 246 students were enrolled with 185 completing the course and 61 who did not.

### **Data Collection**

The study was conducted using secondary data that was retrieved from archived student records in the UNLV Data Warehouse. The data set was requested from the

UNLV Office of Decision Support with the approval of the Institutional Review Board and the Office of the Registrar. In addition to retention rates and grade point averages, demographic information (age, gender, and race/ethnicity) was also collected to ensure that the experimental and comparison groups were closely matched. Data was collected for students who entered the college each year at the census date of the university in the following spring and fall semesters. For example, students who entered the college in the fall of 2010 retention rates were obtained in the spring and fall of 2011 and cumulative grade point averages were collected after completion of the spring semester.

### **Ethics**

An exempt research application form was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at UNLV for review. The application indicated that the data to be studied was existing data that is stored on the UNLV Data Warehouse. In order to protect the identities and privacy of the students included in the study, the participants were assigned a fake, unique ID that does not allow the students to be identified. The Institutional Review Board reviewed the application and determined the project was exempt under the Federal regulatory statute 45 CFR 46.101(b)4. In addition, the Registrar at the UNLV authorized the use of student records for this study.

### **Design of the study**

A quasi-experimental design was used since there was no random assignment of the students taking the course. A true random allocation was not possible since the course was not available to students before 2012 and it is required of all students since the implementation in the fall of 2012. The students who began the program prior to 2012 were included in the comparison group. The students who completed the First Year

Experience course in 2012 and 2013 were part of the experimental group. Descriptive data found the two groups were similar. The independent variable administered to the experimental group was the completion of the First Year Experience course. The dependent variable for the first hypothesis was retention to the following semester. For the second hypothesis, the dependent variable was retention to the following year. The third hypothesis dependent variable was the cumulative grade point average at the completion of the first year of college.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using SPSS 21.0 software. To answer the first two research questions, data were compared of all first-time, full-time students enrolled in the William F. Harrah's College of Hotel Administration at UNLV in the academic years 2010 through 2013. A chi-square statistical procedure was used to compare the retention rates from the first semester to the following semester and for the students in years 2010 through 2013 from the first semester to the following year. Data for students enrolled in 2013 was not yet available for the retention to the following year. The independent variable in each case was completion of First Year Experience and the dependent variable was the retention rate.

The third research question analyzed data for students that enrolled in the fall of the academic years 2010 through 2012. Data for cumulative grade point averages for the students that began the 2013 academic year was not available at the time of data retrieval. The data was analyzed using a *t*-test to determine if there were statistically significant differences in grade point averages for students that completed First Year Experience and those who did not.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Data Collection

Student data for this study of the first-time, full-time students was retrieved from archived records by the Office of Decision Support following authorization from the Registrar and the approval from IRB. The data was collected for the academic years 2010 to 2013. The data set included all students that had chosen a major under the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration umbrella who were attending college for the first time and had a full time course load of 12 credits or more. The data included demographic information for each student including age, sex, race/ethnicity, grade point average at the end of the first semester and first year, and if the student was retained to the following semester and for the years 2010-2012 retention to the following year. This was to compare the incoming classes for homogeneity from year to year. In addition, for the years 2012 and 2013 completion of the First Year Experience was included. The total number of full-time, first-time students that were enrolled in 12 or more credits was 840 for the years 2010 through 2013 (see Figure 1). The sample was 59% female (see Figure 2) and the average age was 18.187 years (see Figure 3). The racial/ethnic breakdown of the students who comprised the group was: .2% (n=2) American Indian/Alaska Native, .2% (n=3) Unknown, .4% (n=3) Pacific Islander, 5% (n=42) African American, 6.7% (n=56) Two or more races, 14% (n=118) Nonresident Alien, 17.9% (n=150) Hispanic, 18.1% (n=152) Asian and 37.5% (n=315) White.

Experimental and control groups were established to by comparing students who completed First Year Experience to those who did not. For the years included in the study, a total of 506 students did not complete First Year Experience and 334 students did

complete the First Year Experience course. In the first year that First Year Experience became a requirement (2012), 149 students completed the course and 54 did not. In 2013, 185 students completed the First Year Experience and 61 did not (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Retention Data by Percent to the Following Semester*

Semester	Retained		Not Retained		Total
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	
Fall 2010	191	94.1	12	5.9	203
Fall 2011	178	95.2	9	4.8	187
Sub-total	369	94.6	21	5.4	390
Fall 2012	196		8		204
FYE Yes	147	98.7	2	1.3	149
FYE No	49	89.1	6	10.9	55
Fall 2013	232		14		246
FYE Yes	179	96.8	6	3.2	185
FYE No	53	86.9	8	13.1	61
Sub-total	428	95.1	22	4.9	450
Totals	797	94.9	43	5.1	840

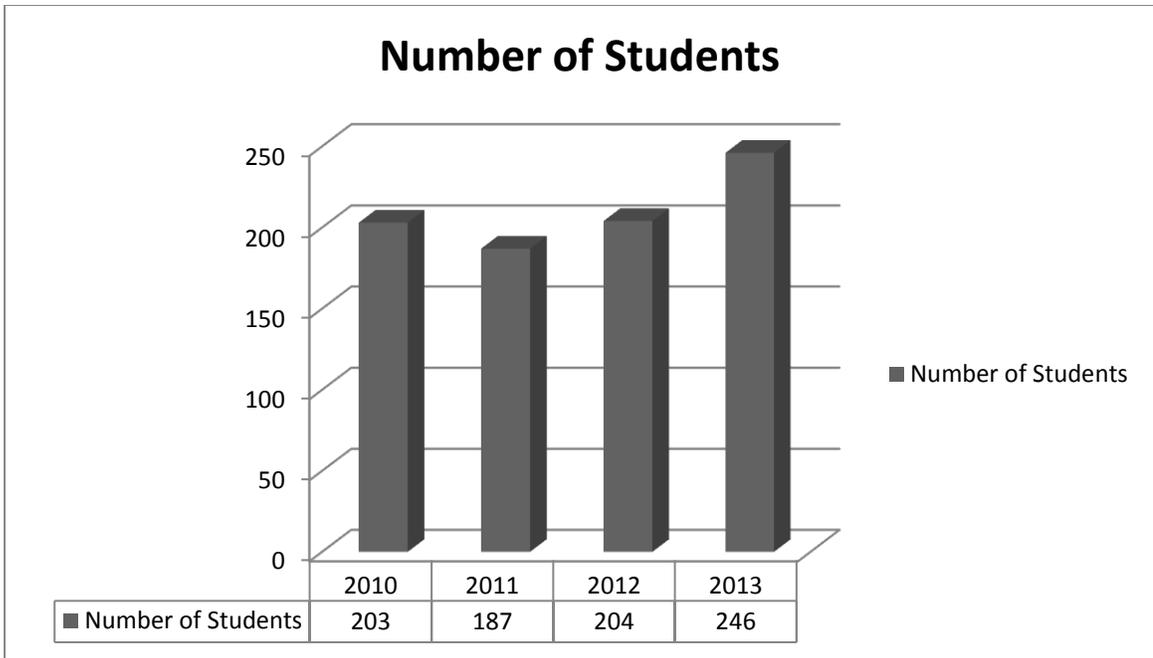


Figure 1. Number of full-time first-time students by academic year.

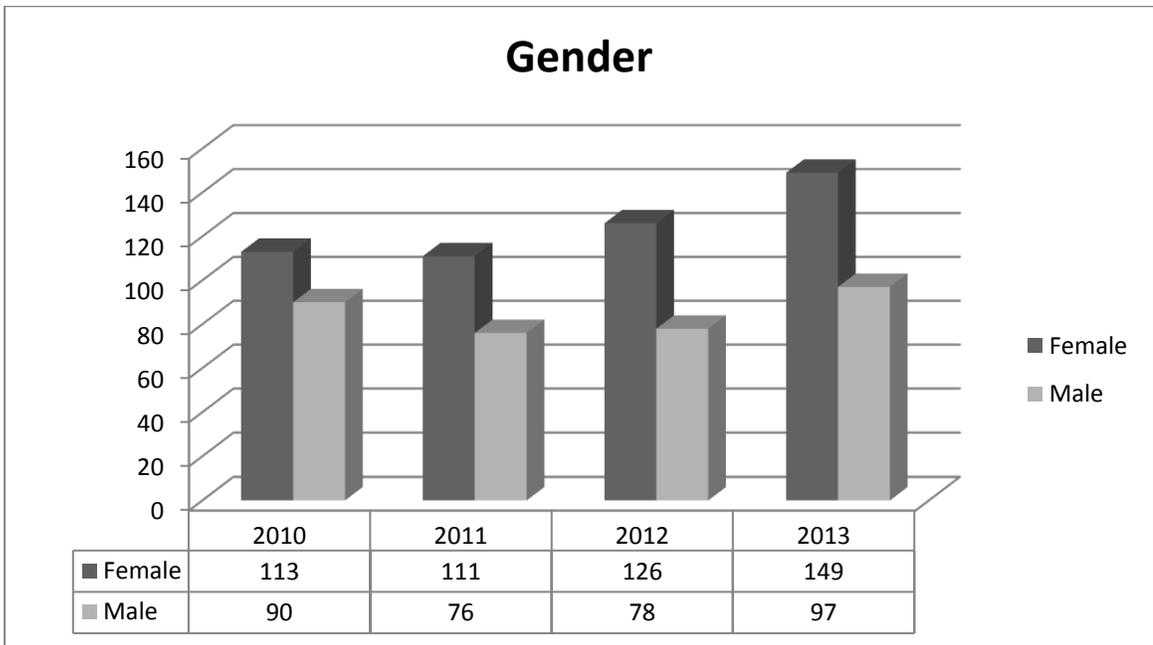


Figure 2. Gender demographics.

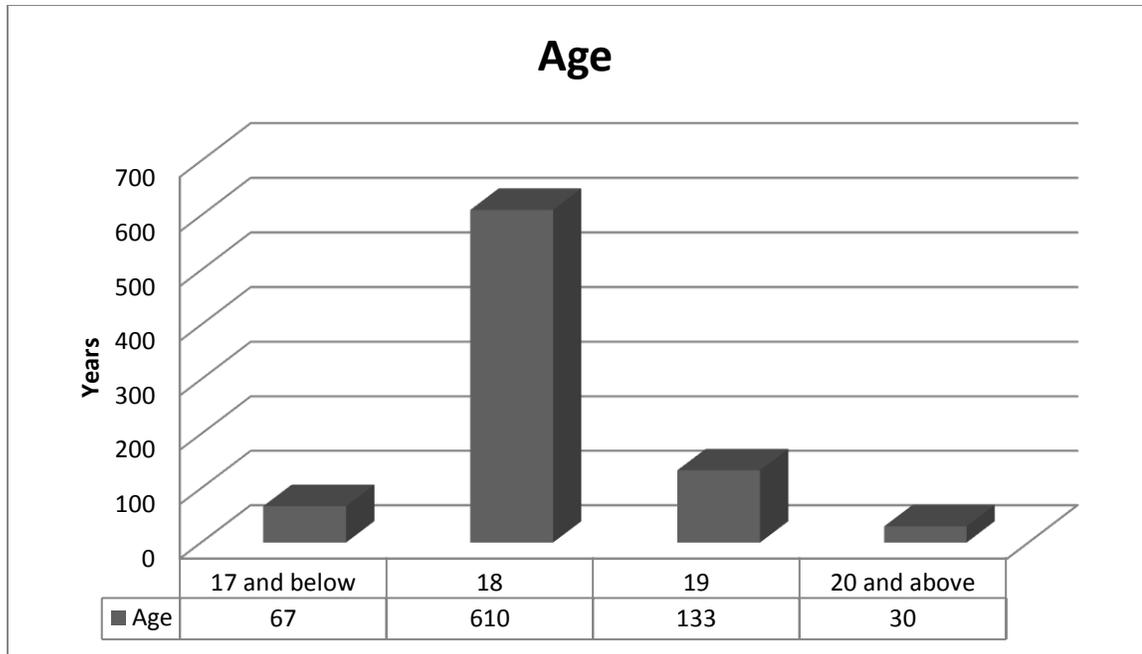


Figure 3. Age demographics.

### Hypotheses Testing

*Research Question 1:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following semester at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

A chi-square statistical test was done using the IBM SPSS program. A total of 840 students were used in the two way cross-classification table (See Table 2 and 3). The  $\alpha$  value=.05. The p-value of the test=.004 with a df=1 (See Table 4). Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis,  $\chi^2(1)=8.470$ ,  $p \leq .05$ . Student retention rates were significantly associated with the completion of the First Year Experience course (See Figures 4 and 5).

Table 2

*Case Processing Summary*

	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Completion of FYE (TCA 103)	840	100.0%	0	0.0%	840	100.0%

Table 3

*Completion of FYE Compared to Retention to the Next Semester*

		Retention to next semester		
		No	Yes	Total
Completion of FYE (TCA 103)	No	35	471	506
	Yes	8	326	334
Total		43	797	840

Table 4

*Pearson Chi-Square Test By Retention to Next Semester*

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.470 <sup>a</sup>	1	.004		

*Note.* 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 17.10

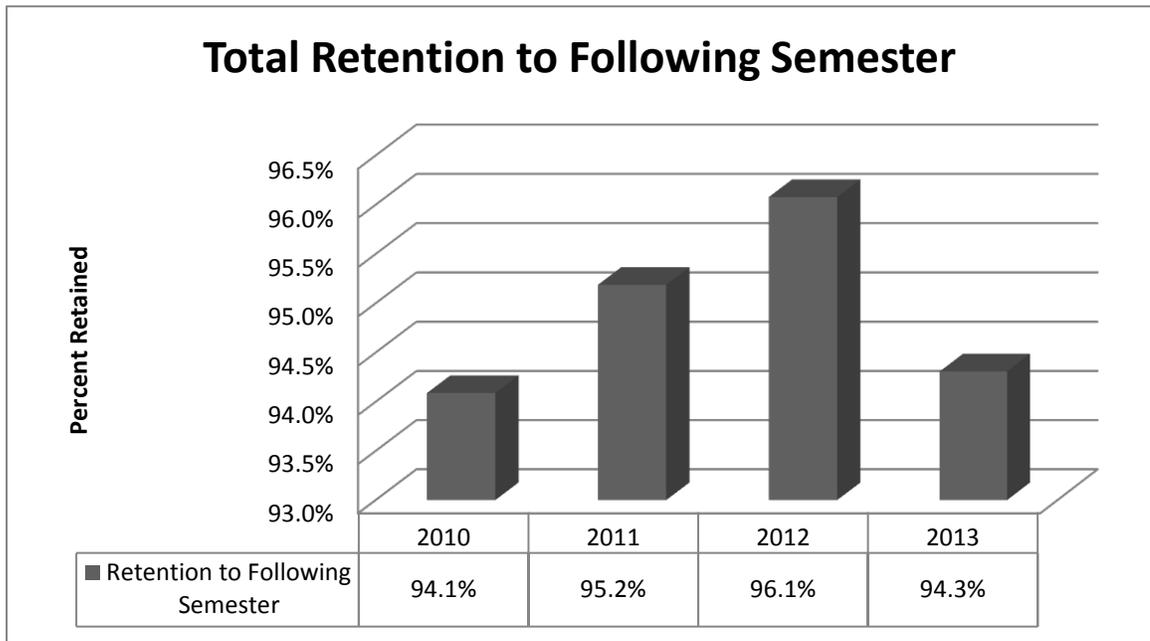


Figure 4. Percentage of students retained to the following semester by year.  
*Note.* Total student retention was used for this table including non-completers of the First Year Experience course in 2012 and 2013.

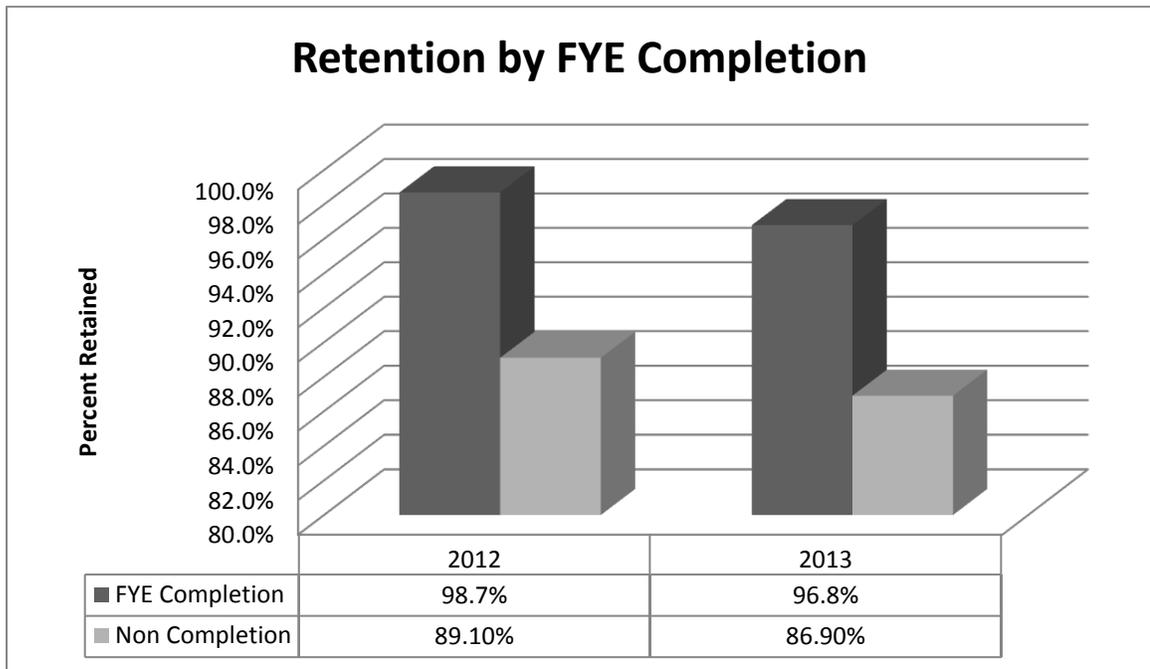


Figure 5. Retention of students to the next semester 2012 and 2013.

*Research Question 2:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following year at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

A total of 594 students were included in the analysis of retention to the next year. Only student data for those who first enrolled in the academic years 2010 to 2012 was included, data for students that began the program in 2013 was not available at the time of the study (See Figure 6). Of the 594 students, 149 completed the First Year Experience course (See Table 5 and 6). Retention to the following year was significantly associated with the completion of the First Year Experience course using a chi-square test of association with  $\alpha=.05$ ,  $df=1$ , and  $p=.000$  (See Table 7). Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis,  $\chi^2(1)=14.050$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

Table 5

*Case Processing Summary 2*

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Retention to the next year	594	100.0%	0	0.0%	594	100.0%

Table 6

*Completion of FYE Compared with Retention to the Next Year*

		Retention to the next year		Total
		No	Yes	
Completion of the FYE	No	101	344	445
	Yes	13	136	149
Total		114	480	594

Table 7

*Pearson Chi-Square Test by Retention to Next Year*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.050 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000		

*Note.* 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 28.60.

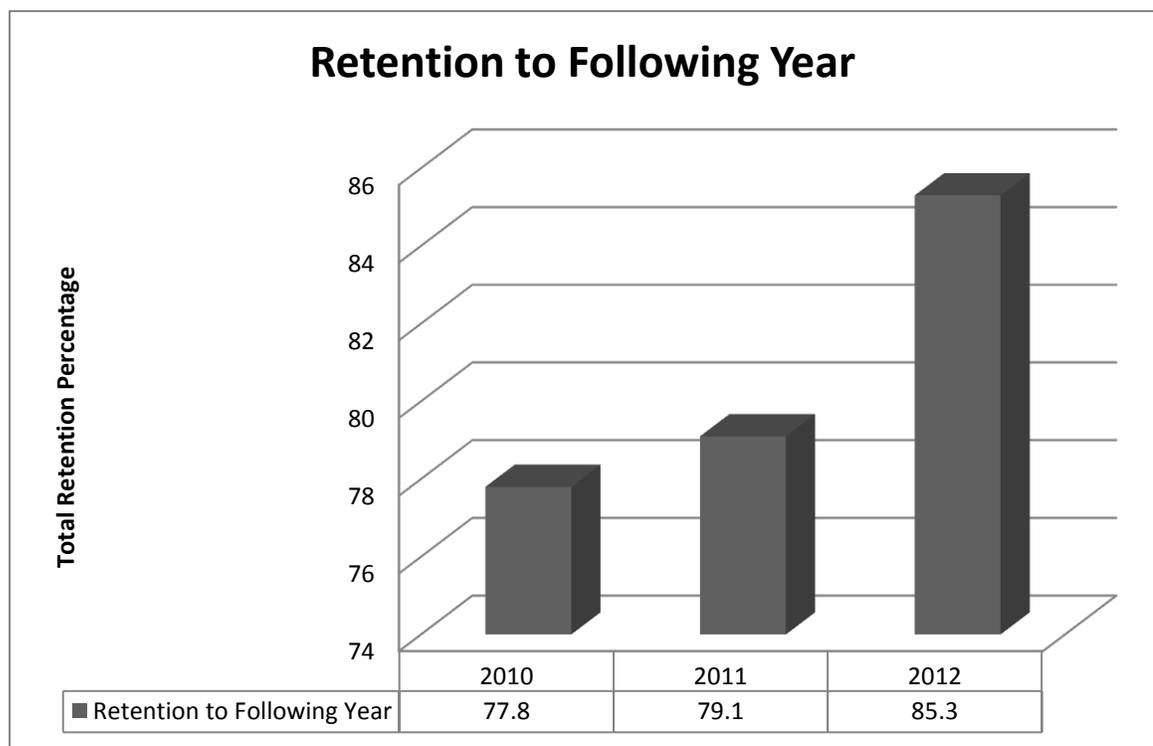


Figure 6. Percentage of students retained to the following year.

*Note.* Total student retention was used for this table including non-completers of the First Year Experience course in 2012.

Table 8

*Retention Data by Percent to the Following Year*

Semester	Retained		Not Retained		Total
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	
Fall 2010	158	77.8	45	22.2	203
Fall 2011	148	79.1	39	20.9	187
Sub-total	306	78.5	84	21.5	390
Fall 2012	174	85.3	30	14.7	204
FYE Yes	136	91.2	13	8.7	149
FYE No	38	69.1	17	30.1	55
Sub-total	174	85.3	30	14.7	204
Totals	489	82.3	114	19.2	594

*Research Question 3:* Were the cumulative grade point averages at the end of the first year higher for students who completed the First Year Experience course compared to those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

Using an independent *t*-test in the IBM SPSS software, first year cumulative grade point average was analyzed for the students entering the program in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Data was not available for students who began in 2013. In addition, data was not available for 35 additional students. For students who did not complete the First Year Experience course,  $n=414$ ,  $\mu=2.77$ ,  $sd=.827$ . For students who did complete the First Year Experience course,  $n=144$ ,  $\mu=2.89$ ,  $sd=.627$ . The statistical analysis indicated  $t=-1.784$  with a  $p\text{-value}=.075$ . There was not a statistically significant difference in the

cumulative grade point averages of students who completed the First Year Experience course and for the students who did not complete the First Year Experience course.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact that completion of a First Year Experience course has on the retention rate and grade point average of first-time, full-time students in the William H. Harrah Hotel College at UNLV. This study was designed to compare grade point averages and retention rates between students who entered the program prior to the creation of the First Year Experience with students who began the program after the implementation to determine whether there are statistically significant differences.

### **Discussion**

This study compared retention rates between first-time, full-time students who completed the First Year Experience course with those who did not and grade point averages of the same students after the first year of college. Archived student data was obtained through the Office of Decision Support at UNLV. Three research questions were posed at the beginning of the study. The following section discusses the analysis of the data for each of those questions.

*Research Question 1:* Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following semester at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?

Analysis of data indicates that students who completed the First Year Experience were retained at a statistically significant higher rate than those who did not. The data compared enrollment from 2010 through 2013. For the fall of 2012, the percentage of students who were retained to the following semester and completed the First Year

Experience course was 98.7%. This was the implementation year for the required course. However, nearly 27% of the students classified as first-time, full-time students did not complete the course and the retention rate for these students was only 89.1% for the same period. Therefore, the rate for students who did complete the course was 9.6% higher. In the second year of the course being offered, 2013, the retention rate for completers of the course was 96.8% compared to 86.9% for those who did not complete the course in the fall semester. In this year the difference was almost 10% (9.9%). Data from the Office of Decision Support does not distinguish between students that took the class and failed or withdrew and those students that did not register for the class.

*Research Question 2: Were students who completed the First Year Experience course retained to the following year at a higher rate than those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?*

The data indicates students who completed the First Year Experience were retained at a statistically significant higher rate than those who did not. The average retention rate to the following year for students that did not complete the course in the years 2010 through 2012 was 75.3%. The retention rate to the following year for students who completed the First Year Experience course was 91.2% or 21% higher. At the time of this study, retention data to the following year was not available for the 2013 class.

*Research Question 3: Were the cumulative grade point averages at the end of the first year higher for students who completed the First Year Experience course compared to those who did not complete the First Year Experience course?*

The data indicates that there was an increase in grade point average for those who completed the First Year Experience course in 2012. However, the increase was not statistically significant for completers of the First Year Experience course compared to those who did not. Those who completed the course attained only a marginally higher mean grade point averages (2.89 vs. 2.77) than those who did not. However, it should be noted that the grade point average of 2.89 is only slightly less than 3.0, a number traditionally associated with acceptance to graduate schools.

As mentioned in the literature review, the previous research has shown different results on retention and grade point average depending on the type of First Year Experience and the location. This study for the UNLV Hotel College has shown a statistically significant increase in retention rates that are consistent with prior studies (Fidler, 1991; Jackson, 2005; Miller, Janz & Chen, 2007; Starke, Harth & Sirianni, 2001).

### **Limitations**

Due to the limited amount of time the First Year Experience course has been offered, only one full academic year was available for analysis for retention to following year and first year grade point averages. In addition, student retention and grade point average are only two indicators of student success. While this is a serious limitation, it is important to remember that this study establishes a baseline from which future studies can be conducted and compared. It is important to note that no causal relationship can be determined because so many variables are involved with retention that are beyond the scope of this study.

## **Implications**

This study indicates that the goal of increased retention rates were obtained by the strong correlation between the completion of the First Year Experience course and the increase in the number of students that enrolled for the following semester for both 2012 and 2013 and the increase in the following year retention for those that completed the course in 2012. Even though there was not a statistically significant increase in grade point average for the first year, the study shows the grade point averages were higher for those who did complete the course.

## **Future Research**

Given the limitations of this study, there are several recommendations for continued research. A longitudinal study that follows students through the remaining years of enrollment at UNLV to continue to compare retention rates for those who completed the First Year Experience and those who did not to the second, third, fourth and years beyond is needed. Such a study would allow analysis to be done to determine if the positive impact of the First Year Experience course has a lasting effect on retention rates.

Assessment beyond quantitative retention rates and grade point average are recommended. A study which assessed students' understanding of the University Undergraduate Learning Outcomes (UULOs) would allow the Hotel College to determine areas of instruction to emphasize to further the knowledge and skills obtained in the first year of college. It may also be beneficial to compare retention rates between more academically-prepared students and those who needed to begin their college career with remedial math and English classes. This would assist administrators and faculty to take

necessary steps in an effort to sustain the positive impact of the course and also give information to improve the course to continue to increase retention in year one and beyond. Such information would also be useful in determining which students were admitted to college. This final note may become more important in the future. As noted previously, at the current educational attainment rate, Nevada will likely experience lower tax revenues in the future. This would necessitate reduction of monies spent on colleges and universities in the state. This, in turn, might have the effect of encouraging more students, and their parents, to take secondary education more seriously--something that is obviously badly needed in Nevada as low-skilled jobs disappear.

### **Conclusion**

The First Year Experience course offered in the College of Hotel Administration at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas had a positive affect on retention, both in the first semester after the course was offered and in the first year after the course was offered. In both cases the increases were statistically significant. However, while grade point averages did increase among students who took the First Year Experience courses were seen, these cannot be described overall as statistically significant. Therefore, the conclusion of this study is that the viability and expenses in accrued by the First Year Experience course in the Hotel College depends on how one measures success. If the purpose is retention, there is evidence that the course has had a measurable, immediate and positive effect over the small period of time studied. On the other hand, if the measure of success is an increase in grade point averages overall, the study cannot confirm that the First Year Experience course had any effect. In other words, the study

provides evidence which is useful to administrators making decisions about the viability of continuing the program.

In business, retaining a current customer has always been viewed as cheaper than finding a new one. Results appear to indicate that this is also true for the Hotel College, at least it is based on the sample and period studied. If that purpose is viewed by administrators as the more important measure then the course should be continued and studied further. However, if an increase in grade point average for current and on-going students is the more important outcome then administrators should not be emboldened by the results of the study and may wish to re-consider the use of resources for this purpose.

## APPENDIX A: IRB



### Social/Behavioral IRB – Exempt Review Deemed Exempt

**DATE:** March 19, 2014  
**TO:** **Dr. Robert Woods**, Hotel College  
**FROM:** Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects  
**RE:** Notification of IRB Action  
Protocol Title: The Hotel College First Year Experience at UNLV: Does it make a Difference?  
Protocol # 1402-4729M

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This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45CFR46 and deemed exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)4.

*Any* changes to the application may cause this project to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a **Modification Form**. When the above-referenced project has been completed, please submit a **Continuing Review/Progress Completion report** to notify ORI – HS of its closure.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at [IRB@unlv.edu](mailto:IRB@unlv.edu) or call 895-2794.

Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects  
4505 Maryland Parkway • Box 451047 • Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047  
(702) 895-2794 • FAX: (702) 895-0805

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## **CURRICULUM VITA**

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Jill Plumer

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Bachelor of Business Administration, 1984  
Northwood University

**Thesis Title:** The Hotel College First Year Experience at UNLV: Does it make a difference?

**Thesis Examination Committee:**

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