

# Oral Defense Announcement

## University of Missouri – St. Louis Graduate School

An oral examination in defense of the co-authored dissertation for the degree  
Doctor of Education with an emphasis in Educational Practice

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### **Enhancing the First-Year Experience Program for Community College Students: Creating a Cohort Model to Encourage Success, Engagement, and Sense of Belonging**

Date: April 16, 2024  
Time: 4:00pm-6:00pm  
Place: Remote

#### **Abstract**

Community Colleges are facing significant challenges to enrollment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impending enrollment cliff which will require higher education administration to adapt, get creative, and lead change in recruiting and retention strategies. Using the Sense of Community Theory (Serason, 1974) and the Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984), this study aims to evaluate student success, engagement, and sense of belonging. Through a qualitative comparative case study, students in a Men of Color (MOC) cohort, a pre nursing (NUR) cohort, and a baseline group of students in the standard college success seminar course enrollment were evaluated using in vivo, value and pattern coding of course assessments, reflections, and semi-structured focus groups. To provide more detailed and rich comparisons, course completion, course success, and student retention quantitative data were incorporated into each case analysis. The research findings indicate that the cohort model two-semester course format had a positive impact on student success, engagement, and sense of belonging. From this the researchers propose several recommendations for community colleges. First, it is recommended community colleges use a cohort model in assigning students to first year experience programs that are either career focused for students who identify a discipline of study or some other affinity for students who do not identify a discipline of study. Second, it is recommended that community colleges incorporate campus engagement activities within the first-year experience program and incentivize students to attend the activities. Third, it is recommended students receive ongoing follow-up not only during the first year at the college but through their credential completion to encourage retention. Fourth, it is recommended the instructors for the college success seminar course be well-trained, vetted, and highly engaging individuals to achieve the goals.

#### **Defense of Dissertation Committee**

Chairperson, Shawn Woodhouse, Ph.D.  
Committee Member, Andrew Crain, Ph.D.  
Committee Member Gretchen Fricke, Ph.D.