

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF A SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM:
AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

Summer bridge programs can be an ideal time for incoming freshmen college students to make valuable academic and social connections. Summer Bridge Programs have demonstrated success for in helping students make these connections. However, few programs have been studied extensively and been shown to have established success (Kallison & Stader, 2012, Strayhorn, 2012). This study, using a qualitative method, examined student perspectives of a summer bridge program and questioned how the participants integrated academically and socially to the university. The study took place at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States.

Students reported favorable opinions of the bridge program. Students reported strong friendships developed over the 4-week program, positive impressions of the faculty, and a positive impression of the university.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Renie Moss who has been with me through thick and thin and has taught me lessons on life and love. To my kids who have had to endure too many nights and weekends without dad. To my entire family who has encouraged me throughout this time.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Times of transition can be challenging for any student as they start a new school. These transitions can be especially difficult as a student moves from the norms and safety of high school to the challenges and newness of college (Vinson, 2008). Students want and need to feel safe and secure in their new environment in order to have the best chance for success. These feelings of safety, security, and the right environment are positively correlated with completion rates (Gilbreath, Kim, & Nichols, 2011). Evidence-based transition programs offered in the fall semester have been positively correlated to help ease the transition and completion rates of students (Oliver, 2016). To help ease this transition, many colleges have created a summer bridge program to jumpstart this transition time before the fall.

The term bridge is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a time, place, or means of connection or transition” (2004). A summer bridge program certainly fulfills this definition of helping students transition the pathway from high school to college and offers many of the transition elements found in a successful fall support program. These bridge programs have existed in many forms within education supporting students’ transition from one stage to another but not traditionally in the summer prior to freshman year. The purpose of bridge programs is to ease this transition experience by making it easier, more meaningful, and even enhance retention (Walpole et al., 2008). However, these bridge-type transition programs are not offered at all colleges despite the research that says a smooth transition to college allows for a greater chance of 1st-year academic success (Vinson, 2008).

Background

Each year, thousands of students enter college, anticipating degrees that will offer opportunities for success in future career and personal endeavors and most of these students enter without a bridge program. After the completion of their 1st year, however, almost 45% of students fail to return for their sophomore year (College Board, 2011), closing the door on many of those ideas of possible successful futures. In addition to the complexities of personal loss felt by students who fail to persist to graduation, the institutions also suffer loss (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). With the rising cost of attendance and an ever-increasing competitive higher education market, failure to persist toward degree completion has serious consequences for both the student and institution (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). However, the sooner a student can begin to make successful transition and connection to the university the better chance they have to experience success in that crucial first year (Cabrera, Miner, & Miley, 2013).

By definition, retention occurs when a 1st-year student returns to college for a 2nd year (Fowler & Luna, 2009). The term used to describe a scenario where a student does not return is called attrition (Fowler & Luna, 2009). With such a large percentage of students not returning, colleges need to further consider potential actions to help students increase their chances to succeed and complete a college degree. According to Tinto (1993, 2012), American colleges first started considering the issue of retention in the 1920s. At that time, only minimal efforts in improving retention were implemented. Since then, many more comprehensive efforts have been attempted, but retention percentages have yet to improve to a significant degree. Clearly, colleges must reconsider current strategies and practices, developing a new comprehensive approach to retention on their campuses if they want to see an increase in the current percentage of students being retained. One policy that has shown promise is the implementation of transition

programs that help students form meaningful relationships. These strong relationships have led to stronger connections to the university and are one pathway to lead to first year success (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013).

So, why should colleges consider implementing transition programs such as summer bridge? Supporting student progress toward successful degree completion is a goal supported by government at both the federal and state level. In a 2012 State of the Union address, former President Obama called college an, “economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford.” With such strong encouragement from the White House, colleges must thoroughly consider their practices related to retention as well as the effect stronger retention programs could have upon degree completion. At the state level, many funding formulas include incentives for colleges to increase graduation and retention rates (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). According to Bean (1986), this economic incentive should encourage colleges to take a more intentional look at what policies encourage student retention and if these policies encourage students to make meaningful connections to the university.

For the student, there is an economic incentive to persist to graduation. Students who successfully earn a bachelor’s degree will experience double the expected lifetime earnings versus those students who only attend college without a degree (College Board, 2011). In fact, on an annual basis, college graduates earn \$17,500 more versus those individuals with only a high school degree (College Board, 2011). Dropping out of college can lead to lower earning potential, concerns about employment security, and fewer opportunities for advancement (Braxton, 2002). Though some drop-outs may eventually return to college, once momentum is lost, returning to college can be difficult (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2012). However, simply

educating students about the financial incentive of degree completion and dangers of losing momentum has netted no positive impact upon retention (Tinto, 2004).

Transition Programs

Since most colleges cannot easily increase their selectivity or raise their standards on a yearly basis, and since many would not choose to, they can instead seek to retain already enrolled students through more effective transition programs. And, indeed, many colleges have begun to develop some strategies to retain more students (Hunter, 2006). According to Adams (2011), some currently used effective retention strategies include “freshmen seminars, tutoring programs, advisory interventions, mandated course-placement testing programs, and comprehensive learning-assistance centers or lab” (p. 20). All of those programs fall under the umbrella of 1st year experience (FYE) also described as transition programs.

First-year experience programs, are often credited to being developed by John Gardner in the 1970s while working at the University of South Carolina. Though the specific programs offered by colleges vary greatly, the primary purpose of 1st year programs is to assist students with the transition from high school to their freshmen year. Transition programs will be described in detail in Chapter 2 (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). Freshmen year transition programs such as these can be effective, in general, in helping universities make meaningful connections to the university (Oliver, 2016).

Bridge Programs

Transition to college programs of various types are examples of freshman year experience programs. Transitions to college are most commonly thought of as occurring during the fall semester. However, since transition is a process and not an isolated event, transition experiences occur throughout a student’s freshman year. These transition programs can be

offered during high school or during the freshman fall enrollment term, but a growing area of popularity is during the summer prior to college enrollment. Summer bridge programs were developed in the 1970s to target admitted freshmen students with academic deficiencies (Kezar, 2001). These programs have demonstrated success in helping students prepare for their first fall semester (Kezar, 2001). Though the reviews are mixed, many researchers say that these programs have shown some success in retaining students and graduating them at a higher rate than students who did not participate (Fike & Fike, 2008).

Though various programs have been implemented, one program that has shown potential in making a difference within selected populations is a summer bridge program. Summer bridge programs, in some instances, are required for full admission to the university. Summer bridge programs of this nature have shown promise at increasing retention (Otewalt, 2013). However, for students whose parents did not attend college there has been inconclusive evidence that summer bridge programs are effective at retaining them (Otewalt, 2013). These programs have also been implemented among some specific majors, like engineering and STEM, that want to increase their own retention and graduation rates (Lee, Wade, & Amelink, 2014, Lenaburg, Aguirre, Goodchild, & Kuhn 2012).

Summer bridge programs were historically established at universities with less restrictive admission standards. These early programs had as their goal to assist students with the transition to the college process in an effort to bolster academic success rates of these students preparing to enroll in the main academic calendar year each fall (Walpole et al., 2008). Traditionally, summer bridge programs were also started to help first generation, low-income, and provisionally admitted students make a successful transition from high school to college (Walpole et al., 2008). Proponents of summer bridge programs believe summer programs can smooth the

transition to college by providing inside knowledge to help students learn how to navigate college and become comfortable with faculty, staff, and other students (Adams, 2012).

Summer bridge programs were designed to assist students with the transition to the academic demands of college, familiarize them with academic support resources, and allow them to make social connections to strengthen their attachment to the institution (Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher, 2005). These programs have been shown to be successful in assisting various student populations in their transition to college (Adams, 2012, McCurrie, 2009, Walpole et al., 2008). Based upon the existing research it is surprising that summer bridge programs have not been more widely embraced by colleges. Many college administrators do not realize the potential benefit to both the university and the student, since research has only been able to determine that bridge programs participants have a correlation and not causation with graduating at a higher rate and the nature of this relationship between the two is not fully understood (Kallison & Stader, 2012, Strayhorn, 2011).

Academic and Social Integration

The concepts of academic and social integration have been studied for some time. The terms were popularized by Tinto (1975, 1993). The term *integration* refers to a student's interaction within the university at multiple levels (Tinto, 1994). A more recent definition by Tinto (2006) simply defined academic and social integration as a student's level of involvement. This definition comes from the idea that a student's encounters and interactions with other students or faculty and staff members can lead to deeper connections. These deeper connections have been shown by many researchers to lead to a stronger commitment to the university and, ultimately, an increase in first year academic success (Fergy, Marks-Maran, Ooms, Shapcott, & Burke, 2011). Woosley and Miller (2009) found social integration to be positively associated

with retention and found academic integration to be positively associated with grade point average, and grades, of course, are positively related to retention.

Social integration includes both the formal and informal interactions that students experience at the university. Tinto (1993) defined social integration as interactions that occur within students' social circles or with the campus community. His definition of social integration includes connections with peers, dating, involvement in student organizations, understanding of academic services and policies, a sense of belonging, and increased out-of-class engagement. Social integration also relates to the commitment to the university which can have a positive impact upon a connection to the university.

Statement of the Problem

Quantitative studies have indicated that bridge programs contribute to a student's academic and social integration within institutes of higher learning (Sablan, 2014). There are few studies which have explored the topic of academic and social integration based upon student experience during a summer bridge program. Many studies exist which examine bridge programs from a quantitative perspective but interviews of students to get an inside perspective is less common. However, in referring to bridge programs Strayhorn says, "empirical studies have remained largely descriptive and in short supply" (2011, p. 142). This study will seek through interviews to better understand how students think about their experiences within a summer bridge program.

There is a need to better understand the process of how bridge programs assist students integrate academically and socially with the post-secondary institution of choice. The desired outcome of many bridge programs is to see students establish stronger connections to the

university. This study seeks to better understand how a group of students view their academic and social connections to the university.

Summer school courses have existed on college campuses in some form for many years (Fish & Kowalik, 2009). However, these offerings have been primarily for undergraduate academic courses without any co-curricular or bridge component (Doane & Pusser, 2005). Many colleges and universities have used summer bridge programs to assist students with the transition to college (Dev, 2005). However, not all students receive the benefits of such programs. Minority, first-generation, and low-income students are often disproportionately represented within bridge programs (McCurrie, 2009), while the potential benefits for students who are more academically prepared has not been widely examined (Garcia & Paz, 2009). Examining a bridge program open to all students of all academic majors and backgrounds could provide valuable insight.

Since research has shown that involvement in any type of 1st-year program will help with social integration a summer program open to all students should help provide the environment for students to experience integration (Kezar, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Examining a bridge program that is not limited to a specific at-risk population offers a fresh approach to understanding how these programs function. Further, this study sought to understand the self-reported experiences which participants connected academically and socially with the university. This analysis could lead to new ways of engaging students in university life. Though this study did not follow students to graduation, increased engagement has been shown to have a positive effect on higher graduation rates and success (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005).

Purpose of the Study

This research endeavor has a dual purpose. The overarching purpose is to better understand how student participants make meaning of their experiences during the summer bridge program. A secondary purpose is to discover student observations and insights into this bridge program and how bridge programs assist student in possibly developed academic and social connections.

This study will add to existing literature by examining the perceptions of students that participate in a summer bridge program. Special efforts will be made to determine the social and academic connections that were developed over the summer. Though only a single institution was included within this study the thoughts, perceptions, and critiques of the students can be applied to other colleges as they design and develop their own bridge programs.

Research Questions

In what ways did the summer bridge program allow the student to develop the social connections of typical university students?

In what ways did the summer bridge program help students prepare for and adjust to the academic expectations and rigors of the university?

This study sought to answer these two main research questions through the use of individual interviews of students that participated in a summer bridge program. An interview protocol was used to facilitate the process but it allowed for the flexibility of follow up questions when the student responded with a vague or incomplete answer. Student participation in the interview process was voluntary.

Significance of the Study

This study used interviews of student participants to gain valuable insight into how students perceived a summer bridge program. This qualitative case study focused on student

perceptions of a summer bridge program and the students' opinions of various activities that were intended to encourage academic and social integration. These activities, along with general student experience of navigating the classroom and university-life, give a more complete understanding of how the freshmen experienced the summer program. Results from these interviews have the potential to provide valuable insight to a variety of populations. A large amount of research has focused on freshmen students transitioning to their sophomore year (Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015). However, a summer transition program has not been widely studied. A transition program, such as a summer bridge, offers a chance to better understand students before they are exposed to any positive or negative influence present within the college (Sablan, 2014).

One population that could benefit from this study is policy makers who are planning this bridge program or bridge programs in general. Student feedback will provide inside looks into everyday perceptions and practices. This feedback can assist as the program looks to grow and to better reach its goal of easing student transition into the university. Changes could lead to improvements for students participating in the program as they benefit from adjustments to the program from the feedback provided and acted upon by university administrators. The benefits could extend to other colleges as they gain insight into what one specific bridge program is planning and how students are impacted. Both strengths and weaknesses can be observed and acted upon within their own program based upon insight from this study.

For any bridge program to meet its goals of helping students connect with the university multiple populations will be involved. In addition to program administrators, both faculty and staff within the university will be involved. Faculty within the program can benefit from seeing how important their connection to the program can be. Faculty interactions with students both in

the classroom and outside the classroom have lasting impacts upon the student participants. Staff members can also benefit from the variety of ways they encounter students in the residence halls, the intramural offices, and even in the library. Staff members often have more influence than they realize.

Another population that could benefit from the study are support systems for the student participants. This support system includes parents and high school guidance counselors. As these populations become aware of the benefits of the program and the valuable student insights they will realize how the program can lead to stronger academic and life skills while experiencing smaller class size and reduced tuition benefits.

Another population that could benefit from this study are future researchers as they look to examine student transition to college through a summer bridge program. Future studies may examine multiple colleges to compare bridge programs or even follow this population to graduation. Since the early connections are valuable the summer seems like an opportune time for future research.

Further, future students may benefit from learning how the study's participants experienced the transition to college through the summer program. When the program that was the focus of this study was first developed the target population was science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors. However, the bridge program currently accepts students from all academic colleges and the selected major is not a criterion for admission or for participation. Another strong feature of the bridge program is the ability for students to catch up or get ahead with their mathematics degree requirements. Many majors have calculus or algebra as a prerequisite and the summer program allows students to stay on-track for graduation. The additional benefit of the bridge program is the development of a common experience. This can

lead to the formation of study groups, making the bridge program an especially attractive option for students who learn best in the company of peers with common interests.

Finally, by interviewing the participants within this summer bridge program, this study can provide information about a potentially underutilized time within the academic year. The study's results may help academic and student affairs administrators determine the ways in which summer terms represent an opportunity to expand student success programs and provide enhanced integration experiences for students. Summer is an ideal time to implement programmatic changes intended to help students start with a strong academic foundation and to make strong academic and social connections. These positive integration experiences have a direct correlation with first year student success (Ishitani, 2003; Tinto, 2004).

New insights based on firsthand knowledge could lead to changes in policies to help bridge programs become more effective in integrating and retaining students once they make the transition in the fall semester. The goal of such programs is to help students become more college-ready and determining how the students feel before and after the program is valuable information and determining the student perception of the impact of reduced cost will also be valuable knowledge for program administrators.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this dissertation, the following definitions are used:

Retention. Retention pertains to the continued enrollment of students from one semester or year to the next. Students who are retained are those with satisfactory academic performance and continued interest in persisting with their studies at the institution in which they are enrolled (Fowler & Luna, 2009).

Withdrawal. Voluntary withdrawal is an action taken by the student to drop all courses in which he/she is enrolled during a semester. Students may drop out with no intention of re-enrolling, termed stop-out, or students may eventually transfer to another institution.

Persistence. Students who persist are those who re-enroll in the following semester or year and/or persist to graduation.

First-year Experience. Term used to describe the complete program offering of a college or university geared toward the success and retention of first-year students. The John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education has categorized these programs into seven classifications: Summer Bridge Programs, Preterm Orientation, Academic/Transition Seminars, Learning Communities, Early Warning/Academic Alert Systems, Service Learning, and Undergraduate Research (Barefoot et al., 2012).

Academic Integration. The degree to which students have performed well in their classes (GPA) and the degree to which they have developed intellectually as a result of college attendance (Tinto, 1994).

Social Integration. The degree of interaction with peers, faculty, and staff, and level of participation in extracurricular activities. Social integration can also be defined by the congruency between characteristics of the student and the normative social system set forth by other students, faculty, and staff and indicated by the social climate of the institution (Tinto, 1995).

Summer Bridge. Term for specific programs offered for entering freshmen after their high school graduation but prior to fall enrollment. In these programs, students will enroll in college courses and live on campus. These programs are often used to remediate academic deficiencies (Walpole et al., 2008).

Learning Community. Block scheduling of students taking two or more courses together and often living within the same residence hall (Mahoney & Schamber, 2011).

Conclusion

The need to help students develop academic and social connections within higher education has been clearly stated. The future potential benefit of the summer bridge program to the student and university is tangible. Although efforts have been made to improve the transition process, the summer term has not been thoroughly explored as a viable option for students to experience a positive experience. Summer bridge programs could provide a strong opportunity for students to make additional academic and social connections that can lead to increased retention rates. It is hoped that this study produces a stronger understanding of the student experiences within this summer program. This study contributes to the student persistence literature and the literature regarding summer bridge programs. The study has implications for institutional practice regarding summer bridge programs and integration experiences. The outcomes of these student interviews lead to valuable knowledge for both this university and other colleges implementing summer bridge transition programs.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to review current literature on the topics of 1st-year programming, often referred to as FYE; student retention; and summer school. The topic of 1st-year programming will include summer bridge programs and other university efforts with transition programs. Tinto's theory of student integration (1993, 2004, 20012) as well as Astin's IEO (Input-environment-outcome) model (1993) will be examined. Tinto's theory served as the framework for the study. The concepts of academic and social integration will also be examined through Tinto's lens and through other studies.

First-year Programs

In the late 1970s, John Gardner founded the National Resource Center on the First Year Experience at the University of South Carolina. The Center has categorized First Year Experience Programs into seven classifications: Summer Bridge Programs, Pre-term Orientation, Academic/Transition Seminars, Learning Communities, Early Warning/Academic Alert Systems, Service Learning, and Undergraduate Research (Barefoot et al., 2012).

Many colleges offer some form of all of these programs in order to help retain students (Hunter, 2006). First-year programming is more than just "a single event, program, or course" (Hunter, 2006, p. 6). The collective goal of these programs is to help students engage more with their university and therefore be retained at higher levels (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Since early action can be critical in helping students to engage with university life, the summer term

has often been used by many colleges to start these relationships through a summer orientation program (Barefoot, 2005).

According to Porter and Swing (2006), institutions have developed 1st-year programs to encourage retention for four reasons. The first reason is that students who continue to persist toward graduation continue to pay tuition and the college has an incentive to keep them enrolled. The college benefits may even be more significant if state funding formulas require a certain percentage of students to be retained or persist to graduation to receive funding. The second reason is the effect of retention upon reputation and, thus, national rankings (Tinto, 2004, 2006). Third is the effect that retention has on perceived institutional quality. As institutions graduate more students, the stronger their perceived value will be. The final reason an institution cares about retention is for fulfillment of an institutional mission to graduate students. This mission is the cornerstone of most institutions of higher learning (Porter & Swing, 2006).

Summer Bridge Programs

Summer bridge programs are defined as intervention programs offered during the summer term after high school but before college that are designed to provide students with academic expectations and social opportunities in order to increase retention (Kezar, 2001, Tinto, 1993). Since the creation of the first bridge programs in the 1970s, these programs have expanded from developmental education to serve a variety of student populations (Kezar, 2001). Some programs target specific majors, such as science or math, while others focus on transition issues for 1st generation college students. However, no matter the population, Kezar (2001) said that a primary common goal of these transition programs is to retain students. According to Raines (2012), “bridge programs with an effective emphasis on academics can have a strong

impact on student retention” (p. 28). Clearly, there is a tangible benefit for students to participate in a summer bridge program and a benefit to the university in retaining a higher rate of students.

The format of summer bridge program will change as the goals change. McCurrie (2009) described how a typical summer bridge program is scheduled over 4 to 6 weeks. In the typical model, classes meet each weekday morning for 3 hours with students enrolled in two courses. Afternoons consist of small group activities including field trips, lectures, or tutoring. Weekend activities vary according to the programs and the residential status of the students. Programs with residential requirements often offer more weekend programming than non-residential programs. Classes are kept small in order to ease the transition from high school to college for the entering students. The cost of programs varies but many programs are run at no cost for the participants (Doane & Pusser, 2005; McCurrie, 2009).

However, bridge programs are not limited to entering college freshmen (see Table 1). Transition programs are helpful to a variety of populations as they move from one stage to another. Programs for college graduates as they transition into graduate school (Hill, Capstick, & Murphy, 2017) have been shown to prepare students for the more rigorous demands of the program. Bridge programs offered to grade school children as they cross over to high school have even been supported with state or federal funding (Malone, 2009, Neild, 2009). Other programs have assisted former high school dropouts with GED completion as they seek to increase their employability (Martin & Broadus, 2013). Regardless, the term “bridge” is not exclusive to colleges marketing to freshmen.

Table 1

Bridge Programs for Other Populations

Population	Time Offered	Host Institution	Researcher
BS to PhD	Summer	FSU	Hill et al. (2017)
Adults without high school diplomas	Multiple Semesters	LaGuardia Community College	Martin & Broadus (2013)
9 th graders	Entire School Year	Multiple Schools	Neild (2009)
7 th through 12 th	School Year	Federal and local programs cited	Malone (2009)

The concept of a college summer bridge program can mean many things. These programs are developed and administered in a variety of ways (Table 2). These programs vary in length, expense to student, credits earned, and population served. Some programs require students to live on campus and some programs serve only developmental needs and are not for college credit.

As seen in Table 2, the bridge programs vary greatly. Some college bridge programs have a focus on academic majors or skills associated within a major. For example, students may arrive at college underprepared for the demands of math and science majors. To help their students, Bowling Green State University has implemented a 5-week bridge program for STEM majors with an emphasis on helping minorities and women with the transition process. Students who apply for this selective program must meet required ACT and GPA requirements to participate and additionally have a STEM-related major declared. The non-credit bearing program exposes students to a shortened variety of the math and science courses they will experience in the fall semester in order to help them build the base skills needed for credit-bearing courses in the fall. The goal of the summer program is to help students complete their fall semester with “successful” grades (Gimler, 2007, p. 12). This program has led to a positive correlation in

Table 2

Examples of Different Types of College Freshman Bridge Programs

Institution	Weeks of Instruction	Course Based	Population of Students	Residential	Researcher
Arizona State University	5-weeks	English and Math	First generation	YES	Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley, & Perry (2012)
Community College not identified	2-week, non-credit	College and life skill based	STEM	YES	Lenaburg et al. (2012)
El Paso Community College	5-week, non-credit	Math, reading, and writing	Remedial Courses	NO	Barnett et al. (2012)
Palo Alto College	4-week	Math	Developmental math	NO	Barnett et al. (2012)
Virginia Tech	5-week, non-credit	Engineering, Math, Chemistry, and College skill seminars	Marketed to STEM but open to all	YES	Lee et al. (2014)
University of Arizona	6-week	Variety of courses offered for credit	Open to all, primarily first generation	YES	Cabrera, Miner, & Milem (2013)

summer math scores and freshman fall grade point averages. A secondary outcome of the bridge program found overall fall grades for the participating students were significantly higher than the control group. The summer bridge students were also retained to their sophomore year at a significantly higher rate than the control group that did not participate in the summer transition program. This bridge program also offers continued academic support throughout the student's college career. Students who participated in the bridge program graduated from college at a significantly higher rate than control groups, 91% versus 67% for the control group. Although the data on students graduating with a STEM major were not collected, researchers noted that the

program was successful due to the high graduation rate of participating students regardless of the degree that they earned (Gilmer, 2007).

Another common component is for a bridge program to focus on students with remedial test scores. In a study that followed students for multiple semesters, Owens and Johnson (2009) examined an Upward Bound summer bridge program over 2 summers and the academic year between. The program offered high school-level courses as well as college remediation coursework. This study included 20 students who participated in all 3 semesters. During the 5-week summer programs the students were required to live in residence halls during the school week but were permitted to go home on the weekends. Students were interviewed three times over the course of the summers and academic year and questioned about how they understood their experiences would relate to their overall college experience. In addition to interviews, site observations were made by the principle investigator. Daily journals were kept by the students which were also examined for “meaning-making.” The academic component included classes, tutoring, ACT preparation, enrichment experiences, and community service opportunities. Owens and Johnson (2009) found that students, over the course of the study, followed traditional theories on trust by moving from a “taking relationship” to a “giving back and contributing to society” mentality. They concluded that though their participant pool was small, the trust that participants developed during their enrollment in summer bridge programs would help to ease their transition into college and adulthood. They felt the summer program, which included increased student and faculty interactions, contributed to this increased level of trust. The study included less of an academic component than many studies since the emphasis was on the process of developing trust with faculty (Owens & Johnson, 2009).

Many summer bridge programs are designed to help students develop test-taking and study skills necessary to succeed in college. A 5-week residential summer bridge program for academically unprepared and 1st-generation college students at Arizona State University was studied by Suzuki et al. (2012). Students with low test scores were encouraged, but not required, to participate in this residential program. The program goals included having students become familiar with campus, participating in student activities, developing a support network, building confidence, and developing academic skills. Fifty-six students participated in the program. The program included a goals survey questionnaire at the beginning and end of the summer and additional surveys at the beginning and end of the fall semester. A control group was also established through several freshman compositions courses. These students completed the same survey at the beginning and end of the fall semester that the summer bridge participants completed. At the end of the fall semester, summer bridge participants' self-reported academic confidence and knowledge of academic resources were significantly higher than the control group. Further, the summer bridge cohort participants were retained at a higher level than the university's overall rate. Researchers found that the supportive environment was reported as important in the students' desire to stay. Researchers concluded that summer bridge programs may provide students with compensatory skills and support strategies needed to succeed in college (Suzuki et al., 2012).

Other colleges have more comprehensive and collaborative approaches to target underprepared students through bridge programs. Kallison and Stader (2012) studied bridge programs located at 14 Texas colleges. These schools included seven community colleges and seven public universities. The institutions were located throughout the state and encompassed all regions of the state and were located in both urban and rural settings. The fourteen institutions

partnered with an area school district in implementing the program. Student participants were rising 11th and 12th graders and had tested at grade level but below the college readiness level on a state assessment exam. At the sites, there were 782 students with the number of enrolled students ranging from 14 to 197 among the 14 institutions. Rising juniors outnumbered rising seniors. 65% to 35%. Student participants took pre- and post-program exams to determine the skill gains. Each institution was given flexibility to select a pre- and posttest. Permissible tests were the Accuplacer, the Compass or Asset, or the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) instrument. Only six institutions' pre- and posttests met the criteria to be used for the study. Five institutions intended to use the THEA, but test administrators would not permit the exam to be given twice over the short period of time of the bridge program. Two other institutions used "simulated" exams that were not deemed to be official by researchers. All student participants, regardless of location, completed a post-program survey. Among the 14 sites, the only commonality was the use of classroom teaching as the primary means of instruction. Some sites employed college faculty while others used school-district faculty. Some sites taught college-level work for credit while others worked to remediate academic deficiencies. Programs lasted from 4 to 6 weeks with 4 weeks being the most common. Twelve programs studied were found on college campuses while two were at a high school. Most of the programs offered enrichment activities including speakers, tutoring, and field trips to other colleges. Some sites offered financial incentives for participation. The researchers collected 438 student surveys with sufficient data for analysis and collected nine post-program surveys from the site coordinators. Researchers found that 90% of student participants planned to attend college. Additionally, 80% felt they were academically prepared for college. Regarding the enrichment activities, 80% felt they understood the academic resources, how to improve their study skills, and the need to attend

college to further their career goals. With colleges having freedom with pre- and posttests, researchers did not attempt to endorse any specific test. However, they concluded that having students come to campus during the summer term and begin their college career earlier was important in making early academic and social connections.

Participation in summer bridge programs, commonly associated with increases in retention, has not necessarily led to an increase in graduation rates, and not all studies have found positive outcomes from summer bridge programs. Stewart (2006) found that students at King's College who participated in a summer bridge program were retained and graduated at the same rate as non-participants. The study compared 89 participants in four consecutive summer programs to a control group of 89 students with similar admission scores. However, the summer bridge participants were required to attend the summer program due to a financial disadvantage or a "discrepancy" in their test scores and GPA. The summer bridge program students experienced higher but non-significant retention rates in 3 of the 4 years. Both groups graduated at a similar rate. However, with the bridge program participants identified as at-risk, the program's directors considered the summer a success (Stewart, 2006).

Summer bridge programs have existed for many years often for provisional or conditional applicants to gain full admission to the university after successful completion of the summer courses. These courses are often considered developmental or remedial. Some academic majors with demanding credit hours offer summer programs in order for students to graduate in a timely manner (Fish & Kowalik, 2009). There does not seem to be a universal design given the wide range of desired outcomes and the variety of student populations. The design depends largely on the desired goals of the summer program. The findings of many of these researchers (Gilmer, 2007; Kallison & Stader, 2012; McCurrie, 2009) suggested summer bridge programs can help

students prepare for their freshmen year and help retain these students and should be widely considered. Although many studies have successfully demonstrated success at increasing retention among students with lower test scores (Hicks 2005; Kallison & Stader 2012; Suzuki et al., 2012), these programs should be expanded so even students with higher test scores could benefit from the experience.

Institutional Rankings and Student Quality

One effective way to retain students is to enroll students with higher test scores (Hoxby, 2009). Students with higher test scores are more likely to enroll in colleges with higher academic rankings as these colleges require higher scores for admission. In addition to helping attract students, rankings make a difference in funding levels through tuition and grants. In an examination of *US News and World Report* rankings and admission data for a number of private colleges, Luca and Smith (2013) found a strong positive correlation between national rankings and tuition prices. They also found a positive correlation in increased rankings and average SAT scores. Luca and Smith examined 16 of the top 25 national universities and 13 of the top 25 liberal arts colleges and examined enrollment and ranking data over eleven consecutive years. They found that lower ranked colleges had increases in grant aid in order to attract students with any test scores. However, though rankings may be debatable using *US News and World Report* rankings, the higher ranked schools have higher ACT scores and higher retention rates than lower ranked schools (Luca & Smith, 2013). Several organizations publish yearly rankings of colleges and universities. Although the rankings are widely criticized, they are given consideration by various audiences. Colleges with the highest selectivity rates consistently have the highest average test scores (Hoxby, 2009). In a study of 190 colleges and universities, Tang, Tang, and Tang (2004) found a positive correlation between tuition pricing and reputation

ranking. Further, the more research conducted by the university as noted by the Carnegie Foundation and the higher degrees offered, the more institutions were able to charge. All of this points to the fact that students with the highest test scores were retained at higher levels and these students, on average, enrolled in more selective institutions.

According to The College Board, rankings and reputation depend partially on students progressing and graduating in a timely manner (Mattern & Patterson, 2009). Further, institutional rankings influence college selection (Luca & Smith, 2013). Colleges are aware of the challenges associated with the calculation of university rankings and the need to have increased retention and graduation rates (Tofallis, 2012). Therefore, colleges often examine ways to increase their rankings. However, a change in national ranking does not necessarily lead to a stronger entering class. Meredith (2004) examined 10 consecutive years of rankings within the *US News and World Report* and examined possible changes within the rankings. This ranking included 233 universities classified as doctoral-granting institutions. The researcher was looking for changes in institutional ranking and the effect of this change on the institution. The top 25 universities were noted and the remaining universities were divided into quartile rankings. As institutions within the top 25 had slight changes in ranking, there was insignificant change in the entering student profile. However, moving from the 2nd quartile to the 1st quartile increased the number of applicants from the top 10% of a high school class and decreased acceptance rate to the university by 4%. Movement from the 3rd to the 2nd quartile resulted in almost the same outcome as movement from the 2nd to 1st. However, a decrease in rankings also had significant outcomes. For public universities, a drop in quartile rankings led to an average 20 point drop in average entering SAT scores. Based on the results of this study, for competitive universities there

was a vested interest in having a higher US News and World Report ranking as these rankings had a strong correlation to the type of students who enroll.

Schmidt, Burroughs, Cogan, and Houang (2011), in a study of “quality of education” and institutional rankings of colleges of education, found only a weak correlation among entering SAT scores, exit exams, and institutional rankings. They examined 900 college seniors enrolled at 81 different colleges completing degrees in education. After examining entrance scores and exit exams, researchers concluded that rankings were more about reputation than the ability to produce quality graduates. Quality graduates was based on the ability to pass teacher exit exams at a high level. The theory that higher rankings led to students passing exit exams at a higher rate was found to be false. However, this study was limited to education programs.

Retention of 1st-year Students

The main issues with retaining students are both economic and ethical. Bean (1986) examined the economic and ethical issues that institutions should consider when developing retention policies. The economic component of the retention problem is that each student who is retained and continues to pay tuition for 4 years is economically equivalent to four students who pay tuition for 1 year and then withdraw. However, the cost is higher to recruit new students to replace the departed ones (Bean, 1986). Though the article is dated, the economic equation remains true: it is more cost effective to retain one student than recruit three to replace the one who will no longer be paying tuition. Jamelske (2009) agreed, stating, “A low retention rate means that a college is always working to replace students who leave which requires resources that could be used elsewhere” (p. 374). Clearly, it is an economic benefit to colleges to retain students.

The ethical component of Bean's argument is that a college should only admit students who they feel can persist to graduation (Schmitt et al, 2009). However, this argument should be explored within the value of the institution (Ingram & Morrissey, 2009). Admission requirements for the public institution within the state where the study took place are set by the state governing board and are consistent across all public institutions. Though colleges can admit a student, the fact that they graduated from high school does not always mean they are ready for college level work (Raines, 2012). Not all colleges have the ability to turn away students who meet admission criteria. For institutions with state-mandated admission criteria, programs should be offered to help the students with lower test scores to have a chance for success.

Some states' funding formulas include incentives to the university for students who are retained and graduate (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). However, performance-based funding has not been proven to be an effective way to increase retention and graduation rates (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). In an examination of the state of Tennessee's performance-based funding formula, Sanford and Hunter (2011) found that in spite of tying 25% of state appropriations to a college's graduation rate, no increase has been seen among state colleges since this funding reform was implemented due to the complexity with increasing retention.

Though a state funding incentive may not be enough to lead to institutional change, a stronger implementation of enrollment management practices may lead to increased retention rates (Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013). Colleges are aware that retaining a student is more cost effective than recruiting a new student. According to Alarcon and Edwards (2013), "A low retention rate means a college must work to replace students who leave, which requires more resources that could be used elsewhere" (p. 129). For this reason, colleges have a vested interest in seeing students return for their 2nd year and persist to graduation. In fact, state appropriations

are forcing policy changes by tying performance in retention or other measurable area, to budgeted monies. This performance-based system can be found in almost all 50 states' budgets to some degree (McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006).

In a meta-analysis of 19 studies of retention, intervention, and grade point average among at-risk students, Valentine et al. (2011) found that intervention programs, in general, had some positive effect on keeping students enrolled in school. The interventions within their examination included study-skill courses, peer-tutoring, mentoring, and living-learning community participation. Some of the studies enlisted the aid of multiple methods for keeping students enrolled while others examined isolated interventions. Due to the variety of programs examined among the meta-analysis, researchers did not attempt to isolate which strategies were most effective at increasing grade point average and keeping students enrolled. However, researchers did conclude that some form of academic assistance is effective in assisting students. If these studies found that academic intervention strategies are beneficial, then implementation of a variety of programs should be considered.

Much of the current research focuses on entering characteristics and using those to predict retention (David & Fike, 2008). These studies looked at characteristics such as high school grade point average, parents' education level, socioeconomic status, and level of high school preparation (Elias, Noordin, & Mahyuddin, 2010). However, entering characteristics do not always give the most accurate picture of the student who will be retained. In a thorough synthesis of the current literature on the topic, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that 1st year grade point average has been shown to be the strongest predictor of student retention. A positive relationship has been found with entering students' academic profiles and retention. In a

meta-analysis of 109 studies, Robbins et al. (2004) found that test scores and high school rank positively related to retention.

Financial challenges can contribute to retention issues (Titus, 2006). Efforts have been made to understand financial aid and minimize the effect of finances on student withdrawal. In a study of financial aid, DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) found that the more generous the aid package, the more likely students were to persist regardless of other factors. However, more studies need to be conducted on the effects of financial aid. The effect of scholarships, another form of aid, upon retention have had mixed findings. Olbrecht, Romano, and Teigen (2016) found that merit scholarship recipients were retained at a significantly lower rate than leadership scholarship recipients. However, Schuh (1999) found that merit scholarships were a positive predictor of student retention. Regardless, more research needs to be completed to understand the effects of finances on student retention.

The significant amount of research that has focused on the 1st year student has led to the development of new strategies and programs to improve retention (Astin, 1993; Braxton, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some of these are freshman year experience programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Strayhorn, 2009), study skill programs (Howard & Jones, 2000), summer bridge programs (McCurrie, 2009), and living-learning communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In fact, 94% of accredited colleges and universities offer some type of 1st year seminar or other program to help with student retention (Porter & Swing, 2006). Nationwide, the current practice is to find a program that will work with your students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

When program administrators examine their retention statistics, they often cite how a specific program has increased retention for a population targeted within the specific strategy. However, there are challenges in linking increased retention rates to any one program since

students may participate in and benefit from multiple programs. Students are not retained for multiple reasons (Astin, 1993).

Most universities realize that successful retention programs require multiple offices coordinating various programs on campus in order to be successful (Hunter, 2006). However, even with the use of control groups, definitively stating that a specific program increases retention would be challenging (Bergeron, 2013). Despite the location or function of the student success program, the ultimate goal of the program should be to integrate the student either academically and/or socially, and that this integration would lead to an increase in student retention. Tinto (2012) found that academic and social integration may be the key to improving student retention. A holistic approach from admission to programs throughout the freshman year can be the most beneficial in retaining students (Tinto, 2012).

Though retention does not take place until students return for their sophomore year, their decisions to return often occur much earlier. Intention to return has been an acceptable method to include within a retention study. In a study of retention at 27 religiously affiliated colleges, Burks and Barrett (2009) found that students who participated in campus religious services or joined a Greek organization, or students who had more significant levels of interaction with faculty members, were more likely to return to college for their sophomore year. Their research was limited to self-reporting surveys that measured intent to persist rather than actual retention. Though students' plans may change from the time of the interview to the beginning of their sophomore year, their intent has been found to be fairly accurate.

Academic and Social Integration

Administrators in higher education struggle with student attrition and often implement programs to boost retention (Jacobs & Archie, 2008; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Despite these efforts,

half of all students who do not persist in college leave during their 1st year (Tinto, 2002).

Therefore, efforts should be made by academic and student affairs officials to help students make early connections to the university. These early connections with the campus community including faculty, staff, and fellow students are believed to lead to stronger assimilation into the social and academic aspects of the campus (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 2002, 2013). This concept is called academic and social integration.

Tinto (2013) also thought that students who had experiences with both academic and social integration were most likely to return for their sophomore year. However, overemphasis on academic integration while neglecting social integration could lead to student attrition (Reason, 2009). Retention programs that introduced students to both concepts were found to be among the most successful (Woosley & Miller, 2009).

Tinto (1993) also expressed the importance of examining not only the individual experiences but also students' *perceptions* of their academic and social experiences. The perceptions are important because students will have different reactions to identical experiences. Tinto's model of student departure identifies eight causes for a student to leave college. Two of these, *intention* and *commitment*, are considered characteristics that are possessed by the student upon entrance to the university. *Work and family* and *finance* are two more of Tinto's causes for departure; Tinto refers to these causes as "external obligations" and considers them to have minimal impact upon retention. The last four causes that the college can have the most effect upon are *adjustment*, *congruence*, *difficulty*, and *isolation*. Adjustment deals with the student's ability to engage academically and socially within the specific college environment. Congruence relates to the degree of fit between the student and the environment. Tinto uses difficulty to

examine academic rigor encountered by the student, while isolation describes the outcome of poor academic and social integration.

Each student enters college with a variety of characteristics that determine the student's chances for success. Woosley and Miller (2009) used surveys beginning in the 3rd week of the fall semester, along with gender and ethnicity, to predict academic success via retention. They found that retention and academic success were best predicted by degrees of academic and social interactions during the first 3 weeks of college. Spring and fall grades were recorded and the retention rate of the students was observed. Researchers felt that transition experiences as reported in the survey, when coupled with "at risk demographic and background materials" (p. 1266), could be beneficial for early intervention activities.

Academic integration examines the degree to which a student is able to make meaningful connections with the environment including professors and other academic support systems. In a study conducted at a small, private, liberal arts college, Barton and Donahue (2009) found that students who participated in a 1st-year seminar were more likely to be engaged on campus and have higher grades. However, they did not find any significant difference in retention among participants versus non-participants. The study used the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) given during orientation and a locally developed survey that was given at the conclusion of participants' freshman year. The study was conducted at a selective college with a high retention rate and it is worth noting that the objective of the 1st-year seminar was simply to provide an orientation to the college (Barton & Donahue, 2009). The researchers speculated that retention was not significantly affected since there was little focus on study skills or academic needs.

Academic integration could include effective study strategies, academic and cognitive skills, critical thinking skills, and connections with faculty and time management. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that “nonclassroom student-faculty interactions” have a positive effect on a student’s educational attainment and thus retention (p. 417). Most student-faculty interactions take place in a classroom or formal setting. However, student perceptions of faculty approachability and concern can be enough to influence persistence (Woosley & Miller, 2009). Faculty-student relationships can be challenging to accurately study. In a large study involving over 150 colleges and including a population of 54,488 students, Kuh and Hu (2001) found that students who self-reported that they were better prepared were more likely to interact with their professors both in the classroom and outside the classroom. This population of better prepared students also self-reported higher grades and intent to be retained at a higher level.

Though almost all research on social integration has involved face-to-face interactions, connections can be made through virtual methods (Morris, Reese, Beck, & Mattis, 2009). A recent study examined how Facebook usage related to retention. The theory is that as Facebook usage increased, the amount of student-perceived social integration increased (Morris et al., 2010). Since Tinto (1993) claimed the meaning that students make of the interaction is the most critical definition of integration, this virtual connection is validated since meaning was made through a virtual experience. The study examined a random sample of 375 entering freshmen’s usage of Facebook. This group represented 38.9% of the freshmen class. The following fall, when students returned or failed to return to campus, the retention rate was compared to the usage data. Between the retained and non-retained participant groups, Morris et al. (2010) found a significant difference in the number of virtual friends, the amount of wall posts, and the number of groups in which students were members. This study showed there is the element of

virtual connections that students make. As social media continues to evolve, there may be concerns about students putting too much emphasis on virtual friends. However, since student personal meaning making is important, these virtual connections should not be discounted.

One finding that is thought to be crucial for integration is for the college to identify social and academic variables both inside and outside the classroom to prepare to assist students as needed (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, colleges need to work to identify the activities and experiences that can be successful to encourage their students. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), identifying the academic and social variables can lead to higher levels of retention with proper implementation. As programs are designed, administrators need to make sure that care is taken to address the needs of students.

The positive outcomes associated with integrating a student into university life has been consistently found by researchers. In a study of 1,058 students enrolled at 14 colleges and universities, Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006), for example, found that student engagement was positively linked to grades and critical thinking. The study included both freshmen and seniors and surveys were used to collect information about academic experiences. Though the degree of effect differed among the 14 colleges, within the study there was a general positive effect. Further, students with lower entering test scores benefited more from out-of-class integration experiences than students with higher test scores. This group also experienced more significant benefits from self-reported supportive campus environments. This suggests that the colleges and universities with the most significant effect should be further examined to determine how they reached their outcomes.

Though colleges may desire both academic and social integration, there are environments where one should have a stronger emphasis placed. According to Reed, Rosenberg, Statham, and Rosing (2015),

Social integration is particularly important at four-year universities and colleges with large percentages of full-time students living on campus and enjoying a rich campus life. In contrast, academic integration is more critical to the success of individuals enrolled in institutions with large percentages of part-time students who live and work off campus. (p. 22)

Summary

If studies related to academic and social integration leading to increased retention rates are valid, then universities should consider the resources that will help their students make stronger and more fulfilling academic and social connections. From learning communities to bridge programs, the connections made through social interactions are crucial. According to Barton and Donahue (2009), encouraging social integration experiences and academic integration opportunities are essential for students to make valuable connections in order to increase retention. If lack of community is the catalyst that causes students to depart, then colleges should invest in helping students develop these connections and develop the needed community. A small investment in integration activities can lead to a significant return in the number of students retained.

First-year Programming

First-year programming is a relatively new concept within higher education. The University of South Carolina is credited with starting this movement in 1972 by offering a class for entering freshmen called University 101 (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). In today's colleges and universities, the content of 1st-year programs varies greatly. Summer orientations, out-of-the-classroom experiences, living-learning communities, and 1st-year seminars are examples of the

major types of 1st-year programs that colleges are employing to help students make valuable connections and complete their degrees. Since the vast majority of colleges offer 1st-year programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), an examination of these program could provide valuable information about freshmen students and the ways they make connections to faculty, other students, and to the campus community.

Orientation

One of the first programs that many students experience, often during the summer prior to enrollment is freshman orientation, typically called summer orientation. This program is traditionally designed to assist students with the transition to college, become familiar with basic campus services, and to enroll in fall semester courses (Woosley, Sherry, & Shepler, 2011). In fact, summer orientation programs are so common that over 96% of institutions offer some form of it (Woosley et al., 2011). However common these programs maybe, they are not always mandatory. In a study of an optional orientation for biology majors at a large public southern university, Wischusen, Wischusen, and Pomarico (2010) found that students who participated in the program were more likely to stay in the major and to be on-track to graduate after their 4th semester than non-participants. The week-long program included lectures, examinations, and study-skill programs for these students. The study examined two consecutive cohorts of students with 60 students participating in the 1st year and 120 in the 2nd year. Researchers compared these students with a non-participating control group with similar ACT and demographic information. The study found that students who participated in the program were retained within the major at a significantly higher rate than non-participants and the students were more on track to graduate than non-participants. *On-track to graduate* was defined by completing required

sophomore level courses with a C or better. However, university retention was not significantly higher for program participants.

Some colleges choose to offer a more extensive orientation for students who want to learn more about the university. In a study at a large public research university of a supplemental extended orientation called Welcome Week which followed required summer orientation, Soria, Lingren Clark, and Coffin Koch (2013) followed the 1,865 participants. Fall and spring grade point averages were examined and a regression analysis was used to predict retention rate. They found that participants in Welcome Week earned significantly higher grade point averages than non-participants and were 17% more likely to return for their sophomore year. Participants were also more likely to be involved in living-learning communities and to be involved in co-curricular campus activities. The findings suggested that an extended orientation can have a significant positive effect on student success since all students attended the previous required orientation.

Though orientation programs vary in their emphasis on academics, student life, or both, these programs will continue to be a part of the freshman year experience (Barefoot, 2005). Since almost all institutions require some form of orientation it would be difficult to isolate the effects of orientation on student retention. However, most institutions consider them a valuable aspect of the 1st-year experience (Barefoot, 2005).

Out-of-the-classroom Experiences

In this program, students participate in a variety of activities outside the classroom. From student activities, residence halls, intramural sports, Greek life, to any other initiative, colleges should support this student engagement as there is a correlation between involvement and retention (Hunter, 2006). Out-of-class experiences take many forms and participation in student

organization of any kind can have positive impacts upon a student's college experience. In addition, Hunter (2006) recommended that campus staff should assist students with "assimilating of new members into a complex organization" (p. 4), with the new complex organization being college itself. With the variety of out of-class experiences available, communication among staff is the key to using these groups to create community more successfully and encourage students to find the experience that will offer them the most valuable academic and social benefit as these can lead to increased retention.

Some retention studies include out-of-the classroom experiences, many of which are specifically described as field trips or service-learning experiences (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). Enrollment in a service-learning course was found to have a positive impact upon retention and upon grade point average (Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010). Some institutions include service as part of a graduation requirement and this has been shown to have a positive correlation with graduation (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Another common out-of-class experience is participation in intramural sports. Intramural participation is also associated with more significant levels of student retention and engagement with the university. In fact, this relationship between the student and the university was strengthened with multiple years of participation in intramural sports (Phipps, Cooper, Shores, Williams, & Mize, 2015).

Living-learning Communities

Living-learning communities are another concept that helps students make valuable connections. These programs vary greatly, and to try to capture the differences, Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, and Leonard (2008) examined 207 types of programs at 34 different institutions. The programs were divided into three categories including (a) small, limited resources, primarily

residential; (b) medium, moderate resources, academic and student affairs collaboration; and (c) large, significant resources, academic and student affairs collaboration. Using multiple regression analysis, the researchers found that students in comprehensive collaborative programs self-reported stronger learning outcomes than the other two categories. However, students in all types of programs reported more learning outcomes than non-participants. Though a summer program may not improve grade point average over non-participants, if there is a significantly higher retention rate among participants, then it would be considered a successful program. A study to examine the effect of support communities in a large public comprehensive university used 223 (19% of the 1,226) freshmen who enrolled in the fall semester and agreed to participate in the study. The 223 students were placed in groups based upon the course that they selected. There was a three-course learning community group including an academic seminar, a one-credit academic seminar group, and a “no treatment” group. This created the following populations: 69 students in the freshmen seminar and academic cohort group, 30 students in the freshmen seminar alone group, and 124 students in the “no treatment” group. The students were followed for 8 semesters and mean GPA, credit hour production, and retention rates were examined. Credit hour production and mean GPA were not found to be significantly different among any of the three groups. However, the students enrolled in the freshmen seminar and academic cohort group had a slightly significant higher retention rate (Potts, Shultz, & Foust, 2004).

Learning community participation has an impact upon academic success. In a study of 3,144 residence hall students at a comprehensive university that included learning community students and non-learning community students, Pasque and Murphy (2005) found a direct relationship between academic achievement and learning community participation. The survey collected information from students involved in eight different learning communities but did not

isolate the individual communities. Even after controlling for high school GPA, parents' income level, and parents' educational level, this relationship existed. Although participation in the learning community was voluntary, there was an application process that could have affected the type of student who participated. Though some colleges may object to the added cost of a living-learning community, these programs have been shown to increase retention versus students who do not participate in a community (Allen & Bir, 2012).

First-year Seminars

First-year seminars or freshman year seminars (FYS) are often described as academic courses, limited to freshmen, that help students with the transition to college work and the college environment (Griffin, Romm, & Tobolowsky, 2008). These seminars have had much attention in research. In Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) meta-analysis of more than 2,500 postsecondary studies related to how college programs and student experiences affect student development, the researchers found that "FYS participation has statistical and substantial, positive effects on a student's successful transition to college" (p. 403). Clearly these courses have some merit in assisting students with the transition to college.

First-year seminars are popular among American colleges with over 95% of institutions offering some form of 1st-year seminar program (Reason, 2009). In fact, according to a survey conducted by Griffin et al. (2008), nearly 50% of all institutions require that incoming freshman enroll in some form of FYE course. FYE seminar courses are designed to increase the likelihood of persistence of 1st-year students. The course is designed to encourage smaller discussion-based learning with the emphasis on transition to the university (Upcraft et al., 2005). These seminar courses are designed to provide opportunities for increased academic and social engagement within the university.

In a study of a newly formed FYE course at a mid-sized midwestern university, Jamelske (2009) examined the effect on 1st-year GPA and the potential effect upon retention. Sixty-four entry-level core courses across disciplines were selected by the researchers as FYE courses and these courses were included in their study. Surveys were conducted among FYE faculty with 49 responding (78%) and 559 responding students (36% of participants). Demographic information and final semester grades were collected from the registrar. Demographic information, including entering test scores and high school grade point average, were thought to be important since the course could have more potential to assist some students with transition issues. Researchers found that students with below-average entering scores showed the most significant positive retention effect. However, living on campus was found to have twice the positive impact upon retention as simply taking an FYE course. The research suggested that a combination of factors will positively influence a student's decision to return for their 2nd year.

Ryan (2004) examined the influence of institutional expenditures on retention rates and 6-year graduation rates at 363 Baccalaureate I and II institutions base on Carnegie Classification. The entering student data were collected from IPEDS. Ordinary least square (OLS) regression was used to test the hypothesis that there would be a positive relationship between expenditure and 1st to 2nd year student retention. The study found a direct positive correlation between expenditure and retention rates and as universities spent more money, more students would graduate. The student variables examined included academic preparation, ethnicity, race, living on campus, and age. Institutional characteristics controlled included institutional size, institutional affiliation, and institutional control. Ryan (2004) found that instructional and academic support expenditures produced a positive significant effect on cohort graduation rates. The more services that existed for students, the better the rate at which they graduated.

Summer School in American Colleges and Universities

Summer school programming is often an underutilized time in an academic year.

Summer school enrollment at many institutions is only one-quarter of fall enrollment. Some campuses have realized the opportunity to use campus resources during the summer term without significant financial increases. Although summer programs have existed for many years, research on them is limited (Fish & Kowalik, 2009). According to Attewell et al. (2012) both colleges and students have benefits that can come from summer programs.

College Benefits of Summer School Programs

Summer school is a major source of revenue for colleges (Dev, 2005). In fact, Price and Bradford (2010) cited that some universities receive 36% of their annual revenue from summer school tuition dollars. This percentage is often explained by the fact that academic scholarships do not cover summer school so there is no tuition discount for the summer. Therefore, tuition expenses are not discounted and more money can be used by the university. Other researchers agree that summer school can provide a significant portion of a college's annual budget (Barrett & Barnes-Young, 2003). With summer tuition providing a significant percentage of an annual budget during a short period of time, the summer semester should be expanded.

The significant economic benefit can be explained in several ways. In an analysis of financial and enrollment data of 25 public colleges offering summer school courses, Doane and Pusser (2005) found that colleges can benefit financially from summer course offerings since faculty are not paid benefits and are only teaching part-time. Doane and Pusser (2005) also found that summer school generally generates sufficient tuition dollars so that revenue exceeds expenses. In fact, the researchers found that 92% of the colleges included in their survey generated money off summer school enrollment (Doane & Pusser, 2005).

In a study at the University of Boulder, Heinz and Lewis (2009) found that many faculty are unwilling to teach summer courses and choose instead to focus on their individual research. Their study focused on a program at University of Boulder that attempted to attract distinguished visiting faculty. The study examined 6 consecutive years of summer school courses within the program. This span resulted in surveys with 63 faculty members who taught courses during the study period. For a variety of reasons, some courses were canceled and the study examined 57 courses across several disciplines that were included in the study. Surveys were conducted of the faculty and department chairs of the academic department. Faculty in this study reported high satisfaction with teaching instead of focusing on research. Smaller class sizes with high interaction were also reported as being a positive experience.

However, not all faculty and not all courses are appropriate for summer school. In a quantitative study of 150 faculty at a large, public institution, Kretoivics, Crowe, and Hyun, (2005) found that faculty believed that due to the compressed nature of summer courses, colleges should consider the types of courses that are taught. In a study of 36 faculty at a small, public institution who taught in 2 consecutive summers, Barrett and Barnes-Young (2003) found that the fast-paced nature of the summer school schedule is not an ideal fit for all faculty. Some faculty reported the long class session and four meetings a week overwhelming and questioned the ability of a student to learn and retain knowledge under these circumstances (Barrett & Barnes-Young, 2003).

Finally, another benefit of summer programs is directly related to smaller enrollment. In a study of enrollment trends at 28 institutions over a 30-year period, Schejbal (2005) found that with fewer students on campus, many colleges find that summer is an ideal time to launch new

programs and experiment with other changes on campus. Building projects and updates to residence halls often are initiated during the summer.

Student Benefits of Summer School Programs

In order to consider why a student may choose to enroll in a summer bridge program it is necessary to examine how a student may benefit from enrolling in any summer course. Though universities see many benefits, students can also expect to benefit from summer enrollment. Students have multiple motivations for attempting summer courses (Fish & Kowalik, 2009). Some of the most common factors are the desire to complete degree requirements, improve grade point average, the opportunity to enroll in smaller classes (Fish & Kowalik, 2009), and explore interests outside of their major (Doane & Pusser, 2005). Summer school courses have also been shown to award higher grades than the same course offered during the academic year (Doane & Pusser, 2005). Students also report that due to the potential lower enrollment there is greater engagement with faculty and higher satisfaction among the students (Doane & Pusser, 2005).

Graduating in a timely manner is a significant motivator for many students. In fact, some colleges have created programs that allow students to finish degrees in 3 years instead of 4 through summer school enrollment (Dainow, 2001). Accelerated degree completion can be a significant recruiting tool as students consider 3 years of tuition instead of 4. For students with postgraduate aspirations, this accelerated program would allow them to enter graduate school a year earlier.

Another benefit of summer school for students is the reduced number of hours a student can enroll and being able to focus on one or two courses. During summer term, many students attempt a single course they perceive to be difficult and focus only on that one course (Dainow, 2001). The format of the one course is another reported perk. In a study of faculty perceptions of

student summer enrollment, Barrett and Barnes-Young (2003), found that faculty reported that their students seemed to have high satisfaction with the typical summer format of extended class sessions that excluded a Friday class session.

Conclusion

As state revenues decline and class sizes increase, summer has become an increasingly popular time to complete courses that will count toward graduation (Doane & Pusser, 2005). Summer enrollment has been shown to benefit both the student and the institution. However, not all students take advantage of summer school enrollment. In order to encourage students to enroll in the summer term, colleges should consider why students do not enroll and examine their policies and procedures to ensure they are student-friendly (Schejbal, 2005). Student enrollment in summer school is affected by “programming, marketing, faculty interest, and institutional culture” (Schejbal, 2005, p. 92). Though a university cannot easily change its culture or its perception by prospective students overnight, it should examine current marketing strategies and program assessments in order to improve student enrollment in summer terms.

Freshman retention has been one of the most studied phenomena within higher education. However, no true consensus has been determined about what leads to increased retention. A variety of programs have been created to help students make stronger and earlier connections to the university and there is some consensus that this integration is important in retaining students (Ishitani, 2003; Tinto, 2002).

Summer bridge programs are one example of a 1st-year experience program defined by Gardner (Upcraft et al., 2005). Many summer bridge programs are focused conditional or at-risk students. Some programs are focused on students enrolled in a particular major. However, few summer programs are open for all students to participate.

In a study of 115 conditionally admitted students who were required to participate in a summer bridge program, Walpole et al. (2008) compared participants' retention rates and integration activities to a control group of 76 students. The summer bridge program in the study was a 5-week residential program conducted in July at a large public university. Each student took two courses: a writing course and a selected course from a humanities list. Students attended tutoring sessions in the afternoons and academic extracurricular activities in the evenings. Though students were permitted to leave campus on the weekend, there was a mandatory leadership conference 1 weekend. Students were surveyed twice during the study and once more in the spring of their 2nd year. Though fall-to-spring retention rates for the control group were higher (96% vs 90%), freshman fall to sophomore fall retention rates were an identical 81% for the study and control groups. The control group participants had similar test scores to the summer bridge program participants though the control group was not comprised of conditional admits and control group participants were not required to attend the summer program. The level of academic engagement as measured by the surveys indicated similar levels of participation in out-of-class activities and academic enrichment activities between the control and test groups. Researchers concluded that though the bridge program may not have affected grade point average there is a correlation with improved retention.

However, the summer has not been used for the general university student to enroll, improve their skills, and integrate into the university. Colleges should examine this semester as a time to offer a summer program to all students. The individual campus culture, the goals of the programs, and student demographics will help with the design of the program. Regardless of design the program, one of the primary goals should be to integrate all students more into the university with the goal of improved retention.

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the theoretical model of college student persistence developed by Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012). Since retention continues to be a problem, universities must find ways to assist students in developing the skills necessary to return for their sophomore year. Two of the most common theories used to frame retention are the theory of integration outlined by Tinto (1993, 2012) and the Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model developed by Astin (1993).

Tinto's Theory of Integration

Tinto (1987, 1993, 2012) refined the work of Spady (1971), who applied Durkheim's (1951) analysis of suicide-related factors to the subject of student attrition. Durkheim's theory of suicide examines how an individual's social and religious spheres affect their degree of integration into society. Durkheim thought that failure to integrate into the social and intellectual life of the community could lead to an increased risk of suicide. Though Tinto (1987) did not believe that attrition was related to an increased risk for suicide, he did see similarities in the failure of a student to integrate into the community and other negative consequences. Tinto (1993, 2012) expanded the suicide theory to conceptualize the factors that influence college student persistence.

Tinto (1993, 1997, 2012) theorized that a student's level of integration into the social and academic environments was strongly correlated with their college retention and persistence to graduation. Tinto's theory stated that institutional experiences would lead to levels of academic and social integration experiences. These experiences would then lead to personal goals and institutional commitment. Social integration includes both the formal and informal interactions that students experience at the university and within the university community. Tinto (1993) further defined these interactions that occurred both within student's social circles and with the

campus community. His definition of social integration includes connections with peers, dating, involvement in student organizations, students' sense of belonging, and out-of-class engagement with other students. Academic integration examines the degree to which a student is able to make meaningful connections with the environment of the university. This definition includes interactions with professors both in and outside the classroom and the use of other academic support systems.

Tinto's (1993, 2012) theory claimed that positive integration experiences within the academic and social circles of the institution reinforce a student's commitment. Reinforced commitment would encourage persistence. The theory also speculated that negative integration experiences weaken the student's commitment to the institution and increase the chances of a student not being retained (Tinto, 1993, 2012). Further, the experience itself is less important than the value placed upon the event by the student.

The model depicted in Figure 1 was designed to be a "guide for institutional actions to retain more students until degree completion" (Tinto, 1993, p. 113). The model allows administrators to visualize the steps that students take in reaching a decision to depart from the university and to discern opportunities by which intervention can be offered. Students enter a university with a wide variety of attributes that will influence their decision to depart or complete their degree. These attributes, along with external commitments, will lead to experiences that will affect the students' "continuing formulation of individual intentions and commitments regarding future educational activities" (Tinto, 1993, p. 115). A main take-away is that according to Tinto's theory, a student's decision to depart is not based upon a single event. Decisions that a student makes will lead to outcomes that will lead to goals and commitments that will lead to stronger institutional experiences or a decision to depart.

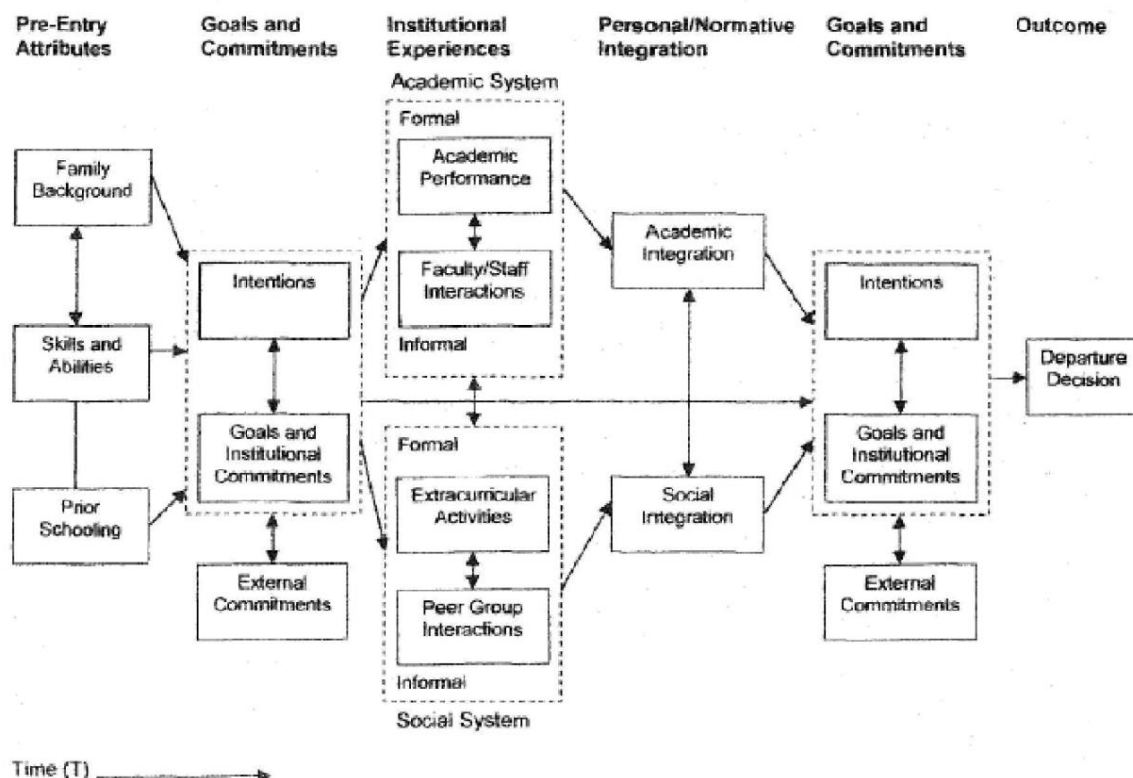


Figure 1. A Longitudinal Model of Tinto's Integration Theory (Tinto, 1993, p. 114).

Tinto (1993) found that the mere occurrence of interaction within the institution does not ensure academic and social integration. A student may have multiple interactions with peers through social activities, but if the student does not view those interactions as positive, the student may be less likely to integrate into the university. Tinto postulated that the perceived quality of the interactions is as important as the interaction itself. According to Tinto, student attrition is believed to reflect the characteristics of both the academic and social communities of college and students. Tinto concluded that the student perceptions of their institutional experiences are the most important factor influencing attrition.

Astin's IEO Model

Like Tinto, Astin (1993) was also a believer in academic and social integration. He developed the input-environment-outcome (IEO) model to describe how college students, particularly 1st-year students, are affected by their experiences at college. Astin (1993) began using national data to study the relationship between campus involvement and students' decisions to depart from the university. This examination of national data led to the development of the IEO model, which describes the relationship between integration and attrition. Astin found a positive relationship between student involvement, both academically and socially, and degree completion.

According to the IEO model, college outcomes are viewed as a combination of three sets of elements. The *inputs* are the demographic characteristics, family background, and the academic and social experiences that are brought with a student to college. The *environment* includes the physical environment of the college, the people, the institutional culture, and experiences that the student may encounter. *Outcomes* are the student's characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors after college.

The theory of involvement by Astin (1993) simply stated that students learn by "becoming involved" (p. 133). This theory contains five basic postulates: (a) involvement requires the energy to invest in people, tasks, or activities; (b) involvement is a continuous concept and different students will invest different amounts of time; (c) involvement contains both quantitative and qualitative features; (d) the amount of learning is proportional to the amount of involvement; and (e) educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to induce student involvement. However, Figure 2 shows the importance of the balance of environment, inputs, and outputs. Each is needed for a student to achieve excellence.

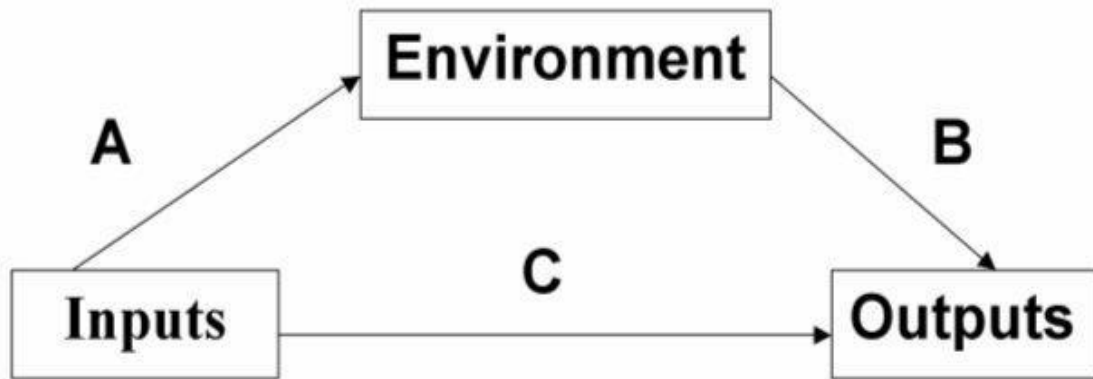


Figure 2. Assessment for Excellence.

The model is used by researchers in a variety of settings to examine the effect of environment on the students' decision to stay. In a study of African American males enrolled in a community college, Strayhorn (2012) applied Tinto's retention theory and Astin's IEO model to a survey. The survey was designed to examine the relationship between academic and social integration and college satisfaction. The study indicated that student satisfaction was positively related to social integration.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline the methodology that I selected to understand how first-time freshmen students experienced a summer bridge transition program. First, I summarize the purpose of the study and provide rationale for the conceptual framework that was selected to answer the research questions. Second, I detail the methodological approach used in the study and why individual interviews were most effective to address my research question. Third, I describe data analysis including coding. Finally, I describe issues of validity, limitations, and trustworthiness related to my research.

Research Approach

This study used a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach was well suited to this study because it helped to develop understanding in how students perceive their experiences in the summer bridge program and reveal how these experiences relate to integration into academic and social aspects of the university. Qualitative research can be used to describe data that are difficult to translate from a quantitative standpoint (Lichtman, 2012). Qualitative research is important because the research question focused on the bridge experience, and the words the students use could be unique and more difficult to capture in a questionnaire (Lichtman, 2012).

Research Design

A qualitative case study methodology was employed for this study. According to Creswell (2012) a qualitative study is conducted for the researcher to develop themes from open-

ended data collection. A questionnaire would be more challenging for researchers to allow for participants' individual expression of experiences. A qualitative approach also allows for a stronger emphasis on a single phenomenon and permits follow-up questions where needed. A primary reason for conducting qualitative research is that it can focus on an experience and capture the "essence of the experience for individuals incorporating 'what' they have experienced and 'how' they have experienced it" (Creswell, 2012, p. 79). In order to more-fully understand the student experiences and the unique nature of the summer program a qualitative study was used. I anticipated that the interviews would reveal perceptions, experiences, and thoughts and ideas that a questionnaire would not be able to address.

In this study, the approach to find the student's meaning of the summer bridge experience was best achieved by conducting a case study. Case study methodology allows the researcher to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of contemporary real -life events" (Yin, 2009, p. 4) such as the summer bridge program. Yin's case study guide to interviewing was used to design an interview that would be "open-ended and assume a conversational manner" (Yin, 2009, p. 107) and the questions were derived from the research theories to focus on student experience and the environment that yielded the experience.

Research Questions

The main purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of students who participated in a summer bridge program in the fall semester following their matriculation into college. Following Tinto's (2004, 2012) theory of integration, the questions asked the students to reflect on the academic and social integration experiences that led to an intention to return for their sophomore year. The goals of this study were to explore the student experiences to gain greater insight into academic and social integration experiences and how the bridge program

impacted the students. With the use of the Astin IEO model, effort was made to determine how the characteristics (Inputs) students brought to campus (Environment) led to a situation they would call success (Output). However, the focus of the interview was on the environment and how the students integrate into the campus culture. Though background information (Inputs) cannot be ignored, the researcher sought to learn more about their place within the setting. Based upon Tinto's Theory of Integration, the research questions help to understand the role the Environment plays on their Outputs and self-reported success.

Background questions were used to determine the student's familiarity with the university and to assist the student with the transition into the more reflective questions. Students were asked a series of questions about their experiences. These questions sought to address two main ideas:

In what ways did the summer bridge program allow the student to develop the social connections of typical university students?

In what ways did the summer bridge program help students prepare for and adjust to the academic expectations and rigors of the university?

The purpose of the research questions was for the students to share their academic and social integration experiences in the context of the summer bridge program. The questions were based upon Tinto's theory and, in part, Astin's IEO theory.

Site Selection and Population Study

The current study took place at a mid-sized, predominately White institution in the Southeast United States. The researcher selected this site for the study because of the unique nature of the bridge population. Lacking an emphasis on developmental students or specific majors or programs, the population was more similar to the entering fall classes than many bridge programs examined. The university is not identified within the study in an effort to

receive the most accurate information possible. Throughout this dissertation, students are identified using pseudonyms. Interviews were transcribed and any possible contact information was removed from the transcript.

The university studied is required by the state to have a relatively open admission standard for in-state residents. Given this practice, students with lower test scores, who are most challenging to retain, require the university to consider programs and practices to help this group. Support programs have been shown to make the most significant difference in promoting a successful academic year among students with lower test scores (Kezar, 2000)

One possible solution for promoting student success and increasing student support is the implementation of a summer bridge program (Kallison & Stader, 2012). In accordance with these findings, the summer bridge program being studied completed its 4th year of existence in Summer 2017. Though originally planned and targeted for STEM majors, all majors were welcomed and the program was equally marketed to all incoming students.

Bridge programs are “short, intensive introductions to college” (McCurrie, 2009, p. 28). Starting during summer term, the summer bridge participants begin their college careers prior to the traditional beginning of the academic year. These students attempted one to two courses and live in a pre-selected residence hall on campus during the summer bridge program. Students had the option to take English, psychology, public speaking, biology, chemistry, or a study skills course. However, students who had prior credit for the listed courses were permitted to enroll in others that would not likely include other bridge students. One important function of the program was to offer high-demand courses to ease course enrollment pressures for the fall. Another purpose was to prepare students to succeed academically and the study skills course was encouraged by the program administrators.

When students were admitted to the summer program, they were assigned one of five different cohorts of class pairings. These pairs were based upon declared major and ACT sub scores in math or English. All students who needed pre-College algebra were placed in that course. One of the courses encouraged by program directors was a college study skills course. Students who completed this course spoke favorably about what they learned over the summer term. English composition was another popular course that students enjoyed due to the small size. At least three different levels of math were attempted by summer bridge participants. Many core classes such as psychology, public speaking, or art appreciation were offered. Due to the popularity of these courses, and with them being open to non-bridge students, they were often offered in large-lecture formats. Though many of the courses offered were limited to bridge participants, some courses included general summer school students.

Student attendees for the summer bridge program were the recipients of significant programming funds. Approximately \$30,000 has been designated by the Vice President for Student Affairs to provide programming opportunities for the summer bridge administrators to provide out-of-the classroom experiences for students during the summer. This included a variety of socials, mixers, and the closing banquet. In addition, the Recreational Sports Office provided summer intramural sport opportunities for all summer students, but efforts were made to introduce and orient the newly enrolled bridge students to the type of programming that existed.

To recruit students for the program, a 10% reduction in housing, meal plans, and tuition was offered. Further, out-of-state students were not required to pay non-resident tuition rates for the summer. Finally, students who enrolled in the program were permitted to remain in the

residence hall they selected for the summer bridge and not move again in August prior to the fall semester starting.

As this program grows and more students complete the high-demand courses in the summer, these courses could potentially have a lower capacity for the fall. Smaller class size and ability to enroll in desired courses have been shown to have positive impacts on student retention (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Further, with demonstrated success in a stronger retention rate among summer bridge participant's efforts, and these efforts linked to academic and social integration, efforts should be made to expand academic and social integration opportunities in other campus programs.

Reflexivity Statement

According to Watt (2007)), a reflexivity statement serves to address how a "researcher's own assumptions and behavior may be impacting the inquiry" (p. 83). As an admission officer with almost 20 years of experience within higher education at a variety of institutions, I bring a wealth of knowledge into the study related to college choice and types of colleges that would best serve individual students. My experience with academic and career advising certainly has some influence upon my view of the decisions that students make related to their future careers. Finally, serving as an admission officer for the institution included within the study could have led to some bias as I was able to see the strengths and weaknesses of the college.

Though I realize that college is not for everyone, my current peer circles are almost exclusively made up of college-educated persons. My parents both are college graduates and my father and older brother earned terminal degrees. My spouse also has extensive experience having worked in student affairs at private universities for almost 20 years. Both my work experience and married life has included live-on-campus responsibilities and experiences.

Though I did not attend a bridge program as an undergraduate, I have seen the value it can offer to incoming students. Though many bridge programs are offered to developmental students, I believe bridge programs intended for the general student population could add enhanced value to the student and to the institution. In my role as an admissions officer, I promote enrollment in this program.

Role of the Researcher

Chenail (2009) asserted that it is important to remember that the participants as well as the researcher bring bias into all social research. Though the bias may be intentional or unintentional it does exist. In fact, “hearing and understanding the perspective of others may be one of the most difficult dilemmas that face the researcher” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1411).

The interview and the results depend upon the relationship and interaction between the researcher and participant. To achieve the best responses, a researcher often has to shift identities from researcher to participant without causing confusion (Greene, 2014).

Participant Selection and Rationale

All 121 students who completed the program and 1 that withdrew on the last add/drop day were invited to participate in the interview process. Students were sent an email from the coordinator of the program (see Appendix A) inviting them to participate in the research study. Students who participated in the interview process were offered a \$5 gift card from Starbucks. Interviews were scheduled in 30-minute blocks with time slots available all day on a Thursday and a Friday which yielded the potential for eighteen interview available each day.

Ultimately, there were twenty-two students who signed up to participate in the interview process and committed to a time slot. Of the twenty-two students who scheduled an interview,

nineteen students successfully completed the interviews. There were 3 students that did not show up for their selected time.

The freshmen who were interviewed talked about their experiences with the summer bridge program. This number of students interviewed represent roughly 15% of the student population that participated in the bridge program. All students were invited to attend and no efforts were made to include or exclude any population or any specific test scores. Students were contacted 1 week prior to the time interviews were scheduled and reminder emails were sent to students that committed to participate.

The population of the bridge program was 61 males and 60 females. The average ACT of the students who completed an interview was 25.3 while the average of the entering fall class was 25.7. With non-residents receiving an in-state tuition incentive, the out-of-state population of the summer bridge participants was 46% while the total fall enrollment was 35% out-of-state students. The self-identified racial breakdown of the entire bridge population was 64 White (53%), 46 African American (38%), 6 Multiracial (5%), and 5 Other (4%). The racial make up the bridge was similar to fall enrollment. Fall enrollment included students who identified as 62% White, 27% African American, 5% Asian, 5% Multiracial, and 1% Other.

Interviews occurred in the early fall semester following the student's participation in the summer bridge program. The summer bridge program was historically marketed to science majors, though it was open to all students following the initial year. Student's academic major choice was not included in the study since students were taking many of the same courses. The bridge program required an additional application, participants' entering test scores were slightly higher than the overall entering freshmen class.

Protocol and Data Collection

The case study interview goes deeper than simply establishing that interactions occurred. I sought to uncover how the students felt about the interactions. The case study design consisted of individual interviews with students in the summer semester during their participation in a summer bridge program or early fall semester after their participation in the program. First-hand interviews allowed me to gain a better understanding of the student experiences within the bridge program and their fall enrollment (Yin, 2009). The interviews provided information about the aspects of the summer program that participants found most academically and socially beneficial.

In order to gain an understanding of each participant's experiences, interviews with open-ended questions were used to guide the study (Seidman, 2006). The ability to create dialogue with the participants and ask for further detail allowed for a conversation that provided rich data. Qualitative interviewing assumes that the perspectives of others are unique and meaningful and that experiences during the bridge program may have shaped their 1st-year experience.

Data collection took place through interviews of study participants. Study participants consented to participate in various research projects related to the summer bridge program prior to their enrollment in the Summer 2017 program. At the time of the interview, participants also provided their verbal and written consent to participate in this particular study. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). The interviews used open-ended questions in order to best capture the student's personal experience (Seidman, 2006). In-person interviews were conducted on campus in September. As 1st-year students are required to live on campus, interviews occurred in central location on campus within the career services

building as their facilities were convenient for meeting with students for interviews. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Interview questions focused on the students' experiences with the summer bridge program, how they felt they benefited or did not benefit from the program, and how well they adjusted, academically and socially during the summer term (see Appendix B). The flexibility of the interview was to ensure that the participants' thoughts and feelings were accurately understood instead of any researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided some flexibility for the interviewer to ask questions as needed. The structure allowed the interview to flow in a logical way but not be influenced by the researcher's bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). All interviews were recorded for transcription and coding of the data. Interviews were scheduled to last 30 minutes but the average length was 24 minutes, with the shortest lasting 17 minutes and the longest lasting 28 minutes.

Data Analysis

For stronger understanding of the interpretation of qualitative data, a model was used for more consistent data interpretation. Miles and Huberman (1994) believed that an individual's beliefs exist not only in their mind but also in the real world. Their goal was to find the relationship between the mind and the real world and recognize that there are some stable relationships that can be found among these social phenomena.

Miles and Huberman (1994) modeled three steps for analyzing qualitative data: "data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification" (p. 10-11). There is not a specific order to examine these data and these steps can overlap throughout the process. Figure 3 illustrates Mile and Huberman's model (1994).

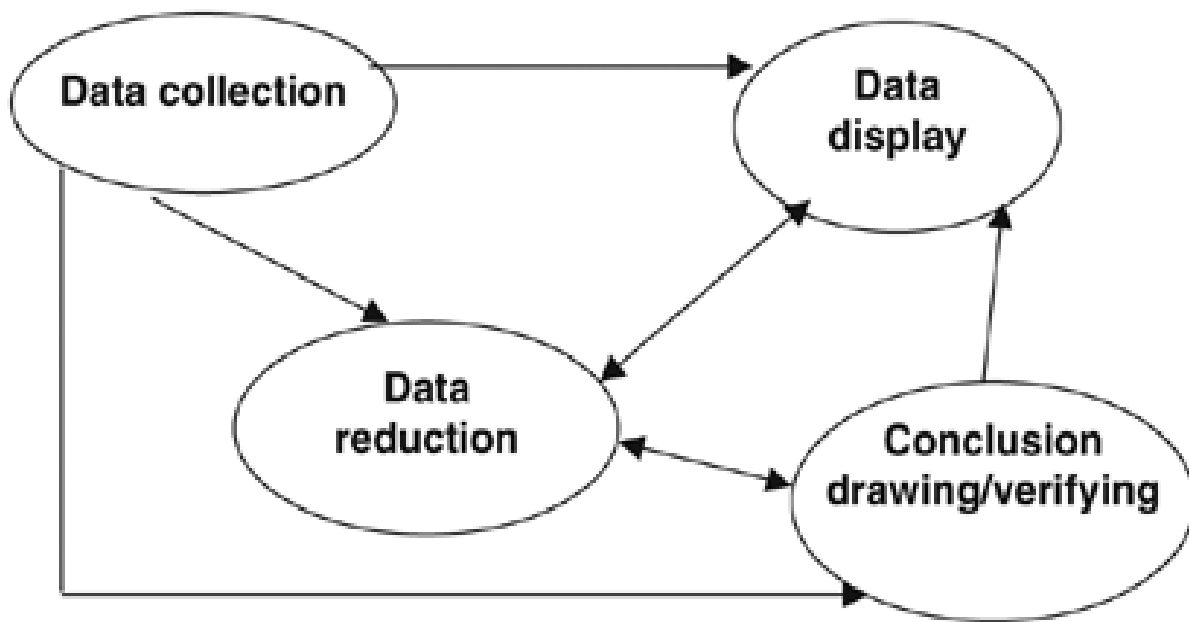


Figure 3. Mile and Huberman's Qualitative Data Analysis Model (1994).

After the conclusion of data collection, the first step of the examination is data reduction. This consists of converting the interview notes into categories that will be developed depending upon participant response and codes will be developed to be used later (Saldana, 2015).

The second step, data display, involves moving the developed codes into categories to better examine any relationships and considering potential conclusions. Word, phrases, complete sentences, or even paragraphs may be summarized or condensed. The purpose of coding is not to simply reduce the data but to make it more understandable. The process of coding often involves creating many categories and the identifying themes and consolidating similar categories into usable data (Saldana, 2015).

The last step, drawing and verifying conclusions, involves a further examination of the data to confirm conclusions or consider alternative outcomes. This step gathers the data into chunks that have similar meaning. Once the data is gathered it may be further clustered into categories. Once this process is complete the researcher will look for themes to emerge with the goal of having those themes address the research question (Saldana, 2015). This step also

involves examining any outliers or data that do not fit with drawn conclusions. However, efforts should be made to consider where all data could fit.

Based upon the analytic strategy put forth by Miles and Huberman (1994), each interview was analyzed separately before I examined the group as a whole using an open coding technique. To further narrow the data, an Axial coding method was used for further data reduction.

Design Issues

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as a manner of conducting research so that the reader deems the findings as relevant. When dealing with qualitative research, interview responses can always be interpreted with multiple meanings and different degrees of application when examining an interview or text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The concept of trustworthiness involves reliability, validity, and generalizability. These principles allow the researcher to ensure others that their interpretations are following a structure protocol (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Quality Assurance/Reliability

To account for reliability, all interview data was professionally transcribed. Once interviews were transcribed, coding was conducted by the researcher. The coding process ensured that all relevant data were captured and each code captured the essence of the experiences shared by students.

To ensure reliability and validity of my interpretation, member checks were conducted by sharing data with student participants to confirm the accuracy of my understanding (Merriam, 2009). All student participants were contacted via email and five students responded to confirm interpretation of data.

Ethical Considerations/IRB

Ethical considerations are important in any study and it is important to protect the identity when students are sharing personal experiences. Respecting participants is paramount to a qualitative case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Once the topic was approved, IRB approval was sought at both The University of Alabama and the institution of focus within the study (see Appendix C). Program directors at the institution included in the study agreed to allow students participating in the summer bridge program to be interviewed and outcomes will be shared with them.

To protect the students' identities, pseudonyms were given or students selected their own. Though only approximately 15% of participants in the bridge program were interviewed, efforts to protect their participation in study were followed. Audio recordings did not include the student's name and were labeled by numeric code. Printed transcriptions replaced the numeric code with pseudonyms.

Limitations

Although the researcher successfully interviewed 19 students, this small population may not have provided a voice into all students' experience. Further, though incentive was offered for students to participate, they were asked to give up approximately 30 minutes of their time. The small incentive may not have been adequate for some students.

Another limitation was the researcher's lack of familiarity with the specific day-to-day operation of the bridge program. This led to possibly not asking the correct questions when designing the open-ended interview.

Though the students were interviewed after the conclusion of the summer program, all interviews were completed before the end of their first fall semester. It was learned that one

student did leave the institution following their summer bridge program enrollment. This student was included in interview requests. Though his or her voice could have provided valuable insight, no response to the study invitation was received. Sufficient efforts were made to reach this student to determine his or her opinion of the summer bridge program and the university.

Delimitations

Conducting a study at one institution may limit the ability to generalize findings to other institutions, even those with identical Carnegie classification and similar students. However, focusing on one institution avoids a possible program delimitation that many summer bridge studies encountered; variability in program design. Summer bridge programs can vary widely across institutions and this variability can make comparisons across multiple campuses challenging.

One delimitation of the study is that students who choose to participate in a summer program may have stronger motivations than those students who enroll in the fall semester since the program is marketed to students with higher than average test scores. Participation in the summer bridge program in the current study required an additional application and students who are willing to complete an additional application may be slightly more driven than students who did not complete this application. A further delimitation may be the small sample size of participants within the program.

A final delimitation is interviewing only summer bridge students to gain their insight into the summer and fall semester. A stronger understanding of the student experience could have included a control group of students who did not participate in the summer program. Or it could have included a control group that participated in a different summer program than the specific program targeted within the study.

Conclusion

This study will benefit colleges that are considering summer programs to assist with academic and social connections that could lead to an increase in retention efforts. With little research on summer bridge programs with strong student affairs programming, this study could help colleges offering bridge programs understand the experiences of student involvement in a co-curricular bridge program. A report by the ACT Policy Center (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2010) finds that the strongest retention efforts occur with a combination of academic and non-academic factors. The ACT research was not focused on summer programs, but since developers of the summer bridge program studied see student affairs programming as a strength, this should result in a strong retention rate.

According to Garcia and Paz (2009), “current economic pressures suggest that reputational standing alone will likely not be enough to maintain support for summer bridge programs in the future” (p. 31). Given the criticism of summer programs, it is past time to have a stronger understanding of the student experience within a college bridge program that includes student organization participation opportunities. This study will attempt to gain insight into the influence of this program upon students’ academic and social integration into university life.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The Bridge program is mostly about getting used to college and getting used to being prepared for the fall. But except I had two classes then instead of having 15 hours now. I learned a lot about discipline and being organized which definitely helped and being more social around people. Getting used to the environment of the campus. (Oscar, summer bridge participant, 2017)

In this chapter, I present the results from the study. Though summer programs may not be the ideal fit for all students, they do offer benefits which will be covered throughout this chapter. Students spoke of their pre-college academic background going into the summer and how they progressed throughout the 5-week program. Students were also asked about their friendships and social connections prior to the start of the summer and how that changed. They talked of experiences with faculty members both inside the classroom and interactions out of classroom. Benefits, challenges, and personal experiences within the program were all shared by the students and these concepts give strong insight into how the students viewed themselves and how they believed that they changed throughout the summer program. Students also gave insight into what could be improved within the program and how they would recommend it to students in future years.

Students were interviewed 4 weeks into the fall semester and asked to reflect on their summer bridge experiences. Interviews were scheduled in 30-minute blocks and took place in the Career Services interview rooms located in a central part of campus. All 121 students who started the summer program were invited to participate in the interviews as well as the 1 student who withdrew 2 weeks into the program. Twenty-two students responded to an email asking

them to participate in the study and scheduled interviews. However, only 19 of these students showed up for their scheduled interview time. Students were offered \$5 gift cards from Starbucks for participating in the study. One student declined the gift card.

Low retention rates in postsecondary education have caused concern for many colleges and universities and for higher education as a whole. Students leaving college before they graduate has a ripple effect upon the students as they seek to find jobs, repay loans, or to take the next steps in life. All of these issues can possibly be addressed by assisting the students in their transition to the university and seeing that they form the necessary foundation for success. Marketing material for the summer program informed potential students that the summer program helped students form this foundation and even get ahead academically. Summer bridge programs, in general, have shown to have some positive effect on helping students engage with the university. At worse, the program allows the students to attempt six credit hours and, for non-residents especially, pay less than the normal tuition rate for these hours.

The purpose of this study was to determine the students' experiences in the College Ready bridge program and understand how they made academic and social connections. The data used in the study came from individual interviews with 19 students who completed the bridge program and enrolled for the fall semester. This chapter describes the research design employed, a description of the study participants, and the coded responses to the interview questions, and direct quotes to describe some of their specific experiences.

This chapter is organized into four main sections. The first section examines the demographic backgrounds of the participants including their race, sex, and 1st-generation status. The next section examines the students' academic connections to the university that may have been further developed over the summer. The following section examines the students' social

connection to the university including their roommate, friendships and their peer groups, and how these grew. The final section examines students' thoughts on the program and their recommendations to future students.

Participants

The 19 research participants interviewed shared individual stories of their summer experiences, their successes, friendships, and academic experiences. Each student shared their decision to enroll in college and to participate in the bridge program. Student participants self-reported as Caucasian (14), African-American (4), and Asian (1). This population compares to the overall bridge population favorably but slightly overrepresented Caucasian students. The complete summer bridge population included 64 Caucasian students, 43 African-American students, 6 multi-racial students, and 8 that reported "other" (which included 2 Asian students).

The gender breakdown of students participating in the interview process was 14 females and 5 males. The complete summer population was almost exactly 50% male and 50% female with 61 males and 60 females. This compares to the university population which is 51% male and 49% female.

Comparing the racial identity of the bridge participants to the entering freshman population leads to some similar results. The racial identity was similar to the general freshman population. Approximately 28% of the freshman class identified as non-White while 26% of the students interviewed were non-White.

Among the 19 participants, 14 self-reported as out-of-state residents while 5 were considered in-state. The out-of-state residents came from five different states with three of these states being border-states from the location of the university included in the study. Three students enrolled from two different states that were not border-states and both of these states

were located more than 12 hours from the university. Ironically, the two students from the same distant state had never met and were not aware of another student from their home state. The 19 students were among 56 of the complete bridge population that were considered non-residents.

Residency break down of summer bridge interview participants was much different than the general freshmen population. Forty-six percent of the summer bridge complete population were identified as non-residents, compared to 30% of the complete fall entering freshmen student population. It is important to note that the design of the program attracts non-residents to attend at a higher rate as in-state tuition is a perk offered to recruit students to the summer program. Within the interview, students were asked about motivation for participating in the summer program and those answers are included later in this chapter.

Biographies of Participants

Daniel Batson was an 18-year-old, Caucasian, male who graduated from an in-state high school. He was a 1st-generation college student who grew up on a working farm where his parents grew soybeans and other plants. He was tanned and strong from his work on the farm. His hobby was participating in rodeo events with his father. His academic major was in the engineering or science field but his ultimate goal was to become a veterinarian. He was an extrovert and a leader who would likely make friends in most any situation. He had earned good grades in high school but attributed that to his work ethic.

Rachel Stewart was an 18-year-old African American female. Both of her parents attended college so she entered the bridge program with a high degree of confidence. She graduated from an in-state high school and selected the university due to the affordable tuition price and proximity to home. She was a biological sciences major but unsure of what area of graduate school she wanted to pursue. She was quiet but had a large group of friends that she

regularly got together. She enjoyed classes and seemed to have a positive spirit that allowed her to enjoy whatever activity she was participating. She had some concerns that she would have “too much fun” and not have the grades that she was capable of earning.

Anna Harris was a tough student to interview. She was a 19-year-old Caucasian female and was the first to sign up to participate in the interview process. She reported the least satisfaction with her summer semester. Both parents attended college but neither graduated. She graduated from a rural out-of-state high school and felt like the teaching there had not adequately prepared her for college. Her parents agreed that her high school was not strong and forced her to participate in the bridge program. She had a low degree of confidence but did report strong grades from the summer. She was a loner and was content to be alone watching Netflix. She participated in sorority recruitment but withdrew before bid day. She claimed to have a strong relationship with her roommate but was not able to share specific things they did together. She was an agriculture major and one day hoped to return to her hometown and work in the agribusiness field.

Lewis Prince was a 19-year-old Caucasian male who had graduated from an out-of-state high school. Lewis dressed well and was extremely outgoing in the interview. Neither of his parents attended college but he selected this university due to his major in meteorology. Though he entered with strong grades he did not feel prepared for college and hoped the bridge program would build his skills. However, he seemed confident and thoughtful and it seemed like a career in meteorology would fit him well. Lewis thought about each question before responding and most of his answers were complete and did not need a follow-up question.

Beth Hammond: Beth was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. Her mom had a doctoral degree and her father was a college graduate. She had two older siblings who had both graduated

from college so there was no doubt in her mind that she would one day be a college graduate. She was an undeclared major who enrolled in this southern university from the west coast of the United States. She was currently leaning toward a business major but had not yet made an official decision. Since she enrolled with a full semester of dual enrollment she felt pressure to select a major soon. She was tall with long blonde hair and seemed a picture of the stereotypical California co-ed. The most challenging part of her experience was the lack of diversity compared to her high school experience.

Connie Douglas was a 19-year-old Caucasian female. She was a non-resident and had graduated from a high school more than an 8-hour drive away to the north. Both parents were college graduates and her father had briefly worked in a city near the university and that was her only connection to this southern University. She was a communications major which surprised me since she initially tended to be more reserved in her answers. However, she warmed up quickly and shared some of her inside experiences as a non-southerner. She was confident in her academic skills and her outgoing nature helped her to make connections. Her challenge so far was adjusting to the heat of the south. She envisioned herself working in the television-news industry but did not want to appear in front of the camera.

Ethan Bertram was an 18-year-old Caucasian male who had graduated from an out-of-state high school. He gave a genuine air of intelligence in his answers and his attitude about the interview. Ethan had never earned a B in his life in school and reported a solid ACT score. He was a biomedical engineering major and thought he would one day go to medical school. Ethan seemed to have already grasped the time management aspect of college. He had fun but reported deliberate study times as well. He was dating another student who participated in the interview; Julie. Both he and Julie were in a group that cooked in the residence halls most evenings. He

came in to the interview from an intramural soccer game but was headed to the library after our meeting.

Fran Drake was a 19-year-old Caucasian female who had graduated from an in-state high school. Both parents were alumni of the university so it was a “natural fit” for her. The month prior to bridge she had completed a theater bridge program at the same university so she already had a strong adjustment to university life. Though her mother forced her to participate in both bridge programs, she reported positive experiences during the summer. Fran was an outgoing person and had a declared major in broadcasting. She envisioned one day working as a television reporter.

Hannah Nolen was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She was among the most academically confident students that interviewed and entered the university with 16 hours of dual enrollment coursework. Both of her parents were college graduates and her father was an alumnus of the university so she had grown up attending athletic events on campus. She was a marketing major and was already considering graduate school of some kind after graduating a year early. She was fit and active and enjoyed spending time with friends and trying new things. She had graduated from an in-state high school and participated in the bridge program primarily to meet new people.

Mary Darrow was an 18-year-old Caucasian female who had graduated from an in-state high school. Both of her parents were college graduates and she had grown up a fan of the university. She felt academically prepared but less prepared socially even though there were many of her high school classmates at the university. She was a chemical engineering major and was excited to talk about the research experiences in which she was already participating. She was also in the Honors College and had moved into that living learning community. Mary was a

student who seemed to have already identified the support system of social and academic that would encourage her to graduate.

Oscar Mitchell was a 19-year-old Asian male whose parents had both graduated from college. He was a petroleum engineering major who had graduated from an out-of-state high school. Oscar had participated in an engineering bridge program for minorities prior to the summer bridge program so he had already established numerous connections. Oscar considered himself a jock and participated in multiple intramural sports. His home was more than 8 hours away, so he was purposeful in his desire to make social connections. Academically, he seemed driven and had the academic background to complete a degree in engineering.

Steven Cooper was a 19-year-old Caucasian male who had graduated from an out-of-state high school. He had considered many selective colleges and both parents were college graduates. He claimed a high level of academic confidence and had earned a 4.0 on his summer courses. His declared major was engineering and he was enjoying all of his engineering classes and had not decided which area was the best fit for him. He was hard working and came to the interview after his on-campus job. He already felt his plate was full so he hoped to select which area of engineering was best for him sometime in the fall semester. His social circle primarily included his roommate and friends he had made within his classes.

Wilson Hooper was an 18-year-old Caucasian male who enrolled from an out-of-state high school located more than 10 hours away. Both of his parents were college graduates. He was born within the state of the institution and that was his primary connection to the university as his family moved away when he was 2. He was an industrial technology major and had a rigid personality about getting his work done. He claimed perfect class attendance so far in college and seemed like he had something to prove. His rigid academic personality likely crossed over to

his social personality as he did not claim many social connections outside of the bridge community. He had strong confidence in all areas of academics except for math which was a motivating factor in participating within the bridge program.

Terri Jackson was an 18-year-old Caucasian female from out-of-state. Her mother was a college graduate, but her father did not attend college. She had an older brother who had completed an engineering degree and she was a biological sciences major. Terri had an interesting history as a homeschool student who spent the last 2 years traveling the country with her parents in a camper. She was excited to participate in the bridge program because she viewed it as an ideal transition from her solo class experience to the large classrooms of a major university. She had completed the majority of course offerings as dual enrollment on-line so she only attempted a biology course. Terri was a self-described introvert but that was not apparent from the interview. She was tall, confident, and quickly answered questions without overthinking the question. Her self-described friend circle included “two girls that I talk to on a regular basis.”

Paul Mardis was an 18-year-old Caucasian male who had graduated from an in-state high school. Paul was one of the more unique students I interviewed since Paul was born as a female but now identified as a male. He had completed numerous dual enrollment courses in high school, so he had a high degree of confidence. Both parents were college graduates, so Paul had always known he would attend college. He was a construction science major and he enjoyed thinking about how a building fit together. However, Paul had recently began to consider other possible degrees. Because students that identify as transsexual are not common at this university, Paul had a single room for both the summer and the fall. Despite the single room, Paul claimed a strong friend circle from both the bridge community and some of his classes. Paul had not yet

joined any student organizations or participated in intramurals but was content with his current balance of classes and free-time.

Grace Reeder was an 18-year-old African American female who graduated from an in-state high school. Both of her parents were college graduates. Grace claimed a low level of confidence in academics but did express varied interests in a variety of fields. In fact, her major was officially undeclared but her two top choices were English and Biomedical engineering. Coming from an in-state school, Grace had multiple friend circles outside the bridge program but was a self-described introvert who only wanted to be around people she previously knew. Despite her slender build, she claimed her favorite activity was baking desserts with a few close friends. She spent much of her free time with friend in an off-campus apartment and feels that class attendance will be a challenge for her going forward.

Kelly Davis was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. Kelly is a 1st-generation college student and enrolled from an out-of-state high school in a border state. She was an engineering major and an active member of the marching band. he was an athletic extrovert and was excited about being exposed to different experiences available within this major university. She came from a small town and loved the opportunities that the university offered. She had a twin sister that enrolled in a different college in their home state and she talked with her daily about their different experiences. She loved marching at halftime of the football game and played in pep bands as well. She had short hair and a constant smile on her face. She felt the bridge program offered her the transition skills. She had attended high school with “Anna” but did not consider her a close friend.

Julie Gafford was an 18-year-old Caucasian female who graduated from an out-of-state high school. Her mother was a college graduate, but her father did not attend college. She came

to college with a boyfriend, Ethan, who also participated in the summer bridge and the interview process. She very reluctantly claimed poultry science and pre-veterinary medicine as her intended major and was still exploring all the degree options available. She was weak in her academic confidence and considered herself “shy.” However, the interview proved her to be anything but shy. She described strong interactions with her professors and her newly-formed social circles. She had joined a sorority on campus and was active in other student organizations as well.

Nedra Williams was an 18-year-old African American female. Her mom attended college briefly and her father never attended. She had low academic confidence and during the summer was enrolled in a developmental math course to help build her skills. She had progressed to the next level math course after making a passing grade during the summer. Nedra thought that her out-of-state high school had not adequately prepared her for the demands of college and she was making efforts to develop the skills she needed. She had a declared major in biological sciences but was unsure how she would use that degree. She enjoyed participating in community service and even had a minor in American Sign Language. Nedra enjoyed her social circle that included students from the bridge program and from a service organization that she had joined during the fall.

The Summer Begins

On, Saturday, July 1st, 122 students moved their belongings into one of the newer areas of construction on campus. It was a hot and humid day and the students were grateful for the army of volunteers there to assist in carrying their belongings from the car to their assigned residence hall room. The hall selected for the summer was one of the newer buildings on campus but was easy walking distance to classrooms. Each room included a private bathroom and

shower that would be shared by two students. Students lived on three floors of this residence hall. There were laundry facilities on each floor and a large kitchen located within the lobby. The residence hall was considered co-residential with men located on one wing and women located on the opposite wing. The lobby was shared space and was a common place for the students to congregate or simply pass through. The move in to the residence halls started first thing on Saturday morning with many families arriving early to avoid the July heat. However, with families driving from a variety of distances, the move-in process continued throughout the day. A welcome dinner and mixer was scheduled that first evening with opportunities for students to meet each other, meet a few faculty members who would be their instructors for the summer, and getting to know campus. Students met with their academic advisors to confirm and finalize their summer course schedule. Based upon math sub score and major choice, students were pre-assigned into one of five “Pregroups” that would include their math class for the summer and the additional class they would attempt.

Sunday was devoted to getting settled and helping students locate their academic classroom buildings. Additional meetings with the program director and the student mentors were introduced. The program director explained the weekend programming that included dining out as a group on Friday and service opportunities on Saturday mornings. There would be regular meetings with the program director on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Finally, students were permitted to relax as classes were scheduled to begin the following day, Monday, July 3rd.

The following morning students entered their first college classroom as official university students. Class start time varied, with some students starting at 8:00 AM and some students not having classes until 11:00 AM. With the fast pace of summer school, many classes lasted 3 hours and this was challenging for many students. Students used their meal plan to visit one of two

cafeterias located in the central part of campus and most students had their second class of the day just after lunch. After the conclusion of their second class their “schedule” for the summer was set. That first Monday evening students realized that the cafeteria was closed and they would be fendng for themselves for their dinner.

The following day was a holiday, July 4th, so students were treated to a day off and the bridge program offered inflatables in the residence hall courtyard along with barbecue and snow cones. After a busy first day of classes, the short holiday was welcomed by the students. Getting to sample Southern barbecue was a treat for some of the students from outside the South. At the end of the day, the students gathered to watch a fireworks show put on in the local community. The following day it would be back to the business of classes.

From here the students’ experiences varied greatly. Students attended classes for the next few weeks and the last day of classes was Monday, July 31st. Exams were offered on August 2nd and 3rd. The night of August 3rd there was a closing banquet that was very special to the student participants. The banquet will be described in greater detail later within the chapter.

College Choice

In order to understand why a student chose to enroll in a bridge program, it is first important to understand why they selected this university. Students select a particular college for a variety of reasons. Within the study, students were asked why they selected this particular university (see Table 3). Some of the commonly cited reasons were affordability, proximity to home, family connections, and academic/major fit. Among the students interviewed, these themes emerged the most often. For the in-state residents interviewed, cost was the strongest factor. Paul said, “It was in-state for me, so it was a closer option and it was cheaper.” Students from outside the state selected the college for a variety of reasons. Steven said he “just felt the

community feel” and decided to attend. Connie agreed and after visiting she said that it “was the best option out of all my other schools.” Academic major was another common theme as several students, both in-state and out-of-state cited their major as the reason they selected this institution. Lewis was one of these students enrolling in a unique major, meteorology, which was not offered within his home state.

Several students selected the college because of family having attended. Fran was one of the classic examples of this factor playing a significant factor in her college search. She said, “My entire family went here and I love the campus, it’s gorgeous.” For some, there were multiple factors in the college search and commitment to enroll. Terri says that there was not one thing that led her to decide on a specific college, “I visited and really loved the campus, and they had my major.” However, Anna simply said it was “the best school.”

Though it was only cited two times by students within the interviews, scholarships were likely an influence in multiple students choosing to enroll in the university. The average ACT for students interviewed was 25.3. Several students earned scores that would lead to significant scholarship offers and increased affordability. For students located out-of-state, these scholarships would eliminate the non-resident portion of tuition and often make this college more affordable than their in-state institutions. The average ACT of the summer bridge was almost identical to the average ACT of the general student population. However, the average of the bridge population was surprisingly lower than I anticipated since the program attracts such a significant number of non-residents who often have higher test scores than residents. Since a feature of the bridge program is to only charge in-state tuition for the summer, this attracts students with all ranges of test scores.

Table 3

College Choice

Reason for Selecting This College	Number of Responses
Fit	8
Cost (including scholarship)	7
Major	6
Proximity	5
Family	5

Decision to Participate in Bridge

Once students have committed to attend the university, they are presented with many extracurricular and support opportunities. One of these programs that was offered was a summer bridge opportunity. Though there are some summer-long bridge programs for minorities within engineering, only one program is open to all majors and all range of test scores. The summer bridge program within this study began at the beginning of July and concluded with final exams the 1st week of August. Admitted students were mailed and emailed information about this program during the spring semester and representatives promoted the event during an admitted student preview day in February. Further, the bridge program was still recruiting students during summer orientation in mid-June. Students who participated in the interview shared that they committed to participate in the bridge program at various times and some did not finalize their decision until the week prior to the beginning of the bridge program. There was no formal deadline to apply but enrollment numbers were the lowest since the 1st year of the program due to a variety of changes in leadership and other factors. Responses about reasons for participating were recorded and coded below. See Table 4 for complete coded responses. Many students gave complex answers to the reason they attended, and their answers were coded within multiple categories. Ultimately, there were 30 total coded responses among the 19 students that complete the interview.

A summer program of this nature offers a variety of reasons for students to enroll. The opportunity to get ahead in their major and the desire to have an easier transition to college were often cited and are common summer bridge outcomes. Terri, the homeschooled student, wanted a slower transition into a college classroom and this program was effective in alleviating her fears. Other students mentioned the desire to take a math course in order to stay on track with calculus for their major in engineering.

Parents and family influence seemed to play a significant factor for many students. In fact, when asked why she participated Anna simply said, “My mom made me.” Fran agreed. “My mother decided for me. She said it would be a very good idea to learn the campus and it’s so much easier.” Though other students mentioned parental influence, these two students were the most extreme and both of these were non-residents. This particular program did not charge non-resident fees to out-of-state students, so the cost-effectiveness of the summer was another significant reason cited for participation and this factor was cited as why parents sometimes forced their student to participate.

Other benefits of the program played a significant factor in several students’ decisions to enroll. The idea that they could complete two courses in the summer played a large factor with several. Ethan stated, “I thought it would be a good opportunity to get ahead of the game . . . and to be here when there’s not as many people.” Rachel said, “My dad and I came (to a preview day) and I wanted to do it so I could get ahead of the game to see how college would be.” With college tuition prices continuing to increase, a program that offered affordable tuition was embraced and for students needing extra math courses, the summer was a time to get ahead or stay on track. Bridge grade outcomes shared by program administrators after the completion of

the program showed that most students who attempted a math course were able to progress to the next level.

When asked “why they participated,” some students mentioned the recruitment process of the program. Nedra said, “I heard about it through a flyer in the mail . . . and I wanted to try to take some classes to see if I was going to be able to be okay by myself.” Connie also mentioned receiving brochures that helped her consider it more. Steven received something in the mail as well that piqued his interest. He said, “I read over it and we (family) thought about it and once we . . . saw the discount on tuition . . . we did it.” With the number of students responding to marketing efforts, it is clear that this is an important practice to continue.

Students were asked, “Why did you decide to attend the Summer Bridge Program?” Some students’ answers were coded into multiple categories.

Table 4

Decision to Attend Bridge

Reason	Number of Responses
Easier Transition	9 responses
Get ahead	6 responses
Marketing of the program	5 responses
Cost	4 responses
Academic opportunity	4 responses
Family influence	2 responses

Clearly there were multiple factors in a student’s decision to participate within the program. Though parental influence was mentioned by 2 of the 19 participants, the marketing efforts made by the program were a factor in 6 of the students’ decision to enroll. Since a portion of the marketing was directed at parents, the mailed pieces had a strong influence. In addition, nine students mentioned the structure of the program and the ability to complete two classes as a factor in their decision to enroll. As program administrators consider future recruiting efforts,

their marketing to students and parents about the structure of the program and the academic opportunity available should continue to attract future students to choose the summer bridge program.

Academic Integration

In what ways did the summer bridge program allow the student to develop the social connections of typical university students?

My first research question dealt with academic integration. The sub-themes included within this category were academic interaction, academic resources, and academic confidence. All of these themes dealt with the student's academic experience in their summer classes and experiences with their faculty. To set the stage for these interactions an interview question was asked about their level of confidence as they enrolled within the university.

Academic integration was not a term formally used in the interview process. Instead, questions relating to the academic connections that students made were included within this section. Interview participants varied greatly in their academic confidence and their answers can be found in Table 5. Students' responses to their level of confidence were fairly straightforward and the codes for this table ended up equaling the number of students who interviewed.

Anna shared,

I actually did not feel very confident in my academic abilities. I felt probably very behind on academic abilities. I mean I wasn't someone who was behind in high school, but my high school was not one that I felt was a good preparation for college.

Fran agreed, "I was scared. In high school they're always telling you about how hard college is, but when I got here I was just in easy freshman classes so I didn't feel pressured." Some students felt fear but were immediately helped. Grace shared,

To be honest, I was kinda scared because I felt like I wasn't going to be able to get the work. But once I got in there and just started learning, the math teacher I had for intermediate algebra . . . was a great teacher and he broke it down in different ways for everyone to understand.

Wilson shared, “the biggest thing I took [from the summer] was learning to properly study and prepare for quizzes, tests, and classes.” Paul thought the summer bridge was “a good way to know how college really works.” Steven thought the value of his summer experience was with his understanding of faculty, “It helped me get acclimated to the college setting knowing how the professors do things. How the class is set up and how communication works . . . it was easier to get your bearings in the summer.” Beth agreed, “It made starting college easier because in the summer you have to go every day and learn everything quickly. The fast pace prepared me for the slower fall pace”.

Some students appreciated the transition and the realization that college was going to be different from high school. Rachel said, “I just had to learn (to study) because my problem was I hadn’t studied before. I’ve always done well without studying until I came here.” Other students echoed her thoughts. Connie found that bridge helped her learn the balance between work and recreation time.

Students were also asked how the bridge program helped them. Their response are coded below. Almost all students answered in the affirmative that the program offered academic benefits but from the codes you can see the slight variance in their answers.

Table 5

Did Summer Bridge Program Help you Academically?

Response	Number of Responses
Yes. Learned to study	10
Yes. Learned the pace	4
Yes. Getting ahead	2
Yes. Learn to balance	2
A bit	1

Academic Interaction

A component of academic integration is interaction with faculty members both inside and outside the classroom. Academic interactions also include encounters with staff members and even other students. All three groups contributed to various levels of interaction with the students interviewed. Though some of the students interviewed would have been perfectly happy to stay in their room the entire summer, all students reported interactions. Interactions with faculty were cited in multiple manners which is a strong testament to both the students, the courses they were attempting, and the faculty themselves.

Student level of interaction with faculty depended upon their behavior as well as the openness of their faculty member. Student use of office hours, informal and unplanned meetings on campus, and other meetings are recorded here. Academic integration is related to how students were making academic connections to the university and their interactions with faculty impacted this level of connectedness. Though academic connections can include more than just faculty interactions, questions about academic connections were asked in a variety of ways. Students' reported interactions, if any, are recorded in Table 6.

Questions were asked dealing specifically with faculty interactions within the classroom and outside the class. Hannah mentioned her large class size as a challenge. She said, "It's less hands on when they're teaching. So I got a little more accustomed to that after high school." However, many students mentioned faculty interaction as a strength of the summer program. Most of the interaction described was limited to the classroom but students still saw this as a positive. Students enrolling within a larger university entered with little understanding that the faculty were a resource for them to use. Many students seemed surprised that a question would be asked about seeing their instructors outside of a classroom setting.

Table 6

Faculty Interactions

Location	Number of Responses
Classroom only	9
Use of office hours	5
Random meeting on campus	5
Before/After class interaction	3
Random meeting off campus	2

Many of the direct quotes from the students offer stronger understanding of their experience beyond the coded responses. For example, Lewis explained some of his interaction with an instructor, “And after class, of course, we would talk. I think I met him one time at Chick-Fil-A. It was pretty cool. And of course, he was friendly, and we talked, and everything, and it was perfect.” The student, Lewis, seemed more outgoing and will likely experience these types of interactions with many of his college instructors.

Daniel had a great experience with his instructors. “I still talk to both of my summer faculty now. I’m not enrolled in either one of their classes.” Daniel thought that the small class size of his summer course was the difference in his experience.

My English comp class only had ten people so we got to know each other on a personal first-name basis. My math professor, I can still go to him even though I don’t have him (this fall) and he’ll help me with anything.

Small class size was the difference here and Daniel viewed his instructor in a positive manner.

He did not mention use of office hours or any other informal meeting during the summer.

However, some students found office hours helpful as they made academic connections and reached their personal academic goals.

Some students talked about the informal nature of the summer and the comfort that offered. Fran said, “My English teacher was really chill. Instead of sitting at his desk he sat on top of his desk. He would talk with us like we were one of the guys, I guess you could say.”

Steven also mentioned English as being “fast paced” for him. He says, “there was pretty constant communication between us.” Many students spoke in similar terms but few mentioned connections outside the classroom. However, there were some instances of interactions outside the classroom. Hannah, taking an art appreciation course said, “We got to go up to one of the art galleries and see his office. We even got to see some of his artwork, so that was cool.”

Kelly, who had a positive experience, took two large classes. She appreciated the bridge to make connections with her large classes. She said, “My chemistry class had 200 people in it . . . my calculus had 105 and no seating assignments. You think it would be easy to meet people, but it wasn’t.” Kelly talked about having familiar faces from the bridge program as being ones that she could connect with during class and after class. Kelly was happy that with bridge she had a predetermined study group and a group likely would not have formed for her without the summer community. Steven’s experience with a public speaking class was more positive, “There were 30 of us which seemed large but the instructor knew what they were doing.” Though class size was mentioned by many students the context of most mentions was of a positive nature.

Encounters with staff members were also experienced by all participants. The coordinator of the program, Nate, was approachable and even taught one section of the study-skills class. Other students reported experiences with staff members. Fran said that the bridge program had a series of speakers from the counseling center and campus dining that, “taught us almost everything about nutrition, alcohol awareness, and drug awareness.” Lewis had some strong experiences with staff members in the library who took the time to teach him about library resources and he, “felt like I had found a great place to study.”

Finally, student interactions were continual. The significant social interactions are recorded throughout the Social Integration section. Since this sub-theme is included within the

academic integration category it is important to consider academic interactions with students. Kelly lived on the “fun floor” of the residence hall and said she would, “go to a different floor for study groups most nights.” Steven took advantage of the group-study aspect for his public speaking course, “we would meet in the lobby of the residence hall and find a room to go over our speeches. It was helpful before doing it in class.” Situations like this were common. Students seemed to take advantage of the peers in the same class for them all to help each other get through the summer. For many, this academic support system continued to the fall semester.

There is certainly room for improvement with academic interaction. Anna mentioned, “study groups started as optional, but the teacher changed it to mandatory.” Other study groups that formed more organically had stronger ties. Mary, an engineering major, was excited that she had found study groups to help her through calculus.

Academic Resources

Outside of the faculty interaction experience, students can make academic connections through campus resources. Campus resources can take multiple forms and the summer often has more-limited resources than other times of the year. However, there were multiple resources that were mentioned and utilized by the summer bridge participants. The major sub-themes included in this area included the library, the writing center, and the math lab, but other areas were mentioned by students.

During the interview, students were asked specifically about their library experience, their connection with tutoring resources, and “any other academic resources.” These open questions allowed students to share what experiences impacted them. When questioned about the summer program introducing them to “the library or any other academic resources,” some students mentioned meeting with their resident assistant as being valuable in their introduction to

college. Though resident assistants are not often thought of as an academic resource, if the students view them in that manner then it was included in Table 7 below.

Students were introduced to the same campus resources opportunities through large group meetings that occurred during the 1st week of the bridge program, but many students were also enrolled in a for-credit study skills course. It is likely that students enrolled in that course were introduced at a more comprehensive level to the campus resources that were available within the library and in other locations. One student who completed the study skills course was very impressed with the variety of resources. When asked if the bridge program helped him become aware of academic resources Oscar said, “Definitely. Nate’s class showed us a lot of different things around campus especially the computer testing place. And the places you could study is beyond my understanding.”

An office on campus that can assist students with editing papers was called the “Writing Center” by the students. Not limited to English classes, but open to any subject, this was a valuable resource. “I learned about the English writing center when I came on a tour last year, but I got to see it and use it this summer,” Steven shared. Rachel agreed, “I loved using the writing center because I really didn’t know how to write that good [*sic*]”. The writing center was a common theme reported by students. Students did feel that it was a valuable resource to help them complete the summer.

The other common area for tutoring was referred to as the “math lab” by students. Wilson said, “I ended up going there (the math lab) when I was stuck on homework and they did help me.” Since only a limited number of students enrolled in math courses, not all students had the opportunity to utilize this resource. However, the students that utilized this office found it to be helpful in helping them complete their math requirement to move along to the next level.

The library seemed to be the hub of study for many students. The library also has a large computer lab and access to printers. Students were required to submit English composition assignments in both paper and electronic formats so almost all students frequented the library. Mary said, “the library was this big, mysterious place . . . they have great research books that will help me in the future.” Other students agreed that the library was a great academic resource. However, Rachel said, “I used the computer lab in the library, but I could never find a quiet place to study.”

There were some other areas that were mentioned less frequently. When asked about academic resources, Lewis mentioned the career center. Though the researcher would not have previously considered the career center an academic resource, Lewis helped me reconsider. He said, “The career center helped me build my resume, helped me with interview skills, and everything else. And I landed a job in the library as a work-study student.” Lewis was the only student to mention the career center as an academic resource but from his positive experience it appears that other students should become more aware of the services it offers.

Table 7

Specific Academic Resources Utilized

Resource	Number of Responses
Library	7
Writing Center	7
Math Tutoring	6
Resident Assistant	4
Career Services	1

Since students were asked specifically about the library, it was surprising how few students mentioned using it in any detail. Connie likely summed up many of the students’ experience, “They showed us the library and encouraged us to use it which was nice.” It seems

as though some students likely stopped with the tour in their use of the library. Oscar did benefit from his introduction to the library: “Definitely the library helped, I’ve been there a lot actually.”

Academic Confidence

Students enrolled in the university after completing a high school diploma and were all traditional age freshmen. However, not all of their previous experiences were similar. Students claimed a wide variety of academic confidence levels as they enrolled. Some students talked about dual enrollment or completed AP courses while other reported weak high school teaching that did not prepare them for college. Sub-themes included in this category were wake-up call, confirmation, and realization.

Daniel, who had a high level of confidence, reported a poor grade on his first exam and called it a “wake-up call” for him. By this, he was referring to the opportunity to realize that college work is serious business and that he needed to change his behavior to reach his educational goals. This wake-up call led him to reflect on what behavior led to his poor grade and how he could adjust for future tests. In this case, a wake-up call was a positive experience for him. Other students reported similar encounters with less than stellar grades to begin the summer semester and having the moment of realization that they were no longer in the safety and comfort of a high school classroom.

Other students mentioned perfect attendance with a level of pride and a confirmation that they were in the correct courses. I suspect this level of pride came from comparing themselves to other students that blew off classes. Lewis said, “Toward the end of the summer it really clicked for me. I started making good grades in my classes and I knew that would prepare me for the fall.” Steven, who selected this college over some highly selective universities said that the summer was what he needed to transition into the challenging courses for his engineering major.

For some students, the bridge program was a confirmation that they had the ability to succeed. Wilson said, “I wasn’t very confident because my high school was weak . . . this helped me learn at a different level.” Mary said that the bridge program helped her realize that she could do well without having her parents looking over her shoulder. She said these feelings of academic confirmation were important “before my parents started paying expensive tuition in the fall.” Statements like these are ones that point directly at how academic confidence can develop over the course of the summer program.

Social Integration

In what ways did the summer bridge program help students prepare for and adjust to the academic expectations and rigors of the university?

My second research question dealt with social integration. The categories included within this section were social locations, social activities, and social relationships. Though each of the three categories have crossover to the other, it was important to bring a focus on each of the areas as the coded interviews led to these themes. Beneath the categories are sub-themes which will be examined in more detail within each section.

The social aspect of the bridge program was important to all students interviewed (see Table 8 below). Twelve of the 19 students interviewed claimed to know “no one” enrolled at the university prior to the summer program. However, this was not surprising as 14 of the students were classified as non-residents. Two pairs of non-residents enrolled knowing one other student from their high school graduating class who was also participating in summer bridge program. Outside of these connections, all other non-residents enrolled in the program without any prior friend-base. Even in-state students did not always enroll with their previously established friend group. Mary, an in-state resident, said, “everyone in college is trying to make new friends” and the bridge community provided a strong environment for that to occur.

An initial welcome meeting quickly helped students to begin the process to make social connections. Beth, an out-of-state resident, explained,

the program really introduced you to everybody . . . ‘Cause you made friends with one person, then all their friends would get to campus and they introduce you to all their friends, and then you just kinda met a lot of people that way.

Ethan, another out-of-state resident, also talked about his experience of finding friends. He said,

it's a lot easier to make friends because everybody's new, and they're all freshmen, mostly. I had a couple of sophomores in the class, but mostly freshmen. And so when everybody is new, it's kind of, it's really easy to make friends.

The program enrolled many students who knew no other student when they started. Of the 19 interviewed, only 7 knew one or more other students participating in the summer program. The 19 students interviewed came from six different states and only two pair of students attended the same high school (one of the pair were in a dating-relationships and the other pair would not call each other friends). The seven that enrolled in the bridge program from in-state high schools all attended different high schools. Because of the diverse locations of the schools, the students arrived without knowing others, there was a need to seek friendships. Beth even said that the social aspect was her primary motivation in enrolling in the program.

Daniel who viewed himself as the “father” of the group organized many evening meals and even created a dining club. He said, “We got really close as a family . . . everybody kinda needed everyone else and had each other’s back.” Wilson agreed, “small connections were made that then led to meeting people, making acquaintances, making friendships and so on.” The social community developed among the bridge students was strong and these quotes and others seemed to give strong support for the program.

Grace summed up her feelings on her social connections as she reflected upon the last day of the program, “it kind of was like a moment where I was like, college can’t be bad, because you get to meet a whole bunch of new people and everyone is just looking for friends

anyway.” Statements like this clearly demonstrate the experience of the social aspect of the summer program.

Table 8

Did the Bridge Program Help you Develop Your Social Group?

Response	Number of Responses
Yes!	6
Factor that Helped	
Roommate	4
Small class sizes	4
Social activities	4
Study groups	1

Social Locations

Interactions among the bridge student occurred within a variety of locations. The university is situated within a small town but many of the students enrolled from even smaller towns. Residence halls, dining areas, and off-campus venues were the three most common sub-themes that students experienced and most experiences fit well within those themes.

The residence halls proved to be the most common place for social activities since the residential program required students to live-on campus within one specific hall. All students interviewed mentioned the residence hall in some capacity. Specifically, the lobby was a social location experienced by everyone since all the students had to pass through on their way to their rooms though not all students mentioned the lobby. The residence halls for the program were co-residential that shared a common lobby with a men’s wing on one side and the women’s wing on the opposite. The lobby was a location for study groups, interactions, and other games. The lobby included a pool table and open tables where board games or card games could be found on a daily basis. There was a large-screen television in the lobby but that was not mentioned as a center of social activity.

The most important feature of the residence hall proved to be the kitchen located within the lobby. Since the dining hall was closed at night many students cooked together for the evening meal. Students cooking in the lobby contributed to constant activity in this area and helped create community for all students even if they were not participating in and paying for the meal. Not only were the meals prepared there, the lobby was where they were consumed and most students stayed long after the meal was complete to help with the clean-up or to continue to socialize and even occasionally study.

Another group dining experience was a special event for students and it did not occur within the campus dining hall. On Friday nights the bridge administrators hosted an event called, “Taste of the Town” where groups went to various restaurants. Each Friday there would be several options for students to choose to have other people from the bridge population, along with bridge administrators, to go to dinner. Students mentioned trying new foods and dining with people they would not normally have selected as an important part of their learning experience.

Though the university is located in a small town there are several things for the students to do. I have called this sub-theme venues as it includes all the various locations that the diverse population of students mentioned. Many students spoke fondly of “trips to Wal-Mart,” which for some seemed to occur nightly. Daniel spoke favorably about going “to the refuge.” The refuge was a state wildlife refuge located within a short drive from the university. Other students mentioned going to the refuge to count alligators. For the students from a more urban background, I am sure that was exciting.

Lewis, an out-of-state student, found the city to be less expensive than his hometown and he took advantage of many venues. He said, “There is a movie theater that is surprisingly cheap

. . . everything here is cheap.” He even found so many activities he never went home. He shared, “I didn’t go home once . . . I did go home with a friend and we went white water rafting which is really awesome.” Rachel also mentioned that “movie nights were a lot of fun.” Some student made connections with their resident assistants to experience other off-campus venues. Hannah said, “we went skating with two RAs, so we got to be friends with people a little higher up.”

Twelve of the students interviewed reported that they did not go home at all during the July bridge program. The actual number could have been higher since that question was not asked directly. However, just because they did not go home does not mean they did not go anywhere. Road trips seemed to be a common theme among some students. Oscar mentioned a trip that he took, “we went to a great Indian restaurant two hours away and it was a great find!” He also mentioned, “we started a Thursday-night basketball tradition at the rec center that we still continue. It is very social.” Other students reported going home with friends for a weekend.

There was a small minority that reported that “other students” had unhealthy interactions with alcohol. Though no student admitted that they personally had any problem with alcohol or partying, they did point the finger at others. Anna, an engineering student who prided herself on high grades commented that many students within the residence halls stayed up too late and played their music too loud.

Social Activities

Summers at the university in the study can be much quieter times. With enrollment only one-quarter of typical fall-spring enrollment, students are often seeking social activities in any location they can find. Sub-themes included within this category were banquets, clubs, and recreation.

One of the most significant events of the summer was the closing banquet. This banquet occurred after finals and students were asked to dress in formal attire. The athletic director spoke to the students and a few other significant people also gave words of wisdom as these students were set to begin the fall semester. The event was held on campus and the meal, to the students, was one of the best they had ever had. The night was emotional as student realized they would never be together in this group again. Tears were shed and there were lots of laughs. The only negative comment was that “the tea wasn’t sweet.” The closing banquet summed up the summer experience for many students and it was often cited as the most important night of the summer experience.

One informal banquet activity mentioned by several students was nicknamed “Top Ten.” This activity had students put on their best attire and go out for a meal together. The Top Ten referred to the way they dressed and presented themselves. The group went to one of the nicer restaurants in the town and used this as way to honor each other. Though this Top Ten did not include the entire bridge population it was important enough that it was mentioned by six of the students I interviewed.

During the summer, only a limited about of university clubs are active. However, students are often looking for connections and ways to contribute to the campus experience. The dining club, previously mentioned by Daniel, was a common topic among students being interviewed and the lobby-kitchen was where many evening meals were prepared by a group of students. Students reported a high level of satisfaction with this group. This student-led group was formed out necessity to have a dining experience since the dining halls were closed at night. The dating couple, Ethan and Julie, were a part of this group. Terri mentioned it as being a helpful part of her week. This group allowed people to contribute a few dollars for them to cook

a meal together. Depending on what was cooked, the amount students were asked to contribute varied from \$2 to \$5. This informal group, formed out of necessity, led to more positive social integration than any planned meal could.

One club that was mentioned was the intramural aspect. Intramurals seemed to only play a small part of student life for the summer bridge participants. The main student recreation facility was located on the far-side of campus. The location likely has some negative impact upon student use. Some students had trouble making connections while others were very active. Daniel found intramurals to be rewarding. He said, “I did the dodgeball tournament and was introduced to racquetball, and I really like racquetball now.” Ethan however, had trouble making intramural connection: “I stopped by the recreation center a few times, but I never signed up to play on a team.” However, since the fall started, the summer introduction has led to active participation among most students interviewed, including Ethan.

To help students make connections, a variety of extracurricular programs were offered on campus. Both weekend programming and afternoon mixers were formally offered by the bridge program administrators. Some of the weekend programming occurred within the open space between two residence halls. Some of the students called it “the green” but as far as I know that is not a formal name for this area. On the 4th of July, a day off from school, this area was the location for inflatables, snow cones, and barbecue. This event occurred after students had only arrived on campus 3 days prior and it must have been a success since multiple students mentioned the significance of it to help them connect with others. Another popular weekend event was Service Saturdays in which student volunteers would help with area nonprofit organizations. Though participation was optional, many students found these events to be

personally rewarding and another chance to get to know their fellow bridge participants. The most common service location mentioned was helping to build a house for a local organization.

In addition to formally planned events, there were many student-led events that led to stronger connections within the community. Oscar said, “one night there was a barbecue and water slide behind the residence halls that was awesome.” Fran also took advantage of the bridge programming; “they had an improv comedy group that was amazing to me since I did theater in high school. I love theater.”

Social Relationships

An area in which the bridge program can claim success is the reported friendships that were developed over the course of the summer. Friendship levels varied, and the sub-themes identified were intimate, lasting, and acquaintances.

Multiple students reported that their only friends were ones that were developed during the program. Time and again students reported that 1 month into their freshman year that their only friends came from the bridge program. Daniel reported that the summer led to mutual dependency upon each other.

Beth found the summer program to be helpful in helping her make connections coming from the west coast. In fact she said, “for me the social aspect was more important than the academic. I took dual enrollment in high school so I felt prepared. I just didn’t know anyone here so I wanted to meet people.” Other students that interviewed also came from over 10 hours’ drive away and were not able to go home on the weekends. In fact, when asked about weekend activities only three students reported going home on a weekend.

Another reported experience was the personal discipline that developed over the course of the summer. Or, in some students’ cases, did not develop. Bedtime and wake time, as you

might suspect, varied among the students. Some students reported never going to sleep before midnight. Nedra was a student within this category. Hanging out in the residence hall or even at friend's apartments took priority over sleep. She reported that her grades suffered because of her poor habits. Terri, however, reported perfect attendance within her classes. Though she did stay up late she always made it to class. Daniel, our self-described "papa" said that he was always asleep by 10:00 and attributed this to his growing up on a farm.

However, some students struggled to find their group during the summer and did not attempt to invest in others to develop friendships. Anna was the perfect example of this. Anna talked about enjoying "Netflix in my room" as her most common evening activity. Anna is likely the type of student that is most comfortable in her room and it would have been less enjoyable to her to be with others. When asked about her social circles, she primarily mentioned friends from classes. My takeaway from her interview was that just because she did not have a large group of friends does not mean she was not doing what she enjoys.

Atypical Experiences

A research decision was made with regard to two participants in the study whose experiences of the bridge program can best be described as atypical. One participant named Paul identified as a male but was born a female. Paul's experience of the bridge program was drastically different from the other 18 participants in the study. A second participant named Terri was homeschooled from kindergarten through high school graduation. Terri's experience of the bridge program was also radically different from the other participants in the study. Though no two students had identical experiences, these two students had unique characteristics. In light of these circumstances, a decision was made to present the experiences of these two participants in separate excursions.

Unique Perspective 1: Paul Mardis

Paul was late to apply to the summer bridge program and he was the last student to arrive on move-in day. He missed the initial orientation meeting and was the last student to move his belongings into the residence hall. Though he arrived late, he was able to begin to make connections in the lobby of the residence hall the first night. He claimed the students were friendly, welcoming, and he enjoyed meeting them. As a transsexual student, Paul was assigned a private room within the men's wing. Since the Obama administration had made it clear that trans students should be assigned within the gender with which they identify, this was the correct assignment for him. Paul expressed no harassment or discrimination over his identity. However, Paul mentioned little about informal social interactions with students. His main source of student interaction seemed to be the organized activities planned by the bridge administrators. He mentioned Taste of Town where a group would go out on Friday evenings to sample local restaurants. Paul also mentioned joining up with a group of students through the bridge program that volunteered at area charities on Saturday mornings. This group helped build houses for Habitat for Humanity and volunteered at a homeless shelter another weekend. Paul currently was not involved in any campus organizations and claimed that his closest friends come from his classes or from the bridge program. He had attended some meetings with the LGBT student group but was still looking for a group of students that he feels most comfortable.

Academically, Paul selected the university for its major in Building Construction Science but since enrolling he was having second thoughts about this being the ideal major for him. Paul had a variety of academic interests and could likely excel in many different career fields. Paul had strong grades in high school but worried about how it would translate to college-level work. He enrolled with 6 hours of dual enrollment work and was excited that after the summer he had

completed the math courses required for his likely major. Though he was still exploring majors, he intends to select a major that does not require calculus. Paul was fortunate to take two classes with small enrollment, so he reported strong interaction with both his instructors and his classmates. He frequently used the writing center on campus to assist with his English composition papers but did not make use of any other academic resource.

Paul would recommend the bridge to future students, but he would advise arriving on time. He thought his late arrival put him in a tough position to make quick friendships. Paul continued to interact with students from bridge and appreciated a mentor from the LGBTQ community that was helpful to him when he arrived. From an academic standpoint, Paul would recommend the bridge program to future students. Paul called it “a good value” and it helped him reach his goals of getting a math class out of the way and making social connections.

Unique Perspective 2: Terri Jackson

Though the vast majority of high school students attend a traditional school there are a number of students that come from a homeschool environment. This was true for Terri and sharing more about her unique experiences with the bridge program can provide valuable insight into how homeschool students transition to the university. Homeschooled students often face challenges that a traditional student does not face so exploring her experience more will be valuable to college administrators who want to understand how to better meet the demands of this population.

Terri enrolled in the bridge program with a high level of academic confidence. Throughout high school she had been homeschooled and for the past 2 years taking the majority of her courses online. She had an even more unique homeschool experience as her family toured the country in a camper for the previous 2 years. She had older siblings who were already in

college so the trip across the United State was just with her parents. With online dual enrollment, she was able to complete 16 hours of college credit prior to enrolling in the bridge along with completing her high school diploma. The main problem that her large number of transfer credits caused was that there was only one class offered by the bridge program that she had not completed that would be required for her major in biology and that was introduction to biology. However, she enjoyed taking one class with a lab and having the rest of her time to get adjusted to college, study, and socialize. Her dual enrollment experience taught her the repercussions of turning in assignments late and that proved valuable to her during the summer and in the start of the fall semester.

Getting adjusted to normal friendships was another motivating factor in her decision to participate. In a typical homeschool setting, students are around other students at least on some occasions and sometime may have typical teen interactions. This was not true for Terri's experience. She was alone with her parents. She claimed her main friends came from the summer bridge experience. She had a great roommate who did not participate in bridge but was in her major, so they often studied together. Her roommate from the summer was "complete opposites" from her but that was a good learning experience for both of them.

Terri had a positive experience with the program and thinks it was good for her to learn more about pacing yourself in college. With her work ethic, she likely did not need the program to succeed but she was grateful that she did it. She thought that taking one hard class was enough and would not recommend anyone take two hard classes in the summer. She also thought that future homeschool students would benefit from the social aspect of the program. Getting to make some initial connections before the fall started, in her opinion, was helpful as she looked to find her place.

Student Recommendations

Of the 19 students interviewed, almost all gave positive recommendations about the program. Kelly, a 1st-generation out-of-state resident whose twin enrolled in a different college had a unique perspective. Reflecting on the possibility of not participating in the program she said, “I think I would have had a significantly harder time, because my sister, she didn't do anything (like the bridge), and she's having a hard time finding friends, and getting to places, and going, just handling all this workload.” Oscar, a non-resident talked about the value he saw in the bridge program: “It already gives you a lead over other kids because the other kids are so lost. And, yeah, you still know everywhere on campus now because you're a month ahead of them basically.” These experiences were not unique. Lewis said, “Participate because it will help with social interactions and with academics.” However, the amount of academic work that the students were willing to do varied. Terri, who, due to a large number of dual enrollment classes only chose to take one class, said, “I wouldn't recommend taking two really hard classes because it is so much work.” Since Terri had completed many of the available courses, her options were limited.

Some students realized that the summer program may not be the best fit for all students. Rachel, realizing the fast nature of the summer said, “I would recommend my high school friends do it if they are willing to work hard!” Hard work in the class and for some, hard work outside the classroom, was another consideration. Many students come from working-class backgrounds and their presence is missed when they go away to college. Daniel said, “I left home at the height of work season since I live on a farm. It was hard to do but my little brother will participate in a few years.” Daniel was another student who benefited from the structure of the bridge program.

One of the strongest testaments of the summer came from Kelly. She said, “I can't just leave here. I've got some commitments here. . . . I've been thinking about that. If I didn't do the bridge, would I really still be here next semester.” This, in my mind, is what success looks like. Students entered with a wide variety of experiences and test scores but left with a stronger understanding of what college could be for them. Though the available resources were the same, the level of use and level of connection varied. Students interviewed found value in the summer. Mary says, “It helped me manage my life and do academics knowing that if I needed to go talk to a professor, just go talk with them!” She felt like the small size was beneficial. Terri enjoyed her biology one class so much she was waiting until the spring to take biology two with the same professor. She said, “She was amazing, great teacher. She was kinda hard but she knew everyone’s name. I can’t wait to have her again.” This was another strong example of the influence that a specific instructor had upon a student.

The main criticism from several students was with their evening dining experience. The cafeteria did not offer extended hours during the summer and many students found that frustrating. Though this proved to be challenging in some ways, it made the students create their own supper club. “It was something like Don’t Starve or something like that. A group of people got together and would make this big meal where we all would pay \$5 to cover the cost,” said Ethan. Another criticism came from limited tutoring options for the summer. Anna said, “I could not understand why the English writing center wasn’t open more.” Beth agreed; she said, “I think they could have offered more tutoring to help with assignments.”

Conclusion

Bridge gave me hope. They basically put you in the middle of college life but they don’t try to make it easier for you just because you are a (recent) high school student. It helped me realize how hard and easy college can be. It was a good test drive to see if I was cut out for college. (Connie, Summer Bridge Participant)

The 19 students interviewed all spoke positively about their summer experience. All would recommend it to friends enrolling in future summers. Though not asked specifically about their grades, most students claimed to have made good grades. Grade data were later shared by the bridge office for all bridge participants (not just those who participated in the interviews) and the average GPA earned was 3.19. Further, 26 of the 31 students who attempted Developmental College Algebra earned a “C” or higher and were able to enroll in College Algebra in the fall. Some students who participated in the interviews conceded they could have made better grades had they put more effort into the classes.

Academic and social connections seem directly related to the effort made by students to achieve these connections. Since all students said they would participate in the program again and would recommend it the program to future students, this is evidence that the program is doing something to help students want to be there. However, the program can make some changes to improve.

The “mentors” were four (or more?) sophomores whose job was to help the students with transition to college issues. Mentors were first mentioned by a student early in the interview process and all subsequent students were asked about their experience with mentors. Some were completely unaware of this position while others had good experiences. According to some students interviewed each of the four was supposed to be a representative in one particular area of student life. Greek life, student government, recreational sports, and diversity including LGBTQ were the areas these mentors were supposed to represent. However, if a key component of helping students with the transition to college includes the mentors, then the bridge program needs to have them as more central figures with more clearly defined roles. From the students

that benefited from their expertise these upper class students could have a more important place than they did.

The summer bridge program, in my opinion, proved to be an excellent vessel to help students with the transition to college. Students arrived with a variety of academic backgrounds. As Astin would say, they had various *inputs* and were exposed to similar *environments* and many students flourished. The interview experience was rewarding in learning more about how students made academic and social connections and how they felt the bridge program helped them complete the summer and transition to the fall.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Summer bridge programs, though only around for 20 years, seem to have a bright future within higher education. The experience of the summer program had a strong impact upon the social lives and academic careers of the students involved. Students reported positive academic and social connections to the university with many students citing specific instances where the summer program made a difference in aiding their transition. As a transition program for high school students, the structure of the program was valuable for students to gain understanding of the formal and informal rules of college before taking a full course load in the fall semester. The individual interviews revealed the value of the program to the students.

Discussion

My findings compare strongly with the literature in many ways. Studies have shown that college bridge programs have a strong positive influence in helping students develop connections academically and socially. Interviews with students confirmed this finding. Further, the study not only confirmed the importance of bridge programs but also provided a stronger understanding of how students develop academic and social integration connections.

The findings of the study compared favorably to the theoretical framework. In developing both the research questions and the interview questions, two main theoretical frameworks were used. Both Tinto's and Astin's IEO theory were useful in setting the stage for the research. The theoretical framework of Tinto's theory of integration included both a social and academic aspect. For Tinto, the social aspect includes two areas that were not reported. Involvement in

student organizations was not a true possibility during the summer and there was no direct mention of dating relationships. Also, since existing student organizations were not a possibility during the summer, the bridge students, in some ways, formed their own organization with the supper club that met most nights in the residence hall. Interactions among students also includes text and social media use and these mediums did not exist when Tinto's theory was published.

The academic aspect of Tinto's theory includes interactions with faculty and interactions with university support systems. Tinto's theory, for the most part, fit well here. However, some interactions occur over email and students consider these interactions as legitimate whereas Tinto did not include email or any social media as an interaction. With English composition papers submitted via email, students see this medium as a way to interact with their professors.

Astin's IEO theory was also considered for the conceptual framework of the study. With a focus on the environment as being the key to helping students form their identity as university students. Background information, or "I," was also considered to set the stage for both their academic confidence history and their friendship history. Astin's theory was a strong fit but my study did not examine any outcome past the summer term.

The strongest testament of these theories is that at the completion of the bridge program students did report that they had experienced a strong commitment to the university. Tinto was accurate in that student academic and social integration experiences led to university commitment. Astin was correct in that the students' *Inputs*, though from a variety of backgrounds, led to the desired *output* largely due to the community that was formed within the *Environment* of the bridge program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to better understand how students make academic and social connections during a summer bridge program. The study allowed participants in the summer bridge program to give insight into their experiences, beliefs, and outlook into the program through interviews. The students interviewed offered valuable insight into their experiences. Students reported positive and negative experiences and offered praise and criticism. These rich experiences would not likely have been captured with a survey instrument.

Overview of Data Collection

The research design included a qualitative case study method since it is the most appropriate mode of inquiry to answer the research questions within this study. This methodology was selected because it constituted the best approach to uncover the personal experiences of the students after they completed the summer program. Thus, interviews were conducted with 19 students during the fall semester following their summer bridge experience. The research project, using narrative inquiry, was designed to understand the individuals being studied and to understand their experiences. This study sought to understand the academic and social integration experiences of the students and how they viewed their experiences within the summer. Though the terms academic integration and social integration were not introduced to the students, the concepts were explored through the survey questions.

Research Questions

Research Question 1

In what ways did the summer bridge program allow the student to develop the social connections of typical university students?

Social connections among the students varied. Since many of the students were non-residents, they did not arrive on campus with an established social network. The vast majority

had no connections prior to the summer and only a few students claimed to have previous friends on campus. The design of the bridge program attracts non-residents at a higher rate than residents, so it seems natural that students would arrive on campus and actively look for social connections. The bridge program did an excellent job of placing these students together in social or mixer-type situations but not all of these actions led to strong social connections. When questioned about friendships, some students spoke more highly of friendships made in the classroom and the study groups that resulted from the classroom experience. Others struggled to make social connections through the bridge program, their roommate, and even in the classroom.

Students who mentioned study groups and connections made through their academic courses also seemed to have the more positive experiences with the bridge program. The academic experience, paired with co-curricular experiences, is likely the outcome that is most desired by bridge program administrators. Figuring out how to capture this experience for all students is the challenge as different student personalities and different combinations of academic courses can lead to different combinations with various outcomes.

Many students talked about roommates and how that led to positive or negative experiences. Several students had such strong summer roommate experiences that they kept the same roommate for the fall semester. Others struggled with finding the right roommate match. Some students interviewed were still struggling with finding the right match. Though not all the students had positive friendships with their summer roommate, most found it to be an experience that provided some benefit in learning how to interact with others. Some students reported still seeing former roommates and reported how they learned through the roommate experience.

With many students coming from out-of-state, the weekends were primarily spent on campus. Some students spoke of trips home with new friends, but most weekends were on

campus. Road trips were mentioned by a few students; it seemed most students did not travel. Though students rarely identified specific events that occurred on the weekend, I did not get a sense of boredom from the students in the interview.

Three themes emerged to explain social integration: Social Activities, Social Locations, and Social Relationships. The bridge program assisted the participants in forming social connections with the university by means of Social Activities. The main sub-themes identified under activities included Banquet Activities, Club Activities, and Recreation Activities. The bridge program assisted the participants in forming social connections with the university by means of Social Locations. The location theme was supported by the sub-themes of the Residence Halls, Dining, and Venues. The bridge program assisted the participants in forming social connections with the university by means of Social Relationships. This connection was formed by means of Intimate Relationships, Lasting Relationships, and Acquaintance Relationships. All areas were important to students in varying degrees. The social aspect of the student experience was crucial as they formed connections to the university. Even if they were happy with their academic experience, the social aspect helped form their lasting connectedness to the university.

Research Question 2

In what ways did the summer bridge program help students prepare for and adjust to the academic expectations and rigors of the university?

Judging the bridge program on the success of this research question, the resounding answer would have to be in the affirmative. All students interviewed spoke favorably of the program helping them learn the norms and expectations of faculty. Students were enrolled in a variety of classes and some classes included non-bridge students. However, some students were able to enroll in classes that were limited to participants in the bridge program. A study skills

type course was popular, and several sections of this course were offered to bridge students.

Students within these courses spoke highly of their faculty as some of them were summer bridge administrators and had a role in recruiting them to the program, moving in to campus, and through bridge orientation sessions.

The institution included in the study is a mid-sized research university in the southeastern United States. The university offers a variety of academic majors but traditionally agriculture and engineering were the more popular. The university is considered a walking campus and academic buildings are located in the central part of campus with residence halls bordering them.

Freshmen entering in the fall are required to live on campus and purchase a meal plan, so the bridge program requirements were a strong test-run for them. Class size can be large for many of the core curriculum classes. However, summer in general, can have much smaller class sizes and some bridge participants mentioned class sizes of less than 15 students. Multiple students interviewed cited their smaller class size as being important in their period of adjustment to college. However, another mentioned that she has completed two large courses during the summer and she felt those were good preparation for the fall semester when she is currently taking other large capacity courses. Based on these mixed reviews there does not seem to be a consensus on how class size in the summer will impact the student as they prepare for the fall semester.

It was not surprising that some students had strong connections with their faculty members and others only saw them in class, though it would be hard to know if the interaction or lack of interaction was due more to the student or to the faculty member. However, even without notable interactions, several students had strong enough experiences with their faculty that they

chose to take further courses with the same summer faculty. This is a positive outcome for the bridge.

Three themes emerged to explain academic integration: Academic Confidence, Academic Resources, and Academic Interactions. The bridge program assisted the participants in forming academic connections to the university by means of academic interactions. This connection was formed by means of faculty interactions, staff interactions, and student interactions. The bridge program assisted the participants in forming academic connections with the university by means of Academic Resources. This connection was formed by the means of the library, the writing center, and the math lab. The bridge program assisted the participants in forming academic connections with the university by means of Academic Confidence. This connection was formed by means of wake-up calls to change their potentially bad habits, confirmation of what they had achieved, and realizations of all the opportunities available. All areas of Academic Integration were important to students in varying degrees. True, the reason many students enroll in college is to complete a degree to improve their economic situation; it would be challenging to achieve this end without strong academic connections. Faculty interactions were among the most commonly cited theme since all students were enrolled in classes but utilizing other resources was dependent upon the student.

Conclusions

The research questions were answered through qualitative interviewing of students. I gained a clearer understanding of how students make academic connections to the university. The interviews also helped me understand how students made social connections with other students and how these connections increased their integration to the university. The purpose of the study was to determine how students make meaning of their experiences during the summer

bridge program. The study has answered the purpose statement. To sum, students made meaning of their experiences through their interactions with faculty and with their interactions with students.

This study sought to fulfill three purposes. There have been few studies that sought to answer the why and how of bridge programs make sense for students; and this study sought to address that question. This study is my original contribution to knowledge. This study sought to answer the how and why. Through the interviews and interpretation that has been answered and now we have a better understanding of how these bridge programs work to help the student and help the university.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this research endeavor. The idea that bridge programs were effective in helping students connect academically was observed and bridge programs are effective in helping students connect socially was also observed. How the bridge programs assist students in connecting by means of academic interactions, academic resources, and academic confidence was self-reported by students. How bridge programs assist students in connecting by means of social locations, social activities, and social relationships was also reported by students. Now we know more about how and why this happens.

The experiences shared by the students in the bridge program give a strong glimpse into their experiences and how they benefited from the summer. The study was designed to give the students a voice about how they made connections academically and socially with faculty, other students, and, ultimately, the university. Following the data collection and coding process, the researcher does have a stronger understanding of what this bridge program is all about and about the experiences of these students that led to their positive integration experiences.

As students recounted their summer experiences they told how they grew and how they believed the summer bridge program influenced them as they transitioned from the safety of the summer to the “real” classes in the fall. They shared positive experiences about how a smaller summer experience prepared them for the fall or how a large summer class prepared them for multiple large classes. They shared negative experiences and blamed negative experiences on others or sometimes owned their own failure within the situation. I was impressed by students who were able to own their own responsibilities with situations and realize how they could have behaved or reacted better. They shared how a fast-paced month in July showed them they could be successful in the slower-paced fall semester. They shared how an experience with two faculty members prepared them to have interactions with five or more faculty in the fall. They shared how the summer showed them how close friendships made through a shared summer bridge experience and could lead to sustained friendships in the fall semester. They shared how these summer friends could expand their social circles in the fall. They shared how roommate experiences from the summer could be similar to or much different from what they found in the fall. They shared a strong glimpse into their lives and how the summer program molded them. They shared their lives.

The bridge program included in the study did a good job of helping these students make these valuable connections to other students and to the university. Next, the program should consider how to expand this experience for even more students for future summers. With the strong community of these students, including a larger number of students would only increase the opportunity for positive experiences for more incoming students.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many ways future researchers could continue to add to this field. This population was only interviewed once following the completion of the summer program. Though the summer bridge office will track the retention rate of these students, a formal interview will not likely occur during their sophomore year. This cohort of summer bridge participants could be followed until graduation. This cohort could be compared to a group of similar students who did not enroll in the bridge program.

It could be interesting to learn how the summer bridge program more specifically shaped the students' friendship choices. Though several students claimed all of their friends were from the bridge program, will this still be the case when they are sophomores? By the time they are seniors will they still interact with their cohort of students from the bridge program? Did this shared experience have a long-term effect on how they located social circles?

Another direction for research could compare this population to a comparable group of students who entered in the fall semester. A comparison of retention rates and graduation rates will certainly occur within the bridge office. However, is there more that can be learned by speaking with these students? Other groups that could be considered would be students that enrolled in the summer but were enrolled in a different bridge program. Did they experience similar outcomes? If so, what were the similarities? Was there something unique about this bridge program that led to positive integration experiences that was not found within other bridge programs? Finally, were there students who enrolled in the summer but lived off campus and did not participate in a bridge program? This population could likely offer a perspective that could be valuable.

This summer bridge program led all students included in the interviews to claim positive experiences. Though there were some general complaints and specific critiques, all students interviewed would recommend the program to future students. Though the program coordinator did not see the interview questions prior to the completion of research, if the goal of the program is to help students connect with the university then the program, from this study's perspective, it can be labeled a success. If the goal of the program is to retain students at a higher level or to graduate at a higher rate, those results cannot yet be determined.

Recommendations for Practice

There are several areas that should be considered for bridge programs. Given the success cited by the students, then colleges not currently offering bridge programs should consider starting one. Students formed connections through structured programs and through organic means and both were important. The structured programs likely set the stage for the unstructured organic connections to occur. Bridge program administrators should consider activities that will create situations for students to form their own connections.

Bridge programs should also consider other populations that are often lacking in connections to the university. This university enrolls a large number of transfer students each fall semester. A summer bridge program for transfer students could benefit these students as they transition from their established circles in community college to the larger university. Non-traditional populations, enrolling as freshmen or transfers, could also benefit from a program of this nature. Though an on-campus component may not be feasible for this group, the community of students entering with similar challenges could be beneficial. Students in the study benefited from the community of students in similar situations as well as transfer and non-traditional students could also make meaningful connections that lead to academic and social integration.

There are some practices that this specific program could consider to help students. The most common complaint was related to the cafeteria hours being limited in the evenings. However, this could have had an unexpected benefit to the program and to the students. Many students cooked together in the residence halls and even formed their own supper club. This group experience was a positive one for many students interviewed. However, from a marketing and parent perspective, charging students for a meal plan and not giving students the option to use the meal plan for one of the three meals a day is a significant failure. This will need to be addressed before future summers arrive and new students expect the services they are paying for to be available.

Another area the bridge program needs to consider is the role of the student mentors. Some students cited strong connections with the mentors while others did not seem to be aware of their existence. The bridge program should consider adding additional mentors in order to meet the transition demands of the students. The role and job description of the mentor should also be considered. Since some students reported positive interactions with mentors then they certainly have an important role. However, since others were not impacted, their role and situations they encounter students should be considered.

Another area of consideration for this specific bridge program and for bridge programs in general would be the courses offered. With a growing number of students completing dual enrollment, AP, or other alternative college credit programs, the variety of courses for the summer should be considered. Eighteen of the 19 students interviewed attempted two courses and the student who only attempted a single course enrolled in class with an additional laboratory section, making the class four credit hours. However, if the course offerings were expanded then this would likely lead to more students being interested in enrolling.

Finally, given the success of the program, bridge administrators should consider how to more effectively tell their story and increase their enrollment. With better marketing efforts the enrollment within the program could easily double. Program administrators could even consider having a student who completed the bridge program last summer talk about their gains from the program. If this practice were to occur at fall preview day then it would certainly lead to increased interest.

With freshmen success being an area of concern for most colleges, programs that could help students with the transition process should be carefully considered. Making connections to the university early in a college career can have positive impact upon a student's decision to continue enrollment. However, not all students are able to enroll in July due to family, work, or other concerns. Efforts should be considered to help this population with their transition.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was fulfilled by answering the research questions that examined how and why students make academic connections and social connections with the summer bridge program.

The findings of this research study contributed to three prominent conclusions. The first conclusion was that bridge programs are successful in assisting students in making academic and social connections to institutions of higher learning through classroom and extracurricular activities initiated by the bridge program and activities that occurred organically. The second conclusion was that bridge programs provide students with an academic and social experience which helps them integrate into the public life of the university. Integration could certainly occur in the fall semester but with larger classes and more activity it can sometimes be more difficult to find your location so the small community of the bridge program created the environment for the bridge students to connect. The third and most important conclusion of this study relates to the

original contribution to knowledge that was made by this research endeavor. Based upon the findings of this study there is a better understanding of how bridge programs create an environment in which students are academically and socially integrated into institutions of higher learning.

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APPENDIX A

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY

Dear student,

I am a doctoral student at The University of Alabama. I am conducting a research study as part of dissertation titled “Student Perceptions of a Summer Bridge Program”. I would appreciate your participation in this research study.

I am wanting to learn more about the summer bridge program that you completed at (redacted university name). I selected (redacted university name) as I completed my undergraduate degree here and I work in in the ug graduate admissions office. I am interested in your in-class and out-of-class experiences. The interview should take less than 30 minutes and you will be compensated with a gift card from Starbucks for \$5. I hope to complete these interviews in the early fall to make sure I best capture your experiences in the summer program. The interviews will take place in the career center interview rooms. Please let me know if you are interested in participating by responding to this email.

Feel free to also be in touch with my faculty advisor, Dr. Claire Major, 205-348-7825 (office) or cmajor@bamaed.ua.edu if you have questions related to the research study. Lastly, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact The University of Alabama Research Compliance Office at 205-348-5152.

Thank you,

Philip Moss

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for participating in this evaluative aspect of the summer bridge program.

The researcher is in no way affiliated with the summer program and your honest responses are requested so as to help improve the program. The purpose of this study is to gain feedback from student participants and the impact upon a student's integration into the university both academically and socially.

The questions here will be followed, but the interview is not to be held exclusively to them. At the direction of the interviewer, the script may be modified if the researcher deems prior responses lead that direction. Interview will be recorded and transcribed. The information from this individual interview will be used by the researcher and your specific individual responses will never be divulged to anyone within the university. Pseudonyms will be used for data reporting purposes.

Thank you for your participation in this research study.

Script:

Background Questions:

1. Prior to enrolling, why did you choose to attend this university?
2. How did you decide to attend the summer bridge program?
3. Tell me about our bridge program.

Academic Integration related questions:

1. How confident did you feel in your academic abilities when you enrolled in the summer program?
2. How were those feelings of confidence related to your decision to enroll in the bridge program?

3. Did the bridge program help you academically? If so, how?
4. Do you think that the bridge program could have done more to help you academically? If so, what?
5. Tell me about a specific day that the bridge program helped you academically.
6. How frequently did you interact with instructors?

During class sessions?

After class?

- 7: Did the bridge program introduce you to any academic resources that you didn't know about before? Which ones?

Any tutoring resources?

Any library resources?

Social Integration questions

- 8: Describe your friends/friendships with other MSU student before the bridge program.
- 9: Did you feel like you had a good support network of friends on campus? Why or why not?
- 10: Did bridge help you develop your social group? If so, how?
- 11: What kinds of social activities did bridge offer?

Any group work?

How about after-hour meet-ups?

Any formal or informal introduction to clubs?

12. How did you spend your time when you were not in class sessions?
13. Is there anything else about your friendship or social activities that I did not ask about that you think is important for me to know?

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL

August 23, 2017

Philip Moss
Department of ELPTS
College of Education
University of Alabama
Box 870302

Re: IRB # EX-17-CM-053 "Student Perceptions of a Summer Bridge Program at a Southeastern University"

Dear Mr. Moss:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your protocol has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.101(b)(2) as outlined below:

(1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Your application will expire on August 22, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closure Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of FORM: Continuing Review and Closure.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office for Research Compliance

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