Becoming a Cardinal:
The First-Year Experience and Organizational Socialization

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Abstract

The transition from high school to college is often one of the most difficult in an adolescent’s life. Like many other colleges, North Central College has designed a First-Year Experience (FYE) program that aims to help students make this transition successfully. The program is comprised of many elements including Summer Orientation, Summer Reading, Welcome Week, First-Year Advising, and a Fall FYE 100 Course. The Class of 2013 was the first incoming class to experience this program, thus it was an opportune time to begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Assessment of such programs, however, has posed significant challenges within higher education. My project, grounded in the discipline of Communication, utilizes organizational socialization theory as an orientation for evaluating North Central’s FYE program. Drawing from focus groups\(^4\) conducted with program participants I examine the ways in which new students seek information and what aspect(s) of the FYE program the students perceived as the most helpful during their transition. Unlike most studies of similar programs that focus on an institution’s perspective, my study looks at students’ perspectives of the transition, thus contributing significantly to our understanding of what North Central and other colleges with similar programs can do to better meet the socialization needs of first-year students.

\(^4\) The research methodology for this project was approved by North Central College’s Research Ethics Committee
The transition from high school to college is often one of the most difficult in an adolescent’s life. It is part of a recurring socialization, “the comprehensive and consistent introduction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it” (Jorgensen 1993). Many students may be living away from home for the first time and experience a drastic change in independence. Others may be challenged by the demanding academic college requirements. Still others may be in new place, surrounded by complete strangers. It is clearly a critical time of life management and interpersonal adjustment (Clydesdale 2007). Ultimately, some students fail to integrate successfully into their campus community, thereby becoming part of the high attrition rates that plague colleges and universities nationwide (Jorgensen 1993). In fact, in 2004, one in four college freshmen did not return for their sophomore year and nearly half of students in community colleges did not return to complete their degree (Schrader 2008).

Research shows that some students are not prepared to meet the academic and social challenges of postsecondary education. For example, Wirt et. al. (2004) reported that 76 percent of postsecondary institutions offered some form of remedy for basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics, which suggests that many students are ill-equipped for the academic demands of college. This, coupled with a decrease in teacher direction, makes academic success difficult for first-year students. Students who do not successfully manage their first-year of college may drop out of higher education entirely (Schrader 2008). Higher education leaders now understand both the fiscal costs of attrition rates and the public relations consequences of unsuccessful students, especially today when families are more likely than past generations to blame the institution for their student’s failure (Hunter 2006).
With the growing need to prepare students for their first year, institutions have implemented extended orientation programs to ease the transition into college life. These programs, often called “first-year experience” or “freshman year experience,” are designed specifically to welcome, to provide extra support, and ultimately to enhance students’ assimilation into the institution. They may also address student regret over their choice of institution, as students typically need to be ‘resold’ or convinced of their college selection within the first six weeks (Jorgensen 1993). Overall, the efforts of such programs are intended to increase retention and graduation rates (Schrader 2008).

From the standpoint of colleges and universities, successful student socialization is vital to keeping students from dropping or failing out, which can affect their tuition income, retention and graduation rates, and the overall reputation of the institution. Yet research in this area has mostly ignored the input that students themselves bring to their own socialization and their opinions on the most helpful methods of orientation. Students are often considered passive recipients of the socializing forces, but in actuality, they are vital and active participants in the socialization process. Newcomers both give and seek information in attempts to assimilate to the organization’s culture. Thus, one must examine their perspectives and role in the socialization process in order to accurately gauge how students socialize to their new college or university.

In order to better understand the role of students in the socialization process and their perspectives on the many methods of orientation, I examined the First Year Experience (FYE) program at North Central College (NCC). I explored two main questions: (1) What information seeking tactics do first-year students use in order to find information that they need to be successful both academically and socially? (2) What part of NCC’s FYE program did students
perceive to be the most helpful? In order to start answering these questions one must understand FYE programs at multiple institutions, learn where they began and why.

**First-Year Programs**

First-year seminars or First Year Experience (FYE) programs instituted at many American colleges and universities are designed to help students during the transition from high school to college. It is well documented that many students are not ready for the advanced coursework of higher education, so FYE programs are meant to help supply extra academic and life skills. These skills may range from anything as simple as knowing the location of the library to more complex issues such as knowing how to seek help when personal issues arise. Some other skills that might be covered are study skills such as note taking and library research, time management skills, institutional awareness, and interpersonal skills (Schrader 2008).

Events in the 1960s and 1970s led to significant changes in higher education that focused attention upon issues regarding college students in transition. First, the conclusion of World War II brought many more students to college campuses. Many of these were first-generation college students and needed additional support from institutional members. But faculty members did not feel responsible for students’ development outside of the classroom; thus a void existed. Shortly after that time, Dwyer (1989) identified three factors that convinced college administrators of the need for a program to help first-year students with their transition: they arrive without skills for success, changes in curricula and regulations made decision making difficult for students, and peer cultures were no longer enough to help students adjust to their new environment.

A 1984 report titled, “Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education” from the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education of the National Institute of Education drew more attention to the first year. Finally, in
recent years institutions came to realize the importance of the first year as a foundation for the entire undergraduate experience (Hunter 2006).

The First-Year Experience movement began in the late 1970s, gained momentum in the 1980s, increased again in the 1990s, and continues to grow today. The idea for such programs began at the University of South Carolina, due primarily to the initiative of its president, Thomas Jones. The university assumed the informal role as the nation’s clearinghouse for information on first-year initiatives until the establishment of the National Research Center for the Freshman Year Experience was established in 1986. Since then, this research center has made many advances for improving FYE programs and has been renamed the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (Hunter 2006).

Depending on the school, FYE programs may offer or require a course that could last anywhere from two weeks to one full school year. The course provides students the opportunity to learn in small classes through readings, regular discussion, and writing. The goal of courses such as these is to introduce students to the caliber of academic work required at a college or university. Most schools will give students one or two credits for completing the program and/or course. In addition to the course, many programs require a summer reading book. This book is carefully chosen by the institution for all new students to read with the intention of integrating its topics into the FYE course or other introductory level courses.

Some FYE programs, or parts of programs, focus more on social events that bring new students together to form new relationships and bonds. For instance, many schools invite first-year students to campus before other students return for the school year. This allows them a “week of welcome” to be introduced to the college and to connect with their new classmates. “Welcome Week” is additional time for the institution to impart their culture and expectations on
the students. For example, institutions might invite speakers advocating safe sex, responsible drinking, or diversity. During this week especially, institutions are trying to help students assimilate into their specific culture.

Other FYE programs have “living/learning” communities where new students live in the same residence hall, or sections of a residence hall, in order to encourage bonding and create the feel of a “small college” in a large university setting. Often students are grouped by interest in either academics, social, or cultural activities. These communities provide an environment for students to create a peer support system. They offer all the same amenities as other residence halls but highlight a unique living and socializing environment.

Overall, no matter what the college or university provides, the goal of first-year programs is to introduce the students to their new school, assimilate them to its culture, and to learn skills essential for student success. White et. al. (1995) suggested that FYE programs should give students the chance to interact socially with peers and faculty as well as introduce students to academic facilities, counseling, and other faculty and staff. The program “should not be understood as a single event, but as a process that should be linked programmatically…and tailored to suit the needs of the university” (White et. al. 1995, p. 33).

Another key ingredient in successful transition programs is recognizing that students are frequently moving from one cultural environment to another. It is unreasonable for college and university members to expect osmosis from the students. Therefore, deliberate efforts to assimilate new students into the educational culture and environment are essential if schools expect students to succeed (Hunter 2006).

Institutions should also focus on faculty and staff development. Those who teach at the collegiate level are experts in their area, but are not necessarily adequately prepared to teach
first-year seminars. Faculty and staff sometimes tend to assume that the current undergraduate experience is similar to their experiences as an undergraduate, but this is often far from the truth as each generation changes vastly. Attention to students’ individual characteristics, needs, behaviors, and experiences is central to developing and sustaining successful transition initiatives (Hunter 2006). By understanding the entry characteristics of new students, one is better equipped to help their development and growth (Schrader 2008). Thus, additional training is essential to include a focus on student characteristics and demographics, active learning teaching pedagogies, and evaluation techniques (Hunter 2006).

In addition to these findings, Kuh (2007) suggested what institutions can do to help students survive and thrive in college. His six steps are essential to engage students in learning. First, institutions must teach students how to use college resources as early as possible. Next, they must create an atmosphere where students can listen to each other, challenge one another, and learn about campus events. They must feel a sense of community in the classroom. The institution must also develop networks and early-warning systems to support students when they need help. Next, they must make programs widely available and make all students aware of them. These might include internships, study abroad, and service learning. Institutions must assist students in getting the information or help they need such as course advisement, counseling, registration, health, and residence life options. Finally, they must connect every student in a meaningful way with an activity and/or a role model (Kuh 2007).

Overall FYE programs were developed to assist students who were not ready for the social and academic challenges of higher education. Programs may consist of multiple aspects, including coursework, orientations, and special housing. Although all FYE programs are unique
and fit the needs of the particular institution, researchers have attempted to identify what characteristics make a program more successful than others.

**Research Results from First-Year Programs**

Many studies have found a positive relationship between participation in FYE programs and higher sophomore return rates, improved academic performance, and increased knowledge and use of student services. For example, Hollins (2009) found that students who participated in FYE had better grade point averages and were retained longer. Similarly Papier (1991) found a positive correlation between enrollment in a first-year seminar and retention. But Fidler and Hunter (1989) pointed out that “no matter how well planned, researched based, and proactively conceived a freshman seminar may be, programs can be…totally destroyed by students’ reactions and perceptions” (p. 228). Thus, understanding students’ perceptions of the value of their experience could help make their outcomes less variable and more positive overall.

Role models have also been found to be an effective tool in the success of students in FYE courses. For example, Black and Voelker (2008) studied the effectiveness of preceptors in an introductory course at the University of Hartford. Results suggested that having a preceptor was associated with greater engagement among first-year students. The students were more likely to agree that they had a good understanding of expectations of them in college than students in courses without preceptors (Black 2008). These findings mirrored those of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) who also found higher engagement from students with peer tutoring. Thus, having preceptors, or academic leaders, could be helpful during the transition from high school to college and are aspects institutions should consider using in their programs.

Smith (2009) explored student perceptions of the helpfulness of parents, friends, high school teachers and guidance counselors, college professors and academic advisors, SOAR (a
college orientation program) and the first year seminar (a one-credit hour course). Results showed that mothers are perceived to provide the greatest number of helping behaviors and to be the most helpful resource during the transition, followed by high school teachers, fathers, friends, and high school counselors. College academic advisors and professors seemed to provide the least number of helping behaviors. However, many gender differences existed in the results. For example, female students were more likely than males to report that mothers, friends, and counselors are helpful and more likely to report some preferences to SOAR, academic advisors, and professors as sources of help. The overall findings suggest that college academic advisors are more helpful for disadvantaged students with low GPAs (Smith 2009).

Although research tends to show that first-year seminars are generally successful, there are many different approaches a seminar can take. One great debate is over whether more academically focused or socially focused programs are more effective at integrating new students. Ryan and Glen (2004) sought to find out which program worked best at their university. Incoming first-year students in the fall semester of 1999 were given the option to participate in one of two seminars. One program was the College Success Seminar, which focused on students’ learning strategies. The other, the Freshman Seminar, was designed to bring students closer to a faculty member. In order to gauge each program’s success, they looked at one-year retention rates and the number of full-time students in academic standing. The results revealed greater retention for the students who took the strategy-based seminar. This seminar also improved the retention rate of first-years with low GPAs. These findings suggest that new students, especially first-generation and commuter students, need to develop competencies in order to develop a sense of accomplishment, which in turn integrates them into the institution (Ryan 2004). However, the students at the university might be uniquely in need of academic
skills, rather than bonding with a faculty member, because their institution had less selective admissions policies, enrolled many first-generation college students, and was a commuter school.

Another way that FYE programs have been studied is by looking at students’ metaphors of their first year. Jorgensen-Earp and Staton (1993) asked first-year students to describe their experiences in order to see their perceptions of what it means to be a college student. They found five major themes: newness, status, control, engagement, and satisfaction. Overall, while some of the participants downplayed the amount of change college brought to their lives, the majority saw the transition as both new and important. For example, one student commented, “I know these are the best years of my life. I just need to work hard and try and make as many memories as possible.” Some of the other metaphors identified issues that the students faced such as new environment, change in status, new academic expectations, and a transition period. The responses demonstrate that the entry phase of socialization into school environments lead to student concerns over their self adaptation abilities and academic abilities. The students who indicated fears about the transition need to gain a stronger sense of community from their new environment and gain a greater sense of confidence in themselves. Thus, if an orientation program ignores the concerns of newness, status, control, engagement, and satisfaction, it will be inadequate in meeting the student’s needs (Jorgensen-Earp and Staton1993). First-year programs that focus on these needs are vital for students’ to make a seamless transition.

In general FYE programs improve the academic success of first-year students and increase retention rates. Because of their success, much research has been done in an effort to improve programs and many schools have adopted or created their own First-Year Program.
North Central College’s First Year Experience Program

Like many other colleges, NCC has designed a First-Year Experience (FYE) program that aims to help students make the transition from high school to college successfully. The program is comprised of many elements including Summer Orientation, Summer Reading, Welcome Week, First-Year Advising, a First Year Interdisciplinary Seminar and a Fall FYE 100 Course. During the time in which NCC’s FYE program was studied, it was in its first full year.

All first-year students attend a one-day campus Summer Orientation program to give them a chance to learn their way around campus and to prepare them for the academic school year. During the Summer Orientation program they meet with their faculty advisor, or a faculty advisor in their academic area of interest. At each session, students begin the process of registering for their fall term classes and sit in on a sample class. Students are led through the program by an Orientation Leader (OL), who is an outstanding upper-class student. The OL serves as a role model, source of information, and guide during the sessions. Throughout the day, new students learn about the many resources available to them such as structured study time, the Writing Center, and tutors.

As another portion of the FYE program, all first-year students were allowed to move in the week before classes started, in what is known as Welcome Week. In addition to students meeting other new students, the OLs, Resident Assistants (RA), and Commuter Assistants (CA), they had the chance to attend many social activities such as an outdoor movie, a comedy showcase, a boat dance, and a trip to the zoo. Students also attended the first two sessions of their First-Year Course, FYE 100, and a library training session.

The fall FYE 100 course is required for all first-year students at NCC and was taken with other peers who indicated interest in the same discipline. The courses met twice, for two hours, during Welcome Week and for one hour each week for the first seven weeks of fall term. It was
taught by a faculty advisor with the assistance of a student academic leader. The course was organized around a contemporary case study, which was written by NCC faculty to address real-world issues raised in the summer reading (What Is the FYE Program).

The case studies discussed one of four issues: food policy, immigration reform, drug smuggling and prosecution, as well as how the government interacts with and accommodates the students’ populations (Sage 2009). The ideas came from faculty who were asked to “create topics that had real world implications, that required further research and academic scrutiny, that looked at issues from the perspective of multiple academic disciplines, and that forced students to make a number of ethical decisions” explained Dr. Lou Corsino, NCC’s FYE coordinator. The case studies were written, revised, and then modified so they might appeal to students in particular programs or disciplines such as science, College Scholars (the Honors Program), and music. Each class was assigned one of the four case studies based on the discipline of the class.

The summer reading, which was required reading for all first-year students, was Coyotes written by Ted Conover. Corsino explained, “We wanted a book that was accessible, one that students could read without a great deal of jargon or prior academic knowledge. At the same time, we wanted a book that spoke to a real world issue that posed ethical and social concerns.” Another reason the book was chosen is because it speaks to the transition of freshman in that it is centered on the idea of crossing borders into new perspectives, which is “much like the integration into college,” Corsino said. It touches on entering a new social world, making new friends, and seeing the world through a new perspective, all of which are also concerns of first-year students (Sage 2009).

Although all first-year students were required to read Coyotes, discussions in FYE 100 primarily focused around the case studies. Many sections held in-class debates about their case
study’s subject, while others simulated a city-council meeting. Students received one academic credit for this course, and they were required to do work outside of the classroom. Several sections were asked to prepare a written journal and discussion question for each class period, and some sections required a research paper at the culmination of the course. Other sections were asked to prepare an annotated bibliography. In addition to coursework, students were required to meet with their academic advisor (the professor for the course) to discuss registering and choosing their courses for the rest of the year.

Later in the academic school year, either in the winter or spring term, most first-year students are required to take an interdisciplinary course (IDS 125). In this course, students explore a contemporary issue with the goal of understanding how different academic disciplines can be used to gain a broader understanding of an issue. In the past, some themes explored have included Law and Literature, Politics and Music, and Consumption in the Global Age. The course is generally team-taught by two professors, from different disciplines. IDS 125 is the last piece of the FYE program (What is the FYE Program).

Although North Central College’s program is relatively new, they have already implemented many of the items that Kul (2007) posited as essential to engage students in learning. They have an “early alert” system where faculty, staff, and student para-professionals (e.g. Resident Assistants, tutors, Academic Leaders) can identify and report students who are struggling with issues that may be hindering their academic success. The alert is sent in the form of an e-mail to the Assistant Dead for Student Success and if necessary, a follow up by the Dean is made to the appropriate faculty and staff members. The goal of this system is to identify struggling students and to refer them to appropriate resources, and ultimately to increase the retention rate of academically high-risk students (NCC Retention Plan 2009-2010).
Additionally, NCC has hired a group of high-achieving students to serve as role models and mentors to the first-year students in their courses. These students, called Academic Leaders (AL), were trained in tutoring, diversity, and characteristics of the Y Generation, or the ‘Millennials.’ They attended each FYE class session and were encouraged to do out-of-class activities. Some academic leaders held study groups, sent weekly e-mails, and invited first-year students to campus events. However, each AL used their role differently so there was little consistency from class to class. Nevertheless, research has shown that having preceptors in first-year courses is extremely helpful for student engagement and retention (Black 2008).

By understanding the areas of the FYE program, one can see how NCC attempted to aid new students’ socialization into the campus culture by providing them an opportunity to learn both inside and outside of the classroom. However, socialization is a complicated process and contains many stages and activities, especially when evaluated from a communication perspective. In order to better understand how an individual assimilates into a culture, one should consider the communication theory of organizational socialization. Although this theory was originally designed for newcomers in a workplace, it may shed some light upon the similar situation students experience during the transition into a new college or university setting. This theory will be particularly useful because it focuses on communication behaviors within the socialization process and it views the communication as a two-way process. In so doing it allows first-year students to be seen as active participants in the socialization process, which is rare in most previous research on this topic.

**Communication Theory of Organizational Socialization**

A college campus is like any organization in that it can be considered in terms of its culture. Organizational cultures typically consist of unspoken long standing rules of thumb,
special language, and sets of values that help shape everyday behavior, models for social etiquette and demeanor, customs and rituals, and norms of how members should relate to colleagues, subordinates, superiors, and outsiders. Organizational socialization refers to the process by which one “learns the ropes” of a particular organizational role and the norms of the organizational culture. In general it is when one learns the skills necessary to assume a new role. This learning process may be self-guided or may consist of trial and error, training, apprenticeship, or a form of orientation (Van Maanen 1978). Jablin (1985) explains it as either planned efforts by the organization to socialize members or the attempts of the members to individualize or change their roles and work environments to better satisfy their values, attitudes, and needs individuals experience.

**Phases of Socialization**

Although socialization (also known in the literature as organizational assimilation) may not follow exactly the same pattern for everyone, organizational scholars have found it useful to consider phases when studying the process that individuals experience as they enter an organization (Miller 2009). The phases of the organizational assimilation process typically contain an anticipatory phase, an entry or “encounter” phase, and a long-term period of “metamorphosis,” in which members negotiate roles (Jablin 1985). More recently scholars have included a fourth stage, “exit” (Xu 2007).

The first phase, *anticipatory socialization*, refers to the processes that occur before an individual actually enters an organization. There are two types of anticipatory socialization: occupational and organizational. For example, one may learn about the type of work required in the organization or learn about the organization itself. Since most first-year students have undecided occupational plans when entering college, for the purpose of this study, I will focus on
organizational anticipatory socialization. During the anticipatory stage, newcomers develop expectations about their experiences in the organization they are about to enter (Xu 2007). The second phase of socialization, encounter, occurs at the organizational “point of entry.” Simply put, it is when a newcomer first comes into the organization and/or role. In order to adapt to the new environment, one may rely on predispositions, past experiences, and the interpretations of others. This phase in particular can be stressful, especially if the newcomer had well formed expectations about what the organization “should” be like (Miller 2009).

Newcomers often experience surprises because of differences between their expectations and the reality in their organization. For example, it is common for newcomers to expect more feedback than they are actually given. Research shows that conversations with insiders of the organization help reduce levels of disappointment. These interactions help newcomers reformulate their cognitive schemas, scripts, and behavioral models. Overall organizational entry has been conceptualized as the “breaking-in” period or “encounter” stage of assimilation, at the end of which time newcomers are supposed to have a basic understanding of the organization (Jablin 1985).

For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on the encounter phase because that is where most first-year students are when entering college. They have recently entered the organization and are newly participating in its practices such as classes, sports, and extra-curricular activities. They most likely are performing information seeking tactics and undergoing role negotiation as is typical of the encounter phase.

The final stage of the socialization process, metamorphosis, occurs when the newcomer has made the transition from outsider to insider. During this stage, the person has truly become an accepted, participating member of the organization. This is when a member feels most certain
about his or her role and place within the organization. However, one must remember there is always some bit of uncertainty in organizational roles and culture. Socialization is an ongoing process, and it continues through exit and disengagement from the organization (Miller 2009). Thus, the particular stages of socialization may be difficult to distinguish for many newcomers because some may assimilate very quickly during the entry or encounter phase, while others might take longer (Xu 2007). In order to ease both the length and anxiety of socialization both the organization and the newcomer make efforts to assimilate.

**Organizational Attempts to Assimilate**

Socialization is a dual process. On the one hand, the organization is trying to influence the adaptation of individuals through formal and informal socialization strategies. While on the other hand, the newcomer is trying to gather information and discover his or her role. In this section, I will discuss the efforts that an organization makes to help newcomers socialize. They do many things including orientation sessions, training, and formal mentoring. In fact, organizational efforts often involve planned activities and formal communication, such as those designed for NCC’s First-Year Experience.

Almost all large organizations provide newcomers with some sort of oral and written orientation. Many formal orientations are brief, but manage to offer newcomers extensive amounts of information. These programs may serve a variety of objectives, including welcoming newcomers, helping them feel comfortable, providing them with information, and giving them a history of the organization and its principles (Jablin 1985).

Organizational training programs are one of the primary ways to socialize newcomers. These programs typically are formal and may be completed by newcomers as a group. Research shows that training has the greatest effects on newcomers with low levels of work-related self-
efficiency and those who are experiencing difficulty coping to organizational information. Moreover, the availability, type, and extent of training made available to organization members represents to them how much their membership means to the organization. For example, those who receive training to help them more efficiently function in the organization believe that the organization values their membership and wants them to succeed (Jablin 1985).

Another form of socialization is formal mentoring, a deliberative pairing of a more skilled person with a less experienced one, with the goal of having the newcomer grow and develop specific competencies. It has been suggested that mentoring facilitates newcomers into the work role, encourages social interaction, and enhances identification to the organization. However, formal mentors are different than informal mentors, in that formal mentors are selected and trained by the organization, while informal mentors are not likely to have any training prior to the mentoring. Still, informal mentoring relationships are extremely beneficial to newcomers. These relationships develop naturally and last as long as the two parties experience positive outcomes. In addition to formal and informal mentoring, it is vital for newcomers to develop relationships with others in the organization, especially leaders and peers. Relationships provide support, facilitate the learning process, and may reduce stress associated with adjusting (Jablin 1985).

Although organizations often design formal and informal processes such as training, mentoring, and/or written or verbal orientation to assist with newcomer socialization, one must remember that socialization is an interactive two-way process. Just as the organization attempts to help assimilate the newcomer, the newcomer also attempts to understand the organization.
Newcomer Attempts to Assimilate

The counterpart of the socialization process focuses on interpersonal communication between newcomers and insiders and tends to be more open in nature. This is when the employee tries to understand the organization in order to better suit his or her needs. He or she does this primarily by either giving or trying to obtain information (Miller 2009).

Newcomers can play an active role in communication and can give information. In fact, Jablin (1984) found that information giving made up at least twenty-five percent of newcomers’ total communication behavior. This information giving is an indicator of the newcomer’s sense making and ability to cope with the stress of organizational entry. It can also provide insight to how well the newcomer constructed his or her role and orientation to the new environment.

Newcomers also actively experience role negotiation, which occurs when two or more people consciously interact with the purpose of altering the other’s expectations about how a role should be enacted and evaluated. Ultimately, newcomers can attempt to individualize their roles to better satisfy their own needs, values, and beliefs. It is believed that the newcomer-leader role negotiation process is key to the newcomer’s success in the role negotiation process (Jablin 1985).

Furthermore, newcomers proactively seek information because of their uncertainty in the organization and new role. They tend to acquire information so that they can become contributing organization members. Understanding how they solicit and receive this information is important because effective socialization is linked to enhanced job satisfaction and performance, as well as a reduced turnover rate (Comer 1991). In the case of first-year students, if they become true organization members they might be more likely to enjoy being a student, become a successful student, and stay at the institution. One can correlate job satisfaction to institutional satisfaction and success.
Newcomers will use one or more information seeking tactics to make sense of the organization (Jablin 1985). They may ask for information in a direct manner. They may get others to give information by hinting indirectly. Asking someone else, a third party, rather than the primary information target is another tactic they use. Newcomers might also test their boundaries to see the reaction. Additionally they might use jokes, self-disclosure, or verbal prompts to ease information out of insiders. This sort of disguising conversations gets information by attempting to make it part of the natural conversation. Simply watching another’s actions or surveillance is an easy way to gain information. Finally, a newcomer might listen to other’s conversations to gain information (Miller 2009).

It is proposed that newcomers have three ways of acquiring information: active explicitly, passive explicitly, and implicitly (Comer 1991). The implicit channel is when information giving occurs nonverbally; usually, the member does not even know the newcomer is gaining information. Here the member initiates and controls the timing and content of the information, but in the active channel the newcomer directs the conversation and the member controls the exchange of information. Much research has been done to determine if channel, type of information, and information giver matter in the socialization process.

Research about Information Seeking Tactics

Research has shown that often peers contribute more towards newcomer socialization because the supervisors or superiors are too busy. For instance, one manager has many subordinates and one professor has many students. Thus, the role of peers is critical. Lois, Posner, and Powell (1983) and Posner and Powell (1985) agree that peers are both more available and more helpful than superiors in the socialization process (Comer 1991).
Comer sought to discover the ways in which newcomers acquire information from their peers and what type of information they receive. Previous research suggests that newcomers seek two types of information: “technical” meaning information that will help them complete tasks, and “social” knowledge including norms that affect performance. Comer found that newcomers received both technical and social information from their peers in similar quantities. Twenty-five percent of newcomers acquired information through at least two channels and of these forty percent obtained it through all three channels: active explicitly, passive explicitly, and implicitly. However, the active explicit channel was reported the most frequently by newcomers. This might be explained by newcomer’s perception that self-initiated learning is socially desirable.

Additionally, newcomers reported they acquired social information evenly from all three channels, but they received the most technical information from active explicit, then passive explicit, and hardly any from the implicit channel. Perhaps newcomers did not believe they should wait for an explanation (passive explicit) or to watch other’s behavior (implicit) because they wanted to do their job right. Overall, results show that newcomers’ involvement with peers in work interactions facilitates their acquisition of information about the organization (Comer 1991).

Miller and Jablin (1991) theorize that the use of these information-seeking tactics will vary depending on how much uncertainty the newcomer feels and the social costs of seeking the information. For example, it might be considered embarrassing to the newcomer if they do not know something, or they might be afraid of irritating their peers in order to get responses. Several studies have investigated the use of information-seeking tactics by organizational newcomers and have supported the importance of uncertainty and social cost (Miller 2009).
Given the importance of information seeking to the socialization process, NCC’s FYE program wisely provided many opportunities for first-year students to seek information. It introduced them to their peers, different student leaders, their faculty advisor, and multiple faculty and staff members. There were many outlets that students could have received information from overtly, hint for information, or simply watch to gain information. There were also multiple opportunities during the FYE program for the students to feel uncertain and embarrassed. Therefore, the setting in which the information seeking occurred could have altered newcomers’ assimilation. One must know what information seeking tactics newcomers used to ease their transition and what key factors of the program the students perceived as the most helpful during their transition in order to determine what they actually used to influence their own socialization process.

Methodology

In order to collect data on the information seeking tactics of first-year students and their perceptions of NCC’s FYE program, focus groups were conducted. Focus groups are observed conversations between groups of people usually with a shared experience. They are used to collect qualitative data from homogenous people in a group situation through forced discussion. They have been found useful in assessing needs, generating information, developing plans, testing new programs, improving existing programs, and evaluating outcomes (Krueger 2009). The goal of focus group research is to find a range of opinions across several groups.

Focus groups provide a more natural environment than individual interviews because participants are influencing and influenced by others, just like they are in everyday life. They are effective research tools because participants feel comfortable and respected (Krueger 2009). Because participants are stimulated by the experiences of other members of the group to
articulate their own experiences (Lindlof 1995), focus groups will be an effective tool for researching the FYE program. The group dynamic will be useful to elicit multiple students’ opinions and variance in their experiences. In addition, having multiple participants may make first-year students feel at ease sharing information and the discussions may result in a broader range of responses than individual interviews would. Focus groups will also allow me to talk with more participants than would be feasible with individual interviews. Additionally, since focus groups have been useful in the past at improving existing programs, they will be useful for evaluating the FYE program after its full first year.

Research about focus groups suggests that the researcher must conduct several focus groups in order to identify trends and patterns. Each focus group typically contains five to ten people so that all participants have a chance to share. The quality of discussion is strongly affected by group size. Focus groups of ten to twelve participants are risky if the topic is complicated (Krueger 2009). One to two hours is the accepted range for interview length (Lindof and Taylor 2002). For the purpose of this study, four focus groups were conducted and each lasted about an hour and a half. However, the number of participants varied in each focus group based on the amount of students who showed up to participate. The first session had eight students, the second had thirteen, the third had seven, and the fourth had four. Thirty-two students total participated in the study.

All focus group participants in this study had completed NCC’s FYE program and were currently first-year students. No differentiation was made between resident and commuter students or students from in-state or out-of-state, although these factors would likely influence socialization and should be explored in future research. Students were recruited in several ways. First, I went to Speech Communication (SPC) 100 classes and solicited volunteers. This method
was not entirely successful because some students taking SPC 100 are upperclassmen. Then, I went to IDS 125 classes to recruit more volunteers. This method was done the most frequently because it was a good way to reach students from multiple disciplines since nearly all first-year students have to take IDS 125. Finally, I asked the director of the honors program to send an e-mail inviting students to participate in the focus groups. This was done in order to reach a portion of honors students, many of whom are not required to take IDS 125. For each of the four focus groups, I sought volunteers until ten people were recruited for each session. I did this to ensure that I would have enough students at each session in case some did not show up.

Initially, I had an extremely hard time recruiting first-year students. It seemed like either the times I chose were too busy or students did not feel inclined to help me. When this problem arose, I was able to collaborate with Dr. Lou Corsino, the coordinator for FYE. For program purposes, he wanted to conduct focus groups geared towards assessing the FYE program. He had three main questions of interest. In return including his questions in my focus groups, he provided me funds to offer pizza and a $5.00 gift card to every participant. Once I had these incentives, students were much more interested in participating in the focus groups. I am grateful for Dr. Corsino and the FYE committee.

The questions asked in focus groups are predetermined and carefully sequenced. They must be phrased and ordered in a logical manner so that participants can answer them adequately. As outlined by Krueger (2009), there are different types of questions and each has a distinct purpose. For example, opening questions are designed to get everyone to talk early in the focus group. These questions should be easy to answer and are usually based on fact as opposed to opinion. In this study, I asked participants for their first name and their favorite class this term. However, these comments were not transcribed in order to maintain anonymity. Next,
introductory questions introduce the topic of discussion and get people to start thinking about their connection with the topic. These questions give the moderator clues about participants’ views. For example, in my study, I asked what the participants’ first experience at NCC was like. Then, transition questions move the conversation into key topics that drive the study. Usually, they help participants view the topic from a broader scope. For instance, I asked students to write down the first thing they think of when they hear First-Year Experience. Next, key questions are those that drive the study. Typically, key questions consist of two to five questions. In my focus groups the key questions have to do with information seeking tactics and helpful parts of the FYE program. Finally, ending questions bring closure to the discussion and enable participants to reflect on previous comments (Krueger 2009). To close the discussion, I asked if there were any other comments about the FYE program. At this point, I transitioned into the questions that Corsino requested. I put these questions at the end because they were somewhat difficult for students both to understand and to respond to. By putting them at the end, participants were already comfortable with the topic, each other, and me. A complete list of questions is included in Appendix A.

After running the first and second focus groups, I learned that it took longer for students to open up than I had anticipated and that not all students in the groups contributed to the conversation. In order to remedy these problems I decided to have participants make name plates to use during the discussion. This was useful for me because then I could call on particular participants who had not yet shared. Also I asked students to write down some answers to certain questions before they responded orally. This helped because students already had thought of something to share, so they were more willing to say it in the group setting. These tactics made the third and fourth focus groups run much more smoothly.
As with all research, there are ethical concerns with focus groups. I made sure to share the purpose of the research with the participants. Being open and honest about the expectations of the group and the topic of discussion is important at the onset of the conversation in order to gain participants’ trust. In addition to explaining that their comments will only be shared with the rest of the group and myself, I encouraged students to keep what they hear confidential (Gibbs 1997). In order to assure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and any details that could reveal identity were altered. I had all participants sign an informed consent form before starting the focus groups (see Appendix B). At the conclusion of the focus groups, I gave each participant a debriefing form (Appendix C).

For the purpose of my research project, I audio recorded each focus group. Then, I used a transcriber which allowed me to listen to the recording while entering the text at a computer. This provided the closest thing to a verbatim record that could be accomplished. Even though research has shown that sometimes participants may self-censor when they know they are being recorded, having a complete record of the conversations allowed me to take in the full scope of the discussions and to engage in several levels of analysis (Lindlof 1995).

Overall, my research process enabled me to see the trends and opinions that existed in the data I collected. Focus groups allowed me to gain insight from more students than I could have reasonably interviewed, and they allowed me to learn about a variety of socialization experiences.

**Results and Discussion**

In order to analyze the data, transcripts of the focus groups were coded and separated into sections according to type. Comments were first divided into the two larger categories: one of information seeking tactics and another of the components of FYE program. From there, they
were separated into the different tactics: overt questions, indirect questions, third party, testing limits, disguising conversations, observing, and surveillance. Then, they were separated into the individual parts of the FYE program: FYE 100, Welcome Week, IDS 125, Advising, Summer Orientation, and the Summer Reading. Everything that did not fit into either of those two categories was placed into a separate category. This system allowed the data to be sorted and analyzed. Each category was first examined individually, and then alongside other information seeking tactics or other parts of the FYE program respectively.

**Analysis of Information Seeking Tactics Data Analysis**

As discussed previously, newcomers proactively seek information because of their uncertainty about the organization and their new role. They tend to acquire information so that they can become contributing organizational members and in order to reduce their own stress and anxiety during transition. Understanding how they solicit and receive this information is important because effective socialization is linked to enhanced job satisfaction and performance, as well as a reduced turnover rate. In the case of first-year students, if they become true organization members they might be more likely to enjoy being a student, become a successful student, and stay at the institution (Comer 1991). Therefore it is important for us to see which information seeking tactics first-year students used most frequently and for what purpose in order to provide better resources for the future.

**Overt Questions**

One of the information seeking tactics is overt questions (Miller 2009), which is when organizational newcomers ask for information in a direct manner. Overall, it seemed like being overt was a quick, easy, and direct way for students to get the information they needed. Thirty-one examples of overt tactics were found throughout the data. Of these, 15 inquired about
academic information and the rest, 16, were related to seeking social information. Thus the
information sought was split relatively evenly among both academic and social tactics.

When asked what kinds of academic information they needed in order to be a successful
college student and how they found this information, a student replied, “I was kind of worried
about to what extent they [professors] wanted us to cite things in informal papers, as opposed to
research papers…. the way I found out, is that it differs from teacher to teacher, what they
require and for what assignment. So I just ask, straight out” (2-2)\textsuperscript{5}. A trend seemed to exist
where students asked questions about academics to authority figures, such as professors and
advisors. Other examples included asking other staff members; a student explained, “I had no
idea what I wanted to major in either so I wanted a school with a lot of flexibility and stuff. So
basically I wanted to know what kind of classes I’d be taking…I got a lot of that from contact
with [a staff member] from the Admissions (office) over the summer” (3-2). As might be
expected, being overt and asking people in authority was a useful way for first-year students to
seek information about academic information.

Being overt was also an easy way for finding out social information, “I really liked my
RA…she’s just always approachable and really nice, so I felt comfortable going to her” (2-5).
Overall, social information was found by asking peers, or para-professional staff such as
Resident Assistants, Orientation Leaders, and Academic Leaders. For instance, a student
mentioned, “I wanted to know about like clubs and stuff, and like when they were… I found out
at the club fair” (1-2). This is different when compared to academic information, where students
sought information from authority figures, or employees of the institution. Instead of going to
‘adult’ authority, newcomers went to peer group leaders who they perceived to be authority on

\textsuperscript{5} Transcript citation scheme. The First number indicates the focus group number, and the second number indicates
the page number of the typed transcript.
social information. This might be expected because the peer leaders are more knowledgeable about current college social information than adults who attended college years ago, and most likely at a different institution.

Overall, it seems that students would go to whomever they felt the most comfortable with, who they thought had the most knowledge on the subject, and who they perceived to be the most accessible in order to find the information they needed. Whether this was their RA, coach, admission counselor, or advisor, students did not seem to be afraid to seek out help.

Yet, in some cases, the students were frustrated when who they wanted to speak to was not available. For example, “My advisor is really hard to come by. I was trying to pick my classes before we left for Christmas break and I was here during D-term, and he was like never here... so during D-term, I checked all of his office hours, and he was never there” (1-3). Another student mentioned, “My RA was not helpful I think she tries to be a good RA, but I think that she’s just so busy that it’s hard for her to be a good RA. Whenever you need her you feel like you’re bothering her. She’s nice... she’s just hard to find” (3-6).

Results found from the instances where students used overt information seeking tactics seemed to complicate previous research. Lois, Posner, and Powell (1983) and Posner and Powell (1985) agree that peers are both more available and more helpful than superiors in the socialization process (Comer 1991). However, this is not the case when the peer is a para-professional, or peer leader. While some students found their peers to be helpful, others were frustrated because there were just as busy and inaccessible as the “superiors” or professors. Thus, peers were not in all cases the most available or more helpful than superiors, or authority figures. It seems that a para-professional is somewhat middle ground between a peer and an authority figure. While they do not always have all of the answers, they are knowledgeable about the
social aspects of college. At the same time, they are seemingly more available than authority figures, but less accessible than other peers. Therefore, this role could be somewhat hard for new students to understand.

Of the 31 comments, six mentioned were negative. Of those six, three were dissatisfied with the lack of availability of the authority figured they asked, and three were dissatisfied with the lack of knowledge of the authority figured they asked. For example a student mentioned, “One time during Welcome Week, I think it would have helped if the orientation leaders could have been in our area of study more. I was with a Biology major and it seemed like they didn’t know. They were like, well you’re going to have to take a math class, but I don’t really know” (3-6). Another student explained, “I really didn’t think it was that helpful because my advisor wasn’t my major so they couldn’t answer any questions” (1-2). Therefore students were most likely upset because their overt efforts were not fruitful due to the lack of knowledge of the ‘authority figures’ placed in the program to help them. They felt that in order to get useful, accurate information it had to be provided by someone with experience in their program/major. When this was not the case, it created frustration, most likely because the student had to seek information somewhere else. The expectation that their advisor or authority figure would be knowledgeable overall was unfortunately, not always met.

A, as expected, students sought academic information from authority figures such as professors, faculty, and staff and social information from their peers. Students perceived authority figures to be both knowledge and accessible, but in some cases this was not true. The same problem occurred even with some peers, which compliates previous research. While overt tactics worked quickly and easily for some, others had to turn to third parties for information.
Third Party

Asking someone else, a third party, rather than the primary information target is another tactic newcomers use (Miller 2009). Third party information seeking tactics were somewhat hard to distinguish between overt questions because sometimes students used overt tactics, but talked to someone other than the direct party they needed. For example, instead of going to ask their professor for help in class, many students went to the Edge, which is a structured study time with tutors for various subjects and workers from the Writing Center. For coding purposes, I labeled this third party because of the indirect means of seeking help. Thus, all comments where the student could have gone to the primary target for information, but went somewhere else, were labeled third party because of the roundabout means of seeking information. Twenty-one third party comments were identified, of these the majorities (13) were about Edge. Some other examples included students talking to their golf coach, roommate, academic leader, and older siblings. Out of 21 comments, 18 of these were seeking academic information, while four sought social information. Perhaps when seeking social information it is easier for newcomers to use other information seeking tactics besides third party.

The prevailing sentiment from the students about Edge was negative. Those who had been there did not recommend it. For instance, when talking about the least helpful aspect outside of the FYE program, a student stated, “Yeah. I went there for Math once and the guy just kind of sat there and watched me do it, he didn’t really help me. And if I had a question, he would just kind of beat around the bush, and not really answer it. I just kind of sat there, as I would have if I was doing it in my dorm doing it on my own” (1-3). Other students had trouble finding a tutor in the subject they needed, “There was usually not someone there for subjects that I need,” said a student (1-3). Thus, although students sought help from a third party, it was not always as successful as going to the primary person for help. This could be the reason for all the
negative comments. Students might be frustrated because their efforts to seek information were futile and they may feel like their time was wasted.

One reason for frustration with Edge was that students’ expectations of getting help were not met by the tutors. When asked what the least helpful thing outside of the FYE program was, a student responded:

Definitely Edge, I would not say bank on it, but if I wanted help I was like, oh yeah there are tutors for every subject at Edge! Then I would show up and expect to get help from someone and there’d be no one there. And, like when you’re a freshman, it’s like…what do I do now? (1-3)

Thus, students went there expecting to get the help that they needed and then were left defenseless against homework that they may not know how to do. They left disappointed and were forced to use another information seeking tactic or give up.

Yet not all efforts to seek information using a third party were useless. Four comments mentioned talking to friends or family members to seek information, and these students seemed to be satisfied with the results. One student mentioned, “I wanted to know about the community and the paper work and I found that out from alumni that actually went to the school” (4-2). Other students discussed the benefits of having older siblings to turn to for help. One said, “Older siblings really helped to talk to” (1-7). Another added, “One of my sisters dropped out and she just said, don’t drink as much as I did” (1-7). Thus, it seems like students used their connections with family and friends to find out the information they needed to know. While, this may not have been the most direct route in seeking information, it might have felt more useful to the students because it was a way of connecting with loved-ones about a commonly shared experience.
Only two third party comments mentioned authority figures, one being a staff member and another, an academic leader. This is a surprisingly small considering the accessibility (students see each party once at least once a week) and knowledge of both parties. One might expect that these outlets would be used more as third party tactics, especially considering the positive responses the students had when talking to these ‘authority’ members directly. For example, a student talked about their academic leader, “Mine, I think was more help than our actual teacher. He sent more e-mails than the professor did. He did everything. He helped with advising, clubs, and tutoring” (2-3). Perhaps these outlets were so useful because of the low ‘traffic’ of first-year students they had asking them questions. The individuals were able to give the newcomers more attention because not many people went to them for help.

Generally, except for the Edge when students sought information from someone else rather than the main source of information, they were pleased with their experiences. However, their expectations about the Edge did not match reality, which caused some irritation. Typically using social-network connections was useful for newcomers. In cases where the information was not found through third parties, newcomers could use other information seeking tactics, such as indirect questions.

**Indirect Questions**

Organizational newcomers may get others to give information by hinting indirectly. This particular method was not found largely in the data. However, often students sought information using indirect methods of communication. Thus, is it important to clarify that when labeling the information seeking tactics, the definition used for this research is not only when newcomers hint for information, but also when newcomers used indirect or non-face-to-face communication to seek the information that they needed. Thus any comments where students used technology,
printed materials, or non-direct means of seeking information, it was labeled as indirect. In the data, 13 comments identified students using indirect methods, besides the first party, or third party, to find the answer to their questions. Most commonly, this occurred when first-years used the internet, brochures, or booklets to obtain the knowledge they needed to succeed:

I didn’t really know exactly what I wanted to major in. So I wanted a school with a lot of variety and flexibility, where I could double-major and still be fine. I guess I got a lot of information like online, and visit days, and random pamphlets and stuff in the mail. And I still like looking through the course catalog saying; okay…if I do this minor, if I do this minor- what will happen. (3-2)

This comment shows how the student was able to have their questions answered without consulting with an authority figure or a third party and seemed to be satisfied with the results.

Eleven out of 13 comments discussed students finding out academic information. Most were positive, but three demonstrated frustration and confusion. For example a student mentioned, “Merlin. I found it so hard to register. They really just gave you the date you were supposed to register and then sent you off on your own with your class. So if the first time you did it, it would be nice if they sat you down in the library and really walked you through it” (2-2). Another student added, “They went through it with us at orientation…but they didn’t really explain it. They just said, click this, and now click this. So then when you went back to your room, you didn’t really retain it” (2-2). These comments show times when students wanted more information but may not have asked for help overtly. Instead, they were forced to figure it out for themselves. Perhaps they hinted for information by talking to their peers about how hard Merlin is to navigate, but no one picked up on the fact that they were struggling. Overall, students
primarily used indirect information seeking tactics to discover academic information. In these examples it was procedural information that confused newcomers the most.

Two comments showed newcomers acquiring social information. Students even mentioned ways that they learned without even trying. For example, when asked how she obtained the social information she needed to know about college, a student replied, “I guess in the halls, we had to keep our doors open all the time. We didn’t have to, we just did. We got to know each other really well” (2-2). Thus, the student demonstrated that they learned a lot about their floor mates and most likely made friends because of the nonverbal act of leaving their door open. This allowed for newcomers to feel welcome on the floor which allowed them to socialize and form bonds together. This indirect, unintentional means of seeking information helped newcomers seek social information from their peers and to form relationships.

Overall students were able to gain much needed information simply by looking online or at the brochures and booklets that the college provided them. They were also able to gain information accidentally by using nonverbal communication. Yet, some students were unable to find the information they needed and were required to use another information seeking tactic. Students who may have been particularly annoyed with the lack of available information may have turned to testing limits.

**Testing Limits**

Newcomers might also test their boundaries to see the reaction revealing norms of organizational behavior. Testing limits was not brought up directly in the focus group conversations. Thus, when coding for this information seeking tactic, I considered students giving up or not caring about finding important information as a sign of testing limits. This appeared to be students testing limits because they wanted to see how far they could get without
trying before they got noticed or ‘in trouble.’ Testing limits is something that most students may not admit to, or might be something that they are not consciously aware of. Still, in the data two examples of students not caring or not trying were present.

When asked what academic information he needed to know in order to be successful, one student responded, “For Math, there’s that Maple program. That’s a terrible program. It just pissed me off; I’d rather do it by hand” (2-2). Then when asked how he figured it out, he said, “Oh, I didn’t. I just quit” (2-2). Although not stated as such, this is testing limits because clearly the student knew that this program was important, or else he or she wouldn’t have brought it up when asked for academic information that one needed to know in order to be a successful student. Instead of asking for help from his professor, academic leader, or R.A., the student chose to give up, thereby testing his limits with the professor and seeing how far he could get in the class without using it. The student even admitted that they “quit,” thus acknowledging that they tested their limits because they wanted to do it by hand instead.

A similar story was told when answering the same question in a different group. A student explained, “I didn’t have questions about what I needed to do. I was spur of the moment. They contacted me about track and that was it. I didn’t really worry about what I needed to get in at all” (4-1). Clearly the student acknowledged that there were things she should have worried about, but since he or she was here for track, the “rules” and worries didn’t apply. This is considered testing limits because the student wanted to see how far one could go without having to worry about school.

In both situations students were testing their limits academically. This is interesting because students often socially test limits in college, especially with underage drinking. Yet here, students strictly gave academic examples. Perhaps testing limits academically seemed to fit with
the topic of the FYE program. Thus they felt comfortable sharing these examples, and not those of socially testing limits. Also it seems like the students knew that they were supposed to take academics seriously, but did not always want to do so. Thus, they chose to seek information by breaking rules and not worrying about consequences. This tactic can be extremely informative because it can be seen as a call for help from struggling students. Hopefully the FYE program, which is set-up to target at-risk students, would have spotted these students and the appropriate people would have been able to help them.

**Other Tactics**

Other ways that newcomers seek information, might include jokes, self-disclosure, or verbal prompts to ease information out of insiders. This sort of disguising conversations elicits information by attempting to make it a part of the natural conversation. Simply watching another’s actions, or surveillance, is an easy way to gain information. Finally, a newcomer might listen to others conversations to gain information (Miller 2009). While these tactics have been identified in the socialization literature, they were not found in this particular data set. There may be many explanations for this. Perhaps these tactics are not used in this setting; maybe first-year students at a college do not use jokes, disguise conversations, or observe people in order to seek information. While this is possible, it is not very likely. Another explanation is that conversations within focus groups did not allow for these tactics to be easily recalled and discussed. Limitations of the research methodology are discussed in greater detail in the “Limitations” section. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all of the known variations of information seeking tactics were found in the data.
Summary of Information Seeking Tactics Data

In response to my first research question, students found information they needed to know in order to be successful both socially and academically by using overt tactics, asking third parties, asking indirect questions, and testing limits. Overall, students seemed to ask overt questions to those whom they perceived to be either knowledgeable about either academic or social information or those who they thought would be accessible to help them. However, they were dissatisfied when neither of these assumptions were met. Currently the program is designed so that some students cannot be assigned to academic advisors and orientation leaders who are not in their particular major field of study. While this can be frustrating to the students because the authority figure does not seem knowledgeable, both parties are trained to find out any information they cannot answer themselves and provide it to the students. So the program accounts for situations where the student is frustrated by the perceived lack of knowledge of authority figures. The majority of students who used third parties went to Edge and were dissatisfied with the help they received. Those who used indirect questions or methods to seek information often used the internet and were happy with the information they found, but were surprised when the information did not match reality. Very few students used testing limits, but all examples were in an academic setting.

Knowing where students seek information will allow institutions to make information easily accessible to students in the places they are likely to seek it. Thus, students will be more likely to find the information that they need in order to be successful and will be better equipped to socialize into the institution. Also if students had more information it would lessen their expectations and assumptions. This kind of information about what tactics students actually use to engage in socialization along with feedback about FYE programs, will promote better programs and a more successful transition.
First-Year Experience Program Data Analysis

While my first research question sought to discover what information seeking tactics first-year students used in order to seek both academic and social information that they needed. My second research question sought to identify what parts of the FYE program students perceived to be the most helpful to their transition. In the focus groups students were asked which part of the program they thought was the most useful and which part of the program they thought was the least beneficial. I first separated the data by grouping it into comments about the individual portions of the FYE program: FYE 100, Advising, Summer Reading, IDS 125, Welcome Week, and Summer Orientation. This helped identify trends within the data and draw conclusions about specific components of the program.

FYE 100

Even though students were asked to consider all parts of the FYE program, when asked what were the most and least helpful to their transition, the most popular topic seemed to be FYE 100. Overall, 84 comments discussed FYE 100. Of these, 45 were negative, 25 were neutral, and 14 were positive. The overwhelming response to the course was negative. Some of the major themes that were mentioned as reasons why they disliked the course were a heavy workload, the time of the course, the purpose of the course, and the discipline of their professor.

Since many students in each focus group had different professors, the students seemed eager to share their individual experience with him/her compared to other students in the group. The majority of students were paired with a professor who was in their major field or discipline. However, due to such a large incoming class, students having double majors, and students with undeclared majors, some students had to be placed with a professor who was not in their anticipated discipline. This seemingly ‘random’ placement caused much frustration to students.
For instance a student stated, “My teacher was extremely useless. We were all sports majors and she was chemistry so she was useless” (2-3). This feeling echoed throughout students who felt like they were placed in the wrong group: “I really didn’t think it was that helpful because my advisor wasn’t my major so they couldn’t answer any questions” (1-2).

On the other hand, those whose major matched their professor’s discipline seemed very happy and positive about the experience: “I liked that you really got to know your professor and they’re your advisor so you can go to them and you feel comfortable with them”(1-2). Another student added, “I think it would be a really helpful and beneficial thing if the advisor did match the major. Unless there were some people that were un-majored and then I guess they could be un-majored together. Then you would be able to go to people and bond with them” (2-5).

Clearly, students only saw a benefit to a relationship with their professor/advisor if it was going to help them in the future.

Aside from the professor/advisor, students seemed to dislike many aspects of the FYE 100 course. They felt as though they did just as much, if not more, work for FYE 100 as they did in their other classes: “My teacher never taught freshman before. She was used to teaching 300 level classes, so our class was like a 300 level class, it was terrible. I got so much work in that class. It was like double every other class” (2-5). They also did not like the fact that having this one credit course kept them from taking other courses: “Well FYE screwed me because I was trying to take another class, but I couldn’t because it put me at 10 hours because it’s worth one credit, which is worth nothing” (2-4).

Generally, the students did not see the point of the assignments. They especially did not understand the case studies and how they related to anything else: “For my FYE class, I thought it was completely pointless because, no seriously, our topic was about food. Like organic food,
and he took it seriously! He made us go to stores and I just felt like why were we talking about this? It doesn’t have to do with anything” (4-3). The purpose of the class was not communicated to the first-years well enough for it to resonate with them. They did not see how this class set them up for, or helped them with their overall college career. As one student explained, “The whole time I was wondering, why am I taking this again? I know that it was suppose to be an introduction to the college experience but when I looked at the other classes I was taking and I was like this isn’t like college at all. The only one it’s similar to is my IDS class” (3-9).

Overall the comments about FYE were negative, however the one positive aspect that most newcomers agreed upon was the exposure to their peers that the class provided. For example a student said, “The one good thing about FYE was getting to know the people in your class” (2-2). Another student had a similar response, “In my FYE group I made like a lot of friends” (1-2). Thus, the students felt like FYE provided them with a social atmosphere where they felt comfortable talking to their peers and for the most part their professor.

Generally students had many complaints about FYE 100. Some did not like the pairing of their advisor, the workload, the credit hour amount, the case studies, or the purpose of the course. However, the course did help foster new relationships newcomers and their peers. Equally as helpful was the relationship it created between newcomers and their advisor/professor when they were matched with a professor in their major.

**Advising**

A critical part of the FYE program was academic advising. As mentioned earlier, this portion was unique because the professor of the FYE 100 class was also the academic advisor to all of the students in the class. Out of all the data, 17 comments were identified to be specifically about advising. Some of the comments were hard to distinguish between FYE 100 and Advising
because of the dual role of the advisor/professor. However, I coded comments as Advising if they were only about the advising process and did not comment about the course or teaching methods.

Accordingly, the comments that students shared about the advising process mirrored those made about FYE 100. Students whose majors did not match that of their professor were not happy with their experience. Out of the 17 comments, eight were students who had a negative experience with their academic advisor. For example, a student stated, “I think they should match the advisors better. Because mine had no idea how to help us, she even told us to go talk to other people” (2-5). After that comment another student chimed in, “Yeah, I would agree with that because I liked my advisor but he didn’t know anything. Like during our first meeting, he had to make like three phone calls to other professors because he didn’t know the answer”(2-5). Not only did students dislike their advisor not being knowledgeable about their particular field of interest, they also experienced some advisors who they perceived as not helpful at all:

My academic advisor, I don’t think he was effective. I was the only one in the class who didn’t have a folder for a long time or a 4 year plan. He continually forgot my folder…and I was the only one in class without a folder. He’s just okay, he tried to help me out but as a professor, but he was too busy befriending the kids instead of teaching them. I need him to be a professor, not my friend (4-7).

It seems like students had negative experiences when either their advisor was not knowledgeable about their field, or was not accessible to help them. Students perceived making calls or referring them to other people as a sign that the professor was not competent. Yet, perhaps their expectation that their professor would have all the answers was unrealistic.
Students who did have an advisor in their field saw the benefits: “I liked that they matched the academic advisor as the professor because then I didn’t have to go talk to a stranger. And he’s our theory and our band teacher and we see him all the time” (3-5). Out of the 17 comments, nine were students who had positive experiences with academic advising. For example, “Well I’m a business major and he’s a business professor so he knows all the classes you’re supposed to take. He knows what you want to do, and what you need to get there. He’s just really helpful” (1-6). Therefore, students placed high value on their professor and academic advisor being in their discipline.

Aside from the discipline match or mis-match, students did seem to value simply getting to know their professor/academic advisor. For instance a student explained, “I definitely felt more comfortable like going in and talking to them, knowing that they knew who you were” (2-4). Another student had similar feelings, “I liked how they got to know you, so if I went in they would know my name and face and be able to help me” (1-6). Students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to build a relationship with a faculty member.

In sum, students liked having an advisor who was in their discipline and was knowledgeable about it. On the other hand, they were frustrated when they had to seek information from sources other than their advisor. Nevertheless, getting to know another person on campus was seen as helpful for most students.

**Summer Reading**

On the other hand, conversations about the Summer Reading book, *Coyotes*, were extremely negative. Of the 44 comments made during the focus groups about the summer reading book, 31 were negative. In fact, many students mentioned the book when asked what the least helpful part of the FYE program was to their transition. As a whole, they did not understand
how the book related to their lives and to their class as one student explains: “I think the fact that
they were trying to tie everyone together with a common book didn’t work…if we could have all
read something that was more relevant to our class, it would have been better” (3-5). A few
students commented that the book was a bit outdated and it felt irrelevant to the present time. For
example, a student said, “Get one more recent. Even without the recentness, it wasn’t relevant.
There are immigrants, some even at this school, I understand, but what does this have to do with
us and being new, first-year students in college?” (4-3). In general the newcomers could not see
the importance of this book to the class or to their lives. Perhaps this frustration again came from
their expectations. The purpose of the book was only briefly explained to them during their
summer orientation and after that it was just seen as a requirement for the FYE 100 course. The
reasoning and expectations for its use were not explained in great detail, which left the students
to train their own conclusions.

While the FYE program aimed to incorporate the reading into the classroom in multiple
ways, it appears that this did not actually happen. For example, one student stated, “My FYE
class was a waste of time and so was reading that book. The class was on food and we never
used it. This has nothing to do with illegal immigration. I’m not sure why I had to read it” (2-3).
Students agreed that the book was not an integral part of their FYE 100 class, IDS 125 class, or
their English classes. Thus, to them it was a waste of their time. “I know like for FYE class we
had the Coyote quiz, but if you just read the back of the book, the answers were right there. So
we didn’t really have to read it,” explained a student (1-3). Another simply stated, “It would have
been really easy not to read that book” (3-5). These negative comments could also stem from
their expectations not being met. The first-year students were told that Coyotes was a required
reading, and that it would be used in multiple classes. Thus, students stressed out over reading it
and were disappointed and upset when they didn’t even discuss it, “That book stressed me out over the summer. I thought we were going to have tests on it and then we didn’t even talk about it” (3-5). Clearly, in this regard their expectations did not meet the actual reality of the FYE program.

Some other issues that students mentioned about the book were related to the author, Ted Conover, who came to speak to the first-year students at the end of the fall term. Eight comments total were offered, and all of them were negative. Students felt that Conover did not talk to them; rather, he just read from a note card: “Yeah, he just read us a piece of paper. He read us what we read. We know this already”(4-5). Another student added, “When he came to the school alls he did was tell us about the book. He just read a paper that he wrote. He probably couldn’t discuss it because it’s been so long” (4-5). Thus, students were not only disappointed with the book they were also let down by the presentation from the author. Overall, Coyotes did not seem to relate to the students:

I thought that’s what they were trying to do, is relate to us. But if they had a book more recent, it would be a lot better. It’s like something our age, maybe someone studying abroad our something, trying to immerse in a different culture. That would have been better. You know how the library had FYE help website, there were books on that website that would have been better than Coyotes (4-5).

Although some students did acknowledge that their professors tried to use the book, and that they did have one assignment or discussion about it, the overwhelming majority did not.

By and large students have a negative opinion of the summer reading. Mainly they did not think the story was relevant to their lives and they were frustrated after they read the book.
and did not use it in classes. Their expectations for the book did not match the reality of its use, which is similar to their comments about IDS 125.

**IDS 125**

IDS 125 was not a major topic of conversation during the focus groups, which makes sense because the majority of participants had not yet taken the course. Sixteen total comments were made about IDS. Of these, ten were negative, three positive, and three neutral. Those who had a negative opinion had a strong objection to it:

I was in the dance IDS and it was absolutely terrible. It’s not a blow off class; I figured it wasn’t a class you had to be a dancer to take. The description was the history of dance, like the cultural expression of dance. Anyways, I can’t dance at all; let’s just say that and I don’t know anything about it. A lot of our assignments have to do with like knowing about dance and it doesn’t really mean anything to me. So that was kind of hard. I didn’t like how it was done and the teacher and everything. (2-4)

In this situation the student was not prepared for the course because he or she felt that the description was not detailed enough. Another student also commented on how the description did not match the actual class, “Mine was supposed to be on socioeconomics, but my teacher is the Spanish teacher here and she just decided to change it to border issues and Chicago history” (2-5). Again, the description did not match the actual course. Thus, it seems that the students had expectations about course content before the class and if they were not met by the professor, then they discounted the value of the course. Their expectations did not match reality, so they were dissatisfied.

While on the other hand, students whose expectations did match the course, or whose expectations were exceeded, were happy with the course:
I really like my IDS class. I like the selection and the amount of classes that you could take, because there are topics on everything. I’m taking the 1950’s one and my professors are crazy and completely uninhibited. It’s really discussion based and I guess I really like the subject area. I get to write a paper on Alfred Hitchcock and that’s really exciting and like, I don’t know…it’s not similar to all the professors I had in high school. It’s unique. We’re reading a lot and we watch movies all the time. It’s kind of like the ideal college class because it’s not that stressful but it’s fun. (3-5)

It appears as though the descriptions had a high effect on this student because of the great variety in choices of classes. The student read through the descriptions, chose a course that he or she wanted and when the course matched the description, s/he was happy.

In general expectations played a large part in the evaluation of IDS 125 for newcomers. Recall that research on organizational socialization states that if the newcomer has a lot of expectations that are unmet, assimilation to the organization will be more difficult. This was the case for first-year students for both IDS 125 and Welcome Week.

**Welcome Week**

Welcome Week was a popular topic of conversation during the focus groups. Perhaps this was because it was a shared experience for all of the participants. But since each participant had a different viewpoint of the experience, conversations were able to flow and develop throughout many of the focus group sessions. Forty-six total comments discuss Welcome Week; of these 28 are positive, four are negative and 14 are neutral. Similar to IDS 125, participants had a mixed view of Welcome Week. They seemed to appreciate the opportunity to be able to be on campus before school stated in order to get a feel for campus and to make friends. However, they did not appreciate having to go to FYE 100 classes and multiple sessions all day everyday. For instance,
one student said, “I think the first week of Orientation, it was way too busy. You had no time to 
do your own thing, and get to know your own people. There was constantly stuff for you to do” 
(1-4). While another disagreed:

I would say the same thing, you’re more comfortable and more likely to be outgoing 
because everyone that’s there is in the same situation as you. The point of it is to get to 
know your class. So you’re more comfortable to do activities and to be social. If you just 
got put into a class, it would be really intimidating to go up and talk to someone. It just 
made an environment where it was comfortable to get to know people. (2-3)

Thus, perhaps students expected to be able to socialize and were surprised when they had so 
many things to do. While some people thrive with a packed schedule, others find it too 
constraining.

An issue that students mentioned about Welcome Week was the fact that they were with 
the same group the whole time: “Yeah, and that’s like how I felt in our FYE groups, and during 
Welcome Week, like we never really met anyone else. I liked it in some ways because you did 
get to know those people really well, but no one else” (1-2). Another student had similar 
feelings, “Sometimes you just wanted to go and be on your own and not be with the group” (2-
6). Students seemed to have felt forced to participate in the activities, such as “The bad part 
about Welcome Week is I felt like they were forcing us to be together. And I don’t like being 
forced to do anything. That’s the only reason I didn’t like it” (4-3). Thus, newcomers felt 
restricted by not being able to get to talk to other groups of people and not being able to do what 
they wanted. They most likely did not see the benefit of the groups or the activities they 
participated in, if they participated at all. Two students admitted that they did not participate in 
all of the activities, one stated, “I didn’t really participate in Welcome Week. I went to class and
then went back to my room. I didn’t like do any of the orientation stuff. It wasn’t helpful because I didn’t participate” (4-2).

Another issue related to Welcome Week was the lack of communication beforehand regarding the schedule. Students did not anticipate having so many activities that they needed to attend and were upset when they found out at the last minute. For example, on student explained, “I helped her move in [best friend] if I did not help her move in, I would not have known when to show up, or what to do. I asked her RA when I was suppose to show up tomorrow and then I found out that we weren’t done till 10:30 at night and I was like, “I have a job” (3-3). Another student added, “I was the same way. The first Wednesday of Welcome Week I was scheduled to work at 5:00 pm and like stuff started at noon and there was this whole itinerary that no one told me about” (3-4). It seems like this surprise and anger stemmed from the lack of communication between the students and the Office of Orientation. A student summed it up by saying, “There was a lack of communication, especially for commuters” (3-4). This situation could have to do with a difference between their expectations and the reality of the situation. Students who were not aware of their commitment and schedule for Welcome Week were not expecting it to be as intensive, so they were upset. While students who were aware of the schedule were not as upset, but still felt overwhelmed, “I feel like really overwhelmed,” another student added, “There was no time to get your room together,” one more said, “I didn’t even have time to do laundry” (1-4).

Taken as a whole students enjoyed the opportunity to become acquainted with the campus and other first-year students during Welcome Week, but they felt restricted both by the overwhelming number of activities planned throughout the day and the limited groups they were placed in.
Summary of FYE Program Components

Overall, it was hard for students to see a large benefit in any of the components of the FYE program. In regards to the FYE 100 class, students did not seem to understand the purpose of the course and did not expect to do so much work for only one credit hour. Students were happy to be able to form a relationship with a faculty member through academic advising. Those who saw a benefit in the future, because they had similar interests, thought it was useful to foster a relationship. While those who did not have the same academic interests as their advisor did not see a benefit to forming a relationship and were unhappy with the pairing. Newcomers did not see the purpose of a summer reading book because they could not see how it was relevant to their lives or the course. The book was also hardly incorporated into any first-year courses. The difference between expectations and reality caused frustration for newcomers taking IDS 125 and participating in Welcome Week. Many students explained the descriptions of the IDS 125 courses were not accurate and were dissatisfied. Similarly, students were unaware of the time commitments during Welcome Week and were unhappy with the lack of free time. Thus, students were more negative than positive.

Social Networks as a Key Socialization Factor

When examining all of the comments that did not fit into one of the information seeking tactic categories it seems as though perhaps in this particular context, transitioning from high school to college, there needs to be another information seeking tactic category, support systems. Instead of or in addition to employing one of the seven tactics identified by Miller (2009), it appears that some of the newcomers may have tried to learn from the current support systems they had such as parents or high school friends. For example, one student said, “I’m a commuter too, and I knew I was going to commute…my best friend is still in high school, so she’s still at
home. And I didn’t think I’d be spending that much time here, like outside of class” (3-2). A similar story was told by another student, “I’m a home body and I’m an only child and I’ve never had to share anything and I didn’t want to dive into that right away” (3-3). Another student mentioned, “One of my things socially was deciding if I was going to room with my best friend because we both picked North Central for different reasons, but we heard some horror stories about best friends living together and not being friends anymore…but we decided to do it” (3-3). These students seemed to be intentional about keeping some sort of support system with them during their transition period. Thus, they may have participated in another form of information seeking, but in these comments, they demonstrated using current friends and family to help them adjust to their first year at college.

When examining all of the comments that did not fit into one of the parts of the FYE program categories, some other important conclusions could be drawn. It seems like newcomers had positive experiences in small groups of students who had similar interests to them. For example, “My thing was being from out of state, it seemed like a lot of people knew everyone from high school or whatever, but meeting new people made me nervous. So I think it really helped that we’re all together on one floor” (3-3). In this example, all the students who came from out of state were placed to live on the same floor in a residence hall so they were able to bond with each other and form friendships. Being in a smaller environment might have helped them do so. Another example that a student mentioned was a similar situation, but on the honors floor, “I feel like living on the Honors floor was really helpful and having our R.A. I feel like her and the honors community was a helpful foundation to have” (3-6). Again, this small environment, and common interest among the newcomers helped them through the transition. Even outside of the residence halls this was seen, “I feel like in extracurricular I got to know
people really well. Like Choir, and French Club, I’m on the executive board now, even though I just started” (3-6).

Overall, it seems like smaller groups of students helped the first-years feel comfortable getting to know each other and aided them during their transition. These intimate groups may also have been seen as a support system especially because they were composed of people who were all going through the same life change. These findings are similar to those of William Smith who found that mothers provide a large number of helping behaviors and are the most helpful resource during the transition from high school to college, followed by high school teachers, fathers, friends, and high school counselors (William 2009). Clearly it is essential for first-year students to maintain the current support groups that they have coming into college.

Learning what was constructive and what was unhelpful for students during their transition can be useful for institutions when planning their FYE programs. Institutions can use and expand upon aspects of FYE programs that students find especially helpful and try and improve parts that might not be as beneficial.

Previous research indicates that newcomers often experience surprises because of the differences in their expectations and the reality of their organization. If institutions can limit the disparity between the two, it would seem that newcomers would adjust more smoothly to the organization. While research discusses the importance of socialization and how it can be a unique process for each individual, it does not explore the process from the viewpoint of an individual. Knowledge gained from this study shows multiple experiences and allows a more individualized and personal look at assimilation.

White et al. (1995) suggests that a program “should not be understood as a single event, but as a process that should be linked programmatically, and tailored to suit the needs of the
university.” Understanding of the process is increased by looking at socialization through the lens of organizational socialization because of the active role newcomers play. The theory discusses the entry characteristics of new students, but does not provide a deeper look at how their growth and development into the organization actually takes place. Through this research one is able to see how a first-year student tries to make it through the point of entry stage to the metamorphosis of being a full organizational member.

**Limitations**

Some limitations existed in my research as a result of the methodology. The most prominent issue that I faced was that not all of the information seeking tactics were found in the data. There may be many explanations for this. But, most likely focus groups did not allow for certain information seeking tactics to reveal themselves. For example, activities like surveillance and listening were not brought up in the discussion. Yet, these are not things that one might normally bring up in conversation, especially surrounded by peers. Also both activities are more subconscious. Thus, the students might not be fully aware that they listened and watched people in order to find out relevant information. Therefore by using focus groups as opposed to observations or surveys, I was not able to collect data on all of the information seeking tactics.

Another limitation of my research project was the size of the focus groups. While, I intended for them to all have an equal number of participants, this was not the case. In fact they ranged from thirteen people to four. Thus, there was not as much consistency in the process as I would have liked. Nor was I able to gain much information from the students in the large focus group of thirteen people, which was certainly related to its size. The number of participants in my study was also limited based on the number of actual participants that showed up. I was only able to reach thirty-two students and most of these were females. Having a heavily female
population might have compromised my findings slightly because different tactics might have been used by males who were not represented in my data. Also males might have had a different perspective on which part of the FYE program was helpful to them.

**Conclusions and Implications**

**Information Seeking Tactics**

My first research questions sought to find how first-year students sought information that they needed to be successful college students both academically and socially. My data revealed that first-years students use four of the seven tactics identified by researchers (Miller 2009). By looking at how first-year students used the information seeking tactics, can shed insight as to how to improve the FYE program for the future.

The first information seeking tactic found was overt, when newcomers come out and ask for information directly. The data showed that students sought academic information from their professor, staff members, or other faculty members. They went to professors because they thought they would be knowledgeable and accessible. However, in some cases neither of these things was true. Professors who did not have the same academic interests as newcomers did not seem to students to have the advising knowledge they needed. Also, some professors did not have time to dedicate towards the first-year students whom were their advisees. Thus, in order to remedy this situation, perhaps in the future the FYE program could try to do a better job matching the major of the student to the discipline of their advisor. Additionally, maybe the advisors had too many advisees and were spreading themselves too thin. Perhaps, NCC should only allow first-year advisors to advise first-year students in order to keep their attention and focus on the newcomers.
For social information, newcomers typically went to peers, or para-professional staff such as Resident Assistants. They did this because they perceived their peers to be accessible, especially compared to the authority figure. However, this was not always the case. Many students brought up examples when their resident assistant was too busy to help them, or when their orientation leader disappeared. Thus, in order to provide students with more peer outlets to seek information, NCC should provide more role models to students so the availability of one is not an issue.

Looking at third party tactics, when students went to a third party instead of the primary person for information many students mentioned going to structured study time at the Edge. However students were not very happy with their experience here. They felt that tutors were not available in the subjects that they needed and that those who were available were not very helpful. Thus, in order to improve structured study time, perhaps the organizers should advertise certain subjects being there on certain days. This way, students would know when to show up if they needed Math, Biology, or Psychology help. Also, in order for the tutors to be more useful, perhaps they need more detailed training and more practice. Tutoring multiple students in a night is not easy. Thus, maybe all they need is more guidance on the “how to” of tutoring.

As for indirect questions, where students sought information using indirect methods of communication, such as websites, many students mentioned using the internet to find information. However, in the examples they gave, sometimes the descriptions online did not match the reality of their experiences. Thus, the college should work to make the web sites, publications, and any digital communication more accurate and more specific so that students know exactly that to expect. Additionally, they should try to make more information available online since it is such a popular medium. For example, NCC should post information about the
FYE program on Facebook, Twitter, and the college’s website. They should make the information available in places where the students are already looking, rather than having to direct the students where to look.

Finally, regarding students testing limits, which are when students give up or do not care about succeeding either academically or socially at the institution, some examples were mentioned. For these cases the students did not mention anyone helping them with their struggle or time of carelessness. Thus, I would suggest that NCC continues to work on their early alert system that is used to identify students who are in need. This system currently works on a referral system and goes through a central location. However, perhaps if the system was decentralized it would detect more students who need extra help and support.

Overall, students were generally able to find the information that they were seeking. Though they ran into some obstacles along the way, those challenges could easily be reduced with a few minor changes to the program. Now that we know students often go to authority for academic information and peers for social information, we can better train these groups to address those needs. Similarly, now that we know students use the internet we can make more relevant and accurate information available online. Knowing the places new students go for information can aid institutions in placing information strategically.

**FYE Program**

My second research question for this project sought which part(s) of the FYE program students perceived to be the most and least helpful. Gaining student perspective on the program will help improve the program for future years.
Staring with the FYE 100 class, many students enjoyed the social aspect of the class, especially getting to know their peers and their academic advisor. However, a large complaint from the newcomers was that the workload was far too intensive for a one credit course. Many felt like they were doing just as much work as they were for a three-credit course. Thus, the FYE Committee should consider either changing the course credit amount or helping the professors change their work expectations for the course itself. Additionally, students did not understand how this course related to their “first-year experience” as the title and website description suggests. Thus, the FYE committee should consider making the description more accurate and explanatory.

As for the academic advising portion of the FYE program, students loved the fact that their professor was also their academic advisor. But again, were not happy when their academic interests did not match that of the professor or when the professor was unavailable. Thus, the school should do a better job matching and limit the number of advisees one advisor can have.

In regards to the summer reading, students had very few positive comments and did not understand its purpose in their experience. This could be explained by the fact that very few professors used the book in their classroom, leading many students to feel that it was pointless for them to read. Perhaps the college should make sure that the book is incorporated not only into FYE 100, but also IDS 125 and English courses for newcomers, or even possibly reconsider using this book or a summer reading assignment at all.

For IDS 125, not many students commented on it. But those who did either had a positive experience because their expectations for the class were met, or had a negative experience because they were let down by the description. Again, NCC should be more thorough when
explaining the topics covered in each course, and when explaining the purpose of having an interdisciplinary course. Here especially student expectations played a critical role in their experience of the course.

When discussing Welcome Week, students mentioned how much they enjoyed being able to socialize and have fun with their peers. However, they were surprised by the amount of activities planned that week and felt as thought they were over-booked. Some also mentioned the inability to meet new groups of students because they were always with the same group the whole day. Perhaps in the future, Welcome Week should schedule breaks and free time and should inter-mix the groups more throughout the day. This would allow students time to relax and branch out and meet different, new students.

By knowing what students thought was helpful and not helpful for each part of the FYE program, NCC can begin to tailor it to the students needs. If the purpose of the FYE program is to help students transition into college, then making changes to benefit the students will advance the goal of the program.

Outside of the FYE program, and the known information seeking tactics, students seemed to use new or existing support groups during their transition. For example, students often mentioned talking to friends and/or family members about college. They also brought up how helpful some common-interest groups they were placed in at NCC were helpful, such as the out-of-state floor in a residence hall. Based on the newcomers’ use of support groups, NCC should continue giving students common-interest groups from which they can build relationships. However, they should also remember to encourage students to use their friends and families as support throughout the process. Sometimes the school focuses on cutting students off from their
old support groups and forming new ones, but, this research shows that maintaining support networks could be a vital part of making a successful transition.

Overall, the FYE program still needs some fine-tuning. It is in its early stage of development and could make some minor changes that could have a major impact on students’ success. But as a whole, the program does help make students’ transition easier. Giving students a peer or role model to connect with seemed helpful in finding social information. Providing an opportunity for students to get to know their academic advisor seemed to make their academic transition easier. There are just a few examples of how the program’s goal is met, but their process could still be improved.

Knowledge gained from this research can be useful not only for NCC, but also other institutions wishing to make their students transition easier. Specifically, knowing what information seeking tactics students use can help institutions place information where students actually look. For example, instead of institutions paying thousands of dollars to give students a brochure about the FYE program, placing the information online could be a more cost-effective, and audience-appropriate way of disseminating information. Additionally, having students share what they actually perceive to be helpful instead of just looking at GPA and retention rates to see if the program was successful could be a more accurate way of gauging success. Letting the students’ voices speak instead of their grades gives us informative feedback that one might not otherwise receive.

NCC’s FYE program has already implemented some new changes for next year including going from four case studies, to a single case study for every first-year student. The FYE committee is also building a series of music events, speakers, and other activities around the
course. Also in the works is a New Orleans trip in which first-year students will have the choice to participate. This trip will connect will to the summer reading for next year, *Zeitoun*, the story of a man and his family who are trying to cope with the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina. While students were not shy about criticizing the program, one positive aspect will remain for next year’s class, the immediate connection that took place between advisors and students. These changes and possibly others that will be implemented as a result of this study and other initiatives will make the FYE experience even better for first-year students. Corsino says, “In the end, we believe this will do the most to promote student success both at North Central College and in the future” (Rhew 2010). Knowledge gained from this study will help institutions prepare their FYE programs so that first-year students can socialize successfully.


North Central College Retention Plan 2009-2010.


Appendix A

Schedule of Focus Group Questions:

Tell us who you are (first name only) and where you’re from?
**Responses to this question will not be transcribed**

What was your first experience with North Central College? Describe it.
Reworded: Tell me about the first time you were on campus?

Write down the first thing that comes to mind when you hear First-Year Experience?
Reworded: Quickly free associate what you think of when you hear First-Year Experience. Write it down.

What kinds of academic information have you needed as a new student here? (Citing sources, finding articles, choosing classes, homework help, etc.)
Reworded: What kinds of things did you need to know to do well in your classes?
How did you learn about this information? From whom? When?
Reworded: How did you find out what you needed to know? Who did you ask and when?

What kinds of social information have you needed as a new student here? (student organizations, campus events, wellness center, work-out facilities, places to eat, etc.)
Reworded: What kinds of things did you need to know to fit in at college, or feel at home?
How did you learn about this information? From whom? When?
Reworded: How did you find out what you needed to know? Who did you ask and when?

What parts of the FYE program which includes summer orientation, welcome week, FYE 100, summer reading, IDS 125, or academic advising have been the most helpful in your transition to college? Why?
Reworded: Which part has assisted you the most in adjusting to college?

What parts of the FYE program which includes summer orientation, welcome week, FYE 100, summer reading, IDS 125, or academic advising have been the least helpful in your transition to college? Why?
Reworded: Which part has assisted you the least in adjusting to college?

What outside of the FYE program has been the most helpful in your transition to college? Why?
Reworded: What other things not including summer orientation, welcome week, FYE 100, summer reading, IDS 125, or academic advising has assisted you the most in adjusting to college?

What outside of the FYE program has been the least helpful in your transition to college? Why?
Reworded: What other things not including summer orientation, welcome week, FYE 100, summer reading, IDS 125, or academic advising has assisted you the least in adjusting to college?

Is there anything else you would like to add/share about FYE or your transition to college?
a. Reworded: Any closing remarks?

LOU 1
A major goal of FYE is to introduce students to academic conversations or discussions that emphasize critical thinking, the need for evidence, and take a multi-disciplinary perspective on issues. (This is opposed to just giving your opinion)
Do you believe that this type of academic discussion was present in your FYE Class?
Do you now feel comfortable having this type of discussion?

LOU 2
Another goal of the FYE program was to have students see the connections between what they were studying in FYE 100 and the larger goals of the college especially LEV, interdisiplinarity, and intercultural understandings.

Do you think you saw these connections in class?
Any examples?

LOU 3
What about having your faculty advisor did you like?

Do you have any questions about the research project?
Appendix B

Informed Consent

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY
The purpose of this study is to understand how new college students seek information about their school. Specifically, I am interested in what parts of the First-Year Experience (FYE) course and program, if any, were helpful, in making the transition to North Central College. By conducting focus groups with students who completed the FYE 100 course, I hope to illuminate students’ perspectives about the course and program. This information will be used in my Honors Thesis and will be presented at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, and possibly the Rall Symposium. Additionally, some information may be shared with the FYE Committee. In all cases, names will be changed and any details that could reveal your identity will be altered.

PROCEDURE
In a group setting, you will answer a series of questions about your ideas, opinions, and experiences as a first-year student at NCC. At some points during the focus group you may be asked to write answers down. Oral answers will be audio recorded, but will be used for analytical purposes only and will not be used to identify any individual. The focus group will take 60-90 minutes.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Data will be collected anonymously: please do not place any identifying marks on the paper provided. In addition, no effort will be made to link responses to you, and all identifying information will be removed from or altered in the transcript. As a result, you should feel free to be completely honest in your response to each and every question you will be asked. Only the investigator (Kelly Carew) and her advisor (Dr. Amy Buxbaum) will have access to the audio recordings and complete transcripts. The college’s FYE committee may be given limited access to portions of the transcripts; but this information will be anonymous.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question. Should you desire to discontinue your participation at any time, you may stop answering questions and/or notify the researcher. You will not be penalized for this. The Researcher is willing to answer any further questions you have about this study.

AUTHORIZATION
Purposes and procedures have been explained to me and I agree to voluntarily participate. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring a penalty. In addition, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

____________________________________________
Your Name (Please Print)

____________________________________________
Your Signature

______________________________
Today’s Date

CONTACT INFORMATION:
Kelly Carew
Phone: 630-518-1549
E-mail: Kacarew@noctrl.edu
Appendix C

Debriefing Form

Thank you for your participation in my research project!
The purpose of this project was to see how you found information as a first-year student at NCC
and to discover what aspects of the FYE program you perceived to be most helpful during your
transition to college. You answered a series of questions. I expect to find that students who have
successfully socialized into the culture are those that have connected to peers, faculty, and/or
staff members through both formal and informal interactions in ways illuminated by
organizational socialization theory.

It may have been difficult to answer these types of questions, and your generosity and
willingness to participate in this study are greatly appreciated. Your input will help contribute to
the advancement of the FYE program.

Please be sure to maintain confidentiality about the discussion in this focus group.

If you are interested in this area of research, you may wish to read the following
references:


Jorgensen-Earp, Cheryl R. and Ann Q. Staton. “Student Metaphors for the College Freshman

Ryan, Michael P. and Patricia A. Glenn. “What Do First-Year Students Need Most: Learning
Strategies Instruction or Academic Socialization?” Journal of College Reading and

Schrader P.G. and Scott W. Brown. “Evaluating the First Year Experience: Students’
Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors.” Journal of Advanced Academics 19 (2008): 310-
343.

Smith, William. “Students’ Perceptions and Experiences with Key Factors During the Transition

If you have any further questions, please contact:
Kelly Carew Phone: 630-518-1549 E-mail: Kacarew@noctrl.edu

If you have concerns about the conduct of this focus group or the project in general
please contact:
Dr. Amy Buxbaum Phone: 630-637-5346 E-mail: Aebuxbaum@noctrl.edu