

BRIDGE PROGRAMS: THE NARRATIVE OF SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION FOR  
FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

by

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts  
Interdisciplinary Studies

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George Mason University  
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Bridge Programs: The Narrative of Successful Completion for First-Generation Students

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my loving husband Tyler, my three wonderful cats, Lewis, Herman B and Layla.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen. Thank you to my husband, Tyler, who was there for support through the many ups and downs as well as being a very thorough editor. My sister who was willing to do the first and last edits as well as all of the friends, fellow program members and family (including the feline members) who were there for emotional and moral support.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **BRIDGE PROGRAMS: THE NARRATIVE OF SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

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George Mason University, 2015

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This study was completed in order to look at the barriers at a Mid-Atlantic large four-year institution for first-generation students who completed a summer bridge program. The purpose of this study was to explore any barriers that might exist for these students. Through the narratives of these students' experiences, it was found that the bridge program created a holistic experience for them. Based on their description, their success was due in large part to the program and the administrators supporting them from their entrance at the institution to their exit. In these interviews, the students reflected on their experience at the institution and were incredibly grateful for the opportunities they had been given. These students had received their undergraduate degrees and were a bit nervous and worried about the next step, but had no doubts that they had been able to complete their last step because of the participation in the summer bridge program

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Approximately 19 million students are enrolled today at more than 4,000 post-secondary institutions, compared to 11 million in the mid-1970s (Strayhorn, 2010). This dramatic increase in enrollment is due, in part, to the economic and social benefits of a higher education degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009). A degree for a student can lead to economic self-sufficiency and ultimately a change in lifestyle and future (Ross, 2013). Carnevale and Strohl (2010) identified degree attainment as having “replaced the industrial concept as the primary marker for social stratification” (p.71). Sokatch (2006) added, “going to college represents the best, and perhaps the only, realistic option for upward mobility and escape from poverty” (p. 129). The earning potential for graduates, whether associate or bachelor’s, is higher than it is for a high school graduate and one of many benefits of attending higher education (Ross et al., 2012). By allowing all populations to gain admission to higher education, the middle class can be more accessible for all people (Kallison, 2012). The opportunity for higher education can be an important step for social mobility and it is essential to provide education to all populations.

Higher education as a pathway to upward mobility creates a need for universities to fulfill a civic responsibility to provide this opportunity for all (Blake, 1998). However, despite an increasingly diverse country, certain populations of students



continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Walpole, 2008). The underrepresented populations are often identified as African-American, Latino, first-generation or students from a low socioeconomic background (Allen, 1999; Blake, 1998; Balz & Esten, 1998). Statistically some of the percentages for attendance and attrition for these populations are dismal. Only 53 percent of low-income students graduate high school and attend college (Strayhorn, 2010). Furthermore, African-American and Hispanic students are more likely to withdraw from higher education than their white counterparts, 22 percent and 13 percent respectively. The percentages for students whose parents did not graduate from higher education institutions in the US, often known as first-generation students, are just as low. Researchers have found that less than half of first-generation students obtain their degrees (Balz & Esten, 1998; Chen & Carroll, 2005). The likelihood of college completion further decreases when any of these identities intersect, such as a first-generation, Latino student from a low-socioeconomic background (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). These findings demonstrate a need for support for some populations of students in higher education.

Students who identify as underrepresented students can face social and academic challenges in higher education institutions. Their backgrounds and environments can lack what researchers call cultural capital or social know-how (Bourdieu, 1977; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Kezar, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Students with these backgrounds are less likely to receive adequate information and support about college during their early childhood, primary, and secondary education experiences. The cultural capital needed for higher education includes knowledge and skills to navigate the

institution and access the resources to help them succeed (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Cushman, 2007; Graham, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Woosley, 2013). Students need knowledge to navigate the admissions system, finance management, and the means to transition from high school to college including the ability to: create social relationships, obtain academic self-efficacy, identify appropriate attire, and interact with faculty. This lack of cultural capital, or knowledge of resources, leads students to feel unsupported, intimidated, and isolated, which contributes to attrition of these populations (Balz & Esten, 1998; Milem, 1997). According to Tinto (1982), “individuals that are marginal are rarely successful” (p. 692).

In order for these student populations to succeed in higher education there must be a welcoming environment with access to resources (Balz & Esten ; Blake, 1998). Some institutions have created programmatic solutions to help provide this supportive atmosphere (Kezar, 2001). The programs, called bridge programs (BP) or summer bridge programs (SBP), vary widely. These BPs are designed to support students so they are able to transition successfully to higher education and degree attainment.

### ***Purpose***

This thesis is based on a qualitative study of first-generation, high achieving students in a summer bridge program. It is my attempt to capture their narratives regarding the successful completion of their college experiences, including their bridge program. The purpose of this study was to ask, *What barriers exist for first-generation students after the successful completion of their bridge program?* A secondary research

question was, *What further actions can be taken to provide this population with greater support?*

For the purposes of this study, *first-generation students* are defined as students whose parents have not attended or completed higher education in the United States. Additionally, students in this study are considered high achieving. *High achieving* students are defined by the institutional program in this study as students who completed high school with a grade point average (GPA) of a 3.8 or higher on a 4.0 scale (Coordinator of Summer Bridge Program, communication, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014). *Successful degree completion* means completing all of the requirements for degree attainment. *Persistence* is the ability to overcome obstacles or barriers to achieve degree attainment (Balz & Esten, 1998).

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this literature review, I will synthesize the research on bridge programs (BPs) by exploring the history of the programs and their components. Additionally, the purpose of this review is to summarize the gaps found in the varied BPs. Three themes emerged in the existing literature as relevant for the purpose of this study in the context of existing research on BPs: (1) the creation and evolution of BPs, (2) “Summer Melt”, and (3) the components that a majority of BPs contain. I also explore how BPs are designed as a supportive transition or “bridge” from high school to higher education.

### ***Bridge Program History***

One of the first bridge programs was started in 1969 at the University of Arizona to target racially underrepresented, low-income and first-generation students to help them adjust to the first year at college (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). Since this program was started many have sprung into existence, serving many different populations (Sablan, 2013). There are programs that target specific groups similar to the Arizona State program as well as others that focus on remedial education and subject areas such as STEM (Ackerman, 1991a; Ami, 2001; Garcia, 1991; Gold, 1992; Kezar, 2001; Sablan, 2013). The variety of programs available today, like the Arizona State program, was ignited by a series of federal programs created in the 1960's.

### ***Federal Bridge Programs***

In the 1960s President Lyndon B. Johnson signed several laws into action that were focused on education and that helped to develop the design of the current system. These included, but were not limited to, the Education and Secondary Act of 1965, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Blake, 1989; TRIO history, 2014). These programs were intended to expand access to education for growing populations of students of color and low-income students (Blake, 1989). The legislation mandated that at least two-thirds of families of participants must come from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, neither parent could have attended college in the United States. These students were identified as first-generation college students (Balz & Esten, 1998; TRIO History, 2014). The programs created as a result of this legislation became known as "TRIO" programs in reference to the triad of "Upward Bound," "Talent Search," and "Student Support Services" (Blake, 1989; TRIO history, 2014). The programs were intended to provide a supportive pathway toward high education institutions for first-generation students. Until this point, many institutions had served homogenous populations of wealthy, white students and now faced a unique challenge of educating non-traditional students. Low-income and underrepresented students met many institutional challenges including isolation, exclusion, and a lack of knowledge of institutional structure and resources.

The TRIO programs were designed to account for the challenges that these students faced, including a lack of institutional knowledge (Balz & Esten, 1998; Blake, 1989). The programs were intended to break down social and cultural barriers. The students who participated were often unaware of the processes of application to college,

how financial aid is obtained, and where to find help, because of their first-generation status (Balz & Esten, 1998). The programs helped to provide this knowledge in addition to loan mentoring and financial guidance to navigate the cost of higher education (TRIO History, 2014; Federal programs, 2014) The financial guidance included information on financial aid programs, resources on finding scholarships, and assistance in the completion of applications. Another aspect of some programs included information on temporary housing for students who may need it during their education (Federal TRIO programs, 2014). TRIO programs are often small, sometimes fewer than 250 students per program, in order to ensure a personal experience (Balz & Esten, 1998). Students are supported by counselors, exposed to helpful resources, and provided opportunities for academic development (Balz & Esten, 1998; Federal TRIO programs, 2014). The introduction to financial aid processes, applications, and where to find help are essential cultural capital to persist through higher education without altering the institutional processes and systems.

The TRIO programs help to pave a successful pathway to higher education for some low-income, first-generation students. As of 2014, these programs have served over 790,000 students in over 2,800 programs nationally and have proved their efficacy by helping students to persist through higher education (TRIO History, 2014). In a study completed by Balz and Esten (1998) the TRIO program participants were compared with non-TRIO participants. They found that over 30 percent of TRIO students completed their bachelor's degrees within 10 years, compared to only 12.9 percent of non-TRIO participants. The same result was found when the researchers controlled for private

institutions, with 49.6 percent of TRIO participants attaining their degrees, as compared with only 43.7 percent of non-TRIO participants completing their degrees. These results were also similar when looking at graduate school degrees; students who attended undergraduate TRIO programs are more successful. These programs help students to flourish in many environments in higher education.

TRIO programs are designed to promote students' self-efficacy and provide students with the cultural capital needed to be successful within the first months of college (Rose, 1989; TRIO History, 2014). These programs connect the dots between the doubts students might have and the expectations institutions have of them. Broadly, TRIO programs inspired institutions to create new initiatives across the country called Bridge Programs (BPs).

#### *Institutional Bridge Programs*

The main priority of most BPs is to aid in the transition to college for targeted populations at the particular institution. Thus, bridge programs vary widely. Unlike TRIO programs, each institution must find the funding and the staff and also must create a mission for a BP. Kezar (2001) outlined the range of programs and their foci. Some programs focus on writing, mathematics and remedial education, while others focus on specific populations. There are programs for low-income students, first generation students, students of color or students with disabilities. Additionally, programs can vary in cost as well as requirements. Some programs require students to be accepted to the institution before the program whereas others mandate that a student must successfully complete the summer bridge before they are accepted into the university. With the variety

of programs and many goals and requirements, researchers have had difficulty finding evidence to support the effectiveness of BPs. Many researchers describe the difficulty in assessing these programs because of the lack of empirical research for each program and the inability to compare one program to another (Douglas and Attewell, 2014; Buck, 1985; Perna, 2002; Raines, 2012). Some programs exist in the student affairs departments while others govern out of academic units (Sablan, 2013). Another difference for programs is funding. Several programs are completely funded for the summer and also provided financial compensation during the academic school year. Others were paid for but also provided the students with a stipend throughout the program, and there were some that required the students to pay for the program out of pocket (Sablan, 2013; Wathington et al., 2011). However, as Sablan (2013), Wathington, Barnett, Weissman, Teres, Pretlow and Nakanishi (2011) and Walpole (2008) point out that even with the variance in the programs, the priority placed on transition, when the program took place, and the program components were often very similar.

### *Summer Bridge Programs*

In order to advance underserved populations in higher education, it is important to recognize when these students are the most vulnerable. TRIO programs are successful programs but do not have a specific time period in which they occur. A vulnerable time period, identified by Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, Castleman and Wartman (2009), is called the “summer melt.” This melt occurs between the last year of high school and the first year of college, even when the students have paid their deposits to the college of their choice. Arnold et al. (2009) found that up to a third of these students who had been



accepted into college decided to attend college elsewhere or decided against higher education attendance entirely. This large portion of students who changed their minds during the summer, Arnold et al. (2009) found, was due to the students' lack of social know-how or cultural capital. Along with the financial aspects and the social know-how, it was found that even students who had felt confident and worthy enough to go to college were at risk of not attending higher education.

In summer melt, it is proposed students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are faced with the transition from a familiar world, high school, to an uncharted one, college (Arnold et al., 2009). This transition and all that it entails was shown to cause some students to rethink their decisions to attend college. The decisions that need to be made during the summer between high school and college, especially for underserved populations, need a supportive bridge to provide helpful information and encouragement in the transition.

Researchers suggest that in addition to a specific time period, students will gain cultural capital if the BP has four targeted program components: 1) academic classes, 2) workshops or presentations to target skills, 3) a college knowledge component and 4) the development of relationships with peers, mentors and faculty (Ackermann 1991b; Buck 1985; Evans 1999; Fitts 1989; Garcia 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Students who are identified for these programs benefit from these components because they help them to create relationships, foster a connection to campus, clarify goals and expectations, and develop the ability to navigate the campus (Karp, 2011; Kezar, 2001; Sablan, 2013; Wathington et al., 2011). With these components, researchers suggested

that Summer Bridge programs (SBPs) can reduce the summer melt as identified by Arnold et al. (2009) and build social know-how or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Kezar, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). The ultimate goal is to provide students with enough sense of self-efficacy, college knowledge, and support to succeed in the institutional culture, in order to persist through their higher education careers.

### ***Common Bridge Program Components***

In this section I describe these four components in greater detail.

#### ***Component 1: Academic Classes***

The first component of a bridge program that has been identified to help prepare students is the academic classes (Cabrera, Miner and Milem, 2013). These classes are a way for students to experience college coursework but with extra academic support provided by the program (Cabrera, Miner and Milem, 2013; Wathington et al., 2011). Depending on the program, these classes are either remedial like lower-level English and Math or standard college classes (Wathington et al., 2011). These classes are intensive due to the short summer class timeline, four to nine weeks, and offer the benefit of focused learning opportunities. This means that students attend the same classes several times per week and for remedial students it offers more exposure to developmental subjects (Wathington et al., 2011; Barnett et.al., 2012).

#### ***Component 2: Workshops and Presentations***

The second component is workshops or presentations to target skills needed for a successful transition into higher education (Kezar, 2001; Sablan, 2013; Wathington et al.,

2011). Many, if not all, programs implement this component. Some of the workshop or presentation topics include financial management, communication skills, identification of learning styles, knowledge of faculty norms, stress management, study or note-taking strategies, career counseling, time management, and expectations of what to expect in a college classroom. These have been identified as important skills that students need to succeed in college. Although not directly related to academic needs, these skills provide the emotional or psychological support for students to succeed in the rigorous coursework they will experience as college students (Kezar 2001; Sablan, 2013; Walpole et al., 2005; Wathington et al., 2011).

#### *Component 3: College Knowledge*

The third component that is often implemented in BPs is “college knowledge” (Wathington et al., 2011). This component allows students to develop a better relationship with the campus so they cultivate the necessary social and academic connections (Kezar, 2001). These activities are designed so students learn to navigate the bureaucracy often found on college campuses. They often include tours of the campus, an introduction to academic support services, information on registration and course planning, and information on how to become involved on campus (Kezar, 2001; Wathington et al., 2011). Researchers recommend that the know-how of navigating a campus can improve a student's likelihood or persistence of staying at the institution (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

#### *Component 4: Relationships*

The fourth component is the development of relationships and the cohort nature of most programs (Wathington et al., 2011). These aspects are designed to facilitate a more informal learning environment. This is vital to the students' success in transition, because it allows them to develop a support system and be better prepared socially (Barnett et al., 2012; Kezar 2001; York & Tross, 1994). Researchers indicate that these relationships contribute to student persistence and their effort to graduate. In this component, students are often required to have study hours during which they spend time with tutors and are assigned a college-aged mentor (Walpole et al., 2005; Wathington et al., 2011). This time with the mentor is intended to engage and connect students to strengthen their support network. Mentors are often chosen based on their abilities to relate to students. In contrast, relationships with faculty members may not be strong but students in Wathington's et al. (2011) study remarked that a small connection was developed as a result of the program. These relationships have been found to aid in a student's persistence in achieving a higher education degree (Homel, 2013; Kezar, 2001; Wathington et al., 2011).

These four components--academic classes, workshops, college knowledge, and relationship development--are the key elements for students with disadvantaged backgrounds in order to have a more successful transition to higher education (Karp, 2011; Kezar, 2001; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996; Wathington et al., 2011; Walpole et al., 2005; York & Tross, 1994). Researchers argue that participants in Bridge Programs with these components will be more successful because they have developed characteristics or cultural capital that help them build their ability to cope and persist through higher

education. These characteristics include self-efficacy, sense of control, self-confidence, reasonable expectations and most importantly for institutions, the ability to overcome barriers to degree completion (Ackermann, 1991a; Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Fitts, 1989; Kezar, 2001). After a successful BP and new skills for dealing with issues, ideally a student would be prepared for the transition into higher education. The student armed with their support network, a new set of skills, knowledge, and preparedness for the academic rigor should be able to better navigate obstacles and obtain their higher education degree.

### ***Empirical Support***

The empirical evidence for the efficacy of TRIO programs has allowed these programs to continue to have the needed financial support (Balz & Esten, 1998; TRIO History, 2014). However, there is mixed evidence for many other bridge programs (Sablan, 2013). Studies on BPs have found some evidence that support the common components (York & Tross, 1994). However, there still exists little to no empirical information to support the effectiveness of these programs as a whole and their influence on retention and persistence (Barnett et al., 2012; Evans, 1999; Logan, Salisbury-Glennon, & Spence, 2000; Sablan, 2013; Wathington et al., 2011). In York and Tross' (1994) evaluation of students' participation in a program, there were no results or positive effects on the students and their persistence in higher education. Other researchers, including Walpole (2008), Santa Rita and Bacote (1996) and Gilmer (2007), showed positive persistence and GPA results from participation in the program. While Fletcher, Newell, Newton, and Anderson-Rowland (2001) said that the program could possibly

affect the retention rates but they did not find definitive results. This was similar for Hicks (2005), Garcia (1991), and research done by Wathington et al., (2011) and Barnett, Bork, Mayer, Pretlow, Wathington, and Weiss (2012). Wathington et al. (2011) completed an extensive research study of eight programs in Texas in 2009. In this study, the researchers found that the program group did not significantly enroll in classes at higher rates than the control group, meaning that the program did not encourage students to persist through their education any more than students not enrolled in the BPs. However, the program participants' achievements in writing, mathematics, and reading were statistically more significant compared to that of the control group. This means that the tutoring provided in the program was helpful when the students' took the courses during the academic year. In 2012, Barnett et al. completed a follow-up analysis of the same groups and found that there was still no effect on the program participants' enrollment versus the control group. Additionally, the statistical significance with grades in math, reading and writing from Wathington et al. (2011) were no longer substantial. The range of programs, studies, and participants leaves bridge program research disjointed and deficient.

In an attempt to compile information around the varying types of BPs, Sablan (2013) completed a meta-analysis of many different studies of programs. Most of the studies that Sablan looked at were single-site evaluations and the meta-analysis noted the many similarities and differences across programs. This is one of the only extensive studies of its kind. Sablan found it was difficult, due to the lack of similarities in programs, to perform comparative analyses of program costs and outcomes. She found

that although there are common components, no BP is exactly the same in structure. Further, she found that results of the studies of BPs varied. With some studies researchers found a decrease in GPA between semesters and no significant differences between participants and non-participants. Additionally some programs had higher graduation rates and higher academic standards among program participants. Likewise, O'Conner (2002) suggested there is an insufficient comparison of structures of institutions overall and constraints that may impede a student's persistence. She argued that the constraints--financial, bureaucratic, or otherwise--on the students are the consequences of the rigid structures at institutions. It can be contended that bridge programs are supposed to mitigate these structures to make institutions accessible, but the empirical evidence to support this argument, is lacking.

Recent contributions of research to the components of bridge programs point to potential strengths of BPs. Castleman (2012) found that more students enrolled in higher education after college counseling for financial and emotional support. The most profound aspect of Castleman's 2012 study was the financial advice that counselors were able to offer their students. These counselors avidly helped their students find the monies through grants and scholarships, to make up the difference between what their financial aid package and what was needed. The financial weight of committing to higher education is hefty. For students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, this could make or break their decision to attend a college. Although most bridge programs come at no cost to the student, there are some that require their students to pay a fee for the required academic courses (Wathington et al., 2011). The suggestion that college counseling has

helped enrollment, however, does not directly relate to the completion of a degree.

Additionally, even the cost of time to the student and their inability to have a summer job during the program could have implications for a successful transition.

O'Conner's (2002) view of institutional constraints offers a new way to look at BPs. The possibility that even with supportive environments, underserved students are challenged by institutional structures such as finances and bureaucracy and will struggle because the programs can only mitigate the systemic barriers that exist. As described above, BPs are often short programs that vary from four to nine weeks (Sablan, 2013). It appears likely that if a student's background over the first 18 years of their lives negatively affects their ability to succeed, then a brief program would only help temporarily (Barnett et al., 2012; Walpole et al., 2005). However, with the increased need for access it is vital for institutions to place these programs at a high level of importance. It cannot be expected that students overcome obstacles and barriers to persist to their degrees if researchers contend that they are predisposed to fail. The first step is to identify the barriers students face after the successful completion of a bridge program and how the institution can be more supportive to reduce the attrition of underrepresented students



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

In this study I explored the narrative of first-generation students by eliciting their accounts of their college experiences. I collected the stories after their participation in the SBP at a large, public institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and their matriculation from this institution. It is important to identify my role as a researcher in this study. As a first-generation, white female I approached this study with a social justice lens. It is my belief that all populations should have access to higher education because of the institution's civic responsibility to education all people. In this chapter, I describe the context, participants, procedures, and analysis process used in the study.

### ***Context***

The summer bridge program engages high achieving students as defined by their high school grade point averages (GPAs) and SAT scores (STEP, 2014). The students self-identify as first-generation students during their admissions process and then are invited to apply for the program (Coordinator of Summer Bridge Program, personal communication, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014). This self-identification in the admissions process asks the students to select their parents' level of education on their applications. Upon being accepted into the university, a small number of students who identified as first-generation are encouraged to apply for the BP and then chosen based on the application. The number of students asked to apply is small in proportion to the number of first-

generation college students entering the institution each year. The program can only admit approximately three percent of first-generation students because of the cost per student and the funding allocated from the university for the program. Students in this SBP are required to live on campus and take two college level courses while participating in the day-to-day programming. The classes took place during a regular summer session at the institution and lasted for five weeks. These classes were not specific to the SBP and the professors were not informed that the students had not taken college level courses before that time. Additionally, the program is highly structured and includes all four of the components discussed above and identified in research of a successful BP. The SBP pays for the courses, textbooks, and room and board for the duration of the five-week program.

### ***Participants***

The population for this study included students who had graduated from both the SBP and the institution so they could describe their entire college experience from bridge program to graduation. The participants graduated from the institution in 2013, 2014, and 2015 and graduated from their SBP in 2009, 2010, and 2011. The criteria for this particular BP were for the students to be high-achieving high school students, in-state residents, and first-generation college students in the United States. Although other research and bridge programs consider socio-economic status, neither the program nor this research used socio-economic status as a factor. Additionally, this research only took into account high school achievement because it was a criterion for the BP, college achievement was not considered. Students who met the institutions' requirements for

graduation between 2013 and 2015 were eligible for participation in this study, as long as they also had successfully completed the BP. The seven participants selected to participate in this study. Below is the description of each of the participants who took part in this study.

Participant 1, Eleanor, was from the class of 2014 in the institution and the SBP class of 2010. The interview with her took place in-person. She is currently pursuing her Master's degree; her undergraduate degree is in Psychology with a minor in Criminology. She grew up in Northern Virginia and began a program in early high school to help prepare for college. Her family is originally from Bolivia and impressed on her the importance of higher education. In her pursuit of a higher education degree, she became very involved and found her niche living and working on campus.

Participant 2, Neal, was from the class of 2015 in the institution and the SBP class of 2011. The interview with him took place in-person. He looked forward to graduating and finding a job in the Northern Virginia Area. He graduated with a degree in Conflict Analysis and Resolution. He grew up in the Northeast but went to high school in Southern Virginia. His transition from high school to college was interesting because of the isolation that can happen when away from family. He was successful because he was adamant about understanding and meeting the expectations of the university. He appreciates the SBP for helping him to obtain his degree and meeting the high standards set by the institution for graduation.

Participant 3, Harry, was from the class of 2015 from the institution and the SBP class of 2011. The interview with him took place in-person. He graduated and hopes to

become an integral part in the Northern Virginia community with his degree in Government and International politics. He grew up in the Northern Virginia area but is very connected to his Middle Eastern culture and family heritage. He feels blessed to have participated in a program in high school that prepared him for the rigors of college and recognizes that the SBP was an integral part of his success in higher education. In his account of the SBP and thereafter, he knows that his involvement, experience, and knowledge of campus allowed him to persist through his higher education. He has aspirations of continuing his education.

Participant 4, Ethan, was from the class of 2014 in the institution and the SBP class of 2010. He graduated with a degree in History and Economics. The interview with him took place over face-to-face Internet video software. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree. He grew up in Northern Virginia with his siblings and his parents, who emigrated from El Salvador. He recognized that the support provided from a pre-college program allowed him and his parents an opportunity to understand the pathway to higher education. This program and the SBP allowed him to understand himself and the importance of education. Within the program and throughout his undergraduate career, he discovered several of his passions and became very involved on campus. He expressed that his gratitude towards the program and administrators is difficult to articulate because of the immense impact on his life.

Participant 5, Ashley, was from the class of 2013 in the institution and the SBP class of 2009. She graduated with a Bachelor's in Health Administration. The interview with her took place over face-to-face Internet video software. She is currently pursuing a

Master's degree. From a military family, she grew up traveling, but attended high school in Southern Virginia. She attributed part of her success to her own drive and motivation but recounted that the SBP program was a contributing factor. With an independent spirit, she identified some barriers that she overcame to be in the place she is today. She credited the administrators of the program with positively impacting her life and undergraduate experience.

Participant 6, Ian, is from the class of 2015 in the institution and the SBP class of 2009. He graduated with a degree in Global Affairs with a minor in international development and business. The interview with him took place in-person. He hopes to one day have an impact in international development work. As an immigrant, he understands the importance of building community and surrounding himself with positive people. He believes the community is at the core of who he is. His pursuit of higher education is not only for the betterment of himself, but also everyone around him. He emphasized that his pre-college program encouraged him to tell his story and to pursue higher education. At the institution, he built his support system and worked diligently to complete his coursework. He hopes that he can continue interacting with the SBP to influence future graduates.

Participant 7, Zoey, is from the class of 2014 from the institution and the SBP class of 2010. Her undergraduate degree is in Criminology, Law and Society. The interview with her took place over face-to-face Internet video software. She is currently working in Northern Virginia where she grew up and graduated from high school. She credits her hard work in high school and in a pre-college program with getting into higher

education and the SBP. She and her family emigrated from Mexico when she was very young and spent most of her young life as an undocumented student. When faced with the challenges that both college and federal processes produce, she forged ahead and then became an advocate for others. She was steadfast and committed to working hard and gaining experience during her undergraduate experience. She acknowledged that the SBP gave her many opportunities and helped her to be successful in her pursuit of higher education.

### ***Procedures***

The purpose of this study was to explore the college experiences and any barriers of first-generation students after they have graduated from both the bridge program (BP) and their university. An informational interview was sent out to approximately 90 students who graduated from the BP from 2009-2015 who met these criteria (see Appendix A). Students who emailed the researcher to set up a time and date for the interview became the participants of the study. The interview as the method of research was intended to capture a holistic account of first-generation students' college experiences as enabled by qualitative research (Creswell, 2014, p. 186).

The interview for each participant lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. These interviews were conducted face to face or via video-chat on Skype, Internet video-chat software. The interviews were essential to discovering what the student considered fundamental to their success. In essence, the interview questions were developed to have the participant describe their entire college experience, including but not limited to their high school experience, their summer bridge program narrative, and their account of their

college years after the program. In the first four questions, I intended to have the participant divulge information about high school, families, and their decision to attend college. As identified in the research, it is common that first-generation students may not have the information needed to understand all of the processes and systems within higher education (Bourdieu, 1977; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Kezar, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). It was important to understand their context and decision-making in regards to their college experience.

The second part of the interview explored their transition, how the SBP related to that transition, and any barriers that could be identified throughout their college experience. In this examination of their transition to college, account of the SBP, and their time in their undergraduate career, it was important to focus on particular aspects. These aspects included their social and academic development, financial situation, and ability to navigate the institution to complete their degree. This part of the interview revealed the intricate details of their experiences at the institution and any barriers they may have faced to the completion of their degree

After the interviews were completed, an analysis was done on their responses and common themes that arose from their narrative were identified. Through this analysis, several common categories were found and further analysis was completed to break down the categories into several central topics. From the topics there were many interconnections of the stories in response to the questions. These interconnections or findings were broken down to determine any policy implications for bridge programs and will be explored in the discussion section.

## *Analysis*

Due to the lack of consistent theory and knowledge about BPs, I chose the grounded theory approach for this study. As Charmaz (2014) describes, “grounded theory coding consists of at least two phases: initial and focused coding” (p. 42). This is also known as axial and selective coding, respectively. Where axial coding is the creation of general categories, selective coding is the process of identifying interconnection among the categories (Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998).

The interviews were transcribed and coded with the computer program NVivo for various themes. NVivo is software that helps to organize, analyze and code qualitative data (What is NVivo, n.d.). NVivo allowed me to analyze the data quickly first into initial categories and then into central topics. The questions for the interviews can be found in Appendix B.



## **CHAPTER FOUR : FINDINGS**

### ***Introduction***

In this chapter I report the findings from the analysis conducted for this study. As a first-generation student who did not participate in a bridge program and based on the existing literature, I believed that underrepresented students would face barriers because of their lack of knowledge of higher education institutions (Karp, 2011; Kezar, 2001; Santa Rita and Bacote, 1996; Wathington et al., 2011; Walpole et al., 2005; York & Tross, 1994). The main finding was that students from this institution's summer bridge program persisted through their degrees with continued help from the administrators. Rather succumbing to the barriers, students credit their success to the holistic and focused approach from the SBP staff.

The study also was designed to identify what further support first-generation students needed throughout their college experience. The last three findings are based on how to provide more support to this population, even if there are not identified barriers. One of the findings was the importance immigration played in the lives of some of the students. In this finding, the knowledge of students' experiences with immigration helped the program to provide greater support in necessary areas. The next finding, from the narratives, was support of students before entering college and how they chose the institution they attended. Pre-collegiate programs helped to create the institution as a

home away from home with a support system that served as a family for the students. In addition to providing this network of support, the pre-collegiate programs aided a majority of these students in navigating the college application and entrance process. The final finding is described by many of the students was the need for opportunities to transition from college to graduate education or professional jobs. Students recounted that they matriculate successfully, however, many of the participants discussed the difficulty in transitioning from undergraduate education to the next stage. They articulated a need for support through this transition time. In this chapter I delve into these findings in more detail drawing on the narratives of the participants.

***Primary Finding – Lack of Transitional Barriers***

As supported in the research, transitional challenges are the main focus for a bridge program (Kezar, 2001). Contradictory to the challenges that Kezar (2001) proposed, and the question that I asked in this study, the students did not identify barriers in their transition. They credited their success to the holistic approach from the SBP staff, even after the program was completed. When asked to describe their own transitions, many of the students initially mentioned the first moments on campus on their own. Neal described,

It was really interesting when they first dropped me off for [the bridge program], I remember sitting in the dorm room, right in [my residence hall room] over there and they were- kind of like - I just sat there and I was like, wow, I'm really by myself out here now. So it was interesting it was a lot of internal processing of what all is going on around me.

Ethan mentioned a similar experience in his first moments on campus about to begin his transition,

So it was very very, I guess like, scary. In the beginning, I knew that I was very, I was just hesitant. I remember wanting to just back out of [the bridge program]. I applied to [the bridge program] and was accepted, but it was really because of my two friends who I met in the [pre-collegiate program] who also applied.

Ashley felt more empowered than scared:

Honestly, it was empowering, because I'm here by myself, I'm still a crazy person - I've always been fighting to get out, regardless I was going to make this shit work. I was like okay, I don't need a friend to pass a class, okay, so regardless I was going to make this work.

Even with this initial description of isolation, the participants then discussed that this feeling dissipated after the first couple of days of the program. The program helped them to navigate a variety of challenges including campus familiarity and resources, college coursework, and most importantly develop a network of administrators, peers, and mentors. The workshops and seminars taught them vital time management skills, helped them to improve study habits and other ways to navigate college. This part of the finding is consistent with the literature and the four components that are found to be effective for bridge programs (Kezar, 2001; Wathington et al., 2011; Walpole et al., 2005; York & Tross, 1994).

#### *Component 1: Academic Classes*

As a part of the program, the students are required to take two classes during the summer. Even though the students had the support of the program, many described the experience as scary or mentioned they were nervous before taking classes. Eleanor remembered vividly how difficult her economics class had been during the bridge program. Others discussed how they pushed through communication problems or misunderstandings with the professors and were able to successfully complete the classes. Many of them connected their academic success with the mandatory study hours required by the program; they learned to budget time and understand how much study time was required by a college course. They also cited the workshops as a source of support for classroom management techniques. Neal mentioned, gratefully, that the program and especially the classes helped “to buffer the mistakes, I made in the fall.” All of the participants commented on the A’s or B’s they received in the classes and how empowered they felt as they began their freshman year. This academic support provided by the program contributed to the students’ confidence and success in the fall. The participants expressed that their experience entering their first fall semester was easier because of their completion of the SBP. They understood what classes were going to be like and the resources they had available to them. Mostly, they recognized that they had a support network of peers, faculty, and administrators that would encourage and comfort them when they needed it most. The experiences described by the students are exactly what the bridge program is intended to do, instill a sense of self-efficacy, confidence, reasonable expectations and the ability to overcome barriers (Ackermann 1991a; Cabrera, Miner & Milem, 2013; Fitts 1989; Kezar, 2001)

### *Component 2: Workshops and Presentations*

The participants also mentioned the benefits of the workshops and presentations throughout the program. Neal mentioned the workshops as an aspect of the program that he took for granted. He described how simple the program made it by providing all of the resources that they needed to succeed in their classes. Harry also mentioned the benefits of the workshops by referencing that is where he learned to manage his study time well. Other workshops mentioned were public speaking, writing, time and stress management. These presentations were provided so that the students could gain skills, as well as emotional and psychological support, that are necessary for their college career (Kezar 2001; Sablan, 2013; Walpole et al, 2005; Wathington et al., 2011). Most of the participants referenced these workshops as when they were able to get insight on all the different topics that were really helpful to their success in the classes during and after the program.

### *Component 3: College Knowledge*

One of the most mentioned aspects of the program by the participants was the college knowledge portion. The students recognized that their familiarity with the resources and physical campus gave them a huge advantage during the first couple of weeks. Ian described it like this,

I already knew- I knew the campus. I knew where things are- with the [bridge] program, I knew the different offices and how I can use the different offices. So I was the freshman, and people would come to me and ask me for directions, so that was the easy part.

Harry described a scavenger hunt around campus during the first couple of days that was particularly helpful with navigating the campus and learning about resources. He explained that he and his group had to go to each office on the list provided and then learn about the office before they could move onto the next place. This taught the students where the resource was and what the office did. Other participants mentioned learning about where to print, student research opportunities, where to get involved, and available majors. Many of the students mentioned they felt that the program had covered everything in such a short amount of time. This knowledge of campus and resources helped to connect them to different departments and ways to be successful. Harry stated, “I knew how to get around the campus, I knew what resources we had, so it was a taste before the actual thing. So that definitely was like a soothing, you know, a really nice transition for me because I was more prepared.” The ability to navigate the physical campus is an important component for students to feel comfortable and stay at the institution (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006; Tinto, 1993). The participants mentioned these resources as a continuous source of their success and ability to navigate the institution.

#### *Component 4: Relationships*

The relationships formed during the bridge program are another component that creates a support network for students (Wathington et al, 2011). These relationships were especially important for the students after the program was complete. During the interview, students were specifically asked to talk about college life after the bridge program. As mentioned previously, after the program is when the empirical support for

bridge programs is deficient (Kezar, 2001; Sablan, 2013). In the studies done by Wathington et al. (2011), and Barnett et al. (2012) the positive affect that the program had on the students seemed to wane after the second or third year. However, the participants in this study described the relationships they built during the program as an important aspect of their undergraduate life.

One issue that was mentioned frequently was the difficulty of advising and class registration. All of the students described in detail that their relationships with administrators of the SBP steered them through this struggle. The administrators would help them register for classes and figure out what they needed next. Each person attributed this support for their academics as a major component of their completion of college. Ethan even mentioned that he had a frustrating experience with his advising office for his major, so the administrators from the SBP stepped in to help him through each registration. Harry stated that it was something that he was particularly bad at and wished that he had taken a bit more time to understand. However, he was still able to make it through because the staff knew him and knew that he struggled with it, so they provided this support. With Ian, he commented that it was because of the support that he was able to study abroad in South Korea, an experience he otherwise would not have had. The support provided after the bridge program helped them to successfully navigate the institution.

The connection to the program and the administrators also benefitted the students financially. Although the program is unable to provide financial resources for all of the students, it helped to connect them with jobs on campus. Most students said that they

worked either for the office that supports the bridge program or an office where they had connected with an administrator that helped with the program. Some of the students worked for the bridge program itself to help mentor the new group of students and be “in a position to give back,” as Ian described it. These paid positions on campus helped the students financially. Eleanor even returned as a graduate student to the office that she worked in during her undergraduate career. Additionally, students mentioned how the office helped them access scholarships or grants that they qualified for; some were even able to receive financial support through a bridge program grant. These were grants for semester tuition, books and other items and financial support for studying abroad. Ian soberly vocalized that:

There were times where the finances were really tight. And there wasn't enough money to pay for books, pay for school but going back to the [bridge program], talking to them, to the director and people that worked there. And going back to [an administrator] at the office and talk to them and.... The fact they listen to you and come up with ways to help you, were- it made it really really easy and simple for me.

As identified by several researchers including Castleman (2012), financing an education can be a large barrier for first-generation students. Even though the SBP was not able to provide all of the students funding or work, they connected to other departments or places on campus that could help to ease the financial burden.

The topic of relationships also resurfaced when the participants were asked to talk about barriers that might impede their graduation. Some students commented that there



were times they felt isolated and it became difficult. However, because they were involved and secure with campus, they felt connected and attached to the campus and people. They said there were times they felt discouraged because their parents could not help them achieve something or that they felt out of place. This discouragement was described as alienation from other students, that they did not belong or that it was not an equal playing field. The students would remain positive by using the confidence inspired by their previous experiences, either that they were successful in college or that they had people to support them. Many of the students described their persistence to obtain a degree because of the pride that both their biological family and their [bridge program] family had in them. Ethan described the motivation: “if I gave up I would be letting down, you know my [bridge program] family and my family. My immediate family – because I know everything that they have invested in me you know- I am a piece of them, I am a representation of them.” The students felt supported through the program and then afterwards, inspired by their relationships and continued success. Ian articulated it like this:

I’ve never felt that I wasn’t going to graduate because I knew that I had the support and if I kept working and be persistent and being resilient, and just be optimistic. I knew that I had the support system from family, friends, professors here and the different offices on campus to succeed. So I’ve never felt that I wasn’t going to graduate.

The bridge program provided support during the five weeks but also continued it through the students’ college careers. Students identified that having relationships and a support

system after their SBP contributed to their degree attainment. This claim is supported in research (Balz & Esten, 1998; Kezar, 2001). The program is successful in providing students the opportunity to transition to college and persist to degree attainment with a support system in place on campus.

The students briefly mentioned other aspects they struggled with throughout college. Several mentioned that finances were something that was always salient to them. Ashley described her struggle of having a job off-campus without a car and the expense of both time and money to stay on campus during the summer. Others mentioned the difficulty of taking advantage of opportunities because of their cost. Additionally, several mentioned that time management was an issue they had to overcome. Harry described his involvement as an experiment. He was involved in many activities on campus and oftentimes too many at once, but he was thankful for the opportunities. Another participant alluded to his becoming too involved; he realized it when the first week of school he had to be in three places at once. All of these problems did not become barriers because of the program and administrators arming the students with the skills and knowledge to overcome them.

In the narrative of the challenges of their transitions from high school to college, the participants continually mentioned how the bridge program helped them to cope. Whether it was a component of the bridge program or an administrator, the participants continually attributed their success to their participation in the bridge program. As Ashley stated, “[the bridge program] taught you how to navigate school, taught you how to get

through college life.” All of the participants stated that their transition seemed easier because of the SBP.

In this program, the students could comprehend the difference between high school and college and understand what their lives would be like in the fall. The components of the program helped the students feel confident in the first semester, while other first year students were confused about where to find resources. Harry stated, “It was tough, and at the same time, it was easy.” Neal also stressed, “I wouldn’t say it was hard because the rest of the students [in the bridge program] were going through it as well”. Ethan emphasized how grateful he was for the opportunity and support system that the bridge program provided:

If I didn't have that support system, if I didn't have [the bridge program], I would have been really lost my first, during the fall semester of my freshman year because [the bridge program], showed me how to apply for classes, or register for classes showed me all the basic things that I probably would have hesitated or like, not known what to do.

The participants extensively discussed the confidence that was instilled by the bridge program. Ashley described it like this:

It gave me confidence. Overall through the transition, kind of like, this is going to be okay. You can do college, its not that much harder, its not like they have it in the movies like, it’s doable. People do it all the time. People graduate every year.

Others described it as the program helped them to spread their wings, really empowered them, and that it helped to make all of the stress completely worth it.

The students identified the four components as benefits that helped them persist through their college experience. The students completed the classes, workshops, all five weeks entirely together. Both mentors and faculty advisors supported them individually and in designated small group time. The students could also depend on the mentors and staff of the program to help them with their schoolwork. This support and network both challenged the students and helped them grow. Many explained that the connections formed out of a shared experience inspired them to be confident. All participants shared the sentiment that the benefit of the relationships fostered by the bridge program helped them to be successful throughout their undergraduate career. Ethan described this holistic approach as “en loco parentis”, and that the program was supportive, both academically and socially.

The SBP at this institution is a well-designed program with all of the important components outlined in existing scholarship about BPs (Kezar, 2001, Wathington et al., 2011; Walpole et al., 2005; York & Tross, 1994). The students interviewed did not identify any barriers; rather they stated that the program helped them to supersede any obstacles. Contradictory to what this study proposed, the holistic approach of the program helps students to overcome any barriers they might have to degree attainment.

### ***Finding – The Impact of Immigration Narrative***

Students who identify with either a first-generation, low socio-economic status or an underserved population in higher education are often talked about in percentages and numbers. Although helpful to paint a picture, as shown in this study’s introduction, this does not provide the context for a student who may have one or many of these identities.

These are narratives that are not often taken into account in the quantitative studies of bridge programs and are vital to provide comprehensive support for students. In the research of bridge programs, the description of first-generation students is frequently about the numbers of African-American or Latino students that either do not attend higher education or do not succeed (Allen, 1999; Blake, 1998; Balz & Esten, 1998). However, the effect of immigration on first-generation students is not often mentioned in many bridge program studies. In this section, I will explore how immigration affected the lives of the students and how the program provided individual guidance and considered their backgrounds and situations in this support.

The most prominent part of many students' stories was immigration. Their stories of immigration and how it affected them were an important aspect of how the program provided needed support. Out of the seven participants, five of the students had parents who were born outside of the US. Two of those five students were also born in the same country as their parents. The stories and comments from these five students created a powerful story of motivation to attend higher education. Several of these students commented that their family background and experiences influenced their major or course of study. Ian described it like this:

Most of the reason why I studied Global Affairs is because; growing up I noticed that community has a huge part in raising a child. And I remember when I was a little boy; my mom would leave and go to the garden to farm or something like that or work. And then she would leave me with neighbors you know, my dad would do that same thing, leave me with neighbors and if I was to mess up or do something

that my parents told me not to do... looking back, that had shaped my life and I believe that if a community is well-groomed and healthy, they have a huge part in raising a child. And because of that I also saw a lot of disparities between the government of [the country] being corrupt and the promises they make before the elections and what they actually do when they get into office. So I feel like as though, growing up I said that if I was given the opportunity to be educated, I would be a person that would go back to the community and try to improve the lives of people and work with them to solve so-problems that they're currently facing or problems that they may face in the future.

Zoey commented on her status as being undocumented. She stated that it was difficult because it limits what opportunities are available after high school. She added that this was before the legislation that allows undocumented students to receive in-state tuition, so the cost of college was even more daunting to her and her family. She stated several times that the situation put an enormous amount of pressure on her, especially when her family went through the documentation process. She attributed some of the pressure to both this process and the work in high school that she felt she needed to do to stand out from other students to demonstrate that she deserved to attend college. Zoey commented the most stressful time was waiting for the decision:

From one day to the next it was either yes, you're going to stay here with your family and you're going to- these dreams you're be able to fight for or no and you have to leave. So you're kind of like you know standing in the –on the line between- it's a just a drastic change in life. Like, all that I've lived before, all that

I've worked for, might just go away. In just a decision in saying that you don't get these papers that legalize you.

These aspects of their stories were extremely important to not only how the students decided to go to college but also how the administrators provided support for them during their collegiate experience.

The program and its administrators have to consider each student in order to effectively use their comprehensive approach. They first address this in the students they accept into the program. The definition for a first-generation student, on page seven, is how students are identified for the program. For this SBP, first generation means that their parents had not attended higher education in the US. However, this does not indicate that the students' parents did not have any exposure or experience to higher education. Some participants identified their parents going to higher education in other countries or attending some in the United States but leaving prior to graduation. For these participants, it means that higher education is no less important for the families, but that the processes were foreign to them. Many discussed hearing about college their entire lives and how important it was for them to attend. The decision for all of the participants to go to college was made early by their families and influenced the students throughout their lives. Harry commented that his mother stressed throughout his life that for immigrant families, higher education is an essential step for creating a better life. Zoey emphasized that because she was undocumented for most of her high school career, she knew she had to work extremely hard in high school, but did not know how she would achieve the next step. Ian, who immigrated to the United States before high school, said

that college is a way for him to return and share his knowledge. Some of the participants even shared stories of their grandparents. A few mentioned that their grandmothers attended higher education in different countries. Harry compared the two sides of his family, where one completed higher education, but another was not allowed to attend and could not read or write. Ashley commented on her unique experience that her mother and she had applied for college at the same time and graduated with their undergraduate degrees at the same time. All of the participants in this study identified as first generation but that definition was one of the only characteristics these students had in common. The identities they held were as diverse and complex as the stories that they told. These students had one aspect in common, that they identified as first-generation students. However, once they were accepted, the program administrators provided support for their individual needs. The comprehensive support for these students, whether academic, emotional, or financial, was identified because of the program administrators' knowledge of the student. The administrators did not assume that the program was going to ensure the success of the students, so they made sure to accommodate for individual differences.

All participants credited their success to the administrators of the SBP having knowledge of them and their situation in order to help them overcome any barriers they encountered. This meant that the administrators took into account, not only the student's demographics, but also their life holistically. These included the individual student's definition of first-generation, the support from family, and the effects of immigration on their families and their own life. As first-generation students, their whole experiences are what drive and motivate them to attend and persist through college, rather than one race



or socioeconomic factor. The SBP understood this and supported them entirely throughout their college careers.

***Finding –The Benefits of Pre-Collegiate Program Support***

This finding addresses how to provide students with support for more than just the bridge program and throughout college. Five out of the seven students (Eleanor, Harry, Ethan, Ian and Zoey) participated in a pre-collegiate program. The pre-collegiate program, of which there are two types identified in this study, are designed so students receive support throughout high school and are prepared to apply to college. These programs provided many benefits, similar to the SBP, to the students including: familiarity with the campus, connections with staff, and a network of support. The first program is an independent program and is not affiliated with the institution. However, the second program, which four out of the five students participated in, is operated out of the institution. The students who participated in these programs ultimately chose the institution that provided this program to attend for their undergraduate work. This section will explore how the students navigated the process of applying to college and how they ultimately chose their college based on the support from the pre-collegiate program and the location.

In the data about first-generation students, a missing piece of the story is how students navigate the process to apply to college. Some of the processes for applying to college can be complicated, particularly the important aspects of high school that are critical for admission into college. The aspects the participants identified as important include: GPA, SAT scores, tax forms for the FAFSA, knowledge of scholarships, and

other resources as among the many complicated steps of the college application process. These are the details, or cultural capital, that students sometimes struggle with and have to figure out on their own in order to apply and attend college (Bourdieu, 1977). This is particularly difficult if there is a language barrier for parents. Several participants mentioned that because their parents' primary language is not English, they were often explaining the process to them. Zoey mentioned that even graduating high school was a navigation process because she was only the second in her family to do so. These components are built into a bridge program, but often the knowledge is needed even before a student thinks about the application for college. Many of the students were supported in this process by their pre-collegiate program.

Five students in this study identified that they participated in a pre-collegiate preparation program. Eleanor, Ethan, Ian and Zoey referenced the same program and Harry participated in another similarly structured program. These programs identified the students in middle school or early high school to participate. As the four participants described the same program, it included: tutoring after school, mentors, workshops on finances and process for college, trips to colleges, information sessions for parents and a summer academy that was located on campus at the institution. This program also provided guaranteed acceptance to the institution with a certain GPA as well as an opportunity for a full or partial scholarship. Three of the participants received either the full or partial scholarship based on their credentials and participation in the pre-collegiate program operated by the institution. Eleanor described this program and the reality of attending college:

I knew that I would have to college at some point but, it didn't really hit me until the [pre-collegiate program]. [Pre-collegiate program] kind of, like we would come every summer to [the institution] and take our-the classes we would be taking the following –like upcoming year. And I really liked the environment, I was like wow... this is pretty cool. Alright I like this...so then I started- that's when I started getting interested in college, and I was like alright, this is, this is like nice -once I got, like I said, epiphany, I kind of was like- I got to get my stuff together, get really good grades, I started like really thinking about making my family very proud.

For these students, the bridge program was extremely helpful in their success as undergraduates. Their success and attendance at a higher education institution was also due to the pre-collegiate programs helping them build a network of support and be familiar with all that the institution had to offer.

The pre-collegiate program that four of the students took part in was an enormous influence on their decision to attend the institution. Eleanor described her decision process like this:

So I decided to come to [the institution] one, its close but mainly because of the [pre-collegiate program] they provided so much resources I felt comfortable at [the institution] already, I felt sort of like already attached to [the institution] and I kind of already had that vision ... so I kind of, my mind was already set to [the institution] and I was like I'm going to do it and then [the summer bridge program] happened and I was like I'm definitely going to do it because of this...

Others talked about their decision process in a similar manner, saying that not only were they familiar with the institution, but that they already had a family at the institution. The pre-collegiate program helped them prepare for college, with greater knowledge of and a network of support. They knew other students starting college that year with them and their mentors who still attending the institution. Ian described it as having an established network so he would not have to start completely over; he had friends, staff support, essentially a family at the institution already. Additionally, three of the five students mentioned the financial benefits of participating in the program. The program provided opportunities for students to receive full or partial scholarships. Three of these students said this was a tremendous benefit and it was a determining factor in their decision. The financial burden of college was mentioned by all of the participants interviewed, but these three referenced their own situation as being lucky or grateful that they received a scholarship. They attributed their scholarship, and thus the participation in the pre-collegiate program as contributing to their persistence in college. The participants talked about two types of pre-collegiate programs and credited them for assisting in the navigation the college application process. Both pre-collegiate programs were after-school programs that included multilingual meetings with parents, visiting colleges and exposing the students to college resources. These programs, available to first generation students in high school, helped the students and their parents navigate the path to college. These programs were important sources of support for these students to access both college and the bridge program.

In addition to the support of the pre-collegiate programs, most of the participants cited the location of the institutions as a large determining factor in their college selection. It allowed them to be close to their families while in college. The institution was located in the area close to where they had grown up and this was a large factor in their decision to attend this institution. Ethan stated:

My parents really encouraged me to go to [the institution] not only because I got the scholarship but because I would be close –closer to home. And my mom, would just be like crazy, if I even went to like [another in-state school], which is like 3 hours- you know like down the- 3 hours away from [the area] but my mom is like, we just have a very tight knit family.

Ian expressed that the proximity to a support system was as important as the location. He and two other participants also talked extensively about the accessibility to family and to a large city and the opportunities available there. In addition to being close to families, the five participants frequently mentioned their participation in the pre-college program, and the network of support and familiarity with the campus as other central factors in their decision. The students specifically mentioned that it was not only the support that was provided by the pre-collegiate program but also the proximity to their families and opportunities that would help them succeed.

Additionally, when talking about the process and the knowledge it takes to apply to college, several participants mentioned the support they received from high school teachers. Eleanor commented about the support from her teachers: “I loved all the teachers, the counselors, they played a huge part in me being successful” and Ethan

described a Math teacher that pushed him to believe in his own potential. The students also talked about how these influential educators nominated them for pre-college programs.

Choosing to attend college and where to attend were important decisions in these students' lives. Their decisions were informed by the location of the institution and the network support they felt they had. Those students that participated in the pre-collegiate program were influenced by the benefits of the program, the knowledge of the campus, its resources, and the support when they entered their first year. The process of where to go to college and persisting through the summer melt can be difficult for some first-generation students (Arnold et al., 2009) . However for most in this group, they had the support and knowledge to successfully transition.

### ***Finding - Transition After College***

In the students' hindsight, most of them had no barriers because they prevailed with the support that they had. The participants credited the program and its components with helping them to successfully transition into college and subsequently, their graduation. The narratives indicated that the program had helped them throughout their college career with the support of the administrators, connections or friends. The students mentioned briefly that there were some challenges, financial, time management, academics, but none of those were insurmountable. However, several mentioned that the part that remained overwhelming was the next step. The only barrier they could identify is how to transition to the next phase in their life, which is not a barrier to graduation but

to being successful in their next step. This transition has not been explored by previous research.

### *The Next Step*

Many of the students, when asked what were some additional challenges, mentioned that they were nervous or scared for the next step in their lives. Harry, Ian and Neal were transitioning from college and were faced with big decisions in the next few weeks, at the time of interviews. They specifically expressed that they felt like they needed some guidance on how to make this decision. They contemplated questions like, should I get an internship or what job should I take, how should I start looking, should graduate school be an option? Neal commented, “they teach you how to transition to college and you know that you're ready for the four years. But as you're figuring out the four years –it's kind of on your own to figure out what's after”. Harry also mentioned this but added that the program administrators had really done so much for them inside of the program and after that unless they were given more resources, it wouldn't be humanly possible for them to provide this support. The other students that had mentioned their struggle on transitioning out of college were in professional positions or in graduate school already. Ethan's narrative was particularly captivating:

So I just finished my first year of grad school. But...that has been a complete -- completely – its been challenging. At times I - I just felt like like you know giving up. Kind of I felt like you know, am I letting-- if I gave up I would be letting down, you know my [bridge program] family, my [pre-collegiate program] family, my [biological] family. My immediate family – because I know everything that they

have invested in me you know- I am a piece of them, I am a representation of them. So that kind of helped me push through my first year of grad school. But also, its another transition right? Because I have been at [the institution] since I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. That's when I began [the pre-collegiate program], and so I was in- that's approximately 10 years at [the institution]. From 7th grade until I graduated last Spring. That's a significant amount of time, so I knew I was supported, I felt confident you know, I – I felt like I could take on the world, right? Moving to [a different state] -right? Moving to a completely different p-university. Different people, not knowing anyone. That to me was just a huge challenge- and I experienced, I-I retreated back to kind of like who I was and I felt that I lost so much.

He continued to say that it is important to realize that the transition happens after high school but will also happen again in a very quick four years. He added, “many first generation college students we haven’t built up the social capital that will help us navigate our futures.” Ashley stated that, “Undergrad for me was pretty smooth. Graduate school –that’s what gets you! [laughs] That’s a whole different ball game – we need a [bridge program] for that!” These students who had successfully transitioned and completed college, even with some challenges along the way, realized that support to shift from college to after college was needed.

The students’ narrative was not without struggle or issues. However, they overcame those struggles and persisted with the help of the program as mentioned in the first finding. The challenges that were more difficult or overwhelming were the ones that



they had to face without help, the transition after college. Both perspectives, soon to be graduates and graduates, stated a similar need. This need was to navigate the resources, the opportunities and to live in a new place with new people. All of the participants acknowledged, though, that there would need to be extra resources for this to happen. As it is now, the administrators and program go the extra mile to do what they already do.

### ***Summary of Findings***

The students described their journey through college from when they decided to attend college, their decision and process in applying, their transition, and then their college experience. These interviews allowed them to look at their experience retrospectively. It also provided them an opportunity to reflect on what helped them to be successful as they worked to obtain their degrees. The data that supported the primary finding were the candid comments by the students in their appreciation of both the summer bridge program they participated in as well as the administrators' support. The students described the benefits of the program that included classes, workshops, and familiarity with the campus and peer and faculty network creation. The students described in detail these benefits and how it created a successful first year in college for them. As mentioned previously, these are the components of bridge programs that are supported by research (Ackermann 1991b; Buck 1985; Evans 1999; Fitts 1989; Garcia 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, the students further accounted for all of the support they received even after the program had ended. The administrators for the program would help find solutions for the students financially, which included jobs on campus, as well as involvement opportunities, and academic and emotional guidance.

The students' narrative of their experience included the holistic support that they received in order to successfully persist to their degrees. Students credit their success with the holistic approach from the SBP staff, even after the program ended and had no identifiable barriers to their degree completion.

One of the most important aspects of these participants' story was the effect of immigration. The details on their experience with immigration were essential elements in the participants' narratives and providing support to them. Of these seven students, their stories were similar in very small details, including being first-generation, however even that definition varied for each one. These students had varied backgrounds that included families from South America, North America, Africa and the Middle East. These students spoke different languages, grew up in different parts of the state and the world and identified themselves in many different ways. Their cousins, brothers and sisters, grandparents, parents and vastly different cultures influenced these students in a number of ways. Each story that was told inside of an interview was unique. The bridge program provided access for them because they were first-generation students but then provided support for them by accounting for the details of these students' narratives.

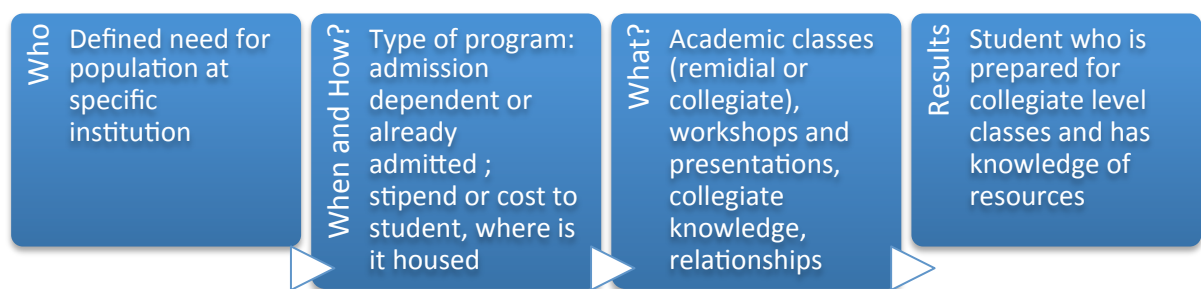
Another focus of this research was to find other ways that the students can be more supported. The participants in this study identified the significance of their pre-collegiate programs. The students then made the important choice of institution; the decision was predominantly made based on location. Both of these provided some level of support either from the pre-collegiate program or family. The program helped to create the institution as a home away from home with a support system that assimilated family

for the students. Five of the students chose the specific college because of the familiarity and networks they already had because of their participation in a pre-collegiate preparation program. This program had allowed them to develop a supportive administrative and friend network that they could rely on as well as knowledge of the campus and its resources.

In the students' reflection, there were not many aspects of their college experience that the bridge program did not support. One commonality between most of the interviews was the need that there be more support for transitioning out of college. Many of the students mentioned the need for internship or job search support, emotional transition as well as how to adjust to life after college. Several of these students commented that the institution had been their home for close to a decade because of the pre-collegiate program and when they left, it was difficult. In the interviews, this was the most common barrier that students identified after their successful degree and bridge program completion.

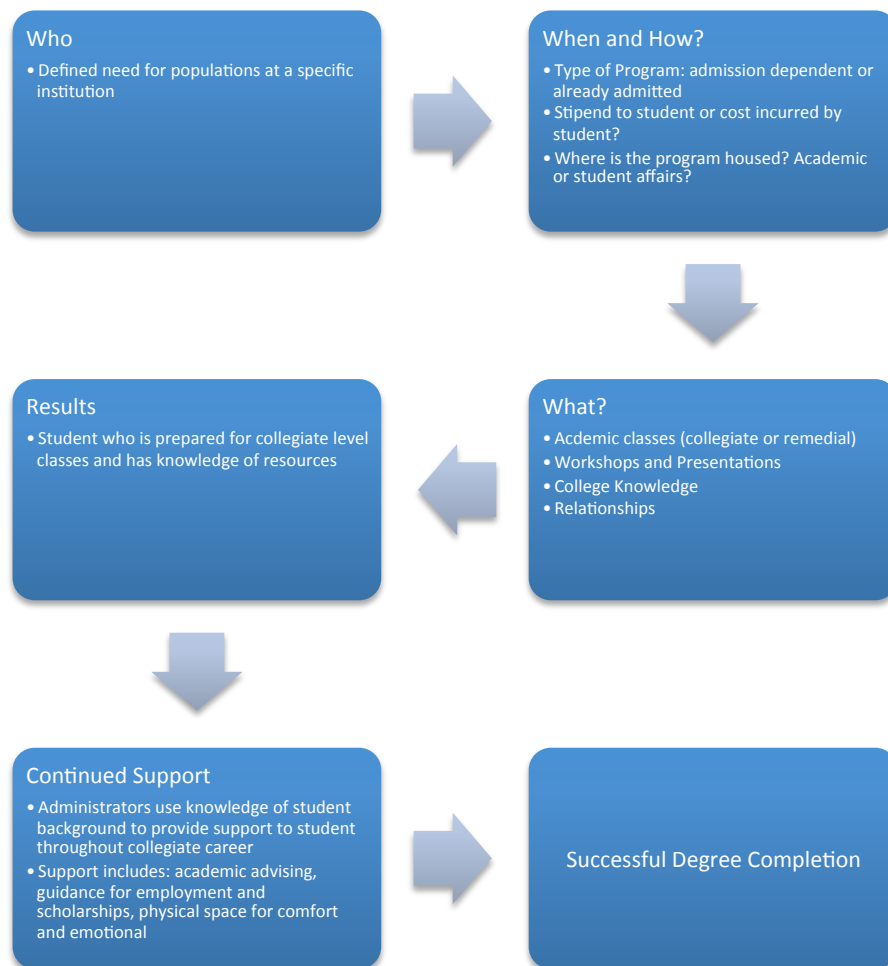
The overarching purpose of this study was to explore whether barriers existed after the BP for these students and what the barriers were. Based on this study's literature review, I propose that a current model for bridge programs looks like this:

***Current Bridge Program Model***



However, because overall the students said that this study's bridge program and administrators were holistically focused on their experiences, academic and social needs and persistence through higher education that they were able to achieve their goals. Due to this discovery, I propose that a model for this study's bridge program looks similar to this:

***This Study's current model***



The students identified that the bridge program they had the opportunity to participate in was a large part in their successful degree completion. Therefore, the continued support

that the program and administrators help the students to prepare for college as well as contribute largely to their degree attainment.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### ***Introduction***

This thesis was based on a qualitative study of first-generation, high-achieving students who had completed both their undergraduate degrees and a summer bridge program. The purpose of this study was to explore these experiences and examine if there were barriers to degree completion after the summer bridge program. In this study, I explore a bridge program from a qualitative perspective. I discovered four findings that emerged from the data.

The first of these findings contradicted the research question I proposed. Students credit their success with the holistic approach from the SBP staff, even after the program ended. Although there were some challenges, these were mitigated by the support network and knowledge that the students gained from the program and did not become a barrier to their success. The participants identified the four components from existing research as being important. However, ultimately it was the continued support from the program that allowed them to be successful. In existing scholarship, a program like this SBP has not been studied. Kezar (2001) and Sablan (2013) studied the different types of BPs but none were as comprehensive in both the support and guidance that this program implements. The program in this study not only has the four components that research supports but also provides encouragement and help for all of the needs for these first-

generation students. Based on their narrative, they were successful because of the bridge program and its holistic approach.

The second finding is another way the program supports the students. Most of the participants' stories were influenced heavily by immigration. The bridge program was able to provide them individual support by the administrator's familiarity with the students. Their narrative included the struggle of their parents and grandparents as well as their unique definition of what it meant to be first-generation. Some of these participants' parents had attended higher education, but in a different country. Others had grandparents that done the same thing. This narrative, and others, of a first-generation student experience is largely missed in the research. The students in the research are quantitatively discussed based on race, socioeconomic status, and academic demographics.

The third finding referenced the extra support that was provided to a majority of the students in this study. A pre-collegiate program helped to create the institution as a home away from home. The conjunction of the two programs, both a pre-collegiate program and bridge program, is also not seen in the existing scholarship. The support for some of the participants included middle school, high school and college. This extensive support helped the students to not only navigate college, but also how to prepare for college academically, how to complete the application process, and then how to find funding. The care that the pre-collegiate program provided helped to create another network for these students to rely on. This network and the proximity to family was an important factor in college choice.

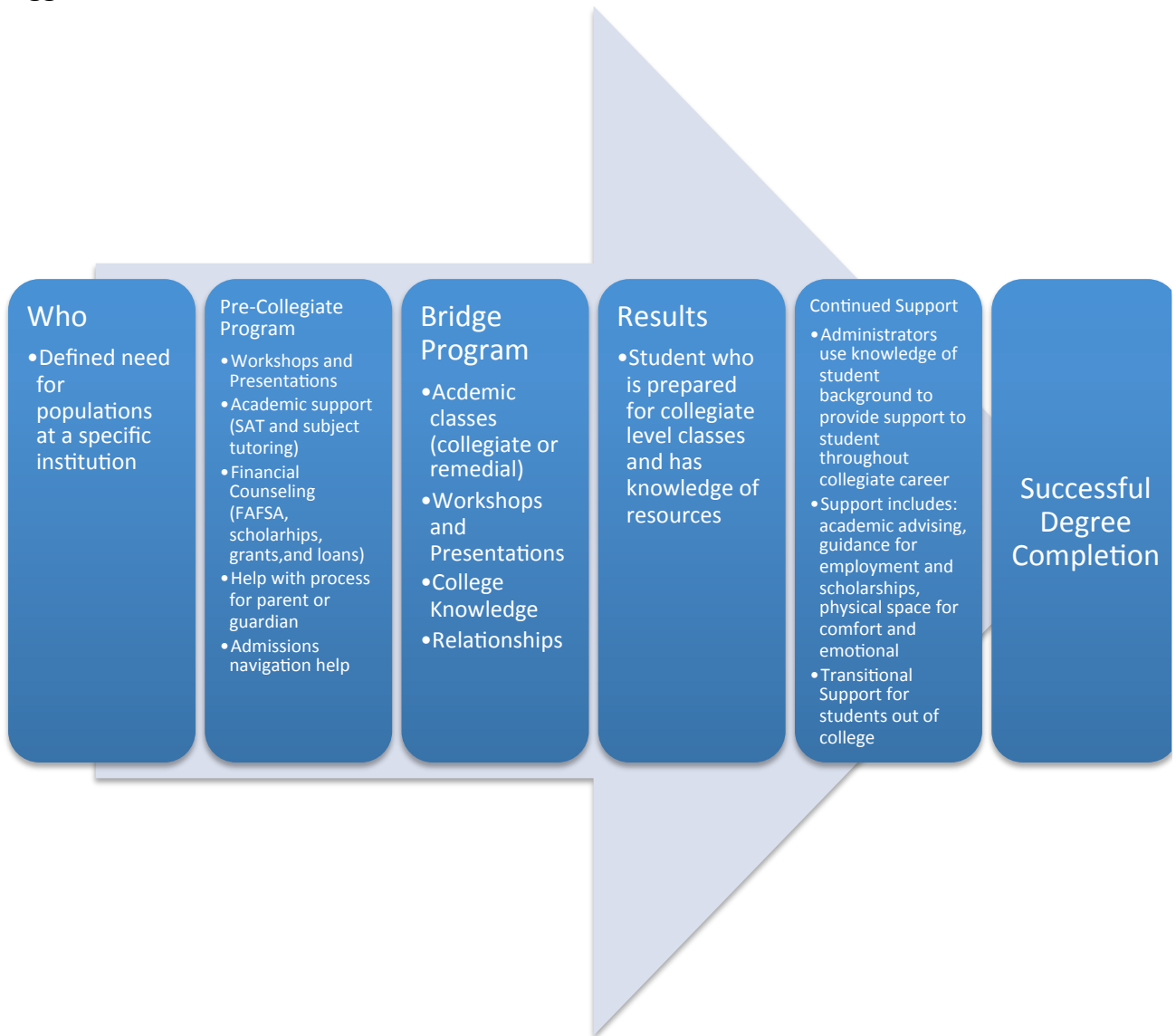
The fourth finding was an additional way to provide support to students in their transition. Although students matriculate successfully, many of the participants spoke to how difficult the transition was from undergraduate education to professional jobs or continued education. This is another aspect that is missing from previous research: the transition out of college. The students received the guidance they need during their collegiate career but felt lost on how to navigate the next step. They articulated a need for support through this transition time.

### ***Implications for Practice***

In the first two findings, I explored that the participants felt that the bridge program was successful, that the program helped them to overcome barriers and navigate the institution. In the third finding, a majority of the participants identified a pre-collegiate program to navigate the process to attend college. The last finding was the only identification of a barrier or an overwhelming problem for the students. For these students, the bridge program and the pre-collegiate program helped them to successfully build cultural capital in ways that supported them in their success. These findings are vital for future bridge programs. Not only is important to provide support for the students throughout the program but also, if possible, before and after. A proposed model for a program this type of program would look something like this:



### ***Suggested Model***



These students were supported by the pre-collegiate program to help them navigate the process to access college, then by the bridge program in the transition, and by the administrators throughout their college experience. This allowed for the majority of students in this study to navigate both the process to apply and gain admission to college as well as continue to successful degree attainment.

In this issue it is also vital to look at the factors that can contribute to the underrepresentation of these students are the academic or social adjustment challenges faced when transitioning to higher education (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In hopes of explaining these sorts of phenomena, Bourdieu (1977) explored the idea of a Social Reproduction Theory and its effect on students. According to this theory, institutions and their many facets, including curriculum and systems, were constructed by dominant groups in society and are still designed around the needs and desires of dominant groups. Bourdieu further explains that institutions are still structured to cater specifically towards these groups, thus excluding other groups from flourishing in the environment. Bourdieu coined the phrase “cultural capital,” which is the idea that the knowledge needed to succeed in higher education is passed from generation to generation. This knowledge is used to preserve privileges and exclude anyone of non-dominant groups. Ultimately, this means that the education system is designed to be exclusive. Unless institutions alter the structure or the students of non-dominant group are provided access to cultural capital, obstacles will continue to exist (Weninger and Laurau, 2003). Administrators must be cognizant that educational systems actually

reinforce social inequity, which in turn produces class immobility or social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Giroux, 1991; Macleod, 1987). Unless, the difficulties are identified and altered then higher education will continue to be exclusive. In researcher Sandy Homel's (2013) dissertation, she supports her study with the Social Reproduction theory first proposed by the sociologist, Bourdieu. Institutions should look at their bridge programs as the avenue to reduce or eliminate the inequities in their systems. In this vein, students would need this holistic support and guidance to navigate the system that currently exists, the application process, the collegiate experience and the transition out of college. If looked at through the Social Reproduction lens, steps would need to be taken to build the cultural capital that would supersede the exclusive institutional systems.

An additional implication for practice is adjusting several programs to be similar in structure. The difficulty of analyzing programs as identified by Sablan (2013) is due to the absence of similarities between programs. Bridge programs should always include the four components and be measured by the effectiveness of those components for participants. If these components are implemented in a similar structure for several bridge programs, then comparative analyses could be conducted. The information from these analyses could then provide find an effective framework for bridge programs. Future bridge program creators should also look a holistic approach for students during and after the program but also seek to provide a pre-collegiate program for support.

This research could be used to guide the implementation of future bridge programs. Currently, programs are often short in nature and may not follow up with the

students once they begin their first year at the institution. The bridge program in this study continually reaches out to the students and provides support for them throughout their college experience. The program's administrators continually meet with the students, providing academic, emotional, or financial guidance. Two of these were mentioned repeatedly by students 1) the navigation of requirements for graduation and 2) the help to find either campus jobs or scholarships for financial support. Course planning and academic advising could be implemented into future bridge program as a component to help students. Additionally, as Castleman (2012) finds that financial counseling can have a positive effect on students. Financial plans for future bridge programs should include these resources for students to access after the bridge programs are completed. These resources provide reinforcements for the bridge program components that are found to be successful. Additionally, an important goal for comprehensive bridge programs could be for students to identify their own agency in degree completion. The students in this study attributed their success to the bridge program and continued help from administrators. However, if it is possible for programs in the future to promote the students' self-efficacy and confidence enough to recognize that the ability to complete a degree is within themselves and can be internally motivated. The most important aspect of this is that the institution or entity that provides the financial support for these programs is that the goal is a holistic solution.

### ***Pre-collegiate programs***

The students in this study also alluded to the pre-collegiate program being a tremendous help for both them and their families. This was an important component for

these students. In the proposals for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2014, called the Higher Education Affordability Act, it outlined for a need for pre-college support (Harkin, 2014; House Committee on Education and Workforce; Kline, 2014). The Higher Education Affordability Act proposal focused on the financial advising for students with tax forms, FAFSA and loan counseling. This is in addition to the need for academic and emotional support as researched by Castleman (2012). The effectiveness of the TRIO program encourages the belief that a pre-collegiate program for students that includes many of the components of a bridge program can be helpful for first-generation students. The programs would address any questions or problems students may have before they apply to college so that the admissions and financial aspects will be more maneuverable. In order to create access for all populations of students, it is important to help them navigate not only college but also the pathway on how to higher education as well.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

For future research, there are three implications from this research. First, that the research on first-generation students should be based on the experiences of those students and examined in qualitative research. Secondly, bridge programs should look to create similar structures. These structures should not only include the four components but also holistic and comprehensive support. These programs could then be evaluated to identify any barriers that exist. Additionally, these programs could be looked at through the Social Reproductive lens to identify if these barriers are innate structures of the institution. This in addition to the research or literature review focused on first-generation students and

the effects of immigration would allow future studies to be comprehensive. Thirdly, if a program has the resources to include a pre-collegiate preparation program in its' holistic practices then this should be assessed as well.

First, as addressed previously in this study, the conversation should be modified from numbers and statistics to include the complex and rich narratives that these students have to offer the world of research. This is especially important in the lens of a holistic program. One of the most important declarations from the students was the emotional support they received from the administrators because they understood them and knew them well. They knew they could receive help and support because there was a relationship that had preceded the help. Future research could look explore what barriers students identify if surveyed to reach a larger number . Interviews could then be used to identify any barriers and may not be helpful to students in their collegiate experience.

Additionally, quantitative research on bridge programs is not in short supply (Sablan, 2013). Sablan's (2013) analysis gives examples of many studies; however these were analyzed with only quantitative and mixed methods approaches. Indeed, these reports are required by the financial benefactors to support the investment on first-generation students and their persistence to degree attainment. However, in these reports the definition of a first-generation student is generic and overgeneralized. Researchers suggest that students from a low-socioeconomic background who identify as Latino, Hispanic or African-American are more likely to have trouble with their transition higher education and to cease their pursuit of higher education (Suzuki, 2009). However, in this description it is assumed that students from a low-socioeconomic status who identify as a

Latino, Hispanic or African-American all have the same experiences in high school and then in their transition to college. It is postulated that the four components implemented inside of a program are solutions that can help any first generation student regardless of their ethnicity, personal and cultural background and financial status. It is helpful that these components have been identified and can be implemented to help students be successful, but as each student's college experience is unique so is their transition and in that, their challenges (O'Conner, 2002).

Secondly, if a program is able to alter their structure to include a holistic approach from the student's entrance into the program until matriculation, the program should be evaluated with a mixed methods approach. This approach would take into the account of students' quantitative successes such as GPA and successful completion of classes as well as their narratives. Both of these aspects are important to developing a full portrait of how bridge programs can help first generation students. The mixed method evaluation would be based on the assumption as Creswell (2013) states: "provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data alone" (p.19).

Even with these structures in place, the success of BPs are mixed and students are not always retained at the institution (Barnett et al., 2012; Castleman, 2012; Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Kezar, 2001; Strayhorn, 2010; Sablan, 2013; Walpole, 2008; Wathington et al., 2011). It is therefore important for researchers to look at not only the characteristics and skills that BPs aim to develop in the students, but also what approaches are helping

students to be successful and how can the institution better support these programs, administrators and students.

Lastly, a program that is holistically supportive should also include a pre-collegiate preparation program. Future research can create a longitudinal study that explores a student's experience from the beginning of their program (pre-college) to when their undergraduate degree is completed to identify any barriers to their degree. Additionally, as suggested by the participants in this study, there would be an additional transitional program for helping students to be successful after college. It is vital that resources include staff and supplies for the students to support this kind of program. If the financial support does not exist for this type of program, providing supplementary support as needed for students facing their next transition. A future study can be done to examine the affects of this kind of program on students. In order to alleviate barriers or obstacles, institutions must do everything in their power to support transition programs, administrators and departments that implement the program. If there is shortsighted funding, there will be shortsighted results.

### ***Limitations***

As in all research, this study has its limitations. This quantitative study was completed with seven voluntary participants; in the future it would behoove this area of research to include more interviews. These interviews should include participants that both volunteer information as well as others' opinions that may be more critical of the program. This would allow a broader perspective to be represented. Additionally, this research was only conducted on one summer bridge program at one institution. Further



comparison studies could be conducted at several institutions with a mixed methodology to look and explore students' experience. As mentioned previously, it is important to mention that the bridge program in this study also only serves a low percentage of incoming first-generation students at this institution. It would be beneficial to both the program and institution to include a large population and additional resources for the program to discover if these positive affects would take place on a higher number of students.

### ***Summary***

This study was completed in order to look at the barriers at a Mid-Atlantic large four-year institution for first-generation students who completed a summer bridge program. Bridge programs were created with the intent to support students who are currently underrepresented in higher education. As the system currently exists, certain populations are successful in degree completion without programmatic help, however there are populations that are continually affected by the institutional system and process of navigation. Bridge programs were created to aid in this navigation but the effectiveness of these programs are found to have mixed results. The purpose of this study was to identify any barriers that might exist for these students. Through the narratives of these students' experiences, it was found that the bridge program created a holistic experience for them. Based on their description, their success was due in large part to the program and the administrators supporting them from their entrance at the institution to their exit. In these interviews, the students reflected on their experience at the institution and were incredibly grateful for the opportunities they had been given.

These students had received their undergraduate degrees and were a bit nervous and worried about the next step, but had no doubts that they had been able to complete their last step because of the participation in the summer bridge program

## APPENDIX

### **Appendix A:** Solicitation for interviewees

Dear[bridge program] Alumni,

I hope all is well! I want to tell you about a project that a [institution] student named Amber Duffey is conducting for her Master's thesis. She plans to explore the effect that transition programs like [bridge program] have on first generation students. Completing this interview process with Amber could give us some valuable data that we could use to advocate on behalf of [the bridge program]. Please see Amber's email below for more information. It would be great if you could participate. Interviews can be conducted in person or on skype. If you are interested and able to participate, please email Amber at [\[email\]](#). She is also cc-ed on this email for ease.

Thank you!  
[bridge program coordinator]

## **Appendix B: Questions in Interview**

- 1) Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - a. Where did you grow up?
  - b. What did you study here at Mason?
- 2) Tell me about your high school experience.
  - a. Where did you go to high school?
  - b. What were your favorite classes?
  - c. What did you like to do for fun?
- 3) How did you decide to attend college?
  - a. How did you decide to come to Mason?
  - b. How did you first learn about Mason?
  - c. Did you consider other schools? If so, how did you choose this one?
- 4) What role did your family play in your decision to attend college?
  - a. What is the educational background of your parents (or primary caretakers)?
- 5) Describe your transition from high school to college.
  - a. To what extent did high school prepare you for college?
    - i. Academically?
    - ii. Socially?
  - b. What was most challenging about the transition to college?
  - c. What was easiest about the transition to college?
- 6) Tell me about your experience with the STEP program.
  - a. In what ways, if any, was the program helpful?
  - b. Were there aspects of the college transition that you felt the STEP program did not address?
- 7) How would you describe your financial situation during college?
  - a. What were your options for paying for college?
  - b. Who was involved in helping you figure out how to pay for college?
  - c. In what ways, if at all, did your financial situation affect your life as a student?

How would you describe the process of navigating Mason and everything you had to do to graduate?

To what extent did aspects of the STEP program help you navigate Mason?

Can you think of things that the STEP program *didn't* do that might have been helpful to you while you were in college? [If they need clarification on what

you're asking, add: Do you have suggestions for the STEP program about how they can better assist students?

Were there any challenges you faced in college that we haven't discussed yet?

If yes, what were they?

Did you ever feel that any of those challenges would be a barrier to you obtaining your degree? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Do you have any questions for me about anything we've talked about, or about my study?

*Thank the participant for their time and insights.*

## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to explore the experience of participants of a bridge program. In this exploration, the focus will be to find any barriers to degree completion after the participation in the bridge program. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute interview that will be audio-taped.

#### **RISKS**

A risk of this study might be a deep reflection into their college experience which might cause anxiety around how the person handled the situation. However, the deeper reflection might allow them to realize how far they might have grown in their lives.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research related to bridge programs and access to higher education for first-generation students

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. Your name will not be included in any surveys or collected data. The data, which includes a transcribed version of the audiotape will only include your name on an excel spreadsheet corresponds to the number of the transcribed document that will only be privy to my committee and myself. The committee consists of 3 Mason professors. This information will be kept on a non-public Mason computer for the required 5 years. Copies of the audio will be stored on a Mason computer until it can be transcribed. It will then remain on this computer for 5 calendar years, after this point it will be deleted from the computer and hard drive in its entirety.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

#### **CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Amber Duffey (MAIS-Higher Education program at George Mason University. She may be reached at 703-993-1614 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Dr. Paul Gorski may also be reached for additional information via email at [pgorski1@gmu.edu](mailto:pgorski1@gmu.edu). You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the research staff, and I agree to participate in this study.

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Name

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Date of Signature

## **Appendix D:** Categories and Subcategories

### **\*\*Category: Location**

#### **Subcategory: DC Suburb**

Code: Arlington

Code: Falls Church

Code: Fairfax

Code: Woodbridge

#### **Subcategory: Southern Virginia**

Code: Fredricksburg

Code: Charlottesville

#### **Subcategory: Proximity to Mason (4)**

### **\*\*Category: Education- High School**

#### **Subcategory: Teach Support**

#### **Subcategory: College Prep Program Support**

#### **Subcategory: AP / IB classes**

#### **Subcategory: preparation from High School**

#### **Subcategory: Knowledge of college process**

Code: Family Help

Code: process of application - requirements

### **\*\*Category: Early Identification Program**

#### **Subcategory: Components**

Code: workshops

Code: summer time on campus

Code: living on campus

Code: mentors

Code: Starting early

#### **Subcategory: Benefits**

Code: knowledge of George Mason

Code: free classes offered

Code: family / support on campus

Code: familiarity with Mason

Code: Program Benefits convinced students to go to Mason

Code: guaranteed acceptance w/ GPA

### **\*\*Category: Family Support**

#### **Subcategory: Influence- pride, decision**

#### **Subcategory: biological family**

#### **Subcategory: friends as family**

#### **Subcategory: program family**



**\*\*Category: College Choice**

**Subcategory: Mason**

Code: EIP  
Code: attachment / familiarity with campus  
Code: in-state school  
Code: size  
Code: location  
Code: friends influence  
Code: ambassador  
Code: flyer from STEP / program  
Code: name familiarity

**Subcategory: Other**

Code: acceptance  
Code: size  
Code: location

**\*\*Category: Transition Challenges**

**Subcategory: Procedural**

Code: Finance / FAFSA

**Subcategory: Emotional**

Code: Change of study habits / expectations (syllabus)  
Code: time management  
Code: belief in self – self accountability  
Code: processing of being alone

**Subcategory: None**

**\*\*Category: Parent Education**

**Subcategory: Education completed**

Code: some college  
Code: high school  
Code: no high school or college

**\*\*Category: STEP program**

**Subcategory: Components**

Code: living on campus  
Code: classes  
Code: workshops  
Code: study time  
Code: mentors  
Code: other participants

**Subcategory: Benefits**

Code: knowledge of campus offices  
Code: free tuition  
Code: free board on campus for 5 weeks

Code: family / support on campus  
Code: familiarity with Mason  
Code: Program Benefits convinced students to go to Mason  
Code: adjust from high school to college- work out growing pains

**Subcategory: Suggestions**

Code: STEP out- after college  
Code: Real Life Application  
Code: Use of Alumni

**\*\*Category: Finances**

**Subcategory: Payment**

Code: Grants  
Code: Loans  
-Government (Unsubsidized/Subsidized)  
Code: Scholarships  
-EIP  
-independent  
Code: Work

**Subcategory: Financial difficulty by year**

Code: freshman year and sophomore fine, jr & sr difficult  
Code: fresh, soph and jr fine- sr difficulty  
Code: all years fine- scholarship

**Subcategory: Affected Life**

**\*\*Category: Post –STEP program**

**Subcategory: Support**

Code: Emotional  
Code: Academic  
- retention with course counseling  
Code: Financial  
-find grants/ scholarships

**Subcategory: Remaining transitional challenges**

Code: class difficulty  
Code: procedural knowledge  
Code: navigation of resources / college familiarity  
Code: feeling equal / deserving  
Code: time management

**\*\*Category: Persistence / Attainment /**

**Subcategory: Involvement**

**Subcategory: Family Encouragement**

Code: to make grandparents proud  
Code: Family insistence (throughout life)

**Subcategory: Doubt**

- Subcategory: Confidence**
- \*\*Category: Education-Student**
  - Code: Narrative- what are the characteristics of each and the passionate part of their story
- \*\*Category: First Generation**
  - Code: what “in vivo” difficulties define a first gen student
- \*\*Category: Immigration**
  - Subcategory: Opportunity**
    - Code: New Country
    - Code: Generational Differences
    - Code: Easy to education
  - Subcategory: Culture**
  - Subcategory: Hardship**
- \*\*Category: Occupation (within Person Classification)**
  - Subcategory: working on Masters**
    - Code: in Public Health
    - Code: Higher Education
    - Code: Forensic Science
  - Subcategory: Finished with bachelors**
    - Code: Criminal Justice
    - Code: Global Affairs
    - Code: International Development
      - Code: Conflict analysis and Resolution

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Amber Duffey graduated from Mishawaka High School, Mishawaka, IN in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Science from Indiana University in Bloomington in 2010. Amber was employed at George Mason University from 2010-2012. Between 2012 and 2014, she was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco. Upon her return from Morocco, Amber was then employed again by George Mason University. She received her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary studies in 2015.