

## **Boot Camp: Preparing Teacher Candidates for the Discipline**

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### **Abstract**

Colleges and universities commonly implement orientation courses to help freshmen and transfer students adjust to the academic demands and social challenges of higher education. This article examines one university's implementation of a similar concept for teacher candidates transitioning from general to professional studies. The seminar, known as *Boot Camp*, is designed to prepare students for the rigor of coursework/clinical responsibilities and the teaching profession. Through a pre-post seminar questionnaire, participants showed growth in their perceptions and understandings of seminar topics. A faculty questionnaire indicated positive student outcomes from the seminar as observed through coursework and daily interactions with teacher candidates.

### **Introduction**

Colleges and universities often implement orientation or seminars to help freshmen and transfer students adjust to the academic demands and social challenges of higher education (Barefoot, 1992). Is the first year of college, however, the only point in which students need guidance and understanding of the demands placed upon them as they move toward graduation? Though universities make efforts to retain students through degree completion, attrition of completers is still a concern (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, Oh, 2008). A review of research finds many studies reporting positive outcomes from freshmen/transfer seminars, yet concerns persist beyond the entry year as students navigate through upper division/professional courses.

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The authors of this study, all teacher educators, noted unexpected struggles in some teacher candidates entering their professional programs of study. In seeking answers to address these concerns, they examined first-year seminar best practices and results as well as investigated if such practices exist as students move from general education to professional studies. They discovered a dearth of literature exists on such programs extending beyond the first year.

### Aims and Outcomes of First-Year Seminars

First-year seminars are defined as courses “intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students” (Barefoot, 1992, p. 49). Barefoot (1992) classifies such seminars into five basic types: (1) extended orientation, (2) academic with uniform content across all sections, (3) academic with content that varies across sections, (4) preprofessional, discipline-linked, or major-specific courses, and (5) basic study skills. The literature indicates the programs are instrumental in helping students make critical adjustments to academic demands and social challenges of higher education. Most seminar objectives aim to increase academic performance and retention rates (Padgett & Keup, 2011), however, multiple studies show outcomes of first-year seminars extend beyond initial course objectives, including stronger interpersonal and communication skills, more frequent interactions with faculty, improved practical competencies, study skills, and time management, increased usage of campus services, and fostered connectivity with the institution (Koch, Foote, Hinkle, Keup, & Pistilli, 2007; Kuh, 2008, Padgett & Keup, 2011).

Permzadian and Credé (2016) situate seminars within the framework of stress inoculation theory and met-expectations theory. Stress inoculation theory, according to Lazarus and Folkman, suggests that “stress results when perceived environmental demands and uncertainties exceed an individual’s perceived coping resources” (in Permzadian & Credé, 2016, p. 281). With met-expectations theory, when an individual enters an organization for the first time there is some level of inconsistent match

between what the individual expects to experience and what the individual actually experiences (Porter & Steers, 1973). First-year seminars are organized to communicate information concerning tasks, the environment, and expected stressors (Fan & Wanous, 2008), so that students can adjust their pre-entry expectations and beliefs to better align with post-entry expectations and experiences (Fan, Buckley & Litchfield, 2012; Janis, 1983). Additional benefits for new students also include learning about stress coping resources (e.g., academic advisement, career services) and stress coping skills and strategies (e.g., time management, study skills), as well as connecting with instructors and peers (Permzadian & Credé, 2016).

### Boot Camp

After examining the research on first-year seminars, the authors designed and implemented a one-day orientation for elementary education teacher candidates with goals for preparing students for the demands of the major and the profession. The authors, along with other faculty, had noted a disconnect between their expectations and students' understanding of the increase in academic and professional demands of the discipline. For example, faculty observed some students were often unprepared for in-class discussions and projects as well as unaware of and inexperienced with the time needed to study and prepare for coursework and field experiences. The seminar provides faculty opportunities for communicating information and expectations of courses, field experiences, and the profession as well as aligns students' pre-post entry beliefs and expectations. Through the seminar, faculty focus students to recognize and value the importance of entering into their program of study, realize the increase in academic demands within discipline coursework, set expectations for professional excellence, and begin building trusted relationships.

The seminar, renamed *Boot Camp* by faculty, is held the first day of each semester. In order to provide a full day, quality experience, students come together as a cohort to receive consistent

information about program expectations through a co-teaching model. Students are engaged in discussions, tasks, and cooperative learning activities. Topics addressed in *Boot Camp* include the importance and value of the teaching profession, growth mindset and grit, academic integrity, and professionalism in oral and written communication. The importance of adhering to a level of excellence in classroom presence, specifically class attendance, participation, attitude, and assignment completion is also addressed.

### Methodology

To gain insight into the perceptions and understandings of students prior to *Boot Camp*, a cohort of 20 students responded to a 6-item open-ended questionnaire focused on 3 areas: professionalism, academic misconduct, and growth mindset. Midway through the semester, the cohort completed the same questionnaire along with an item asking respondents to reflect upon ways in which *Boot Camp* was impacting their first semester as a teacher candidate. Seventeen of the original 20 member cohort were able to be matched for analysis. Both pre- and posttests were coded to determine growth while assuring anonymity of respondents. Additionally, this cohort's faculty completed a 3-item questionnaire to gather their perceptions of student outcomes as a result of *Boot Camp*.

### Results

Analysis of the *Boot Camp* pre- and posttests revealed increased understanding of all topics addressed as indicated by the depth, detail, and accuracy of responses. Student responses to pre-test items were succinct with simple descriptions. For example, when given the prompt *Describe how teacher candidates can demonstrate professionalism*, respondents provided statements such as, “be respectful” and “be professional” with limited details. Post-*Boot Camp* responses to the same question

included increased specificity such as, “have work completed in a timely manner,” “taking an active role in classwork and taking initiative,” and “constantly reflecting, asking questions, and being observant.”

Posttest responses also showed corrections of misconceptions and misunderstandings when compared to pretest responses. One common misconception noted in the pretest was the amount of time needed outside of class to complete assignments and study for courses. Pretest responses ranged from 3 to 40 hours per week with only 18% of students correctly estimating the commonly recommended 2 to 3 hours of study time and preparation per credit hour enrolled (University of Michigan-Flint, 2017). After *Boot Camp*, 82% of students correctly identified the number of hours recommended weekly for study and preparation time. During *Boot Camp*, students were required to plot out study time within their weekly course/field schedules. Of this experience, one student stated, “Setting aside time to study each week... helped me see how much time a week I would truly need.”

Five faculty who worked with 2 cohorts since the inception of *Boot Camp* completed a questionnaire describing changes noted in students and sharing perceptions of the effort. Analysis of faculty respondents indicated increased exhibition of enthusiasm upon entering the program and a greater investment in coursework. Additionally, faculty observed students rising to higher expectations and demonstrating more engagement in class. When *Boot Camp* was being designed, faculty expressed concern about oral and written communication of students. Poor speech (i.e., slang, incorrect grammar), disregarding appropriate titles (i.e., referring to professors and cooperating teachers by last names only), and making demands and excuses were all part of this discussion. These issues were all identified as areas of notable improvement from all faculty respondents. One faculty member shared, “I am pleased to report a much more professional demeanor represented in e-mail communication.”

Faculty and student respondents also reflected on the positive outcomes of *Boot Camp*. Students believed understanding the high expectations of faculty as one of the most beneficial outcomes of the experience. For one student, *Boot Camp*, “insured...that I was in an outstanding program. I knew when I walked away I would be pushed to my full potential.” Another student stated, “One part of *Boot Camp* that has positively impacted me was the layout of how the semester would go...this helped me tremendously to prepare for what was to come.” All cohort faculty are introduced, give presentations, and eat lunch with students during the seminar. This opportunity—becoming acquainted with and sharing expectations to students—was also cited as valuable among both groups. One student wrote, “having *Boot Camp* gave me a way to stay grounded through the semester. It also helped to start relationships with the teachers before the semester started.” A faculty member also indicated that *Boot Camp* was beneficial for students because it “built relationship(s) between [themselves] and faculty.”

### Conclusion

Based upon first-year orientation programs supporting students’ transition to higher education, the preprofessional seminar was designed to prepare students for the academic rigor and responsibilities within the discipline. Though several factors limit the current study, *Boot Camp* has reaped initial results encouraging its continuance with goals to increase its impact and methods to effectively monitor student progress over time. Its initial success should encourage other university teaching faculty to consider implementing similar pre-professional seminars. Further research in this area could help faculty develop highly effective seminar experiences that support student success through professional courses to graduation.

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