

Student Authenticity: A Foundation for First-Year Experience Courses

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Abstract : This study investigates the impact of student authenticity while engaging in academic exploration of students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence. Research questions include: How does incorporating authenticity in first-year academic exploration courses impact; 1) first-year students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence? 2) first-year students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence during the first and last halves of the fall semester? 3) first-year students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence among various student demographics? First-year students completed a Likert-like survey at the conclusion of eight weeks (first and last eight weeks/fall semester) academic exploration courses. Course redesign included grounding the curriculum and instruction with student authenticity and creating opportunities for students to explore, define, and reflect upon their authenticity during academic exploration. Surveys were administered at the conclusion of these eight week courses (first and last eight weeks/fall semester). Data analysis included an entropy balancing matching method and t-tests. Research findings indicate integrating authenticity into academic exploration courses for first-year students has a positive impact on students' autonomy and persistence. There is a significant difference between authenticity and first-year students' autonomy ($p = 0.00$) and persistence ($p = 0.01$). Academic exploration courses with the underpinnings of authenticity are more effective in the second half of the fall semester. There is a significant difference between an academic exploration course grounding the curriculum and instruction in authenticity offered M8A (first half, fall semester) and M8B (second half, fall semester) ($p = 0$); M8B courses illustrate an increase of students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence. Integrating authenticity into academic exploration courses for first-year students has a positive impact on varying student demographics ($p = 0.00$). There is a significant difference between authenticity and low-income ($p = 0.04$), first-generation ($p = 0.00$), Caucasian ($p = 0.02$), and American Indian/Alaskan Native ($p = 0.05$) first-year students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence. Academic exploration courses embedded in authenticity helps develop first-year students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and persistence, which are effective traits of college students. As first-year students engage in content courses, professors can empower students to have greater engagement in their learning process by relating content to students' authenticity and helping students think critically about how content is authentic to them — how students' authenticity relates to the content, how students can take their content expertise into the future in ways that, to the student, authentically contribute to the greater good. A broader conversation within higher education needs to include 1) designing courses that allow students to develop and reflect upon their authenticity/to formulate answers to the questions: who am I, who am I becoming, and how will I move my authentic self forward; and 2) a discussion of how to shift from the university shaping students to the university facilitating the process of students shaping themselves.

Keywords : authenticity, first-year experience, sense of belonging, autonomy, persistence

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