2013

“Bridges to Nowhere”: Rethinking Summer Bridge Programs for Historically Underrepresented Students

Donald Mitchell Jr., Ph.D.

"Bridges to Nowhere": Rethinking Summer Bridge Programs for Historically Underrepresented Students

Donald Mitchell, Jr.

While institutions continue to use and develop summer bridge programs (SBPs), the influences of SBPs remain unclear. The purpose of this current note is to highlight existing literature on SBPs for historically underrepresented students and provide recommendations for building and sustaining successful SBPs.

Summer bridge programs (SBPs) can be defined as "formal programs that support students from groups historically underserved (e.g., first-generation, low-income, underrepresented minority students) in higher education,...[students] who might need extra assistance adjusting to college" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005, p. 116). While all SBPs are designed to orient and transition first-years students from high school to college and beyond, they vary in structure. For example, the Academic Success Institute at Grand Valley State University is a one-week, one-credit pre-semester program for freshmen who want "a head start on their first year at Grand Valley State University…. [The] program [is] designed to empower…participants to develop a sense of responsibility for their own education and learning" (Grand Valley State University, Undergraduate Admissions, n.d., para. 1). In comparison, the Bridge to Liberal Arts and Success at Tufts (BLAST) at Tufts University is a six-week residential summer program where participants complete two 3-credit courses tuition-free. The program was established to "support, develop, and retain students who may be first in their family to attend a four year college, and/or have attended under resourced high school and/or have been affiliated with a college access agency" (Tufts University, 2013, para. 1).

Extant literature documents that SBPs assist with both academic (e.g., Ami, 2001; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012b) and social (e.g., Angela, 2009; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011; Wadpole et al., 2008) integration. Still, SBP academic outcomes are reported as modest at best (Washburn, 2009; Wadpole et al., 2008). The marginal academic gains may be attributed to the condensed timeframe SBPs have to prepare students for the rigors of college courses (Wadpole et al., 2008). In addition, Strayhorn (2011) found that high school GPA—a pre-SBP measure—was the only statistically significant variable for first-semester grades. Megnin (2005) wrote,

[M]ost of the existing programs operate in the summer right after graduation

Donald Mitchell, Jr. (mitchedo@gvsu.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University.

> from high school, which may be too late for many students. A summer bridge program between the junior and senior years would give more students the chance to become college-ready. (p. A2)

Yet starting SBPs earlier is not always an option, due to the costs associated with SBPs.

Given the marginal increases in academic outcomes, it might appear it is reasonable for institutions to consider ending SBPs. However, numerous SBP evaluations are inconsistent (Garcia & Paz, 2009), and because of these haphazard standards, I would argue the foundations of SBPs are wrongly laid. Megnin (2005) noted that the "transition from high school to college might involve factors beyond academic readiness…Summer bridge programs may provide an opportunity for bonding with other students, faculty, and the institution where they will enroll" (p. A2). Megnin (2005) highlights the positive social outcomes SBPs provide.

Strayhorn (2012a) stated academic and financial variables, together, account for approximately 40% of postsecondary outcomes and noted sense of belonging as a variable that is often overlooked. Others have highlighted the importance of student engagement for underrepresented populations (e.g., Kuh et al., 2005). In addition, Wadpole et al. (2008) found that outcomes for students who participated in a SBP included increased confidence and self-esteem. Moreover, SBP participants were more likely to use tutoring and counseling services and maintained more faculty relationships than students who did not participate in the SBP. Angela (2009) added that intrusive advising is an important component of SBPs. These authors highlight the consistent, positive social outcomes related to SBPs.

Aside from the aforementioned results, in a study conducted by Strayhorn (2012b), he found that sense of belonging had modest gains for participants in an SBP and noted that SBPs are "not the panacea for all belongingness ills" (p. 59). Nevertheless, I would add that SBPs *are* essential in integrating historically underrepresented students into the institution and greater community. Furthermore, placing a primary emphasis on belongingness—rather than academic measures—might have further improved the social gains for the participants included in Strayhorn's (2012b) study. In the end, social gains increase student engagement, and engagement has long-lasting, positive effects on academic outcomes (Kuh et al., 2005). Thus, I encourage belongingness, engagement, and social integration as primary outcomes of SBPs, given the marginal academic gains and time restraints of SBPs. What follows are my recommendations for designing and sustaining impactful SBPs.

I have worked with four bridge programs over the past seven years as a volunteer, instructor, coordinator, residential advisor, and co-director. In addition, my research explores the experiences of historically underrepresented populations navigating higher education contexts. Through my research and practice, I have recognized common themes that serve as barriers to successful outcomes of SBPs, and within this manuscript, I offer some recommendations for implementing, improving and sustaining SBPs. The components I consider vital for successful SBPs are a) consistent institutional and financial support, b) building SBPs using

anti-deficit frameworks, c) bridging institutional and community relationships, d) including an academic component as simulation, e) fostering sustainable faculty relationships, f) offering intrusive and effective advising, and g) continually assessing SBPs using meaningful and comprehensive program evaluations. What follows is a brief explanation of each of my recommended components for SBPs.

Institutional and Financial Support

Institutions that are not willing to include SBPs in annual budgets should not have them, or create them, until funding is solidified and sustained. Too often, SBPs are part of discretionary budgets, and program directors have to "guesstimate" how much money they will have each year. Consider pursing endowments as valuable options for funding SBPs. Also, make sure SBPs are a priority for institutional advancement. The dollars invested in SBPs pay off when students are retained, persist, and graduate.

Anti-deficit Framework

A SBP is not a "stable bridge" if student affairs professionals continue to label the participants as "at risk" or "unlikely to succeed" post entry. The literature is replete with the postsecondary outcomes of "at-risk" students. Use SBPs to empower students and deliver repetitive messages that they belong because they do.

Institutional and Community Relationships

Spend time beyond academic components introducing participants to campus and community resources, such as tutoring and counseling services, multicultural affairs, academic advising, career services, financial aid, student organizations, local restaurants and ethnic grocery stores, beauty parlors and barbershops, and local attractions. Creating student "resource guides" may also be appropriate (L. Rettig, e-mail communication, February 13, 2013). These connections help students adjust, integrate, and belong.

Academic Component

The academic component of SBPs should serve as a simulation of the academic year. SBP administrators spend too much time measuring the pre- and post-test outcomes of SBPs. Programs are often too short in length to achieve any immediate academic gains. I encourage SBPs to focus on the rigors and process of the academic year through simulation, rather than grades for academic courses offered during the summer.

Faculty Relationships

Involve faculty in SBPs and include campus-wide intercultural training as a component of SBPs (S. White, personal communication, February 7, 2013). Faculty relationships have positive outcomes on student engagement and persistence (Kuh et al., 2005). Purposefully integrating faculty into SBPs acclimates participants to the importance of faculty relationships for student success.

Intrusive and Effective Advising

Encourage students to bring their "whole" selves to advising sessions for maximum benefits. In addition, advising should not end after a 1, 3, or 6-week SBP. I recommend advising meetings with participants for an academic year, at a minimum. Consider one-on-one advising sessions, group seminars, and academic credit throughout the academic year (M. Messner, personal communication, February 7, 2013).

Program Evaluation

Purposefully evaluate SBPs by inviting outside evaluators who are unbiased to assess programs. Make sure to compare "oranges to oranges," meaning compare similar groups controlling for variables that may impact analyses. Control groups are not always beneficial if lived experiences are vastly different. Evaluations are important in documenting best practices for SBPs and expanding the literature base for student affairs professionals who create, design, and manage SBPs.

I have taught, coordinated, and evaluated SBPs and similar educational enrichment programs that serve underrepresented students at Grand Valley State University, Minnesota State University, Mankato, the University of Rochester, and Xavier University of New Orleans, which all are different institutional contexts and have different institutional cultures. The positive social outcomes of these programs are salient across the board, yet the social integration components of SBPs are often discounted by academic components that produce marginal gains. I ask SBP administrators to consider the recommendations presented as they plan, revamp, and evaluate sustainable SBPs.

References

Angela, P. M. (2009). Proven pathways to success for minority students. *The Education Digest, 74*, 42-45.

Garcia, L. D., & Paz, C. C. (2009). Bottom line: Evaluation of summer bridge programs. *About Campus, 14*, 30-32.

Grand Valley State University, Undergraduate Admissions (n.d.). *Academic success institute*. Retrieved from https://www.gvsu.edu/admissions/undergraduate/academic-success-institute-53.htm

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., & Associates. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Megnin, R. (2005, Aug 01). About the summer bridge program. *The Salinas Californian*, A2.

Strayhorn, T. (2011). Bridging the pipeline: Increasing underrepresented students' preparation for college through a summer bridge program. *American Behavioral Scientist, 55*, 142–159.

Strayhorn, T. (2012a, October 16). *Inalienable rights: Life, liberty and the pursuit of belonging* [video file]. Retrieved from http://tedxcolumbus.com/speakers-performers/2012-the-future-revealed-speakers-performers/dr-terrell-strayhorn/

Strayhorn, T. (2012b). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Tufts University (2013). Bridge to Liberal Arts Success at Tufts. *Tufts University*. Retrieved from http://as.tufts.edu/BLAST/about/

Washburn, C. (2009). A longitudinal look at the summer bridge program at Chaminade University. In R. Hayes (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 5th National Symposium on Student Retention, 2009, Buffalo* (pp. 275-284). Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma.

Wadpole, M., Simmerman, H., Mack, C., Mills, J. T., Scales, M., & Albano, D. (2008). Bridge to success: Insight into summer bridge program students' college transition. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, 20*, 11-30.