

WHAT ARE THE FACTORS OF SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS THAT CONTRIBUTED
TO RETENTION IN UNDERSERVED AND UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS?

BY

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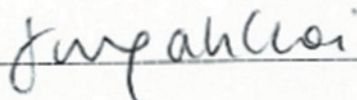
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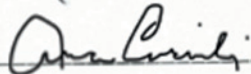
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the lived experiences of underserved and underrepresented students who participated in a college summer bridge program. In particular, the study investigated how the summer bridge program prepared students academically and socially to succeed in a college environment and identified any contributing factors to their retention. This study looked at a summer bridge program, ASCEND (Achieving Success by Cultivating Excellence and Nurturing Discovery) at New Jersey City University (NJCU), which is a public 4-year urban institution. The study also identified various types of summer bridge programs as well as highlighted the observed strengths and weaknesses. Contained in this study is an overview of current literature on summer bridge programs and outlines how these programs specifically affect retention in underserved and underrepresented populations.

The theoretical framework utilized to guide this research study was Vincent Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Retention. His theory seemed fitting for this study, which focused on the academic and social aspects of student retention. Guiding the conversation for this research study were the following questions: how do underrepresented/underserved students describe their experiences with summer bridge programs? And, what specific factors do students identify as having contributed to their retention? The research study identified two significant findings as contributing factors to student retention related to their participation in the summer bridge program, which included academic preparation and social integration.

The first finding involved academic preparation. Many participants felt that participation in the summer bridge program provided an effortless transition from high school to college life, making their time in college a success. The second significant finding regarded the social aspect

of the summer bridge program. The students felt like they “belonged” and “fit in” to the college environment, which resulted in a positive educational experience. Having been given proper navigational skills for the college environment, students did not feel lost. Also, seeing familiar faces among their professors and staff and gaining friendships throughout the summer bridge program enhanced the start of an exciting new chapter in their lives.

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“Remember that no one succeeds alone. Never walk alone in your future paths.”

Sonia Sotomayor

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for his blessings. To my wonderful family and friends, you know who you are, thank you for all of your support, positive energy, and words of wisdom that helped me get through those tough days. Thank you to the many colleagues who provided guidance when I was lost. I would also like to thank my committee, Dr. Choi and Dr. Cicirelli, for pushing me to my full potential, and Dr. Meléndez for being there when it mattered. To my cohort members: You are all amazing, thank you, we did it! Finally, I would like to acknowledge someone who knew I would get my doctorate before the thought even crossed my mind, Dr. Mildred (Millie) García—thank you for letting me see in you what I could one day become: a strong, educated woman of color. Your mentorship and friendship have meant more to me than you will ever know. Gracias!

DEDICATION

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,”

Nelson Mandela.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my son. Kyan, I want you to know that anything is possible if you work hard and never give up, you can do anything on which you set your mind. Keep being curious and kind. You are bound to do amazing things. Don't settle, my love; you got this; you are the light of my life. To my husband, Carlos. We did it together; thank you from the bottom of my heart for your wisdom and patience, for being an amazing father and husband, and for all of the support throughout this journey. You are my rock. To my amazing mother, *la reina de la familia*. Even when life presented challenges, you always showed strength and drive, making sure that my siblings and I had everything we needed. Well, mom, you did and continue to be a wonderful mother. You should be proud. Because of you, I am where I am today. Thank you for your sacrifice and for always being there for me. I love you. Finally, to my dad in heaven: *lo hice papi, te extraño y te amo*.

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CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

The long-term social mobility for underrepresented groups is negative compared to other groups due to existing disparities (Carter, 2006). The earnings over a lifetime for underrepresented populations, when compared to their majority counterparts, is one of many examples. Thus, student retention is critical, especially for underrepresented groups, and campus leaders need to understand the impact on individuals as well as the effects on society (Carter, 2006). The purpose of this research study is to identify what factors of summer bridge programs are contributors to retention in underserved and underrepresented populations. Given this research topic on underrepresented students, it seemed fitting that the theoretical framework utilized to guide this qualitative study is Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Retention.

To address the educational disparities of underrepresented students, institutions have implemented programs such as the summer bridge to address these lower success rates. One such program is the summer bridge program at this study's research site, an urban 4-year public institution. The program was created for incoming freshmen who were conditionally admitted to the college pending the successful completion of the program. The student demographics in the program show that 100% of the students apply for financial aid and identify as a minority, 80% have some form of unmet need, 76% come from household incomes of less than \$60,000, and approximately 90% are PELL eligible and require developmental support. Thus, the program was developed to prepare these students and future students academically. It provided students with a vigorous college orientation over the summer before beginning their first semester and offered additional support that was incorporated throughout their college experience. Table 1 includes the student demographics for the 2019 ASCEND summer bridge program. As shown,

most of the students are female, with 29% of the students residing in the dormitory. The table also highlights the students' race and ethnicity, showing the diverse student population.

Table 1

ASCEND Student Demographics (2019)

ASCEND Student Demographics (2019)		
Gender	Male	45%
	Female	55%
Dormitory Status	Reside on campus	29%
	Commuter Students	71%
Race and Ethnicity	Asian	5%
	Black/African-American	45%
	Hispanic/LatinX	31%
	White	9%
	Other, missing	10%

The first cohort of students was admitted into the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program in the summer of 2015. The program includes an intensive five-week curriculum designed to prepare students to succeed in a college environment. The key components of ASCEND are academic preparation, support, advising, peer mentoring, an orientation to college courses for freshmen during their first semester, campus engagement activities, career readiness, and supplemental instruction. One of the enticing features of the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program is the year-round sustainability through mentorship and tutoring during the students' 4-year college education.

The support of a peer tutor and mentor puts students at an advantage. "The goal of NJCU's peer mentoring efforts is to foster academic success and enhance the psychosocial functioning of new students as they transition from high school to a college environment," (Craig, 2018, p. 98). They offer academic support, tutoring throughout the academic year, assist students one-on-one or in small groups, facilitate career development workshops, and other

student engagement programs. They also focus on the behavior of the student's academic progress and overall personal development. Peer tutors and mentors are responsible for providing students with any information they may need to assist them, encourage them, and guide them in their classrooms. Peer mentors also introduce students to campus life, tutoring services, health and wellness center, counseling center, student government, and clubs and organizations. As a requirement of the peer tutor and peer mentor program, students must keep a minimum cumulative grade point average of a 2.5, be in good standing, and be engaged on campus via involvement in a student organization or club. The ASCEND Program also has a Peer Advisor Liaison (PAL) who works with both the students and advisors throughout the first year in college and during the orientation to a college course.

As part of the ASCEND Program, students are given financial literacy workshops. These programs include information on scholarship opportunities, provide an understanding of the meaning of different loans and indebtedness, teach how to make and manage a personal budget, and utilize engaging, interactive activities such as the Jeopardy game show. Staff ensure that students are completing their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on time, stressing the importance of deadlines and processing for filing and how to use the IRS retrieval tool. The University Advisement Center conducts advising sessions, tutorial services as well as workshops to connect students to all resources available. Also, advisors teach the Orientation to College (OTC) courses, which is a single credit course offered during the first semester of the student's college education. Advisors are building relationships creating an atmosphere of success for the students' first experience in college.

Highlighted in table two below shows the retention rate of the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program from the beginning of the program in 2015 through 2019. ASCEND's retention rate

shows that it has steadily increased since its inception, which may be a function of the program growing and improving its delivery of services over the 4 years reported. In 2019, the retention rate was 7% points higher than the university’s non-aligned cohort bodies, highlighting the effectiveness of the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program. According to Tinto (2017), “While universities need to understand students’ perceptions and their impact on the persistence of all students, it is particularly important that universities understand how these perceptions apply for students who have been historically underrepresented in tertiary education, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds” (p. 5). Thus, using the ASCEND summer bridge program seems relevant to use as the data source for this research study, as many of the students come from similar populations.

Table 2

Outcomes for Special Freshman Cohort: ASCEND vs. Non-Aligned Cohort

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
ASCEND, Achieving Success by Cultivating Excellence and Nurturing Discovery					
One-Year Retention	--	49%	54%	63%	78%
Six-Year Graduation Rate	--	--	--	--	--
Non-Aligned with a Cohort					
One-Year Retention	72%	78%	76%	72%	71%
Six-Year Graduation Rate	29%	32%	32%	36%	37%

While investigating previous research connected to student retention, the data highlights that this subject has been a concern for many colleges and universities. This issue is not new. It has existed for some time and continues to be troublesome. The implementation of summer bridge programs and its purpose—to prepare students for success in college and aid in retention—is discussed below. Also included are some of the benefits and challenges of summer bridge programs, limitations that have been identified by previous researchers, and gaps that exist in the research. With the focus on underserved and underrepresented student populations,

including but not limited to low-income, minority, and first-generation students, this research study highlights trends in both retention and summer bridge programs among this cohort. To provide an all-inclusive perspective, this study captured the voices of students who participated in the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program at New Jersey City University by gathering their perspectives and feedback through individual interviews. Through this analysis, the research looks to identify the factors of summer bridge programs that were motivational contributors to retention for underserved and underrepresented populations.

Statement of Problem

Institutions of Higher Education in the United States and Canada are increasingly concerned about student retention issues currently affecting their campuses. According to a National Center for Education Statistics survey of the cumulative withdrawal rate for first-time students at 4-year institutions in the United States, “only 64 percent of students who entered in 2004 had obtained any kind of degree or certificate by Spring of 2009” (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 5). Extensive research has been conducted to identify reasons why students leave college after taking out loans, resulting in them not receiving a degree or certificate. Retaining students and leading them to graduation is what institutions strive to accomplish. It is their mission. However, student retention continues to be a concern nationally.

Student retention is defined in two ways: (a) “normal progression,” where students enroll, continue full-time each semester, and graduate within 4 years and (b) “dropout/leaver,” which refers to a student who enrolls but drops out before completing their degree (Bean, 2001). In between these extremes, there are “transfers,” which are those students who leave one institution to attend another (Bean, 2001). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) presented a Fall 2012 study of 4-year public institutions and found that “by the end of year four,

42.3 percent had completed a postsecondary credential, while 17.1 percent were no longer enrolled; by the end of year six, 70.1 percent had graduated, while 20.8 percent had left college without earning a credential” (p. 3).

Although the higher education participation rate among ethnic groups, traditionally underserved, has improved, college dropout rates are higher for this student population when compared to their non-minority peers. In a similar report to the one highlighted above from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018), data showed that “Asian students had the highest one-year retention rate, with 82.1 percent returning to the starting institution in Fall 2017” (p. 5). Hispanic students showed a retention rate of 68.8%, which was comparable to white students at 70.7 percent” (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018, p. 5). Of those who leave college before they complete a degree or certification, 19% of traditional students leave within 5 years, compared to 42% of non-traditional students (Choy, 2002).

Gonzalez et al. (2018) stated that current research fails to answer the critical question of whether summer bridge programs retain students. Referencing the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016 findings on summer bridge programs, they highlighted that “most involve five characteristics: an in-depth orientation to college life and resources, academic advising, academic coursework, academic support to prepare students for rigors of college academics and college life, and social support to build strong networks among students (and faculty) to foster a greater sense of connection to the institution” (p. 103). By exploring the relationship of summer bridge programs and student retention, specifically for underserved and underrepresented populations, this study can aid in answering the research questions outlined. Both institutions of higher education and students can benefit from this study by supporting student retention efforts and educational success.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to identify what factors of summer bridge programs were contributing factors to retention in underserved and underrepresented student populations. Summer Bridge Programs were created to help increase college readiness and ease the transition from high school. This study examined whether students who participated in summer bridge programs were influenced in their decision to continue their college education and persist. Retaining students is a challenge for colleges and universities, and more needs to be done to prepare students for successful college life. The investigation of summer bridge programs sought to identify their impact on retention for underserved and underrepresented students.

In the United States, public high school graduation from 2014 to 2024 increased among Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanic students, with Hispanics representing approximately 20% of that increase (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). To increase retention, institutions need to understand their student populations, their needs, and how to best educate and prepare them for success. With limited access to resources, students are at risk of failing or dropping out, diminishing their chances of educational attainment. As student demographics continue to change, institutions need to be prepared and be able to meet the needs of all student groups. As a result, institutions implemented summer bridge programs, among many other retention programs, to aid in this capacity.

Institutions designed summer bridge programs as a means to better transition students from high school to college. These summer bridge programs are open to all students of any race/racial identity, specifically minority students (Johnson, 2016). During the summer months, from the completion of high school and before beginning their first semester in the fall, students are provided with academic preparation and social skills development. Summer bridge programs

prepare students in various disciplines, such as writing and math, providing them with the academic context they may not have received while in high school (Sablan, 2014). In addition to academic program offerings, other areas are incorporated to assist in college preparations such as workshops or seminars on study skills and meetings with faculty, creating a supportive network (Wathington et al., 2016). The combination of academic and other college functions can have a positive impact on student success. Researchers have conducted several studies on summer bridge programs, many of which are quantitative and some of which are qualitative. Both study approaches show that there are opportunities for further exploration due to the gaps that exist.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework utilized to guide this study is Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Retention. Tinto (1993) questioned why some forms of institutional action plans are successful in retaining students. Various types of structures exist depending on the type of institution, but one thing that all institutions have in common is what Tinto (1993) referred to as "the principles of effective retention," which is the amount of time and energy they put into retention efforts. Tinto's (1993) three principles of retention are the following:

1. "Effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals;
2. Effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students, and;
3. Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members." (pp. 146–147)

Tinto (1993) stated that “the secret of successful retention, if there is one, lies in understanding these principles and how they can be applied to the complex problem of the retention of different students in different institutional settings” (p. 146). In his work, Tinto (2007) discussed how research on student retention has evolved from individual attributes, skills, and motivation as well as includes student experiences at different types of institutions backgrounds. Tinto (2007) believed that involvement is critical during the first year of college. Summer Bridge Programs are just one of many retention programs that institutions of higher education have implemented to aid in these efforts. This research looked at factors of summer bridge programs that contribute to student retention. The results contribute to the field by assisting with initiatives to retain students, especially underserved and underrepresented populations.

Tinto’s (1993) theory on student retention was utilized in this exploration of summer bridge programs and the retention of underserved and underrepresented populations. Institutions can apply the collected data and analysis to assess their current retention strategies. Furthermore, new strategies can be added to the academic rigor of summer bridge programs to ensure that the social network component is integrated. Providing a new overview of the subject matter can enhance summer bridge programs for underserved and underrepresented populations. According to research, participants in summer bridge programs are students in need of additional transition support, which includes first-generation and low-income students (Sablan, 2014).

Research Question(s)

This qualitative study examined summer bridge participants’ experiences, with a focus on how the program contributes to retention. The following questions and sub-questions were asked

for this study. Interview questions were then developed utilizing these research questions to guide the conversations.

- According to participants, what experiences helped them persist in school?
 - How do underrepresented/underserved students describe their experiences with summer bridge programs?
 - What specific factors do students identify as having contributed to their retention?

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Existing research on summer bridge programs, both quantitative and qualitative, highlight various limitations and the need for further analysis. Sablan (2014) evaluated summer bridge programs to “(a) provide a characterization of the breadth of summer bridge programs, (b) review the extant literature on summer bridge programs, and (c) discuss implications of these reviews for the future of summer bridge programs” (p. 1). Sablan (2014) found a major gap in the research related to the importance of specific program elements, and few articles made comparisons across programs to try and identify if there are certain elements of summer bridge programs that are more effective. Sablan (2014) also found that there is little research on the cost analysis of summer bridge programs. How institutions run these programs can influence who gets to participate. Of note, however, few ethnographic or phenomenological investigations have employed qualitative inquiry to gain insight into the cultural and social experiences of college students (Sablan, 2014).

Additional research by Cabrera et al. (2011) discussed limitations in their research on summer bridge programs due to restricting the data to a single institution, which does not represent the diversity of summer bridge programs. The authors also highlight in their research

the need for further analysis on which program offerings are most effective (Cabrera et al., 2011). Strayhorn (2011) measured the effectiveness of summer bridge programs related to the following four variables: (a) academic self-efficacy, (b) sense of belonging, (c) academic skills, and (d) social skills. However, this analysis relied on self-assessment of students' knowledge and skills across these variables. Challenges with self-reports stem from whether the participants clearly understood the questions and if they considered the question worthy of a reply; thus, the results may be limited in unknown ways (Strayhorn, 2011). In addition, expanding the data to include a cohort of community college students (Douglas & Attewell, 2014) provided an opportunity for future research to guide policy for summer bridge programs. Douglas and Attewell (2014) echoed Sablan (2014) regarding the lack of qualitative research on this subject. Conducting more qualitative research would provide new insight into the lived experiences of the students who can be implemented to provide them with more effective programs (Douglas & Attewell, 2014).

Significance of the Study

With numerous programs geared towards retaining students and having them persist, institutions are still facing declining retention rates. The rationale for this study is that there is a need to look at participants who took part in some of these programs, such as summer bridge, and examine the likelihood that they will persist or whether they were retained. Specifically, this study explored the inequities of underrepresented students in their degree attainment. Newborn (2015) stated that “the lack of persistence and degree attainments are strongly connected to students from low income levels who will need developmental assistance before they are ready for college-level courses” (p. 11). There is a growing need for summer bridge programs to prepare students both academically and socially, especially during the first year of college. If

institutions fail to meet students' needs, it is also a failure of the college and society (Newborn, 2015).

As institutions plan for their annual summer bridge programs, it is important to consider what has been done and identify areas for improvement. There are numerous structures of summer bridge programs, but examining issues of these programs can help improve efficiency. "As student populations and campuses change, the curriculum for a program like summer bridge also needs to be revised to provide students with opportunities for both social and academic integration" (McCurrie, 2009, p. 38). Reviewing student feedback can also help to find opportunities for improvement to serve the needs of the students better, ensuring that institutions are meeting the goals and objectives originally set forth for the summer bridge programs and adjusting as student demographics change. This evaluation can add to the student experience during the program and can enhance students' likelihood to persist and be retained.

By assessing the current research on student retention and summer bridge programs, institutions can benefit from a review of existing literature and what new research this study identifies. Institutions can then utilize this new knowledge to generate strategies that improve student retention programs. Summer Bridge Programs can be assessed and modified accordingly to increase student retention. Identifying the benefits as well as the challenges of these programs can guide in the implementation of creating an action plan moving forward. Previous research indicates, there are limited qualitative studies on summer bridge programs. This study can extend the current literature by providing significant direct student feedback. Specifically, it can help the population of students who come from underserved and underrepresented populations that participate in these types of programs (Sablan, 2014). The knowledge generated through this research can be applied to inform higher education institutions of where improvements would

better prepare students for college retention. This information can encourage institutions to review their current practices in orientation programs for student retention. Institutions can then implement plans that will provide a more robust student transition from high school to college, aiding in their development and college experience.

Limitations

For this research study, the participant sample was limited to underserved and underrepresented students from a public university in the state of New Jersey. Students who participated were enrolled in an NJCU summer bridge program from 2015 to 2019. The results only apply to this sample population at NJCU and unique to the ASCEND summer bridge program. The particular focus on underserved and underrepresented students does not represent other students who took part in summer bridge programs. Also, since the participants and study of one summer bridge program were limited to one institution, it is difficult to make comparisons with summer bridge programs at other institutions. Also, students who participated some time ago may have feelings and attitudes that changed.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms were used in this study.

Retention rates: A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For 4-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelor's (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who have enrolled again in the current fall. For all other institutions, this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or completed their program by the current fall (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019).

Graduate rates: The rate required for disclosure/reporting purposes under the Student Right-to-Know Act. This rate is calculated as the total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the revised adjusted cohort (IPEDS 2018-19 Data Collection System).

Traditional students: One who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time (Choy, 2002, p. 1).

Nontraditional students: A student who delays enrollment, attends part time for at least part of the academic year, works full time while enrolled, is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, does not have a high school diploma, and/or completed high school with a GED (Choy, 2002, pp. 1–2).

Underrepresented/Underserved: Includes some of the elements of nontraditional students as well as first-generation, minority groups, such as African American, Hispanic, and Native American/Alaska Native students (Choy, 2002; Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Patterson et al., 2019).

Summer bridge programs: characterized as a program initiated by colleges and universities to better transition students during their freshman year (Sablan, 2014).

Summary

Student retention is a concern for many colleges and universities today. Institutions are enrolling students; however, they are unable to retain them. Underserved and underrepresented students including but not limited to low-income, first-generation, minority students are at higher risk of failing. Summer Bridge Programs are one-way institutions that can better prepare students for transitioning from high school to college. As Tinto (2007) highlighted, involvement during

the first year of college is critical to a student's decision to persist. Providing students with the essential tools needed to be successful in higher education is critical to bringing them one step closer to completion and ultimately graduate.

There are various gaps in the research to date on student retention and summer bridge programs. The information gathered through this research study can guide colleges and universities to create more informed programs so that students can succeed and be retained. It is the work of colleges and universities to educate, which means providing not only the academic knowledge needed to succeed, but also providing information on all aspects of college life, including social networking, to enhance students' awareness and guide them on the path to success. It was the aim of this study to serve this purpose and contribute to the field of higher education relevant to underserved and underrepresented students in retention strategies and the transition through summer bridge programs.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students are college-ready when they have the level of preparation needed to succeed in college without remediation. By succeeding, we mean completing entry-level courses with an understanding of the context, gaining proficiency in the course, then moving on to the next level within the subject area (Conley, 2008). Having academic knowledge and skills are only part of being college-ready. Students also need to possess other academic behaviors such as time management and study skills that can enable them to navigate the college environment (Strayhorn, 2014). College ready also means that students understand the college environment (e.g., its culture and structure) and can succeed socially (Conley, 2008).

The goal of this literature review is to summarize the history of summer bridge programs and explore their impact, if any, on student persistence and retention. The literature review will look at various structures and descriptions of summer bridge programs, including student demographics within these programs, as well as their benefits and challenges. Persistence rates, gaps in the literature, and the rationale for this study are also included, and the theoretical framework for this research is highlighted.

Summer Bridge Programs

With rising concerns related to student retention, persistence, and graduation rates, institutions have implemented various programs to enhance the student college experience, especially for first-year students. A summer bridge program is one way to aid in the efforts that institutions have made relative to access, retention, and student learning (McCurrie, 2009). These programs assist underprepared first-year students, some of whom are required to participate in them as a condition of their acceptance. Other students, who show they have potential but lack

academic or social readiness, are recommended to attend (McCurrie, 2009). Summer bridge programs are a means to ease the transition from home and high school into the college environment by connecting high school graduates in the summer to their first semester in college (Woodall et al., 2017).

Some of the services provided through summer bridge programs include academic instruction, tutoring, study skills, mentoring, and development in subject areas such as English, math, and reading. They also encourage parent involvement, relationship building strategies, computer literacy, journal writing/self-reflective activities and there are sometimes opportunities to live on campus, as well as learning communities, and supplemental instruction (Lopez, 2016). The programs expose students to university-level coursework and interactions with academic affairs advisors, faculty members, and peers, as students make connections and build friendships, all of which can form a foundation for supportive networks both socially and academically (Garcia & Paz, 2009).

Summer bridge programs have historically provided support to underrepresented students and students of low socioeconomic status (Garcia & Paz, 2009). Given the backgrounds of many of these students, institutions need to not only focus on the college environment but should also consider other aspects of a student's life outside of the classroom. Students are dealing with personal distractions and difficulties that they carry with them. Thus, there is a need to help students juggle these challenges, including their jobs and family responsibilities, and ensure their sense of belonging in college, while also managing their coursework (Bir & Myrick, 2015). If institutions tie in the social aspect in summer bridge programs, they can help develop a well-rounded student who can manage both the academic and social aspects of the college environment successfully. Outlined below are some of the benefits of summer bridge programs.

Summer bridge programs are important for the transition from high school to college, especially for underrepresented students. Students from these backgrounds identify as first-generation, low-income, minority students, and have barriers to success. Kezar (2000)

underscored the importance of summer bridge programs that addressing obstacles such as

(1) lack of self-confidence; (2) inappropriate expectations or knowledge about college environment; (3) lack of connection to the college community or external community; (4) lack of early validation within the college environment; (5) family members who do not understand the goals of college; and, (6) not involving faculty in summer bridge programs and the transition process. (p. 3)

A summer bridge program can help increase student success.

Lopez's (2016) study focused on summer bridge programs at a suburban community college in southern California and found three major themes: (a) college success skills; (b) program structure; and (c) the self. Through a summer bridge program, students felt that they had acquired college success skills by seeing what college class was like. Students also found the structure of the program entertaining, which helped to keep their interest and calm their fears about college. The final theme on the self; helped students by boosting their confidence and motivation, all as a result of their participation in a summer bridge program (Lopez, 2016).

Bridge programs vary in structure depending on the type of institution to meet the needs of the student population. A common component of these programs is that they are preparing students academically and socially for a more robust college experience. There are residential bridge programs that provide opportunities in various forms. First, students experience practical coursework without the pressure of a recorded grade, which allows them to see how prepared they are for college life. Secondly, through the residential program, students build a community

with other participants. Not only are students prepared to succeed in college by participating in a summer bridge program, but they also gain a sense of belonging (Tomasko et al., 2016).

Most summer bridge programs are face-to-face, bringing a more personal experience to incoming students and connecting them to the university community (Eblen-Zayas & Russell, 2019). However, as the student demographics change, institutions need to adjust to meet their needs. At Carleton College in Minnesota, Eblen-Zayas and Russell (2019) conducted a study about *Making an Online Summer Bridge Program High Touch* at their institution. The purpose of utilizing more technology had to do with the fact that many students had difficulty committing to a full-time program over the summer. Some students had scheduling challenges, and thus it was important to find ways to mitigate attendance issues, making it more flexible for students to participate. The structure of this high touch summer bridge program was hybrid with 6 weeks being entirely online during the summer, then face-to-face meeting for an additional 10 weeks during the fall term. The goals of the program were “(a) to review and strengthen the quantitative skills seen in high school math classes, and (b) to connect with the college community before arriving on campus in the fall” (Eblen-Zayas & Russell, 2019, p. 104). The program proved successful with students saying they would recommend the program and students showing successful completion rates during their first term and demonstrating gains from pre- to post-college programs (Eblen-Zayas & Russell, 2019).

In addition to residential and high touch summer bridge programs, there are also area-specific programs focusing on STEM and Nursing. STEM programs have an academic and social component as with other bridge programs, but also have professional components to foster students’ STEM interest (Kitchen et al., 2018). Kitchen et al. (2018) looked at the effects of STEM summer bridge programs on college students’ STEM career intentions. Data from the

Outreach Programs and Science Career Intentions (OPSCI) study funded by the National Science Foundation in a nationwide survey showed an increase in students' knowledge, skills, and information related to STEM fields. The goal of this STEM-focused summer bridge program was to expand STEM access and address labor shortages, which proved to be an effective intervention (Kitchen et al., 2018).

Workforce diversity is critical, especially in the field of health care. The recruitment of students in nursing-focused summer bridge programs included a diverse pool of students. Thus, 100% of the students who participated in the nursing focused summer bridge program were from underrepresented racially or ethnically or disadvantaged backgrounds. Pritchard et al. (2016) stated that students felt more prepared in nursing programs after participating in the summer bridge program. The program was more distinct than others, having parental involvement, community health experience, service-learning, research exposure, and contextual coursework as part of the program (Pritchard et al., 2016). Students' success in transitioning to college, was the result of the relationships and socialization the summer bridge program provided. In addition to the many benefits of summer bridge programs, some challenges exist.

Challenges of Summer Bridge Programs

The transition from high school to college is challenging for many students. Institutions have been proactive and implemented various academic enrichment and intervention programs to aid in the success of the student's college experience. However, one concern in a study by Sablan (2014) was how students were recruited, admitted, or identified, to participate in these types of programs. Often, students who participate in summer bridge programs need additional transition support and are first-generation, low-income, and come from underrepresented minority backgrounds (Sablan, 2014). Because of this, these programs end up having large numbers of

underrepresented students. Although summer bridge programs are not necessarily remedial, their core academic function is developmental because of the academic support needed for students to succeed in them (Sablan, 2014).

In higher education, programs tend to become stale or even ineffective after some time, thus the need for constant improvements to ensure its success (Windrow & Korstange, 2019). In a case study of Middle Tennessee State University's MT Scholars Academy, a program to aid in the retention, progression, and graduation of high-risk students, after facing some challenges, was refined, and research-informed best practices for student success was implemented (Windrow & Korstange, 2019). The MT Scholars Academy is a continuously evolving summer bridge with changes in staffing, institutional demographics, structure, and university policy (Windrow & Korstange, 2019). Summer bridge programs need constant review to ensure efficiency; otherwise, these programs may become irrelevant to the evolving student population. No matter what type of structure a summer bridge program has, institutions must have an evaluation process to ensure that the program is effective and that adjustments are made as needed, which can be accomplished by collecting and monitoring data consistently. In their research, Gonzalez et al. (2018) noted that there should be two goals in reviewing summer bridge programs: "(1) refine the components so that the summer bridge would result in higher success rates and (2) recruit more students and have more fully complete the summer bridge" (p. 108).

As previously mentioned, the structure of summer bridge programs varies depending on the type of institution as well as the student demographics. What may work for one institution may not work for another. Whether in-person or hybrid, institutions must structure the programs to combine their academic expectations as well as ensuring that they are meeting the student's needs. The cost for institutions to run these programs can also be challenging. The primary

sources of funding for summer bridge programs come from institutional funds, federal and state money, and foundation money and grants (Sablan, 2014). With decreases in federal and state aid, institutions need to find alternate means of funding to continue to run these types of programs. Additional funding means the sustainability of the program as well as opportunities for expansion to reach a broader student population. With the challenges institutions are facing relative to persistence and retention rates, reaching a greater student population is vital to improving their success.

Persistence and Retention Rates

Institutions of higher education have been implementing programs to retain students, yet there are still disparities that exist in completion rates, especially among underrepresented students. Tinto (2002) underscored that “nearly 62 of every 100 well prepared high school graduates who entered a four or two-year college after high school earned a four-year college degree, but only 3 of every 100 poorly prepared students did so” (p. 3). In an article entitled *Reflections on Student Persistence*, Tinto (2017) highlighted specific factors that influence student motivation: self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived value of curriculum. He described self-efficacy as the “effect of past experiences on how individuals perceived themselves and their capacity to have some degree of control over their environment” (p. 2). Self-efficacy influences goals, tasks, and challenges as students adjust to the demands of college life. A student’s sense of belonging means seeing themselves as a part of the community, which comprises the college community, peers, academics, faculty, and staff. A sense of belonging leads to greater persistence because students are motivated and more willing to engage with others, influencing their decision to continue their studies. The final element relevant to the

curriculum refers to the value of education students are receiving, that the quality and relevance are essential.

In a College Board Study on Student Retention from 2005 through 2012, two surveys were conducted. One of the surveys looked at community college structures for student success, which focused on policies, practices, and organizational structures in place throughout the United States. The second survey on student retention practices looked at four year institutions across the country. The survey was administered via email, and secondary data were drawn from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) on retention rates, demographics, and financial aid. The study found that community colleges are actively organizing student success programs, and half reported that they were also engaging in faculty development and assessment practices (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). This study suggested that “institutions are indeed, organizing to address student progress. However, the findings also suggest that institutional commitment in the form of budget and authority, rigorous follow-through, and regular assessment of results is lacking” (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015, p. 368).

Institutions are facing challenges with persistence and retention rates, and students from underserved and underrepresented populations are impacted. As shown in Table 3 in a report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018), Asians show the highest persistence rate at 84.7 percent, while black students had the lowest, at 66.2%, with only half of black students returned to the starting institution. Hispanic students show the second lowest persistence rate, at 70.3%. Thus, there is a great need for retention programs to ensure that students are given the proper support and tools needed to succeed in college. Higher Education Institutions need to look at their retention programs and continuously make improvements to ensure its effectiveness.

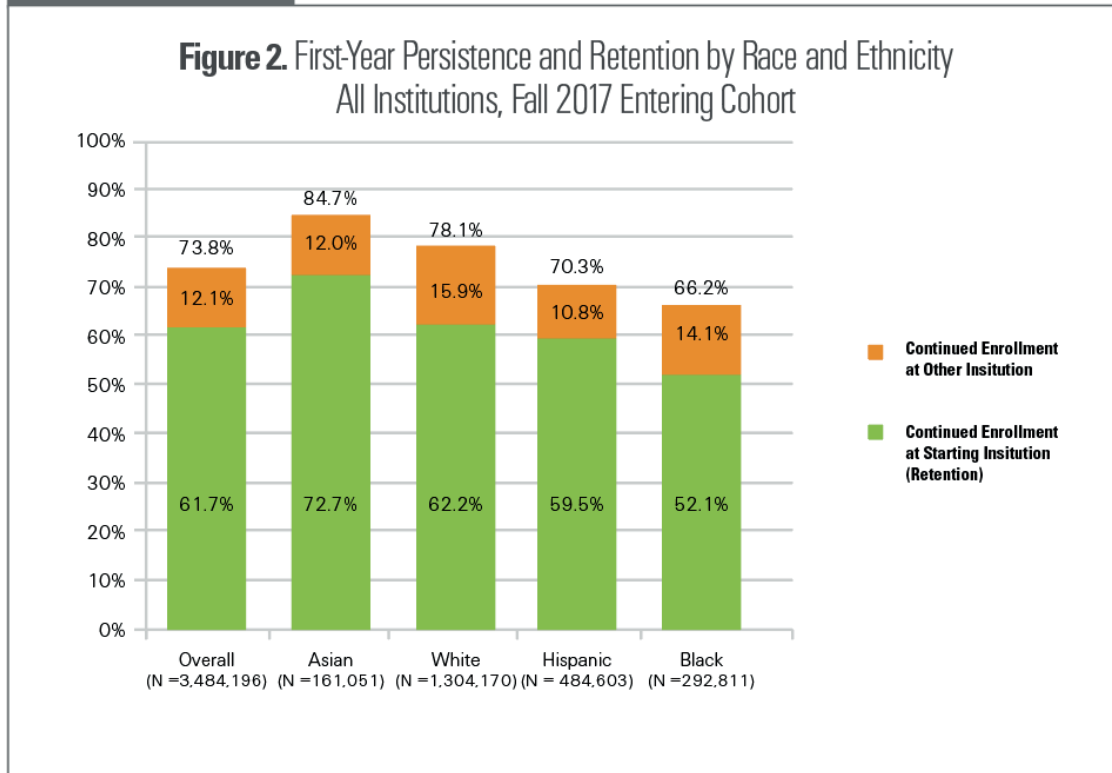


Figure 1. Persistence and retention by race and ethnicity.

Underserved and Underrepresented Populations

Disadvantaged students can be defined in several ways, including coming from an underrepresented minority group, being a first-generation student, and/or coming from a low-income background (Yue et al., 2018). Typically, students who identify with coming from an underserved and underrepresented population are Hispanic or Latino/a, African American or Black, or Native American: “Disadvantaged students are less likely to engage in academic and social experiences” (Yue et al., 2018, p. 19), thus contributing to educational gaps. First-generation college students lack confidence in their academic preparation and have difficulty performing well, doubt their ability to succeed, and face significant obstacles when compared to non-first generation college students (Pratt et al., 2019). As a result, colleges and universities have implemented programs for disadvantaged students to engage them within their first year

and help to improve retention. As previously noted of the demographics of students enrolled in summer bridge programs, many come from underrepresented and underserved populations. Participation in a summer bridge program provides a kind of academic “boot camp” and the “soft skills” needed to be successful in a college environment (Douglas & Attewell, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

“What matters is not merely whether individuals are able to begin college, but whether they are able to finish college” (Tinto, 2002, p. 1). The theoretical framework utilized for this study includes Tinto’s (1993) principles of student retention, as presented in Chapter 1. These student retention principles include: “effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve, they put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals; effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students, and; effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members” (pp. 146–147). Tinto’s (1993) model is relevant to the research topic on the influence of summer bridge programs on student retention.

Tinto (2002) highlighted five conditions relevant to institutions promoting student persistence, especially during the first year of college. The first is expectations. If students feel that their faculty and staff expect that they will succeed, this can lead to higher student success. He finds that this is not always the case, and, at times, little is expected of them. The second is providing clear and consistent advising regarding program requirements, which is especially important for students who are still undecided on their majors so that they understand their choices when making decisions that affect their future. The third is support—academically, socially, and personally—to create a “safe haven.” Support can be provided through programs

like summer bridge as well as mentoring and student clubs. Frequency and quality of contact is the fourth, especially during the first year. The final condition is that institutions need to foster learning; if students are learning, they will stay and succeed.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to look at the influence that bridge programs have on students' likelihood of persistence in attaining a college degree. Academic coursework is just one component of summer bridge programs; however, these programs should also address the whole student (Tomasko et al., 2016). Indeed, some of the literature recommended combining both academic expectations and student needs. The literature review above has also highlighted some of the benefits as well as challenges of summer bridge programs. Yet, although these programs exist, institutions are still seeing low retention rates, which is especially true for students from underrepresented backgrounds. The gaps in the literature allow for the opportunity for further research. This study aims to address some of those gaps related to the likelihood of persistence of underrepresented students.

There is a necessity to find ways of improving student retention and persistence in higher education, and it is more critical today than ever. Institutions must continue to implement retention programs to aid in student success. Summer Bridge Programs are one of the many programs developed to address this problem. However, institutions need to identify the impact of these programs relate to student retention. Tinto's (1993) theoretical framework for student retention guided this research. Through a qualitative study, institutions can utilize the research collected to make necessary changes and improvements in their existing programs to make them more relevant today and in the future, aiding in retention efforts. "Only by understanding the whole student pathways, including where students arrive from and where they leave for, and

why, can they devise and implement policies that lead to more successful students and improved institutional effectiveness” (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015, p. 265). An overview of the qualitative approach, using Tinto’s (1993) theory on student retention, is provided in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology that was utilized in this study, which examined the factors of summer bridge programs that contributed to retention in underserved and underrepresented populations. Through a qualitative research approach, this study looked at the experiences of the participants in a summer bridge at a New Jersey university and provided insight into their motivations to persist with their college education. According to Wu et al. (2016), a qualitative research approach increases the researcher's understanding of matters like retention, about which limited information is known, and provides a deeper understanding of such complex situations or processes. Thus, a qualitative research method seemed appropriate for this topic.

A phenomenology method was used for this study. Johnson and Johnson (2017) described phenomenology as “the description of one or more individuals’ consciousness and experience of a phenomenon” (p. 444). This approach allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of participants in a summer bridge program and how that impacted their persistence in college. The qualitative research and phenomenology approach for this study are discussed in more detail throughout this chapter. This chapter also includes information on the research site, the participant selection, the data collection and sources utilized, the relationship to participants, how the research data were analyzed, and ethical considerations.

Research Site

The research site for this study was a public four-year institution of higher education located in the State of New Jersey in an urban community, where many of the students are from diverse backgrounds. The student demographics include 40% identifying as Hispanic/Latino,

23% are Black or African American, 21% are White, and 8% are Asian (NCES, 2019). The institution is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), a designation that requires institutions to be at least 25% Hispanic. The college, which is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), offers academic programs in the College of Arts and Science, Professional Studies, Education, and Business. The institution offers bachelor's and master's degrees, certificates, and several doctoral degree programs. Students have the opportunity to live on campus, but students are primarily commuter students. The main campus is located in Jersey City, New Jersey; the School of Business is located in Harborside in downtown Jersey City, as well as at a location in Monmouth County. The college was selected as the research site for this study since a summer bridge program was initiated there; also, the student demographics are comparable to those in other summer bridge programs reviewed Chapter 2.

Participation Selection

The participants for this study were recruited from the college's summer bridge program from 2015 to 2019. The goals of the program include the following:

- supporting students' successful transition from high school to college
- prepare students for college-level work,
- develop and strengthen student connections with peers, mentors, advisors, faculty, and staff;
- provide students with knowledge critical to success in college; and
- Enhance students' sense of belonging. (NJCU, ASCEND)

With assistance from the Director for Student Success Initiatives who manages the summer bridge program, an invitation with the flyer was sent via email to students who completed the summer bridge program from 2015 to 2019, inviting them to participate in the study. Copies of

the flyer were also posted in the summer bridge program office, where it was visibly accessible to the students. In addition, a copy of the flyer was given to the students who were interviewed, and they were informed that they could share it with anyone they knew who might be interested in participating in the study. Individual interviews were held with 14 participants. Students were notified that the selection process was based on a first-come, first-served basis, not to exceed a maximum participation of 15 students. Students were provided with a \$25 gift card for their time, participation, and contribution to the study.

Data Collection

After my IRB application was approved, the method utilized to collect data was one-on-one interviews with students who participated in the ASCEND summer bridge program at New Jersey City University. Each interview was conducted for approximately 45 minutes. An audio-recorder was utilized to capture the discussion during the interviews; the recordings were later used to analyze the responses and find common themes. All of the information collected was kept confidential and used for research purposes only. The interviews were semi-structured. The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, which allowed for a discussion between the interviewee and researcher. Follow-up questions arose depending on the responses from the students. The following research questions were utilized during the interviews.

1. Think back to when you were conditionally approved at NJCU and participated in the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program, how did you feel?
2. What was the programming like when you attended ASCEND?
3. When the academic year began for you, how did ASCEND guide you during your first year in college?

4. What about the Summer Bridge Program did you find beneficial to your success in college?
5. Were there any challenges and/or opportunities you may have faced with the summer bridge program that you would like to see changed/modified?
6. What was your overall experience with the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program?
7. What advice would you give incoming ASCEND students participating in the summer bridge program that you wish you have received?

The goals of these questions were to understand how the students felt before the summer bridge program. Since the students participated in different years, I want to get an overview of what the programing was like for them when they attended. The ASCEND Summer Bridge Program structure, including the schedule, curriculum, as well as the rules, all are important and relevant to understanding the students' experiences from their perspective and how the program impacted their retention and their success in college.

Data Source

A total of 14 participants were interviewed privately, one-on-one, between the participant and researcher only to respect the privacy of the participants and maintain confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded. The information was available to the researcher only and kept in a safe at the home of the researcher where no one else had access to the data. Upon the completion of all the interviews, the audio-recordings were transcribed to find common themes that provided answers to the research questions. This transcription was kept on the researchers' laptop, which is password-protected, and was accessible to the researcher only.

The participants recruited for this study were students from the summer bridge program at the research site. The researcher is a university administrator, but she had no prior relationship

with the participants. The first time the participants and researcher had any contact was during the actual data collection process, one-on-one interviews, to conduct the research. There was a consent form that was presented to the participants to sign for participation in the research study. The process was entirely voluntary.

Data Analysis

According to Johnson and Christensen (2017), “While observing, qualitative researchers try not to draw attention to themselves. That is, they try to be unobtrusive so that they will have little influence on the naturally occurring behavior being studied” (pp. 417–418). In qualitative research, once all the data have been collected, Johnson and Christensen (2017) offer various analysis strategies. However, the best approach for this research study included an Inductive Analysis and Creative Synthesis. Johnson and Christensen (2017) described this strategy as a process in which the researcher “seeks immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships” (p. 420).

The approach used to analyze the data for this research study was Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) five sequential steps. These steps include (a) organizing and preparing the data for analysis, (b) reading or looking at the data, (c) start coding all of the data, (d) generate a description and themes, and (e) representing the description and themes (pp. 194–195). One of the significant components of the data analysis was coding the data. Coding falls into three categories; expected codes, surprising codes, and codes of unusual or conceptual interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process assisted with the analysis of the data.

Ethical Considerations

It is essential that for any research study, ethics remains a crucial component throughout the entire process. To help ensure this element during this study, participants received a copy of

the informed consent form, which is part of Saint Peter's University IRB Process. The informed consent form was read to the participants before the interviews, and a copy was provided to them. "In essence, it is important that the researcher is mindful of the impact of the research on the participant and should take appropriate steps to minimize associated risks" (Houghton et al., 2010, p. 6).

Participants' wellbeing must be positioned before the benefits of the study. Participants must feel that any personal information gathered during the data collection process will be kept confidential. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the process if they felt they could not continue. For the researcher to get feedback from the participants, it was important that they understood the research. It was also essential to set boundaries between the researcher and participants to avoid any future challenges. Ethical concerns for each participant were kept at the forefront of the research to ensure its trustworthiness.

Several validity procedures were utilized to ensure the accuracy of the research findings. One of the techniques involved using a rich, thick description, which includes "transporting the readers to the setting and giving the discussion an element of shared experiences" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). Further, any bias from the researchers' perspective was discussed to reflect an open and honest description. Documenting the data collected and ensuring the accuracy of the transcription was also an important component.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method utilized to answer the research question. The data collected and analyzed included where the study took place, who participated, the researcher's relationship with the participants, as well as any ethical

considerations. The phenomenology framework allowed for different approaches to data collection and analysis. This research study provides significant insights for colleges and universities on the factors of summer bridge programs that were contributing influencers to retention specifically for underrepresented and underserved populations. Institutions can utilize this study to implement similar programs on their campuses or revise their current retention programs to meet the needs of their students better and help them persist. The application of the methodology described in this chapter will be described in Chapter 4, which highlights the results of the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents the research findings on the factors that contributed to retention in underserved and underrepresented populations. Through a qualitative study, I conducted one-on-one interviews during Spring 2019 with 14 students who participated in the study site’s summer bridge program from 2016–2019. Although the original target sample size was 15 students, there was an oversampling of freshmen; for that reason, the final sample size was 14 participants. All interviews were held on campus in the bridge program office. Table 3 includes the background data for the students who were interviewed for this research study. The participants consisted of 8 females and 6 males and included freshmen, sophomores, and juniors at the university.

Table 3

Demographics of Research Study Participants

Participant Identifier	Gender	Year participated in ASCEND	College Status
Student A	Female	2016	Junior
Student B	Female	2016	Junior
Student C	Male	2018	Sophomore
Student D	Female	2019	Freshman
Student E	Male	2018	Sophomore
Student F	Female	2019	Freshman
Student G	Male	2018	Sophomore
Student H	Female	2019	Freshman
Student I	Female	2019	Freshman
Student J	Male	2019	Freshman
Student K	Female	2019	Freshman
Student L	Male	2019	Freshman
Student M	Female	2019	Freshman
Student N	Male	2019	Freshman

Students' Viewpoints Pre Summer Bridge Program

A number of the students had similar responses to how they felt about participating in the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program at NJCU, which included feeling nervous, afraid, scared, and even emotional about the idea of participating in the summer program. Some students also felt confused because they did not know what to expect from the program or what it entailed. Other students felt rejected due to the conditional approval, and they were disappointed that they had to complete the summer bridge program without the guarantee that they would do so successfully and be accepted to the university. With the program taking place during the summer, some of the students felt they would not have time for themselves or be able to enjoy the summer before going to college since they had to attend this program right out of high school. One of the students stated that “when I found out I was conditionally approved, I was upset, but I wanted them to know that I need to be here and that I am worth being here.”

Nonetheless, not all of the student responses were negative. Some felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in a summer program that could provide them with access to college. They felt happy, excited, and intrigued about what the program had to offer and considered this an opportunity to observe what being a college student would be like before starting in the fall. They were eager to learn skills that could help them navigate college life and meet new people. One of the participants stated that they did not have a pleasant experience in high school, and thus they were excited about college. Some students were not interested in college, and if it was not for their families' insistence, they might not have attended. Also, the people who organized the program gave them the motivation to improve themselves.

In addition to these mixed emotions, some students were also dealing with personal concerns. A couple of the students were struggling with language barriers because English was

not their first language. Although they did well in high school and had good GPAs, when they took the SATs, they scored very low, resulting in their conditional acceptance to the college, which may not have been the case if English was their first language. A participant stated, “I wanted to succeed in every aspect of my life, and when I came over to [the college], I did very well. It prepared me a lot in the transition from high school to college.” Two students shared that they completed the summer bridge program but did not return to the university in the fall semester due to personal challenges at home and financial struggles. However, both students returned the following spring and stated that their experiences in the summer bridge program and the support they received had an impact on them returning to the university.

In the end, the students felt like they needed to stick it out and give the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program a chance. And, not to be negative before even starting the program and embrace the possibilities. One of the students stated that whenever they thought about all the work that was required, it became stressful, but they knew it would benefit them overall. They felt confident about being conditionally accepted and remaining at the university. Despite all the mixed emotions and personal challenges that the students were facing, they were all excited about their future. They believed that the program would help them to succeed in college.

Foundations of Teaching: Curriculum Overview

With the inception of the college’s summer bridge program in 2015, the curriculum has been modified to help meet the needs of all participants. The students expressed that the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program was held Monday through Thursday for 5 weeks. The program began at approximately 8:30 a.m. and ended in the late afternoon. The students did not have a sense of consistency about the end time because following was a social component that continued into the late afternoon and, at times, into the evening. Part of the program allowed

students to reside in the dormitory on campus, but this was an out-of-pocket expense. However, the cost of the actual summer bridge program was covered by the university; therefore, the students did not have to use their financial aid to cover these expenses. Those students who chose to live on campus for the summer, their social activity ran later as they included extra events and tutoring sessions in the dormitory.

Length of the Daily Program

Some of the students suggested shortening the length of the program as they felt it was too long—not the 4-week period, but the length of the day itself following the courses and activities. The students felt that having a balance between the academic portion and the social component could make the program run more smoothly. Some of the students felt that once the courses were done, the social activities should have been limited or at least not mandatory, especially for commuter students since they still had to travel back home, some even via public transportation. After the full-day schedule, students felt that they finally had time to be alone after spending all day with the same people. Yet, they had a lot of work to do from their classes, so they missed sleep to ensure that the work got done. The workload was a lot, but there was not enough time in the day. Regardless of these suggestions, most of the students felt the program was beneficial and should not be modified.

Academic Preparation

The academic component included English, preparing students for reading and writing, as well as Math. Students also had tutoring sessions in both subject areas with lunch in between the sessions. The commuter students felt that the students who stayed in the dormitory had an advantage related to tutoring because students had joint working group sessions with the peer mentors into the evening hours. As a result, some students mentioned that staying in the

dormitory should have been a mandatory component of the summer bridge program so that all the students would get equal services and opportunities. However, the downside of staying in the dormitory was that some students felt like the activities ran too late, and they did not get enough sleep, especially with trying to keep up with the coursework. Other kinds of academic programming included financial literacy workshops as well as a career workshop allowing students to not only learn how to dress professionally for an interview, but they also met with business leaders who prepared them for their future professions.

Social Interaction

The social aspect of the program included several icebreakers, interactive games and activities, which allowed the students an opportunity to make connections with other students, some of whom became their classmates during the fall semester. One of the participants stated that “it was nice because they would make us work hard on the classwork, and then we would have some fun activities to keep our heads leveled and not explode.” The students felt that the social aspect of the program created a bond between them and the other students. They thought that they not only left better prepared for college but made friends along the way. It was evident that the social aspect of the program was crucial to its success.

Program Rules and Regulations

The ASCEND Summer Bridge Program implemented several rules to help enhance the efficiency of the program. One of the rules was that no phones were allowed. Students had to turn in their phones when they arrived each day. Many of the students did not like this rule, and they felt that it was too strict. Yet, some students thought it made them connect with other students, where they usually would have been on their phones and not as social. In addition to the schedule, some of the students felt that the rules were too stringent, with things such as

having no phones, but it helped develop study habits. Nonetheless, one participant stated, “We have bad habits and because of those bad habits we are in the position we are in, they came up with methods and structures to break those bad habits, and if they are lenient they are letting us get by, and I don’t think that is beneficial to any of us.” Some of the other students shared this sentiment.

In addition to the no-phone policy, attendance was a significant component of the program. If students were late two times, that would equal an absence, and two absences would remove them from the program. Also, students who lived in the dormitory had a curfew. The students felt a lot of pressure with all of the rules, keeping up with the coursework and having enough time to get everything done, time for themselves, and to sleep. Despite the rules of the program, overall, the students felt welcomed and appreciated the combination of the academic and social components of the program. The students walked away better prepared for college and with new friends.

Benefits of the Summer Bridge Program

During the summer bridge program, students were provided with the skills and resources they needed to succeed in college, both academically and socially. However, the sustainability aspect of the program is what the students were most enthusiastic about and felt contributed to their success.

Study Habits

One of the first things that students were required to do when they began in the fall was to go to the tutoring center twice a week, which allowed program staff to touch base with the students, ensure that they were doing well, and provide additional services if needed. Although the students did not like the mandated tutoring, they felt it helped them keep the same

momentum from the summer. One student shared that, “I used the tutoring center my first semester and still use it as a junior today for my grammar.” The students also found that the peer mentors were always around to help and were experienced in many subject areas. Another participant stated that they felt like their mentor was like an older sibling. However, some of the students were concerned with the closeness in age between the student teachers. Although this made it easy to talk to them and they were helpful, when it came time to reprimand them for breaking any rules, it became uncomfortable having someone so young give them directives. Perhaps having a more varied age group among the peer mentors, maybe some even older, was recommended. Also, the director of the program and other staff members were around and stayed on top of the students to ensure that they were not falling behind on their coursework.

One student gave an example of the impact that ASCEND had on her and the tutoring that helped her achieve the success she has today. The student stated that during the summer program, there was an English assignment that required them to write about themselves. Upon completing the assignment, the student got an A- and thought, “wow, I can do this.” However, the next assignment was to write about a book that they were reading, and she got a D on that assignment. She realized she needed to work harder and by the end of the summer program, having completed the book assignment and working with the faculty, peer mentors, tutors, and so forth, her grade had improved from a D back to an A-. The student felt like she did great. She said, “until this day, I still keep the notes from ASCEND because the current professor doesn’t give the same tips, so I go back to my notes from ASCEND, which helps me a lot.”

In addition to tutoring, students felt that ASCEND helped them with time management. One of the participants stated that “if you have free time, go over everything and not let it go to waste.” Students felt like program helped them manage what they had to do throughout the day

and get their work done and stay on top of everything so that they would not fall behind. Students had an opportunity to experience the coursework firsthand, and they gained the knowledge that would help them throughout their college experience, even working with the professors. Students felt that ASCEND showed them how to interact with their professors and not be afraid to ask for assistance. Students also found it helpful that they ended up with some of the same professors when they began in the fall in some of their courses.

Some of the students talked about having a difficult high school experience and not being ready academically. However, after completing the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program, they managed to get good grades and kept a good GPA. One student stated that their SAT score was not an indication of who they were and how or if they would succeed, and the student has maintained a 4.0 GPA. Thus, the students walked away with skills that will not only help them in college but also in life, such as the career preparation workshop. The students felt that they became more confident and gained friendships that would last a lifetime.

Scholarship Eligibility

In addition to providing tutoring and other useful skills that are not only transferable in college, but also in real life, the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program provided opportunities for students to be eligible for scholarships. Students that participated in a certain number of workshops on various subject areas as well as kept their grades in good standing were eligible for scholarships. The students felt like this incentive showed how much the college cared about them and their education. Providing scholarships was especially essential for the students who were struggling financially.

Navigating College Resources

Assisting with the transition from high school to college was critical to the success of many of the students. They felt like it helped them get used to the college environment and gave them the tools they needed before starting. One student also mentioned that they felt like they were not confused on the first day of class, which happens to many new students. From having their IDs to knowing how to get to the library, financial aid, or other departments, the students felt better prepared. Going from high school to college is a big transition, and students felt that the summer bridge experience prepared them for college and how to manage the workload. Some students thought it was going to be a difficult experience, and although it was not easy, their overall experience was not unexpected. Also, the friendships they created during the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program carried over into the start of their college education, they continued to keep in touch and supported each other.

Students were able to get involved on campus through clubs and organizations as well as to find a job within the university, in part due to their participation in the program. One of the students even successfully ran for president of one of the student organizations called FELA (Federación de Estudiantes Latino Americanos). Some students were even hired to work in the ASCEND Office and hoped to serve as a tutor or peer mentor in a future ASCEND Summer Bridge Program. One of the participants said that the program has a saying: “*Make It Happen, and I made it happen, you have to make it happen.*” A common theme among the students was that they felt that the program was like a family. They felt that the staff cared, which showed in their mannerisms and made the students feel good about themselves and what they were trying to achieve. Overall, students felt accomplished and ready to face life in college.

One student mentioned that it is important to keep an open mind and would advise any incoming Students. “At times, it may seem hard or feel like too much work, but in the end, it is worth it. You learn skills that not only will get you through the summer program but throughout your semesters as well.” Other students suggested taking the courses seriously: “If you mess around, you will fail.” Another student mentioned that it is important to learn from those who are trying to teach you and push yourself if you want to be in college. Other students suggested taking advantage of the opportunities being offered academically, including tutoring, scholarships, resume preparation, and social activities.

Social Behavior and Networking

The students learned skills that prepared them academically and met many people through networking, but the program did much more than that. The students felt that they learned how not to procrastinate, how to be respectful and treat people the way you would want to be treated, even how to interview for a job. These social behaviors and other skills were something that the students felt they would not only use in college but also could use in their everyday lives as they got older. The social component of the ASCEND program brought students out of their comfort zone, where they would have otherwise had difficulty making friends. The activities were not only fun, but they allowed the students to interact with each other and ultimately make friends that they could have throughout their college experience. Many of the students even learned how to live with others, as they experienced life in the dormitory. The students learned how to make links and connections with people. All the skills the students took away from the program, including social skills, have contributed to their success.

One of the students stated that if there were any advice they would suggest to any incoming students, it would be to participate in class. That “also means to not be so enclosed and

open yourself up, or you will regret your decisions.” One of the common themes was that students met people and made friends. The program staff cared about the students and their wellbeing. Some of the students also mentioned that it is important not to be rude to the people who are trying to help you. The data repeatedly showed that they learned navigational skills. The students also felt that they were not scolded or treated like children; instead, they felt they could express themselves and were developing a sense of family. Ultimately, the students believed that any incoming students should push themselves to learn as much as they can and connect with others. One of the participants stated that “the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program was like a segway into college, it is going to give you the preparation you need.”

Dormitory Living

One of the students highlighted the importance of staying in the dormitory. They felt that living on campus during the summer program gave them a more personal experience than what commuters got out of it. However, the cost to stay in the dormitory was expensive for many of the students, and, therefore, they chose not to stay. If the cost was lower, the students suggested, all students should be required to stay during the summer program for a more inclusive experience. Dormitory living was an essential aspect of the experience.

Emotional Support

Resourcefulness is just one of the expressions used to describe one of the most beneficial things students got out of the ASCEND Summer Bridge Program. Additionally, students felt a sense of accomplishment, and despite the stress from all the coursework, they never gave up. They felt that ASCEND pushed them and motivated them to do and be better because they thought they cared for and supported them. As noted, tutoring, academic and social skills, and making friends, were all themes repeatedly brought up.

Another significant component of the students' first-year experience was feeling like they fit into the university. Some students came from predominately White neighborhoods and felt out of place, but participating in the program made them feel like the college was home. Overall, the students thought the summer bridge program was a good experience. They felt prepared academically. It was like an “educational boot camp,” according to one of the participants, but it gave the students a foundation to be successful in college. The students said that the people in the program showed that they cared and wanted to see them all succeed.

Many students came to college with personal stories that can affect their college experience. One student felt like it was an emotional roller coaster because her mom was in and out of the hospital during her time in the summer bridge program, which caused some depression and, at times, distracted her from her work. Yet, while in the program, she was surprised because she felt fully supported by everyone and thought she would only get an educational experience in the program, but was getting so much more. She remembers talking with one of the staff members when she was having a rough day, and the staff member said they understood because they, too came, from a difficult background. That connection helped the student personally and mentally. For this student, the academic and social components of the summer bridge program were excellent, but the emotional support she received and the environment was what gave her the drive to continue to work through her many challenges. Overall, she got more than what she signed up for and walked away with a positive outlook.

Unfortunately, attending college was not a reality for all the students who participated in the summer bridge program. Because they had a lot going on in their personal lives that prevented their attendance in college at that particular time, not all of the students enrolled at the university following the completion of the program. A couple of students mentioned that they

would have liked to have had additional food options for dormitory students in the late evening because they were hungry at night. Overall, the struggles that students are facing, if addressed by providing the proper environment and support, can be overcome.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

With higher education institutions struggling to retain students, it is essential to identify ways in which they can get students to continue once they have committed to attending college. The goal of this qualitative research study was to look at the factors of summer bridge programs that contributed to retention in underserved and underrepresented populations. Summer Bridge Programs were developed to aid in the transition from high school to college. This study looked at a summer bridge program at a New Jersey. The theoretical framework utilized to guide this study was Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Retention. By gathering this data, institutions of higher education can review their current retention programs and implement new strategies to improve their efforts to keep students from dropping out.

Student Retention

The overall mission of institutions of higher education is to educate students and lead them to graduation. As previously shared, in a survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the percentage of students who earn a certificate or degree is low compared to the number of students who enroll, many never finish (NCES, 2014). In addition to those that drop out or leave, there are transfer students who complete their degrees at another institution (Bean, 2001). Retention programs, among other things, are designed to provide students the necessary tools to be successful in college. Summer bridge programs are key to ensuring that students can transition from high school to college. As previously noted, in his principles of retention programs, Tinto (1993) underscored that these programs are meant to put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals. And, the big question is, do these programs

have an impact on retention, which ultimately should be a university focus to achieve their mission of getting students from enrollment to graduation.

As institutions face challenges with retention, underserved and underrepresented populations are highly affected. Many of the students who fall within this population identify as first-generation college students from low-income minority groups categorized as Hispanic or Latino/a, African American or Black, as well as Native American (Yue et al., 2018).

Underserved and underrepresented students are not as academically prepared as their majority counterparts. Yet, some of these students come to college with limited academic and social experiences. Tinto (1993) speaks to the education of all, not just some of their students, in his principles of retention, which would be inclusive of underserved and underrepresented populations. If institutions do not provide a proper academic boot camp, that oversight can have a significant impact on their college experience and create obstacles to their success, which results in students leaving, dropping out, and not finishing their degrees. Thus, retention has become a national problem facing colleges and universities today.

Summer bridge is just one of many retention programs developed to assist underprepared students in being successful in college. The obstacles that students face include lack of self-confidence, inappropriate expectations or knowledge about the college environment, lack of connection to the college community or external community, lack of early validation within the college environment, and family members who do not understand goals of the college (Kezar, 2000). By addressing these obstacles through a summer bridge program, students can form a positive foundation for their educational experience. The curriculum in summer bridge programs, as Garcia and Paz (2009) highlighted, includes providing university-level coursework, and it allows students to interact with various departments. Students also make connections. These

social and academic elements form the groundwork of a supportive network, which is consistent with one of Tinto's (1993) key principles of effective retention programs: their committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members. Thus, every student can succeed if given the proper foundation and guidance to do so.

Since the needs and demographics of the students at each institution vary, these programs must be structured to meet the needs of particular students. Many summer bridge programs are face-to-face with a residential component for those students who choose to live in the dormitory, unless it is a requirement, with also having commuter students for those students who are local to the college or university location. The goals of the program are to experience college-level coursework and to build a sense of community, all to gain a sense of belonging (Tomasko et al., 2016). However, not all programs are in-person. As previously noted, Carlson College in Minnesota designed a mixed program that included face-to-face and online components that also teach quantitative skills (Eblen-Zayas & Russell, 2019).

Other types of summer bridge programs focus on skills such as STEM or nursing. The objectives of STEM summer bridge programs are to expand access to science jobs and address labor shortages in STEM fields (Kitchen et al., 2018). The focus of a nursing program is to provide underrepresented racially or ethnically disadvantaged students with a focused summer bridge experience that includes a research and community health component (Pritchard et al., 2016). Regardless of how the summer bridge programs are structured, their shared goal is to transition students to be successful when they start college by giving them the necessary skills academically to succeed as well as creating a social experience that will allow students to fit into the college community.

However, not all summer bridge programs fully achieve the goals they set out to accomplish due to various circumstances. Institutions of higher education are faced with challenges as they prepare a curriculum each year to meet the demands of the students they are serving, which may change from year to year. Sablan (2014) noted a concern with how students are recruited for these types of programs. If a large number of underrepresented students are recruited, then the program may be considered developmental, which is not necessarily the purpose of the program. Also, institutions must make improvements annually to ensure the efficiency of their programs. As with the case study on the Middle Tennessee State University's MT Scholars Academy, what started as a means of student retention faced challenges, and the program was refined to ensure the success of its students and ensure that best practices were in place. Thus, there was a need for constant monitoring to maintain the program's intent. Another challenge, noted by Sablan (2014), is the cost to run these programs. With decreases in institutional, federal, and state funds, many of these programs run out of funding. If there are limited resources, these programs can only be provided to a limited number of students. More funding can allow for a larger enrollment in the program, reaching more students and can have a greater impact.

The summer bridge program incorporates many of the elements highlighted above. The goals of the program include supporting students' successful transition from high school to college, preparing students for college-level work, developing and strengthening student connections with peers, mentors, advisors, faculty, and staff, providing students with knowledge critical to success in college, and enhancing students' sense of belonging (NJCU, ASCEND). Meeting these goals means providing both the academic and social components that students need to get a well-rounded experience before starting college were the primary factors. The

program examined for this research study was initiated at one university. Although this can be a limitation, similar institution types with comparable demographics can benefit from these data. Many students within the underserved and underrepresented population are like this study's participants. The narratives of most of the participants showed that they benefited a great deal academically and, especially, from the social component of the program.

Summary of Findings

After completing the summer bridge program, many of the students felt more academically prepared than when they started. Some came from high schools that did not fully prepare them for college, or they needed additional help in some of the major subject areas. The research showed that English and Math were a big focus during the program, and students felt prepared once they started in the fall. A review of their math and lots of tutoring prepared them for college math level courses. As for English, students felt they learned how to write an essay properly. The research also showed that many of the skills the students learned throughout the summer bridge program and the notes they took prepared them for college. But, it was evident that the tutoring component during the program gave them that extra confidence and ability to perform at a higher level. Continuous mandated tutoring during their first semester, although not very popular, also kept them engaged and informed. These data are significant to this research because they tie into one of the main goals of summer bridge programs, which is to prepare students to succeed in college academically.

During the interviews, it was evident that the social component of the summer bridge program was, in some cases, even more significant than the academic aspect. In the descriptions of their experiences during the summer bridge program, the students demonstrated that they felt connected, gained confidence, made friends, networked with staff and faculty as well as their

peers, and felt like a family. The research data shows that the social component was a focal point of the student's success. Students came to the program shy, angry, and believing that they did not belong. The research showed that the students walked away with a positive point of view of themselves as well as their abilities to succeed and confidence in what they could accomplish.

Some students came with personal challenges, including language barriers. The research showed that through the program, the students felt supported in more ways than they anticipated and were able to overcome their obstacles because of how the people in the program treated them. The research also highlighted that when the students started in the Fall, then felt prepared. This research illustrates that academics was a significant component of the program, but it was also evident that the social element was transformational for the students and, thus, was a contributing factor to their retention.

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth analysis of the student's experience. After conducting my interviews and transcribing my data, it was evident in this research that academic preparation and the social features were the elements of the program that made it thrive and contributed to the program's success. These two foundations are portrayed by Vincent Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Retention, which is the theoretical framework utilized for this research study. Tinto (1993) stated that involvement during the first year is critical, especially incorporating academic rigor as well as ensuring a social network component. He noted that "academic integration is often associated with good grades, positive interactions with faculty, and other activities directly related to the academic college experience. In contrast, social integration refers to contact with peers and involvement of social nature with college activities and student groups" (Harper & Jackson, 2011, p. 214).

As Tinto (2002) noted, the five conditions of academic persistence include expectation, advice, support, involvement, and learning. Many of these traits were expressed by the students during the interviews, having the data support Tinto's perspective on student persistence. Tinto's (1993) principles of retention also include three elements of effective retention programs, which include commitment to the students being served, to the education of all, and to the development of supportive social and educational communities. As shown in the research findings, the social feature of the summer bridge program was vital. Tinto (2002) noted the importance of belonging and being engaged, and of having students "see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff who value their membership – in other words, that they matter and belong" (p. 3). This desired outcome was reflected in the participants' feelings of being welcomed, respected, and like a family among the university community.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative research study looked at the factors of summer bridge programs that contributed to retention in underserved and underrepresented populations, which is critical to the retention crisis facing many colleges and universities today. Given that this research study was limited to only one institution of higher education and a specific program developed at the university, further research is recommended. Institutions can gather additional data from other institutions by type, location, demographics, including community colleges and so on, expanding their knowledge and insight into the benefits and challenges of summer bridge programs and ways in which institutions can improve their retention efforts. As more institutions increase their online courses and other institutions go fully online, future research on the effectiveness of online summer bridge programs is needed. In addition, since many students noted that participation in the summer bridge program gave them confidence, it would also be important to

conduct further research to identify how that confidence affected their college experience. The findings in this research on the effectiveness of summer bridge retention programs can be adapted to help retain all students, especially underserved and underrepresented populations, which is a growing majority in many colleges and universities today.

Nonetheless, this research study can inform institutions of higher education about summer bridge programs as an opportunity to improve their retention efforts and ways in which to enhance their existing programs. Institutions can also look for opportunities to continue to evaluate the success of programs such as summer bridge and continuously develop the curriculum for its effectiveness. Higher education institutions will find, through this study, the significance of emphasizing the social component of retention programs, which seemed to drive the success of the summer bridge program examined here. Further, understanding the needs of underserved and underrepresented students and the unique challenges they face can aid in planning retention programs that help this student population. As student demographics continue to change, institutions need to be prepared to serve all students and provide them with access and skills that will give them help them to succeed. Incorporating these elements and being creative about how retention programs such as summer bridge are structured can help improve the completion rates of students, especially the underserved and underrepresented populations, and thus, increase their long-term social mobility among society.

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