Beyond the Bridge:
Exploring the Experiences of a Summer Bridge Program Through Student Voices

Makeda K. Turner, *University of Michigan*

Carmen M. McCallum, *Eastern Michigan University*

Janella D. Benson, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*

This qualitative study examines the experiences of seven students who were selected to attend a summer bridge program (SBP) located in the U.S. Midwest. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and organizational socialization theory, the study illuminates students' preconceived notions about what it means to be in an SBP, experiences while in the program, and how those experiences help facilitate a successful transition into the first year of college and beyond. Findings revealed that participating in the SBP positively influenced students' college experiences and ultimately their persistence to graduation. Recommendations drawn from the study are offered to higher education staff and administrators interested in starting or improving summer bridge or similar programs.

In efforts to address disparities in attrition and retention rates between students of color, low-income, first-generation students, and other student populations, many colleges and universities have implemented programs to help students transition into college. Amongst these programs you will find an abundance of programs referred to as summer bridge programs (SBPs) (Kallison & Stader, 2012; Sablan, 2014). These programs are specifically designed to assist students of color, low-income, and/or first generation students with their transition to college by providing academic and social experiences to enhance their understanding of college and what it is required of them to be successful at the collegiate level (Kallison & Stader, 2012; Kezar, 2001; McCurrie, 2009; Sablan, 2014). The experiences students encounter during SBPs are designed to expose them to institutional norms and expectations that they may not have been aware of prior to enrolling in the institution (McCurrie, 2009). Across the country SBPs vary depending on the mission and goals of the program and institution, but typically they attempt to create academic and social experiences that will further prepare students for transitioning into college (Kezar, 2001; McCurrie, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011).

Sablan (2014) reviewed literature on SBPs from 1980 to 2012. His review included peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, program evaluation, conference papers/proceedings, and other pieces of relevant information regarding SBPs. His analysis revealed that there were few studies published in peer-reviewed journals that provided empirical data on the student experience of SBPs. Journal articles tended to be quantitative and descriptive in nature, painting a picture of the components of the program but not illuminating how those components impacted students' experiences while in the program, or during their undergraduate years. Research Sablan (2014) reviewed tended to focus on grade point averages and retention rates rather than how addressing college knowledge and non-cognitive variables throughout the program influenced students' experiences. Sablan (2014) and others (Wathington et al., 2011) call for a more in-depth analysis of SBPs in order to expand the scope, methodology, and framing of SBP research.

This study intends to expand the research on SBPs by utilizing qualitative methods to gain deeper insight into the lived experiences of students attending an SBP at a research-intensive institution. Utilizing student voices, this study will illuminate the academic and social experiences students encountered during their program, and the ways in which those experiences impacted their undergraduate years. This study will emphasize non-cognitive variables and how providing information about the college process during SBPs influences students' experiences. It is the goal of this study to complement existing research by imparting an understanding of the ways SBPs influence students to persevere to degree completion. This study adds to prior research by illuminating students' concerns prior to attending the bridge program as well as discussing the impact of the program during students' undergraduate years. The following research questions were utilized to guide this study:

1. How do participants in one SBP describe their experiences in the program?
2. In what ways, if at all, did participation in one SBP influence a student's undergraduate experience?

The authors will conclude by offering various ways findings from this study can be utilized to improve academic support models that contribute to and sustain SBP participants in bridge programs and beyond their summer experience.

Literature Review

To conduct this study, we examined the literature on SBPs with a particular emphasis on how pre-college characteristics, academic preparation, and social interactions influence students' experiences in SBPs. Thus, the literature review is organized around these topics.

Pre-Bridge Characteristics and Expectations

Summer bridge programs have historically focused on easing students' academic and social acclimations to college campuses, especially for students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students (Adams, 2012; Kezar, 2001; McGlynn, 2012; Pike et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2011). Many students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students may struggle transitioning and successfully persisting in college due to their lack of preparation during their high school years (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Reid & Moore, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Reid and Moore's (2008) qualitative study of 13 urban high school students who transitioned to college found that they felt "cheated" because their high school experiences did not prepare them for the rigors of college courses, or provide them with the social skills they deemed necessary to navigate their college environments (p. 251). Students in the study also commented that after being enrolled in college they realized that they lacked critical thinking, problem solving, and writing skills that seemed effortless to many of their classmates. Prior to enrolling in college, many students, especially first-generation students, were not aware that they lacked these skills (Atherton, 2014; Vargas, 2004). Critical thinking, problem solving, and writing skills are often emphasized in SBPs (Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011).

In addition to high school experiences, there are several other pre-college characteristics that may impact how students experience college. Pike et al. (2014) investigated the influence of a host of pre-college characteristics, high school experiences, college expectations, and initial enrollment characteristics on degree attainment. Findings revealed that all variables significantly affected the odds of someone completing college in four to six years. More specifically, being an African American/Black student, first-generation student, and attending a high school that did not have rigorous coursework decreased the odds of a student graduating in four to six years. SBPs are often referred to as a high-impact practice, as designated by the Association of American

Colleges and Universities (Johnson, 2013), that increases students' persistence and completion rates. As such, universities often utilize SBPs to give students adequate exposure to postsecondary resources like academic tutoring, writing workshops, and faculty mentoring that will assist them in successfully completing their degree (Conefrey, 2018; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017).

Academic Interactions

One of the biggest benefits to students of attending an SBP is exposure to academic rigor in a collegiate setting. Wachen, Pretlow, and Dixon's (2018) study conducted with seven 4-year institutions within the North Carolina college system found that first-year, low-income students as well as students of color who participated in an SBP had greater academic success than their peers who did not attend. Douglas and Attewell (2014) found similar results with their national study utilizing data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Their findings revealed that summer bridge students were more likely to enroll in their second year of college and graduate within 6 years in comparison to their peers who did not attend an SBP. This is especially true for Black and Hispanic students. Amongst those who attended an SBP, Black and Hispanic students had a significantly higher graduation rate than their peers who also attended. The effect size was also greater for first-generation students. Both first-generation students and those who had a parent who went to college were more likely to enroll in their second year of college and graduate within 6 years if they attended an SBP, but first-generation college students had the highest retention rates amongst the subpopulation.

Strayhorn (2011) conducted a study on Summer Bridge Program participants at a highly selective, research-extensive, predominantly White institution (PWI) to understand how individuals from various backgrounds navigate different avenues to success in higher education. The purpose of the study was to measure the effect of participating in an SBP. The student sample consisted of 55 entering first-year students that participated in a required 5-week pre-college SBP. A two-phase (pretest/posttest) mixed methods design was used to collect data from this sample of participants.

Comparing pretest and posttest data, Strayhorn (2011) found that many students' academic self-efficacy at the end of the program was significantly higher than that prior to the program. The mean of the students' academic skills at the end of the program were significantly higher than the mean academic skills prior to the program. Students' social skills were also slightly higher after participating in the program. The results show that high school grade point average (GPA) was most strongly and positively related to SBP participants' first semester GPAs. This result affirms the assumption that student success is a longitudinal process of movement through critical transitions from college readiness, college enrollment, and college achievement (Strayhorn, 2011). Collectively, these studies show the inherent contributions SBPs have on students' cognitive and academic growth in the collegiate setting.

Social Interactions

SBPs generally have students live in residence halls for four to seven weeks during the summer (Cabrera et al., 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Strayhorn, 2011). This provides opportunities for students to socialize with peers from similar backgrounds who will also be attending the university in the fall (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; McGlynn, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Residency also provides opportunities for students to socialize with older students living in the residence halls, staff, and faculty at the university (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; McGlynn, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Considering that many summer bridge students are first-generation students that may have had little exposure to college life, formal and informal opportunities to

socialize and learn from others have been found to be a key element that contributes to the success of students enrolled in SBPs (Atherton, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Martin, 2015; Strayhorn, 2011). The community created through bridge programs frequently mediates feelings of doubt and otherness often experienced by students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students as they transition into college (McGlynn, 2012; Reid & Moore, 2008)

Indeed, students who attend summer programs have been found to have an increased sense of social support from peers and faculty in comparison to peers who did not attend an SBP (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Conefrey, 2018; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). The support experience has been found to continue beyond the bridge program into the students' remaining undergraduate years (Strayhorn, 2011). Research has shown that older students, faculty, and peers remain in contact with students and often provide them opportunities that they may not have otherwise been aware of if they did not have social connections born out of the bridge program (i.e. internships, student organizations, study abroad; Strayhorn, 2011). However, some studies have found that the community built and the social interactions that transpire during bridge programs provide students with an unrealistic understanding of what the college environment will be like post-program (Patterson, 2018). This is especially true for students of color at predominantly White institutions (Patterson, 2018). In a study of Black American males at a predominantly White institution, Patterson (2018) found that those who were involved in an educational opportunity program in the summer before their fall semester struggled in the fall because they did not feel connected to the broader campus community. Participants were familiar with the physical aspects of campus but the social community was quite different from what they had experienced over the summer. Many students attributed this unfamiliar feeling due to the demographic makeup of the transitional program. More research is needed to determine if this dissonance occurs in SBPs.

SBPs have helped students of color, low-income, and first-generation students academically and socially succeed on college campuses, and the literature reflects this notion. However, what is missing is the voices of students attending these programs. What the literature does not fully portray is a clear picture of students' lived experiences. This study will utilize students' voices to illuminate how students experience SBPs and the impact they believe attending had on their college experience.

Theoretical Framework

Due to critiques of Tinto not being sensitive to the experiences of underrepresented students (e.g. Braxton et al., 1997; Guiffrida, 2006; Rendon et al., 2000) we have chosen to use organizational socialization theory as a framework to help us understand the experiences of students in bridge programs preparing to transfer into college. Organizational socialization is a specific application of general socialization theory. It specifically focuses on the changes individuals experience as they move from being outsiders to fully being emerged into a new organization or environment. It has most often been used to explain how new employees come to understand their role and organizational culture at their place of employment (Brown, 1985; Falcione & Wilson, 1988; Feldman, 1981). Higher education scholars have utilized the theory to explain how students make sense of the culture, norms, and values found in post-secondary environments (Chaskes, 1996; Yarbrough & Brown, 2003). A student's ability to adapt to formal and informal cultural norms, languages, expectations, and values at a college or university greatly impacts whether or not they will be able to successfully transition into their new educational environment (Chaskes, 1996; Yarbrough & Brown, 2003).

Organizational socialization has three distinct stages: anticipatory socialization, encounter, and metamorphosis. The anticipatory stage occurs before an individual enters the organization. During this stage the person uses preliminary knowledge, which may be accurate or inaccurate, to form opinions about the

organization's culture. This knowledge influences how one thinks about the environment and whether or not they can see themselves as members of the organization. The second stage, encounter, begins when an individual enters the institution. They begin to discover if their preconceived expectations match the reality of their new environment. During this stage individuals form relationships, clarify their roles, and begin assuming responsibilities associated with being a part of the organization. Metamorphosis is the final stage. At this stage individuals have completely immersed themselves in their new environment. They have assimilated many of the values, norms, and behaviors of existing members of the organization and consider themselves to be organizational members rather than outsiders.

Methods

The Institution and Program

This study was conducted at one public Research I institution in the Midwest region of the United States. The predominantly White institution has over 40,000 undergraduate students, which includes an average yearly enrollment of 6,119 freshmen. On average, the majority of the students identified as White (69.3%), followed by Asian (13%), Black (4%), Latino/a (4%), and Native American (0.3%). Approximately 8% of students selected unknown or other for their racial/ethnic identity. Additional information about enrollment can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.

Summer Bridge Program Student Demographics.

		2008	2009	2010	Average	(%)
Total Enrollment		214	209	239	221	
Gender						
	Female	144	129	135	136	62%
	Male	70	80	104	85	38%
Ethnicity						
	African American	125	110	152	129	58%
	Asian American	11	8	5	8	4%
	Caucasian	36	52	50	46	21%
	Latino/a	30	27	26	28	13%
	Native American	3	3	2	3	1%
	Other	9	8	4	7	3%
In-State		175	180	189	181	82%
Out-State		39	29	50	39	18%

The university SBP is a 7-week living-learning community program designed for approximately 250 high-achieving first-year students who are considered underrepresented in the university. The mission/goals

of the program is to strengthen academic skills through foundational courses, provide personalized advising and instruction, acclimate students to the university's academic rigor, establish a supportive and diverse environment, shape students' personal and social adjustment to the campus environment, and expose students to campus resources. Although some summer bridge programs are perceived as developmental and/or remedial (Sablan, 2014), this university's SBP is not designed for students needing remediation. Participants are required to take university level English, Math, and a first-year seminar which will count towards their graduation. This equates to 8 or 9 semester credit hours depending on the courses chosen. Additionally, the program offers intensive academic preparation and highly individualized academic advising.

Research Design

Data for this study comes from a larger research project which used a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006) to explore the experiences of college graduates who participated in an SBP. In the larger study each student was defined as a case. Participants who attended an SBP between 2008 and 2010 were specifically chosen, as the university's 4-year graduation rate was approximately 76% and the 6-year graduation rate was approximately 90% (UM Graduation Rates). In comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported that 60% of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who pursued a bachelor's degree in 2008 completed by 2016, and less than 40% of first-time, full-time undergraduates who pursued a bachelor's degree in 2008 completed in 2012. Students at this university were graduating at higher rates. Pilot interviews, document analysis (advising file, program brochures, departmental memos, other pertinent historical documents, etc.), and semi-structured interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of the human experiences of attending an SBP (McCracken, 1988; van Manen, 1990). For the purpose of this study researchers exclusively focused on data collected during the semi-structured interviews which specifically focused on academic and social interactions. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and included, but was not limited to, the following questions: How do you feel the SBP contributed, if at all, to your academic experience at the university? How do you believe participating in the SBP may have influenced what you find yourself doing now, following your graduation from college?

Data Collection and Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to create a rich pool of participants knowledgeable about the SBP. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to choose students which they believed they could learn the most from based on their experiences in the program (Creswell, 2013). Thus, a recruitment email was sent to students who attended the SBP between 2008 and 2010, asking them to participate in the study. Out of 23 emails sent, 10 students agreed to participate. Of those 10, 7 followed through and were interviewed. All participants graduated from the institution in between 4 and 6 years. All are currently employed in degree-related jobs and/or are continuing their education.

In total, four women and three men participated in the study. All attended public high schools; however, only half attended schools that were racially and ethnically diverse. The other half experienced homogenized high school settings of predominantly Black or Latino students. All but one student entered the SBP with a 3.0 or higher high school grade point average. The majority were first-generation students who identified as Black. Additional information about each participant can be found in Table 2.

Table 2.

Participant demographics.

	SBP cohort	Residency status	High school GPA	Estimated family income	Family background	Ethnic group	First generation
Leslie	2008	In-State	3.4	Unknown	Two parent family household	Black	No
Trisha	2009	In-State	4.0	Unknown	Single parent household	White	Yes
Alexis	2010	In-State	3.7	25-50K	Two family household	Latina	Yes
Brandon	2010	Out-State	3.9	Unknown	Divorced	Black	No
David	2008	In-State	2.9	>100K	Two family household	Latino	Yes
Maurice	2010	In-State	3.5	25-50K	Single parent household	Black	Yes
Megan	2008	In-State	3.2	<25K	Single parent household	Black	Yes

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and uploaded into MaxQDA, a qualitative software tool. Each transcript was read line by line looking for ways in which students described how participating in an SBP influenced their college experience. Meaningful words, phrases, and passages were copied and pasted into a separate file. Next, we used matrices and a schematic display to indicate patterns and develop thematic groups (Huberman & Miles, 1994). We then used the themes to develop codes. All transcripts were re-read and coded with the new codes in MaxQDA. The data was then sorted, compared, and contrasted in order to identify disconfirming evidence.

Findings

Our data analysis reveals that the summer bridge program influenced participants' college experiences while in the SBP and throughout their college career. The findings align with the organizational socialization theory because students went through all 3 stages of the theory as they matriculated through the university. Each student was asked to reflect back and describe ways in which the summer bridge program had impacted them academically and socially. Participants agreed social interactions with faculty, peers, peer-advisors and advisors influenced their college experience. Participants valued being able to test their ability to do college work and interact with a diverse group of individuals in what they perceived as a safe and welcoming environment. Having an opportunity to prove to themselves that they could be socially and academically successful in college contributed to their academic self-confidence and self-esteem which they questioned upon being admitted into the program. To further explain, we organized our themes within the stages of our theoretical framework, organizational socialization: (1) Anticipatory Socialization, (2) Encounter, and (3) Metamorphosis.

Stage 1: Anticipatory Socialization (Invitation)

In order to truly understand how the program impacted their experiences, it is important to understand students' mindset about the summer bridge program and the perception of their participation prior to enrolling. Several participants were not happy to be admitted into an SBP. The program began eight weeks prior to the

beginning of the fall semester and many students were disappointed that they were being asked to give up their summer to attend without a detailed explanation of why they needed to attend. Reflecting on when she got the news, Leslie said,

> At the time, I was like "what is bridge…why do I have to go to school in the summertime," you know "why is this a requirement?" So, at the time I did not want to go because I wanted a break [from school]. I wanted that time off...

Megan agreed. She always wanted to go to this particular university, but she was unaware that the school had an SBP which some students were required to attend. When discussing the moment she found out that she had to attend the program, Megan shared:

> I was excited and kind of iffy too just because I was like, why do I have to go to the summer program like, I felt like my grades were pretty okay. Yeah and I felt like I really didn't need to go to it, just because I felt like, you know I could succeed without the extra push.

The lack of clarity about admissions caused students to question their ability to academically succeed at the institution, lowering their academic confidence. While discussing admission into the program, Megan shared that the lack of clarity about why she was admitted caused her to doubt whether or not she could academically achieve at the university. Although she generally believed she had good grades and deserved to attend, admission into the bridge program made her constantly question herself and her academic ability at the competitive institution. Megan commented,

> I was thinking like maybe they think I'm not good enough because of my grades to really make it and by going to this program, I don't know, some way, this would just make me better at school. But I don't know, it just feels like what could I have done to make it into [the university] without going to the bridge program like what else did I need to do? Like if I would have gotten a 4.0, would I still have to go to the bridge program?

Maurice had similar doubts about his academic ability despite doing quite well in high school. He was considered one of the top students in his high school graduating class. However, being admitted into the bridge program without detailed information about why he was chosen caused him to question his academic standing and worthiness of being admitted into the university. Maurice explained,

> I probably was in the upper 10% of students [at my high school] but even with my ACT scores and overall GPA, if you just look at the pure numbers, I shouldn't have gotten into [the university], point blank period! So when I got that letter, I was just happy even though I understood that it was "Yeah" but, you know, Summer Bridge…not an outright acceptance to [the university]. It felt like I was "in" but I would need to do whatever I had to do to succeed there.

Participants' resistance and questioning about why they had to attend the summer bridge is relevant because it provides insight into the mindset of students when they entered the program. Although some were excited and nervous, most were disappointed that they had to attend. Admission into the program without a thorough explanation caused students to anticipate entering an academic environment where they may not be able to succeed or fit. Students were walking into the program questioning their belonging, academic self-confidence, and the culture of the institution.

Stage 2: Encounter (Integration)

All participants except for one indicated that the summer bridge program influenced their academic experience. Brandon said, "Bridge contributed to everything academically in one way or another, everything!

Everything big, even some things small, but everything…" Most participants in this study agreed and often reflected on how the SBP had built up their academic confidence by requiring them to engage in college-level rigorous coursework and providing them the resources that they needed to succeed at the institution. Although many of the participants attended a high school where they were viewed as high-achievers, their conditional admission based on attending the bridge program made them aware that the university was not convinced that they could academically compete at such a prestigious university. Academically succeeding and excelling in the SBP boosted students' academic self-confidence and made them believe they could academically succeed and strive throughout their undergraduate years despite their thoughts prior to attending. Leslie commented,

> I would say [bridge] contributed because I started off with a [high] GPA [in the fall]. It gave me a boost of confidence cause I was really intimidated. I was intimidated because [the university] is really a huge university and I was also intimidated because, honestly, in high school I didn't think I was going to get into [the university]. I started [the fall] with a 3.5 GPA.

David agreed. He stated that the bridge program contributed to his academic confidence by providing rigorous courses in which he was able to excel. Although the courses were difficult, successfully completing them and developing the academic skills needed to do so at such a prestigious university boosted David's confidence and helped him feel prepared for the fall. While discussing the bridge program David said,

> I think the biggest thing it did was just instilling confidence. So, it helps show me that, hey you can handle the workload. I can remember studying for a test and I remember the first paper I got back, I didn't do well. I was nervous at first but then we got the chance to redo it. Just do some edits and stuff like that, and then as my paper progressed, it got better. And so, the biggest thing the program did was instill confidence in me, the program itself during the summer.

Alexis and several other students agreed that being able to take courses over the summer and boost your academic self-confidence and GPA was one of the many advantages bridge program students had over others who were not placed in the program. Alexis remembered having conversations about studying in college with peers in the bridge program. Her peers would say "Why do we have to study?" Alexis's response was always because college is hard. Although Alexis had developed study habits in high school that helped her be successful, the program showed her how to advance her studying techniques to help her better prepare for college level classes. While discussing studying Alexis said, "Having the tutoring sessions [during bridge] definitely helped… with studying because it's tough...you've got to try hard and [figure it out]." Brandon and others also acknowledged the academic support they received outside the classroom. Brandon believed experiences outside the classroom contributed to his academic success just as much as the quality teaching he received. Brandon explained,

> I finished Bridge with a 3.84. I got a 3.80, something like that in the fall. I think a lot of that has to do with Bridge because of the relationships that I developed and the confidence and the, just the sense of myself that I developed through the bridge program…[I] realize where I could go for resources during the bridge program, like those like, weekly meetings [tutoring sessions].

Participants also acknowledged how the relationships they formed with faculty, peer advisors, and advisors contributed to their academic experience and increased their academic self-efficacy. Academic advisors worked diligently to help several participants figure out their career interests and what direction they should go academically in the fall. For example, Alexis discussed how she was confused and felt lost about what to study and how to choose courses that would allow her to maintain a manageable schedule as she transitioned into the fall. Her academic advisor during the SBP helped her and others sort through their future plans as scholars at the

university and offered advice on how to successfully transition into the next academic year. Alexis passionately discussed the support she received from advisors during the bridge program:

[Helping to] figure out what I want to study... especially your freshman year... Just having someone who can help me figure out where I want to kind of go... [someone saying] maybe you might be interested in this or like try this out... Definitely helps because I didn't know what to do... where to go or...anything. Just having someone to talk to who knows [and will say] like it's okay...you can do it.

Participants agreed that the Summer Bridge Program influenced their academic experiences by allowing them to encounter the university's academic environment prior to the fall. Students were able to boost their academic confidence, learn study skills that positively influenced their course work, and develop relationships with advisors knowledgeable about course schedules and their career path.

Stage 3: Metamorphosis (Acclimation)

The majority of participants agreed that the bridge program influenced their social experiences as they completely immersed themselves into the college culture. During the program students felt that they were able to engage with a community of like-minded students that would become their friends and remain their friends throughout their years at the university. This was something that was unexpected and appreciated by most of the participants because making friends during the regular school year was seen as challenging. Alexis explained,

I made most of my friends at the program [bridge] and it's really hard to make friends the regular year...but those friends that I made [during bridge] were the only ones [I had] throughout the whole four years.

David's experience making friends was similar to Alexis. The relationships he made with students in the summer bridge program lasted over the course of four years while he obtained his undergraduate degree. He appreciated starting his freshman year with folks that he already felt connected to from the summer. David felt that having the opportunity to establish relationships with others in the SBP during the summer gave him an advantage over other students who did not attend the program and have the opportunity to make friends. While reflecting on his friendships David briefly explained how the relationships he made in the bridge program contributed to him having a successful freshman year.

So I already knew friends who were out hanging out, doing stuff. I always had people I could call...during the school year...who I could talk to and say, "Hey, what's going on?" It kind of help to know that because of the close relationships I had with like my roommate and friends [in bridge]...that there are people who are experiencing similar things that I was...maybe having a hard time figuring out math...it's just nice to know that you've got certain people who share the same characteristics with you, that you feel comfortable [with] and that you can then express those concerns.

Maurice also appreciated making friends in the program. He stated that socially was probably where the bridge program was most influential to him as a student; however, he felt that the social skills that he developed were only related to other students in bridge, or other students of color. He did not think the SBP prepared him to deal with the diversity on campus that he experienced in the fall.

I feel like in some ways it prepared me for the interaction with other students of color and other students of the program but when it came to interacting with students at the university as a whole, in general, it kind of failed...I think it's like that's because the other 95% of the students [on campus] aren't here, most of them aren't around. It's the summer. So, I definitely feel like it made it easier to integrate and interact with people of color ...but it failed with how to interact with the general university public.

Maurice was the only student who verbalized this disconnect; however, he was adamant that this was a major failure of the program.

Participants indicated that attending bridge during the summer provided them an opportunity to learn and explore the campus before the hustle and bustle of the regular school year. Participants learned how to use public transportation and navigate from one side of campus to the other. They had an opportunity to explore where all the buildings were in relation to classes they may take in the fall, and they became aware of other essential resources available to them on campus. Thus, David referred to the SBP as an essential "starter kit" for how to be a student on campus. Similarly, Maurice said the program gave them "a cheat sheet of how to navigate through [campus] over the next four years. It's probably where bridge played its biggest role," Later in the interview Maurice continued to explain,

> When you come here in the summer... And you know anywhere from 250 to 300 other kids, you know, these are the people who are going to be around for the most part for the next four years or so. So like you get that first taste of what's college like... again it's not a complete, you know, it's not a complete introduction but it's introduction nonetheless.

Additionally, participants agreed that the bridge program gave them an opportunity to explore what an appropriate academic/social balance might look like in the fall. The program provided academic and social opportunities. There was structured and unstructured time. Students had the opportunity to figure out how to best manage their time in a safe environment. Leslie said having the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them over the summer helped her manage her time in the fall. Leslie discussed some of her social experiences and how bridge helped her figure it all out.

> Socially, you got to go to different parties on campus. You got to learn about different extracurricular activities, so you got to do a lot of stuff that you wouldn't normally do until the fall semester, so you got exposed to things early. I feel like it helped me understand how to balance social life and how to balance academics at the same time because we were doing both. Even though we were taking only two classes. It was still an adjustment cause it was still college courses, so the workload was heavier...and social was our social life.

Brandon agreed that the insights gained through the SBP about the social aspect of campus were extremely valuable. This time further allowed students to acclimate themselves and find their place within the campus. While discussing his social experiences during the bridge program he often compared his experiences to his friends who did not attend the program. He said, "It took them a little bit longer to find their way..." Because of his experiences in the SBP, Brandon felt he had a better grasp of how things worked socially on campus. He credited peer advisors the most for being honest about things, especially when it came to things most programs do not discuss, like dating. Brandon said,

> The knowledge that they gave me, as far as the social life is concerned, like for example they were like, well, you know in the first couple of years the girls will want the [these guys] like that's what they want... But then, in the next couple of years, junior and senior year or after you graduate they're going to want the kid that's smart... Just learning, how the social scene work there, you know that was something that, some insight that the PA were able to give.

Participants agreed that the program allowed them to completely immerse themselves in the college environment. They were able to develop friendships and achieve a balance between what is required of them as students and as social members of the environment. By the end of the program participants identified as college students.

Discussion

This study utilized organizational socialization theory as a lens to explore the impact of a summer bridge program on students' college experiences. Findings reveal that the theory's stages (anticipatory socialization, encounter, and metamorphosis) encapsulate students' experiences from the moment they were notified that they were admitted into the program and throughout their undergraduate years. Prior to beginning the SBP, students were in the anticipatory socialization stage. They made assumptions about the academic environment and how current members of the university (e.g. students, faculty, advisors, and staff) would view them as potential members based on the mandate that they had to attend the summer bridge program. All of the participants were local with the exception of Brandon, and his assumptions about the meaning of being invited to the bridge program were strikingly different. The in-state students were happy about their acceptance, but very critical in understanding what that meant for them and their place at the university. Brandon, as an out-of-state student, didn't hold the same outlook because he saw the prestige of the institution and knew that attending the SBP would allow him to gain entrance into the university. This could be partly attributed to the local students having more knowledge of the university and the summer bridge program.

The university's admissions office was not thorough in their explanation as to why students were admitted into the program. Therefore, students assumed it was because they had deficiencies in their academic records. Feelings of inadequacy, uncertainty, and lack of belonging caused students to question whether they truly belonged at the university. Students assumed if they were questioning their belongingness, current members of the university would question their sense of belonging as well. The majority of students began the summer program doubting they would succeed. This is an important insight about what information should be included in the admissions letter. How students perceive themselves prior to attending can set the foundation for feeling a lack of belongingness.

Once arriving on campus, students entered the encountering stage. They were able to compare their beliefs about the program, their abilities, and the university environment against their original assumptions. Some of their preconceived notions remained valid, but many, especially those related to their lack of ability to be successful, were proven false. Students credited the bridge program with providing them a safe and welcoming space to test their assumptions. Students professed that the SBP positively influenced their academic and social experiences while in the program and throughout their undergraduate years.

After a few weeks in the program students moved into the metamorphosis stage. They discussed how participating in the SBP helped them feel like members of the college community. The feeling of belonging to the community began in the SBP and continued as they transitioned into the fall and through their undergraduate years. Students were also successful academically in the SBP, which contributed to their academic self-confidence. Students noted that programming designed in the bridge program greatly influenced their academic and social experiences. Students did well in classes academically, however the academic influence of the SBP extended beyond the classroom. In alignment with previous research (Cabrera et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017) students indicated that summer bridge provided them a safe environment where they could learn the skills they needed to be academically successful at the college level. For example, students became aware that studying for high school courses and college courses can be quite different. Learning those differences and utilizing those lessons influenced how students approached their coursework throughout their college careers.

Students were also able to rely on summer bridge advisors to help them with career decisions. During the SBP, advisors would assist students with creating manageable schedules for the fall. They also made themselves available to discuss potential majors and career paths with students during the bridge program and throughout students' four years at the university. Students often remarked that after the bridge program they would rely on the wisdom of their advisors when making decisions. Thus, the academic influence of advisors was experienced by students throughout their undergraduate years.

Socially, the SBP provided an opportunity for students to develop relationships and make friends that extended beyond their time in the program. Students appreciated meeting new students and developing friendships with those in the bridge program because making friends in the fall and throughout their undergraduate years seemed difficult. Although students discussed other friendships that were important, friendships with other bridge students were considered unique and special. The mutual experience of being in the SBP provided a sense of trust and understanding not present in other relationships. The bridge program provided the opportunity for students to form these relationships which influenced their social experiences throughout their undergraduate career.

It is important to note that one participant did not believe that the program prepared him socially for the fall. Although he was appreciative of the relationships he made with other bridge students, he felt unequipped to navigate diverse relations in the fall with students in the larger community.

In addition to providing an opportunity to make friendships, students learned how to balance their academic and social calendars in a way that allowed them to be successful in the SBP and throughout their time at the university without abandoning having a social life. In the bridge program students were given enough space to figure out what worked and what would not work if they wanted to be academically and socially successful. The lessons that they learned during the SBP, which they considered to be a safe environment, set the foundation for how they approached their undergraduate years. Students felt grateful to have an opportunity to try things out without the consequences that may have occurred during the regular school year.

The summer bridge program contributed to students' undergraduate experiences in multiple ways. Although initially hesitant to attend, students learned valuable lessons that influenced how they navigated academically and socially throughout their undergraduate years.

Implications for Practice

Though much research has proven the value of summer bridge programs, the opportunity to hear the voices of the students remains limited. Their voices are invaluable and provide a unique perspective, often left out of the current literature, which helps us understand the lasting impact these programs have on student success.

In general, students viewed being admitted into the SBP from a deficit perspective. They primarily focused on what they would be losing by attending (e.g. free time in the summer) versus what they would be gaining from the experience. Although some suspected that the program would provide them with academic and social skills needed to be successful in the fall, the true reason why they were admitted into the program remained unclear and thus added to the anxiety many students experienced related to attending college in the fall. This finding is similar to Todorova's (2017) study on understanding one's placement in educational opportunity programs. In Todorova's (2017) study participants only viewed their selection as necessary to improve the likelihood to graduate. To address many of the students' misconceptions that are potentially detrimental to their self-efficacy, administrators should make targeted efforts to provide information about why students are admitted into an SBP. In-state students who have more interactions with the university won't be as conflicted

about attending if their understanding matches their perception of the program's usefulness and the reasoning behind their unique selection. Providing students explicit criteria as to why they were admitted could allow students to adequately view their selection process and recognize their placement in a more favorable manner. This could be done by providing a defined letter along with the admissions materials. This letter could be free from deficient language while outlining the academic and social benefits students will receive from attending SBPs. This document could also include statistics that show how bridge program participation contributes to higher GPAs and graduation rates, as well as include alumni stories demonstrating successful careers.

Findings from this research also discussed the powerful impact that SBPs have on social interactions. Many participants talked about how friendships developed during the program with peers and peer advisors were essential to their completion and campus engagement. One way to capitalize on this initial positive experience is to facilitate continued interactions after the program is finished. Administrators and members of SBPs could sponsor post-program social gatherings to allow students to strengthen their network as well as build connections that may have been missed over the summer. Given the knowledge that SBPs increase persistence, a continuation of that social support after the summer through organized events could show students ongoing support and let them know that the impact of the program continues throughout college (Cabrera et al., 2013; McGlynn, 2012). This would help show students how the skills and experiences in the bridge program could transfer to college and their career. Having social gatherings could also give students who may have had negative summer bridge perceptions after completing the program the opportunity to reconnect with positive academic and social influences.

One of the most recurring themes found in this study was the appreciation for the SBP providing the participants with a sense of community and belonging at the university. A summer bridge program is not necessarily going to be an accurate depiction of campus life at certain institutions, but it does allow students to create a community, and colleges should display that within the materials. Explaining that the purpose is to help students who may experience similar struggles could ease the transition for future students who may look for inclusivity. This explanation could come from alumni of these programs who are currently enrolled at the institution because their voice will create the most memorable mark. Utilizing students' voices can evolve alumni's sense of belonging and community, while passing the information to future generations of bridge program students.

Many of the participants spoke to their initial and lasting impressions of SBPs. Their reasons for attending college may vary, but the informal knowledge acquired, academic, and social advancements at the university seemingly surpassed their expectations. Although participants may have recalled various challenges and positive experiences from SBPs, every participant spoke of something that touched on their pre-college characteristics. Therefore, considering characteristics like being first-generation or a student of color is important. Colleges and universities should discuss how having students with those characteristics can be an advantage for students as well as institutions. Taking steps towards helping them improve their self-efficacy and sense of belonging through the recommendations provided here could potentially create a lasting effect, but the first step is to allow their voice to be heard.

In conclusion, we recommend that colleges and universities be more explicit in explaining to students why they have been selected to participate in an SBP. We also recommend that SBPs continue to build community amongst participants as well as provide students with skills to build community within the larger campus context. Lastly, we advise that SBPs emphasize the benefits of participating in the program to students explicitly, so that they may utilize that knowledge and understanding of the benefits of the SBP when discussing their experiences with faculty, peers, and friends.

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