

STUDENT TRANSITION EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM: DISCOVERING TRENDS
ON FIRST-GENERATION LATINO/A COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Student Transition Empowerment Program: Discovering Trends on First-Generation
Latino/a College Students

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Counseling and Psychological Services.....	CAPS
George Mason University	GMU
Grade Point Average.....	GPA
Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education	ODIME
Student Transition and Empowerment Program.....	STEP
Wellness, Alcohol, and Violence Education and Services	WAVES

ABSTRACT

STUDENT TRANSITION EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM: DISCOVERING TRENDS ON FIRST-GENERATION LATINO/A COLLEGE STUDENTS

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George Mason University, 2015

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This thesis describes the effect of the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP), a summer bridge program at George Mason University during the summer of 2014.

Research is done in a case-study format, collecting interview data from six first-generational Latino/a college students participating in the program. The data is collected over the course of three interviews per participant, starting at the beginning of the program, the end of the program, and within the middle of their first semester. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author conducted a literature search and reviews research about summer bridge programs and mentoring relationships, highlighting trends from the literature to themes discovered through interviewing the participants. This thesis is slated to be a reference and resource for higher education institutions conducting their summer bridge programs in order to gauge the early effects on first-generation college students.

CLARIFICATION ON TERMINOLOGY

For the use of this paper, the term “Latino/a” is being used to represent the terms “Latino,” “Latina,” and the plural terms “Latinos” and “Latinas.” The use of a gender-neutral “Latin@” and the term “Hispanic” are not used within this text due to the author’s personal choice though those terms are used in other forms of literature on the topic. The terms “Latino” and “Latina” are typically used to describe a person with familial roots in South America, Central America, and Mexico. The term “first-generation” is used to describe a person who is the first in their immediate, nuclear family to attend college. For the purpose of readability, the term “Student Transition Empowerment Program” is used interchangeably with its acronym “STEP.”

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The student population at George Mason University consists of a growing number of Latino/a students. According to 10-year enrollment trend at the university, Latino/a students are showing a steady increase in numbers each year, from stagnant to a dramatic climb in 2008 (George Mason University, n.d.a). Yet, next to Native American students, Latino/a students have the lowest headcount representation within the university (George Mason University, n.d.b). Nonetheless, these Latino/a students could offer the best perspective on experiences beyond the retention data, especially considering their growing participation numbers in support programs, such as summer bridge programs. These programs seek to improve students' preparation for college.

In this study the focus on the collection of retention data are not entirely on Latino/a students, but also those who identify as first-generation students. First-generation Latino/a students are the pioneers in their families, and gaining access to attend an institution of higher education can be both exalting and scary (Borrero, 2011). There are obstacles that these students face when entering a higher education institution that they are not prepared to overcome (Sanchez, Esparza, Colon, & Davis, 2010; Sy & Romero, 2008). These students – as both first-generation students and Latinos/as – require assistance when entering institutions of higher education in deciphering cultural, social, and financial issues, which may not have been properly presented to them prior to

enrollment (Crisp & Cruz, 2010; Gross, 2011; Torres, Resiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006).

At the Fairfax, Virginia campus of George Mason University, the site of this study, administrators and student services officials work towards building a culture of diversity. The office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics provides literature and resources that reflect their mission statement that is to “advance the University's commitment to creating a welcoming, respectful and inclusive educational environment that values integrity and a culture of shared responsibility” (George Mason University, n.d.c, para. 1). The Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education (ODIME), is an office that pursues an “inclusive learning environment through identity development and cultural competency” (George Mason University, n.d.d, para. 1). This office celebrates their values by hosting and co-sponsoring initiatives for historically underrepresented students, faculty, and staff, and their allies in higher education. For example, the Vision Awards – as an example of the office’s celebration of their values among the collegiate community – is a yearly event recognizing and honoring excellence in academics, leadership, and social justice. ODIME offers Latinos/as cultural and social interaction through networking and special initiatives, which includes the Student Transition and Empowerment Program, or STEP, a summer bridge program for first-generation students who have been accepted to GMU. This gives them exposure to the college lifestyle and a support network focused on mentoring.

Summer bridge programs that provide a support system of mentoring for students prior to entering college has become a viable option for supporting first-generation

Latino/a students. Mentoring, often an important part of summer bridge programs, has been shown to benefit Latino/a college students (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Crisp & Cruz, 2010; Stromei, 2000; Zand et al., 2008). In their research, Baker and Griffin (2010) stated that mentorship “involves an emotional commitment ... mentoring relationships are rooted in a mentor’s long-term caring about a student’s personal and professional development” (p. 4). Longitudinal studies of mentoring relationships found that there was increased persistence in academic participation, regardless of whether the mentor’s race or ethnicity matched that of the Latino/a students they mentored (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Kurpius, Rund, 2011). With these relationships – regardless of the mentor’s background – first-generation Latino/a students could get the cultural, social, and financial assistance they originally had not been receiving (Sanchez et al., 2010; Zarate & Burciage, 2010). Furthermore, by incorporating a staff or faculty member in the mentor-mentee process, students have the potential to develop a deeper insight into expectations of their university and campus (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

Besides staff and faculty mentoring, the campus of George Mason University provides opportunities for social development through the availability of student organizations and communities. Listed within the ODIME website are at least 10 organizations with Latino/a influences, from Greek organizations to peer-to-peer mentoring programs. While these are not the only opportunities for Latino/a students to pursue, they provide a starting point in creating a supportive social network within their culture. Often first-generation students do not know that these opportunities even exist until late into their career as students (O’Connor, 2009; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). Hence,

programs such as STEP provide access to those opportunities before the student is even injected into the college campus environment.

How these students effectively empower themselves is determined by the skills they receive early on in their college careers (Dugan et al., 2011; Campbell, Smith, Dugan, Komives, 2012). While there is considerable data on leadership programs and other retention initiatives that engage students and attempt to teach skills of empowerment, there is less data on the effectiveness of programs that serve at-risk and oppressed populations. How a university can effectively ensure that these students succeed is a common mission taken up by a majority of bridge programs, particularly STEP.

The significance in this study is to determine how student development programs, mentoring relationships, and other retention initiatives help first-generation Latino/a students persist through college. The research questions are:

Research Question 1: What is the scope of mentoring initiatives on college readiness and success of first-generation Latino/a college students?

Research Question 2: How can an institution be prepared for assisting at-risk student populations towards graduation?

Research Question 3: How does a mentoring relationship affect first-generation college students in navigating the “college student” role?

Data collected from this thesis could inform higher education educators and administrators on the benefits of mentoring initiatives to at-risk student populations.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss the major elements of the prior research into my topic, specifically mentoring; the relationships that are developed; and the institutional perspective to mentoring programs. Are mentoring programs viable retention initiatives for first-generation Latino/a students? What forms do these programs take? What is included in them?

Latinos/as Persisting in College as First-Generation Students

For one to understand the Latino/a college student demographic, there needs to be an understanding of what these students experience when they step onto a college campus as well as what they experience until they leave campus; whether that be graduation or the discontinuation of further enrollment in courses. In an article by Borrero (2011), an “achievement gap” (p. 24) was found to separate Latino/a student academic progression in education level as compared to White students. This alienates students who did not identify as White. While these students may feel some alienation, there are data showing that during their college career, Latinos/as – within a larger selection of ethnic groups – report high levels of self-esteem (Allessandria & Nelson, 2005). Previous researchers (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Sanchez, et al., 2010; Suzuki, Amrein-Beardley, & Perry,

2012) have found that many Latino/a students from their data happen to come from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are “less likely to have parents with postsecondary education and are therefore less likely to have parents who can provide essential information and resources about the path to college” (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011, p. 322). Furthermore, what continues to complicate college life for these students from low-income and Latino/a families is that many are also “first-generation college students,” a term which refers to “a student whose parent(s) did not graduate from college” (Torres, et al., 2006, p. 65). First-generation college students are unfamiliar with the college student role that includes factors for success. However, this can be overcome through the process of mentoring (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Because mentoring relationships create some level of persistence within first-generation Latino/a college students, this should be an important aspect in summer bridge programs.

Relationship Benefits between Mentor and Mentee

Baker and Griffin (2010) defined the mentoring relationship as involving “an emotional commitment that extends beyond sharing degree requirements and academic information; mentoring relationships are rooted in a mentor’s long-term caring about a student’s personal and professional development.” (p. 4). The focus of mentoring provides first-generation Latino/a college students with a figure of authority within the higher education institution – including deciphering its rules and culture – which can lead to a better informed student (Bordes-Edgar, et al., 2011; Crisp & Cruz, 2010; Salinitri, 2005). When a “figure of authority” is mentioned, it should be noted for the purposes of this thesis that the “mentor” is a faculty or staff member of the institution of higher

education. Previous research points to these types of mentors as having a more desirable effect on the student's success (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Brubaker, 2011; Campbell, et al., 2012; Weldy Boyd, 2012). While having faculty or staff members of the university as mentors benefit the student, how it affects the students – as a benefit – should be noted. Baker and Griffin (2010) stated there are three aspects to mentoring relationships, that of the “Advisor,” or someone to provide career and education paths to discover, the “Mentor,” or someone to provide psycho-social support, and the “Developer,” or someone who provides a collaborative environment to assist the student in realizing future outcomes. For the purpose of the STEP schedule, a Mentor and Advisor are important as roles to acknowledge a student's passage into their role as college students, while the Developer would be needed further along a student's academic career to integrate knowledge gained.

The role of the mentor provides student-mentees with the opportunity to develop identity and culture assimilation on the college campus (Bordes-Edgar, et al, 2011; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kendricks, Nedunuri, & Arment, 2013; Salinitri, 2005). For students entering college who are typically unaware of expectations from their academics (Borrero, 2011), this lack of awareness could put them at a disadvantage and direct route to failure. Allesandria and Nelson (2005) cited theories from Chickering (1969) and Phinney (1989) in understanding how cultural deficit, or the lack of identity relation towards one's own background, would affect first-generation students born in the United States. Furthermore, they hypothesized that these types of students would have generally lower self-esteem because of the struggle between their traditional cultures are in conflict

with the modern dominant culture on their college campus. Yet, cultural conflict can be mitigated through engagement. Interestingly, first-generation students were shown to gain more social and cultural benefits through involvement when engaged (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), a conditional effect of students who are actively participating in their campus. While on-campus student engagement increases a student's understanding of the social and cultural expectations, having little academic engagement would have a negative effect on the student's path towards graduation (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

For a student aspiring to learn the “college student role” of success, faculty and staff members of the university can be considered key members in increasing a student's understanding of the expectations of college (Campbell, et al., 2012). In comparison to peers, faculty and staff are great sources of ongoing support (Bordes-Edgar, et al., 2011), even more so in established structured programs that bring faculty and staff together with students (Campbell, et al., 2012; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Dugan et al., 2011; Salinitri, 2005; Suzuki, et al., 2012; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Chopra, 2011). These mentors act to inform students on issues commonly critical for the retention of first-generation Latino/a students, including “university fit, perceived lack of finances, home-to-school transition, and academic self-efficacy” (Sy & Romero, 2008, p. 213). To give these students the tools they need for understanding the culture of the university, a faculty or staff mentor must be able to establish rapport (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Kendricks, et al., 2013;), while also being financially literate in scholarship and grant opportunities to inform students on how they can alleviate monetary stress of paying tuition (Gross,

2011). Faculty and staff need to provide a clear approach to academics so the student can decipher academic expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Torres et al., 2006). It is also important to have a mentor who can be the factor that bridges the home and school environments, as during the student's transition between these two areas there can be a "cultural dissonance" when occupying two different identities (Borrero, 2011). A concept to consider is that while there is definitely a "transition phase" that occurs for first-generation students from high school to college, the age range in which these students consider life changes – such as identity and possibilities – happens between 18 and 25 years of age (Sanchez et al., 2010). With that determined, it makes sense that summer bridge programs aimed at first-generation students provide the best foundation when applied towards this demographic right out of high school (Suzuki et al., 2012). Degree completion is then determined by factors that focus on the student's constant interaction with their university. This helps to ensure that the first-generation student is aware of institutional support (Suzuki et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993).

Institutional Actions and Support for At-Risk Student Populations

According to a recent study, it is the responsibility of institutions of higher education – in planning for and creating structure for mentoring programs – to base programs around knowledge of on-campus resources. This makes faculty and staff members "more accessible and makes campuses more supportive to students' needs" (Campbell, et al., 2012, p. 617). Institutions can provide other methods of support as well. The need for programs that ease students' transition into college can even provide financial aid literacy (Cates & Schaeffe, 2010; Gross, 2011), encourage seeking

assistance to deter dropout rates (Borrero, 2011), and enhance student leadership roles (Dugan et al., 2011). Without such assistance, it is possible it is estimated that attrition for a first-generation student would be higher (Salinitri, 2005).

Research has shown that students require a certain amount of social and cultural “capital” – or the ability to cope with a new environment – to properly integrate into the college student role at their university (Pascarella et al., 2004; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). As such, first-generation students who do get involved at college “derive benefits from extracurricular involvement and show improvement in critical thinking, degree plans, academic success, and cognitive ability” (Torres et al., 2006). Overall, developing a system where first-generation students can both have access to a faculty or staff mentor, get involved with their campus, and also be academically prepared for college coursework would allow for a well-rounded student that could even surpass another student who does not identify as “first-generation” (Allessandria & Nelson, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). Hence, it is vital that institutions create structures, practices, and policies that prompt first generation students to interact with mentors and become involved.

Consistent with research dedicated to Latinos/as as first-generation college students, ethnicity plays a large part in the long-term retention of students (Crisp & Cruz, 2010; Kendricks, et al., 2013; Sandoval-Lucero, et al., 2011). However, this does not mean ethnicity is the only important factor in choosing a mentor (Bordes-Edgar, et al., 2011). Through the lens of mentoring programs, allowing students to have someone they could depend on and who showed a genuine interest in their success was the most

positive effect that increased retention (Torres et al., 2006). This can be accomplished through many venues. One proven venue is that of a summer bridge program, which “can be great equalizers in education systems with unequal resources for all students” (Suzuki et al., 2012, p. 87). Participation in a summer bridge program creates an experiential learning environment, which has been shown to increase student involvement (Brubaker, 2011) and satisfies the concerns of social and cultural capital, financial aid literacy, and confidence to ask questions (Weldy Boyd, 2012). Summer bridge programs that offer those components and mentor figures in the form of faculty, staff, and peers provide the student with an assurance that they have a support system to encourage their success.

Research recognizes that not all first-generation students or all Latino/a students have the same needs. While not all incoming students into college are the same, it can be argued that incoming students have “pre-entry attributes” that institutions need to incorporate into program goals (Tinto, 1993, p. 115). Being able to adapt support practices through past information of first-generation Latino/a students – such as an essay application stating strengths and weaknesses – assists institutional figures in creating proper support systems (Borrero, 2011). This too gives mentors a chance to connect with the students for proper advising (Baker & Griffin, 2010).

There are reports in current studies about the specifics of programs institutions offer at-risk students, particularly first-generation students. Dugan et al. (2011) stated: “short-duration programs demonstrated the most significant influence across the broadest range of outcome measures. Participation in long-duration programs demonstrated a negative influence on leadership development” (Dugan et al., 2011, p. 68). How this

particularly translates to a higher education institution is that when creating programs, students with certain backgrounds and experiences do not require intensive learning, but simple guidance. For example, student leaders who do not need a long-duration program, a short-duration program may be sufficient to start unlock potential in the college environment (Dugan et al., 2011). Also, long-duration programs that consist of a strict programming schedule may not garner the effects that a program with a more liberal schedule – or even a short-duration schedule – could possibly have (Salinitri, 2005). These effects depend on the aim of the program, in either leadership development or cultural transition into the college environment. Summer bridge programs are – in essence – the optimal alternative for students transitioning as the first in their family to enter college because it occurs prior to entrance into the college campus environment and is short in duration (Suzuki et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2006).

Pursuit of Summer Bridge Programs

The ability of bridge programs to help first-generation students succeed beyond their first year to graduation has been widely reported (McCurrie, 2009; Murphy, Gaughan, Hume, & Moore, Jr., 2010; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). A summer bridge program that is successful can be done in a decent amount of time (Salinitri, 2005), covers a portion of academic coursework (Pascarella et al., 2004), give access to resources (Gross, 2011; Crisp & Cruz, 2010), and provides meaningful connections (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). The specifics that go into creating bridge programs are only successful when they adhere to the positive experiences of the events that are built into it, such as a writing-intensive bridge program to bolster writing ability

(McCurrie, 2009; Raines, 2012). Moreover, an institution should be careful about not just limiting participants to intensive studies, instead encouraging a social aspect that keeps students engaged with one another, such as a support system (Murphy et al., 2010). Successful bridge programs develop these support systems by allowing students to live together, pursue their studies under the supervision and advising of peers, faculty, and staff members, and be close to resources (Raines, 2012).

Research has shown that institutions implement summer bridge programs to give first-generation students the opportunities that most other programs cannot in a timely and structured manner, due to the constraints of a fully-loaded academic schedule (Salinitri, 2005; Suzuki et al., 2012). The summer bridge program should be tailored to individual student needs, with curriculum and course-load tailored to the needs of students, especially easing those uncomfortable with taking a full course-load (Pascarella et al., 2004). Furthermore, the addition of follow-up courses during the school year provides a cohort from the summer bridge program that continues the trend of the summer bridge program's traction with academics and social integration. This continues strides made towards students integrating the college student role into their identity and understanding expectations of the college environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Murphy et al., 2010; Raines, 2012).

In summary, summer bridge programs for first-generation students are a recognized initiative that has a varying success rate among the institutions that use it. The continued focus on the development of Latino/a student participation (Brubaker, 2011) in summer bridge programs, with opportunities for them to use transferrable skills to the

classroom and campus (Borrero, 2011; Campbell et al., 2012; McCurrie, 2009), encourages these students to succeed.

Among the diverse group of participants who have already participated in retention programs, this case study applies the knowledge from previous research to address questions about Latino/a college student success in a summer bridge program intervention. How this knowledge was used to guide the current study is described in the next sections. Following that, study findings seek to add to the literature about support programs for Latino/a first-generation college students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Considering the research questions, the design of a case study fit best. A case study is defined as an “in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). As Creswell (2012) explained, a case study analyzes participants of a program by collecting data through different forms and identifying thematic developments. In this study, the data collected would fall into the bounded system of a timeframe (5 weeks) and a single location (the campus of George Mason University). This type of qualitative research allows for flexibility in data collection. Data sources included documents related to the STEP program and interview data. This is appropriate for case study research.

Participants

The participants in this case study fit under criteria specific to the research questions. They were (a) self-identified as first-generation college students, (b) enrolled in an undergraduate program at George Mason University, (c) were at the age of 18 or older, and (d) had participated in the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education’s Student Transition Empowerment Program – or STEP. A more specific focus was given to the 12 students who identified as Latino/a, the prominent demographic in

this thesis. Students were invited for interviews at their STEP orientation, which is a two-day event that happens the week before the program begins. Of the selected criteria, six students – four females and two males – agreed to participate, and completed and returned a consent form to return at the end of their orientation. The sampling strategy for this group followed that of maximum variation, which in this case study would be effective in documenting the differences between each participant and finding common themes that arise from participants in the summer bridge program (Creswell, 2007). An equal number of students from each gender were projected to be selected, as previous research has shown this to create a fair and intimate detailing of accounts (Borrero, 2011). In the case of the results, I found that this was not necessary.

Data Sources

There are two primary sources of data collection. One is interview data and the other are documents from the STEP program. Each participant was interviewed for 15 to 20 minutes maximum in each phase. There were 3 phases per student: before the student entered STEP, at the end of the program, and during their first semester. The total time interviewed for each participant was about one hour. Interviews were audio recorded in a private setting. The questions were based on gaining an understanding of the participants' background, motivations, future plans, and institutional factors in their persistence through STEP or the school year. For the purpose of gaining their own personal and unique experiences, the questions were conducted in a semi-structured interview style.

Interview questions.

In the starting phase, questions were the following (see Appendix B): Why did you choose this university? What factors brought you in to STEP? Do you have any current goals for school? What has this program and the university done to help you achieve your goals? The goal of the interview questions was to provide a background on the student, their aspirations for college and graduation goals, and seek responses to the effects of the institution and STEP on their development as college students.

Questions for subsequent phases of the study were focused on what students learned about themselves, particularly at the end of STEP and during the middle of their first semester (Appendix B). Such questions as: How do you feel the relationships you have made during this program will progress? What are your current goals for school after taking this program? The focus of these follow-up questions aimed to prompt responses about personal progress, changes in aspirations, and relationships built – in particular, the relationships built with faculty and staff of STEP. The purpose of these questions in general had the effect of seeing where a student was early in the program, how the program changed their ideas of themselves at the end, and how the effects of the program were still prevalent in their first semester.

Documents.

Several documents were examined to offer context to the case. These included institution mission statement, goal statements of STEP and ODIME, also enrollment figures (see Appendix D) and the program schedule (see Appendices A and E). My analysis of these documents involved comparing students' experiences with program intent.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a pool of students who applied and were accepted into STEP. Invitations to interview were distributed at the start of the program's orientation segment, with a short presentation given about the focus of the research. The students were then informed that interviews would be conducted at the beginning of the program, with follow-up interviews being conducted at the end of the program, and the last round of interviews scheduled for the middle of their fall semester as a final check-in. The purpose of these interviews across their first year was aimed at getting their reactions about finishing classes, taking exams, and the differences they perceive after attending the summer bridge program. Interviews took place in the library area within the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education, providing them a place to reconnect with the university immediately after the interview.

The interviews for this study were audio-recorded via small electronic device – the Zoom H4N audio recorder. The internal microphone was used, with the audio being recorded onto an SD card. No other devices were used with the interviews, along with any extra equipment, which could alienate the participant to focusing on the devices rather than the interviewer (Creswell, 2012). Along with the audio device, an interview protocol had been used to write notes that the audio recorder may not be able to capture, such as body language and additional thoughts about certain responses.

Prior to the first interview, participants were again informed about the topic of the case study (or the progress of the study since initial contact), given a digital copy of the informed consent form (if one has not been provided yet) (see Appendix C), and both the

researcher and participant agreed on a time to interview. At the time of the interview, participants were then reminded that the interview was confidential, and if necessary, there would be more questions added for the purposes of clarification. The second interview followed the same format of ensuring confidentiality, but had been scheduled to be at the end of the summer bridge program in order to understand parting thoughts from the participants about their experience. The final interview was scheduled to take place during the middle of the Fall semester that followed the summer bridge program, with the goal of understanding student use of values, knowledge, and skills gained in STEP that are used in their current studies. This final interview also allowed for the opportunity of conducting a member check, discussing with the participant about initial findings from their first and second interviews, and gaining feedback for any clarification on the data collected.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing the data collected followed steps closely set by standards in case study analysis (Creswell, 2012). First, I organized all audio collected within the interviewing process to consent forms and interview protocols. Transcription, or the process of turning audio into text data, followed the organizing of audio recordings. The next step involved exploring data and developing codes, which would be the foundation of this study to understand similarities between participants and their experiences within the summer bridge program. Creswell (2012) suggested that after the transcription of interview audio and interview notes, a preliminary exploratory analysis must be conducted to get a better sense of the collected data. This analysis required the

researcher to review data collected and make connections before diving into the concepts fully. After each transcription has been reviewed, ideas and concepts from the text can be grouped in a process of coding, which is the act of “segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (Creswell, 2012, p. 244). The purpose of creating these “broader themes” from the coding is to determine similarities and patterns, especially naturalistic generalizations – ultimately using these data for self-learning or applying to other populations (Creswell, 2007). By taking the transcripts and reviewing how the themes developed – as related to the connections the participants made during the interviewing process – themes were developed that created a comprehensive story about the summer bridge program.

Limitations

The necessity of identifying any researcher bias in a qualitative study is important (Creswell, 2007). One process to address that is through an autobiographic rendering. As a first-generation Latino/a college student, I have developed through my undergraduate career at George Mason University numerous mentor figures, who encouraged me to participate in leadership development programs, as well as take leadership roles in student organizations. I attribute my success in college to these mentors, yet the concept of mentoring relationships in college had been introduced to me late in my college career. Hence, the creation of this thesis study is the result of seeing a program that students in my situation could benefit from, especially having the opportunity to form familiarity with staff and faculty much earlier than my own experience. Researcher bias then stems from wanting to see these students excel and establish mentoring relationships as soon as

they complete STEP. I had to keep this in mind while analyzing the data, even though I personally did not attend STEP in my undergraduate career. My one relationship toward STEP involved being aware of those who graduated from the program and attained their undergraduate degree, their recommendations for me to meet the staff at of ODIME, and to collaborate with the staff at ODIME – who coordinated the Student Transition Empowerment Program. This allowed me to secure interviews and understand how the program was established.

My collection of interview data accrued to about 6 hours of total data. This amounted to an average of one hour of audio data per interviewee, a limitation by exclusively referring to the interview questions in Appendix B. Given the nature of the interviews and how directly connected to each phase of the schedule, for example interviewing expectations at the beginning of the summer bridge program, and conducting follow-up interviews at the end of the program, any expanded interview would take away from the projected themes and research questions with extra data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction and Background

The focus of this case study aimed at exploring concepts that could be analyzed about the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) at George Mason University – a summer bridge program that set a foundation for retention of first-generation college students – and discover how it could be effectively utilized to assist those participating. To address the research questions I applied a case study methodology that offered guidance in structuring the data collected. Data was collected through semi-structure interviews. During the first round of interviews, I took notes that allowed for me to formulate thoughts on future discussions at subsequent interviews to evolve for previous ones.

The campus of George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia served as the setting for this case study. Previous research had claimed that first-generation students who identify as Latino/a were in need of assistance when entering institutions of higher education (Crisp & Cruz, 2010; Gross, 2011; Torres et al., 2006), which created the basis for pursuing the findings within this study. This assistance had been indicated in previous studies as being rendered in mentoring relationships which gave students insights into

expectations and cultural norms of the college lifestyle, specifically cultural, social, and financial obligations (Sanchez et al., 2010; Zarate & Burciage, 2010). One of the core concepts of this case study was mentoring relationships through the involvement of faculty and staff – within STEP – as key mentor figures (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011).

The participants of this study came from a variety of backgrounds, such as being born in the United States to Central and South American, with their own aspirations and core values being gained from their families or non-familial environment. All the participants were Latino/a and from the state of Virginia, however those were the only superficial similarities. Of the six participants, the ratio was split between male and female: two males and four females.

While the STEP staff was involved in the leading of the summer bridge program, the student participants were the center of this case study. As first-generation Latino/a college students, their specific demographic within this summer bridge program provided the best sample for studying the success of retention programs. Based on numbers for 10-Year Enrollment Data for Hispanic-American First-Time Freshmen (see Appendix D), the Latino/a population at George Mason University is growing each year in larger numbers. The focus on this demographic and campus is due to the environment that George Mason University promotes in its mission statement, which is to “advance the University’s commitment to creating a welcoming, respectful and inclusive educational environment that values integrity and a culture of shared responsibility” (George Mason University, n.d.c, para. 1). The University supports – among one of its many values – diversity, with the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education (ODIME)

being the connection between the campus and students of diverse backgrounds by creating an “inclusive learning environment through identity development and cultural competency” (George Mason University, n.d.d, para. 1). This study interviewed first-generation Latino/a college students through a summer bridge program as a development process and conduit for mentoring relationships.

Findings

The initial data from previous research details how a summer bridge program would have positive effects on students, and in this section: how the Student Transition Empowerment Program worked in parallel to meet these expectations. The students involved in this program underwent an excessive amount of change from their pre-conceived notions of what a college lifestyle would bring them. From the moment the students are introduced to the program, they are brought together as a group to learn about the campus and the program’s expectations of the students themselves. Throughout the remainder of the program, students are encouraged, empowered, and energized for weeks of life-changing events within STEP through the efforts of the staff members who lead the program.

The 6-week program consisted of weekly learning outcomes, which were focused on core developments for the students, which included self-awareness, creating and acknowledging communities, self care, cultural competency, and preparation for the future (see Appendix E). The structure of STEP included several components over the course of the program’s schedule alongside these outcomes, from workshops to social events to seminars. While scheduled programming supported these weekly outcome

goals, my data revealed that their overall approaches were successful at introducing the students to unfamiliar aspects of transitioning into college.

Schedule and Goals.

The orientation that students attended introduced them to the concepts they would be participating in during the summer bridge program. The STEP staff took this opportunity to speak about each of their own individual functions, where the hierarchy was explained: The student is a high priority and can seek help from a peer mentor, who then can seek help from a faculty advisor. Faculty work under the STEP professional staff to provide an educational experience. It is during this time that the idea that these students are reminded about their role within the summer program, whose focus should be to transition both psychologically and socially through workshops and seminars that prepare them to be student leaders. Within their calendar of events, which include study halls and group outings, STEP implemented these seminar and workshop components to complement their intensive classroom study and mentoring experiences, and provide an outlet for the overwhelmed. The purpose was not to intimidate students, but to ease their academic approach to the unfamiliar concept of a college-level education. Some of these seminars and workshops included: self-regulated learning; creating community; introductions to the Career Services office, the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) office, as well as the Wellness, Alcohol, and Violence Education and Services (WAVES) office.

Participant Backgrounds.

The six participants who were involved in this study each came from different backgrounds, from country of origin to familial environment, though they shared cultural similarities that assisted in developing the themes that were discovered. Each participant acknowledged they would receive a pseudonym within this case study, selected by the researcher.

When defining the factor in choosing this university, Anthony sought a program that ranked higher for his major in criminology from his research of reputable campus programs. Ultimately, he chose to stay near family in his college search, limiting his selection:

I had options. I did get good grades, so I could have gotten scholarships but chose to stay home because of my dad ... I didn't want to give that burden – I had to help out with my family a lot, like taking care of my niece. So, I can go back and forth [from campus], taking care of her.

Anthony made his dedication to family a key point in his reason for staying local, therefore being able to participate in STEP. As someone who was born and raised in Northern Virginia, his ultimate goal to join the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a decision that would keep him local and he felt his enrollment in George Mason University would help that.

For Nina, being really close to her family meant she had a support system that “backed each other up.” With parents who came from their home country almost a decade ago, she became the example of success for her siblings. Her reason for attending George Mason University was from not knowing how to select a college. In talking to

friends “whose parents who went to college ... and some who studied at George Mason” she made the decision to enroll in the university on an early decision admissions process. Starting at Mason, she sought a biology degree fully on how it related to her experience on family trips to their home country in Peru. She solidified her decision for this major in her response as “to major in biology and microbiology” and “go back to Peru and help along there with health-related stuff.”

Mary chose to go to Mason not based on her family, who were not a factor because “they were not expecting me to go to a four year college.” By reaching out to a teacher at her high school to learn about her options for post-graduate plans, she decided to attend the university, because “Mason was the school that was near home – and I could still live on campus – and like, study what I wanted to do.” As someone who was not originally born in the United States, Mary emigrated from El Salvador in Central America from her mother for a life with her father and his family. As someone who spent most of her life in one country, to travel between the United States and El Salvador, her decision to pursue a Global Affairs major seemed to fit her based on her responses.

While Anita lived in the suburbs, she had a connection to the university because of the location and proximity to home. With this distance, she felt it was her duty to be close while pursuing her engineering degree due to family issues of being in a single-parent household and a role model for her younger sibling. She described her goal in STEP as being a way “to get as close as I can to a 4.0 GPA, because I never got that in high school.” The program developed her ability to cope with feeling alone and unprepared for college, an effect of being the first person in her family to attend college.

To her, this program had a transformative effect when “it felt nice to know that there are a group of people who have been through similar life situations that I have, and in this group it let us grow closer to one another in different ways.”

Felipe, the youngest of his three siblings, chose to go to Mason as first in his family with great apprehension. His reasons for this apprehension included “to be the first one in anything is scary” to how he “didn’t want to do it, because every student wants to enjoy their summer” after high school. After being supported by a former teacher in high school into going to Mason, but also applying for STEP, Felipe was able to see why this was the choice for him as he “just felt better, safer in a way, because it was going to give me a little taste of college, and what it was like, and meet new people who were in the same situation as I was.” Felipe chose to pursue a major in chemistry, with the ultimate goal of being a dentist to work off of his high school interests where he excelled in that particular subject.

Susan was not the first in her family to go to college – her brother was still working on his bachelor’s degree – but she chose George Mason University, like her brother, because of the importance of it being “familiar, it’s near to DC, and it’s near my home.” Her motivation came from her parents who pushed her to do better than them, but she believed that her strength came from the support network that STEP provided. Before the application deadline, Susan was convinced by her brother – a STEP alumnus – to register, a decision she did not expect, but was glad to “have a head-start in college” and prove to her parents that she could do well. Her decision to pursue sociology as a major

over an anthropology major was based in knowing “they were both related, but then I realized I was into social issues.” She would use her time at STEP to flesh out this major.

These students came from different family situations and obligations. My interpretations of their STEP summer and its impact on their following fall semester, is reflected in the following themes which emerged from the data that described the journey that the participants who were first-generation Latino/a college students experienced – belonging, transition, and development. Overall, a narrative was built by students to describe their own journey into college, which led into a transition that they would endure – or seek to endure – as they discovered who they were and could be. By looking at this discovery, my data found that students were able to understand a realization of themselves, from their own interests to skills waiting to be developed. There was an underlying awareness of academic expectations, a transition from previous education experience into the level of college classes that struck students as an important habit change. The STEP staff guided these discoveries, realizations, and habits exhibited by the students; they were mentoring the students through careful planning of their calendar of events and the inclusive community they created as their tools for developing college students.

Belonging: Being Comfortable in a New Group.

The responses from the interview participants created a narrative about their experiences and expectations for the time spent within the program. A common thread from their responses included a sense of belonging. This came from their familial motivations to their own hopeful expectations of STEP. Through their upbringing, they gained a belief

that a program such as STEP could grant access to managing college responsibilities. This belief brought them to participate. Anthony's decision to attend college was purely based on his position within the family as the only child to go to college, citing the hard work his parents endured, resulting in him wanting "to work hard for them." Nina felt her decision to enter college was defined by her family, noting "my parents always told me to get an education and always go to college, and it wouldn't matter the cost because they would help me out, even if it would be a hardship." The consistent nature of the family relationship translated into an expectation that students wanted from their education, which STEP aimed to provide with building relationships that connected the students to the university culture. As noted by Anita, when students identified the similarities in parental upbringing, it "let us grow closer to one another in different ways."

The STEP staff provided an inclusive environment when creating relationships, which appealed to some students. Mary cited the staff interaction as "that relationship where it's kind of informal, but at the same time it's formal enough that you know that they're your supervisors ... like these people will have your back whenever you need them." The relationships built among the students allowed for a network of support.

Anthony stated:

Mainly excited for when I come next year, I'll know a few people here: upperclassmen, and my incoming friends as well ... It's a nice way to feel welcomed already and pretty much have a foundation at the start of Mason.

Mary – whose goal for college was to find a place of her own among her peers – echoed the same feeling:

I'm excited to get to know everybody in our group. Not just over the summer. We'd be like that group that you always know, that you just look at them and you're like "Yeah." And other people will be like "What are you guys saying?" from across the room, and [we would reply] "Oh, it's a STEP thing." It's a thing that you know is just "us." I want to be that type of group where, like, people are like "Where did you learn all of this, where did you get confidence, where did you get those skills? You guys are just freshmen, why are you guys acting like you're upperclassmen?" ... it's kind of cool where you can go into a freshman class and feel, like, more prepared than anyone else.

The shared feeling among the students to belong to a new environment – to be motivated by their peers and mentors, and not just family – was prevalent in their responses.

The students recognized the need to break their pre-entry college ideas and habits, understanding that a strong work ethic and focus was needed to succeed in the university culture they had been introduced to in the summer bridge program. As Anthony stated, his expectations of STEP were very clear:

My expectations would be that they provide me a realistic view of college, and maybe like how things function and how the classes are, in order so that when I actually step foot on the first day of class I'm not completely lost and I actually know what to do. And that I also have support from the

mentors that are out there, and ODIME, and to know that I can actually rely on them.

Students entering STEP are faced with problems they need to address – from family issues to personal struggles – and they rely on the mentoring of those who manage the program to empower them to address them. Along with those who manage the program, their assigned peer mentors provided them with social and academic support through constant interaction and relating their own similar problems, which normalized students' experiences. The sense of belonging to a community was integral to a student's sense of being connected to both a source of support and the campus culture. Belonging brought students confidence and self-efficacy that they could succeed.

Students who do not feel like they have the confidence to break out from their pre-entry thought process must rely even more on the leadership of the STEP staff, as Mary states:

I'm like an introvert, and it's hard for people to get to know me, because I'm a little outgoing. I like to "think, do, and think" and I think too much in my head, where by the time I decide to "do it," someone has already done it. So like, I've never, actually never, done a lot of leadership positions, even though I know I can be more than qualified for them ... I bring myself down a lot. I'm just like, my parents never had my back, so I'm like "Wait, what if I don't get it?" Like I'm set to fail anyway, so why try? But like, I think that with STEP with all the workshops, how they're helping us, I can feel some difference already. I feel more comfortable,

like in my group. Like if I say something, nobody's going to think I'm stupid, like I'm not smart enough. I feel like everybody's at the same level, like everyone's starting to find themselves.

Comfort came from belonging to the group, which brought feelings of not feeling inferior in intellect. The sense of belonging was a common theme felt from the students as they made the transition from high school to college. Most who felt comfortable in a group experienced the shedding of pre-entry perspectives for more mature views towards adjusting as college students. The adjustments that students make begin to define who they will become after attending STEP, and it was the responsibility of the STEP staff to identify where these students were coming from in order to best serve them.

Transition.

The subject of transition from high school into college is a matter that the Student Transition Empowerment Program took seriously and met with careful planning. According to Schlossberg's (2011) Transition Model, the effectiveness of the transition STEP students went through is based on "how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159). Students have to be able to adjust and arrange their methods of interacting with each other to ensure their own success, while paying attention to their personal well-being and navigating the newly introduced college culture. The most significant change these students undertook is the transition of their habits from pre-college into college-level responsibilities. To ease this change, the STEP staff moved their students together through the schedule of events, keeping programming – such as workshops and seminars – consistent with each day during the week to prepare

for the similar scheduling in the Fall semester that the student will eventually experience. For some students, the difference from high school to college through STEP is noticeable in their transitions, as Anthony notes:

They're transitioning us into college life, and they've been stating to us that "It's not like High School" – I was a kid who never studied in high school and still passed with a 4.4 GPA. And I realized now it's "study time." We have to get adjusted. My mentors have been fairly forward with that; they've been straightforward with how college life is and how difficult classes vary.

The realization of having to fully commit themselves to academics provides for situations where students are not fully prepared for workload they have not encountered in high school. As such, STEP established study halls every Sunday to Wednesday for two hours, encouraging a habit of consistent studying.

Students benefitted from a schedule that was laid out for them prior to beginning the program. In fact, they appeared to understand a bigger perspective on the transition to college as opposed to the transition to high school. As Anita pointed out "There's no bell telling you when to go to class, it's because I'm going there to learn, not because a bell is telling me to go. It's your decision, if you don't go to class, tough luck because you're paying for it."

The students generated an expectation of STEP with pre-conceived notions that they brought from their personal experience before entering the college realm. The transition of their expectations to college ones are enabled due to the access to resources

and services that comes from participation with STEP. Some of these factors that attracted them to the program initially included access to on-campus living, tuition for their summer courses, and as many students pointed out, “establishing the grade point average before you even start freshman year.” With the access the students are granted, their excitement generates possibilities for their future. One student in particular, Anita, was excited that she “would get an established GPA by the end of the summer and with that GPA I could go for scholarships and internships.” The students learn that the habits they encourage during the summer bridge program can help them in their transition into college coursework and future aspirations.

At the end of the STEP’s summer program, students began to feel capable of transitioning from high school to the college lifestyle, and taking on the expected coursework. Students understood more about themselves and how to better use their resources at the campus. As Mary put it:

I think I learned that I am capable of more things than I thought I was. I mean, I’m stronger, well I thought I was stronger before, but STEP has helped me have more confidence in myself. And kind of like before, I would know how to do something I know the answer to, but I would be afraid to speak up, so the best thing STEP has done – through all the workshops and seminars – has helped me kind of like become more confident and believe in myself.

Another student, Anthony, added his own transition, reaffirming his belief about learning style and personality:

I learned a lot about myself, mainly though I learned about the way I study ... I learned that in terms of studying, if I really wanted to get down to studying, I cannot have people around me. And I learned about my personality a bit better, since we took the Meyers-Briggs personality test, so I kind of had an idea but taking the test and talking about it kind of reaffirmed who I am, and how different situations would affect me in different ways.

The result of attending STEP for these students included a greater awareness of their abilities, knowledge of their environment for better use of their resources, and relationships that created a supportive community for first-generation students. This was in part due to the leadership of the STEP staff, who had profound effects on the students themselves.

The relationships that the students developed with the STEP staff and faculty varied, with each student having a unique interaction or goal. The consistency here was that STEP staff and faculty made themselves available to students. As one student described her experience:

Well, the STEP staff, you get to meet them and introduced to them. When you talk to them about your own personal things – when you set up meetings with them, it's pretty cool, because you can have private conversations with them – they know a lot of people, and if you're interested in a particular field and if they know the person, they'll gladly direct you to them and set up emails to meet with them, or set up some

form of communications and if they don't know the person in charge, but the staff members there, they'll go out of their way to reach out to the staff members and find out other resources or people.

Reaching out to staff members outside of ODIME and STEP to connect students to resources, participants of the summer bridge program began to realize the effectiveness of working closely with the STEP staff. Anita realized the benefit of connecting with the STEP staff early on went to say:

From the beginning, the first week, I kind of approached them, I set up a meeting with an ODIME staff member, with the STEP coordinator, I had meeting with all of them just to talk about some issue, my schedule, my personality, or things that I had needed help with. It was something not a lot of people did in STEP. And it was kind of interesting to see, why wouldn't they? These are the people who are going to help you out in the long run, like being in this relationship will help you out a lot. So I think that the relationship that I had early on was beneficial to me, because I got to know them more personally.

The availability that the STEP staff presented to the students encouraged a bond of trust and reliability that served as supports for bridging the transition from pre-college to college. The students knew to contact the staff to lead them through the culture of the campus, making worthwhile connections for accomplishing personal goals, as one student realized, "they can introduce you to people who are not necessarily related to STEP, but it can help you gain something and you can succeed more." While some

students did not utilize the staff effectively as much as others, those that did noticed early on that the staff at ODIME “have their resources and they’re willing to help you and they do it because they want to help you, but with other people you have to develop a relationship first.”

With the inclusion of the workshops and seminars, students began to understand their role as college students. There was a growing hint that the transition they were making – with the help of the STEP staff – would enable them to get more out of their education than previously thought. Anita’s experience explained what she learned about the university and her decision to attend here:

I think that the most important things I learned is how helpful everybody is and how available most of them are, like Career Services, [Counseling and] Psychological Services, WAVES, all the offices we got to meet during workshops and seminars, and knowing how they all work together, like office of University Life and Student Involvement, and it kind of makes you feel like you can do anything and feel like you belong to Mason. It might not be academically, but it can be through involvement and different things you’re interested in. I thought that when I decided to come to Mason, I would just be like “Oh I’m just going to go there and take my classes,” you know, just like the high school routine. But because of STEP, and knowing all these people and building relationships with the past STEP students, they’re also involved: they’re Patriot Leaders, RAs, they’re working in offices, and knowing them makes you kind of feel like

you're part of something, like a family, they have your back and if you need something they're always going to be there, like references, and I didn't think I was going to have that when I came to Mason.

This experience allowed for some students' involvement in school, outside of academics, to create for them a space for personal growth, beyond what they expected. Because of the relationships they have made over the course of this summer bridge program, particular students who go through STEP are much more inclined to invest in their future on the campus.

When asked about whether the relationships with the STEP staff would affect their future, Mary replied with the following:

I completely do. These relationships are opening other doors to me, it's getting me more personally involved and connected to the school. As where like if you didn't meet all these people, you'd be like "Oh, it's just school. I have to get my grades and get educated and then leave." But knowing and having these relationships, you're more connected to the school. And I feel like I participate more than not having met anyone, where I would have just commuted, gone to my classes and attend one organization and just left.

The changing mindset of students after participating in STEP becomes noticeable when compared to their earlier perceptions as they started the program. Considering the weeks of programming, studying, and interactions they have to go through, these students

become acclimated to the new role they are about to take on: that of becoming “college students.”

Developing the college student role: “Believing each opportunity to have meaning.”

The students who participated in the Student Transition Empowerment Program and participated in this study began to understand expectations of their environment, including the demands of academics and campus involvement. One reason for that is because STEP creates a community among those who most recently completed the summer bridge program and those who are on their last year of undergraduate studies. Current students can look forward to meeting with alumni of the program, who are leaders of student organizations and recognizable names in the campus community, such as the president of the Hispanic Student Association.

Anthony described how the thinking about college was changed by STEP:

My mindset, before STEP, it was very different from what I thought college would be. And they pretty much gave me the “101” about how college is. And I feel very confident about it. And I know if I need help I can go to the ODIME office, the Writing Center, I can go to the Math Center; I can find help anywhere. And I’m very comfortable to talking to my professors because that’s how it was in STEP, so you’re comfortable talking to your professors one-on-one.

While Anthony felt comfortable with their academics, academic resources, and approaching faculty members to work with them, Nina felt the ability to manage responsibilities a defining moment:

Well, it's helped plan my goals and helped me organize myself to determine these goals. Without STEP, I probably wouldn't have had goals – well, clear cut goals – going into George Mason, I probably would have been like “I'll just go to school and let me take these classes” and everything. But with STEP, I guess one of the key things they emphasize is to prepare yourself and know what you want to accomplish, so with STEP, taking University 100 and those courses, I have specific goals. Like what grades to get this semester, how many courses I'm going to take. It just helped me organize myself to have clear, distinct goals.

Establishing clear, distinct goals are what Nina discovered would help throughout her academic career. By understanding the expectations that they need to fulfill as college students, they then come to believe that each opportunity they pursue has meaning. They are developing a role that they did not think they would have had if they did not participate in STEP. The mention of University 100, a college preparation course during the Fall semester, alludes to the 1-credit course that STEP students register in after their summer is over, which continues the transition toward college learning and community initially built during the STEP program. Anthony stated what he believed his role to be as a college student:

A college student is very independent, and a college student ... I know a lot of people say you have a lot of work to do, but I guess I'm becoming a college student because I'm being aware of all the work I have to do and

becoming responsible in just doing my work on time and going to classes.

I guess in that sense I would be [turning into] a college student.

And these choices that students make in their role as college students are not limited to academics, but the career paths they build via the opportunities they take advantage of – courtesy of an introduction through STEP. This is noteworthy in Nina’s comments about forming career goals:

Since I went to Career Services [due to a STEP requirement], they had me thinking more. The answer would be: I’m not as stuck on one path as I was before... I wouldn’t say it’s a bad thing, because I’m more aware of other opportunities that I didn’t know; That some of them are a little bit more interesting, instead of one field.

Felipe determined that his preparation as a college student began with knowing where he could find the resources when he needed them for school and personal reasons:

I felt like I knew better how classes would be. I felt like I had more resources than I originally had. And it also helped me know where to go, because I didn’t know where anything was, and being here I knew where the buildings were, where my classes were, and knew the resources and people who could help me if I needed anything. So I felt I was way better prepared.

Making these connections for the student, the STEP staff creates a potential success story for students who progress through the summer bridge program. Students start without knowledge of their campus, and end up having the confidence and interest to make an

impact on their own goals using campus resources, such as Career Services. The student was able to expand notions of career goals to other possibilities. In addition to managing their own career path, managing their interactions with other students became a concept easier to grasp with the introduction of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality assessment as a workshop. Nina explained:

I learned about my personality a bit better, since we took the Myers-Briggs personality test, so I kind of had an idea but taking the test and talking about it kind of reaffirmed who I am, and how different situations would affect me in different ways.

When these students begin to have a stronger grasp on their own future, they become an invested advocate for the program. They are openly prepared to recommend the benefits of participating to others. An example of this being Anita's return to her high school, describing her experience as, "I recently went to my high school to talk to other first-generation students through their college partnership program. I talked about [STEP] to all the students."

In summary, the students who participated in the Student Transition Empowerment Program not only developed a connection to their new campus, but a support network of peers, staff members, and faculty. The scheduled programming developed by the STEP staff became a tool that acclimated the first-generation college students to the rigorous demands of a college education, equipping them with the knowledge of how to handle new situations and advance their own education. This data informs researchers of the potential success of mentoring relationships within summer

bridge programs. Mentors can serve to open doors for continued growth in meaning making of students' college role. Additionally, these findings add to the discussion on the effectiveness of programs that seek to serve first-generation college students.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this section, I will cover how the findings are related to the literature, through addressing of the research questions, and conclude with implications of this study for practice and research.

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to determine the effectiveness of the Student Transition Empowerment Program – a summer bridge program aimed at first-generation college students – among students of Latino/a descent. How these students were benefitting from the program, and the relationships they grew as a response, were sought after through the three research questions asked: 1) What is the scope of mentoring initiatives on college readiness and success of first-generation Latino/a college students; 2) How can an institution be prepared for assisting at-risk student populations towards graduation; and, 3) How does a mentoring relationship affect first-generation college students in navigating the “college student” role? The study developed several themes as a result of the students involved that consisted of a student’s belonging, their ability to transition, and their self-awareness of their role as a college student.

The direction of this study was formed with guidance from previous research that studied college environments, in particular those that were centered around first-generation college students and mentoring relationships. What was found included the appreciation of empowerment in students, through skills learned early in their college careers, which was confirmed in the literature (Campbell, et al., 2012; Dugan et al., 2011;). The most valuable benefit for students is the mentoring relationship, as Baker and Griffin (2010) observed in their own study on mentoring. This includes their discussion of the levels to which mentoring can evolve that provides students with assistance. These levels of the mentoring relationship, the “advisor,” the “mentor,” and the “developer” (Baker & Griffin, 2010) were all present in this current case study. The results of this study found that when the mentoring relationships were between the student and the staff member, or even a faculty member, students gained knowledge of the college level – including academic and social expectations – which was also confirmed in the literature (Brubaker, 2011; Baker & Griffin, 2010; Campbell, et al., 2012; Weldy Boyd, 2012;).

Additional aspects discovered by studying this demographic of Latino/a first-generation college students were the inherent traits they brought into the program. I included “pre-entry attributes” of students are beliefs and perspectives determined by their experience of high school and understanding of what college would be (Tinto, 1993). Students believed that the way they studied in high school would be relatively the same as in college. Other students based many of their academic paths on how they were

closely intertwined with family decisions, juggling family responsibilities with college workload as they would if they were within a high school workload.

Furthermore, the transition that students made into college through the STEP activities, such as the seminars and workshops, encouraged the easing into a new way of thinking about college (Murphy, et al., 2010), allowing students to challenge previously determined “pre-entry attributes” about themselves and college, such as rate of learning, ability to persist, and being able to understand expectations of the college atmosphere. The STEP transition also connected them with networks that embraced essential aspects of their pre-college identities, putting them on a track with others within their demographic. This occurred through workshops and seminars that introduced students to different departments and offices that they would have not approached so readily – a fact discovered through student interviews of this particular study. Another benefit for the students participating in the summer bridge program was the reliability of the STEP staff, allowing the students to have a member of the staff be their de-facto guide on where to focus their academic efforts. Too, connections to STEP alumni contributed support to the concurrent challenge.

When addressing the research questions, it is best to keep in mind that the participants themselves transformed into more mature and prepared college students by experiencing college in the STEP environment. This transformation can be attributed to the effects of the summer bridge program itself, along with indirect interactions between the student and staff. Where the STEP schedule kept students within the same path to receive information at an equal pace, the STEP staff would work behind-the-scenes to

ensure different offices were ready to meet the students, the mentors were trained for interacting with STEP students, and that the environment they developed allowed for students to approach the main office as a space students could use to meet with staff through tours, holding some seminars within their conference room, and maintaining an “open door” policy for anyone to come in. This is known through some students indicating their connection with mentors and staff, whether it was through personal meetings or comments on different aspects of workshops developed for students.

Research question 1: What is the scope of mentoring initiatives on college readiness and success?

First, using Baker and Griffin’s continuum that mentors do not need to share the same background as the students they connect with (2010), the makeup of what determines a mentor is not restricted to who the STEP staff designates. From student interviews, I found that a mentor figure is from the offices and campus resources that a student is introduced to through STEP. These staff members from the campus are able to act as a catalyst for student interests, initiating a path the students can take from their first year and onward. STEP mentors also provide this catalyst, however it is through the form of the summer bridge program itself, through advising sessions, coordinating of seminars and workshops, and the structure of preparing students for developing their pre-entry attributes for a college atmosphere. This continuum states that three roles can be found from STEP staff and faculty, that of the advisor, the developer, and the mentor. The advisor role assists in navigating a school’s processes and procedures, which had been indicated by the workshops and seminars that brought students through various aspects of the school’s rules and resources from the Psychological and Counseling department to

Career Services. This role is focused on short-term responses, which the STEP staff could take on for answering students, but also giving them the opportunity to learn answers through those particular workshops and seminars. The developer role gave students such tools as critical thinking about their own professional development, which in the STEP perspective had been workshops that showed students their own strengths and abilities to apply to their degrees, and ultimately, their careers. This role could definitely be found after the program, when students responded positively to access the STEP staff and different resources they could use towards their own goals. The mentoring role, connects these two roles, though is different by having the ability to connect with a student when necessary – the advisor role comes from giving information when needed, and the developer pushes the student to learn important aspects for long-term goals (career, academic endeavors, etc.).

Second, determining the scope of mentoring initiatives on college readiness and success of first-generation Latino/a college students, which included looking at programs and services hosted at the campus of George Mason University. Involved departments on the campus encouraged topics from career planning to well-being with the purpose of giving students tools to cope with situations they may have not faced before. STEP staff organized specific times for every STEP participant to meet with and hence understand these services and programs. The literature confirmed that support initiatives that promoted learning about campus services were effective (Dugan et al., 2011; Campbell, et al., 2012). By following the examples of how the Student Transition Empowerment Program introduced students to other support services, students know how to reach out to

other services and ask for assistance. This empowers students to approach other departments, faculty, and staff. If properly cultivated, each planned interaction a first-generation Latino/a college student initiates with a member of a program of service hosted at Mason is an opportunity for a new learning. Whether the contact a student made was within their cultural, ethnic, or societal background was not important in this instance, as delivering the service created the necessary impact.

Research question 2: How can an institution be prepared for assisting at-risk student populations to graduate?

The support and resources given to the Student Transition Empowerment Program are central to addressing this question. While federal support for Upward Bound and TRIO programs have decreased (Bidwell, 2013; Mitchem, 2005) and some states have decreased funding for STEP type programs, the continued institutional support of STEP, particularly staffing, is noteworthy. In turn, the STEP staff prepared a structure of peer mentors and faculty and staff mentors. The STEP staff were prepared to tend to the needs of individual students through a schedule based on students' goals. According to the schedule (see Appendix E), weekdays consisted of classes, a workshop or seminar, and a study hall – which together took over a good majority of the day. The weekends, which held non-academic events, were not as heavily programmed with a schedule of events. This is one critique of the program. While more could be done for support – especially for weekend programming – this current method that the STEP staff implemented is aligned with previous research (Allessandria & Nelson, 2005; Pascarella, et al., 2004). In any case, institutional support was present and crucial to participants' growth as college

students. Hence, institutions need to be prepared to offer financial support for students attending and staff and faculty to plan and facilitate the program.

Research question 3: How does a mentoring relationship affect first-generation college students in navigating the “college student” role?

The third research question centered on the mentoring relationship and how it affected first-generation college students in navigating the “college student” role. Evidence did indicate there was substantial growth in participants’ college student role as discussed above. This occurred mainly through relationships. The relationship built between the STEP staff and the student participants promoted the sharing of information – including expanding options for their education. These options included the early introduction to extra-curricular activities and career-based influences on their education track. This supplemented the knowledge they gained through learning about the campus on their own. This informal knowledge gained through interaction coincides with the formal knowledge they were introduced to through STEP. The STEP staff – the mentors in this program – helped students realize expectations and personal limitations, giving the students the sufficient tools to decipher their approach to their first semester at college and make informed decisions about how they can engage their academic career, from supplementing their degree with internship searching and effectively using resources on campus for health or financial purposes. Therefore, the summer bridge program had the effect it intended by providing students with a network to continue on the trend of academic and social integration into their following semester.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings of this case study reflect the voices of the six students who participated in the STEP program at George Mason University. The findings indicate that support programs for first-generation Latino/a students should be relationship based, emphasize mentoring, concentrate on students gaining insight on the role of a college student, and embrace students' sense of self. Students should not have to give up themselves to take on the role of a college student. Relationship building is key – both with program staff, with the staff and faculty in academic programs, and other support services.

I recommend that an extensive longitudinal study is required to more fully address whether or not a university has prepared adequate resources and has the infrastructure to consistently plan follow up programming during following school years. This study only concentrated on the time period before the commencement of the academic year and the first year. A future study could consider how the adequacy of resources and their priority within the institution. As for the summer bridge program itself, no additional recommendations could be determined with their current formula.

On a larger scale, this study does not address the structural barriers institutions impose to under-represented students when a program such as STEP is introduced. While summer bridge programs, such as STEP, offer support for a student's growth and success through integration into the college environment, it does not eliminate those structural barriers that deter students' admission into the school, their persistence once in the school, and graduation. Such barriers could include the lack of faculty and staff of color

as mentors, or the lack of financial aid to assist students who are particularly at-risk in covering tuition costs. Additional research needs to be conducted to identify barriers that first-generation Latino/a college students experience in entering and graduating from institutions and recommend how institutions can eliminate them.

Further Limitations

This study did not take into account that the Student Transition Empowerment Program was not the only one of its kind that took place during the summer, and during the time the data collection occurred there was no indication of any other collaboration within the university for similar programs. These similar programs at George Mason University are geared towards assisting at-risk student populations, such as the Early Identification Program (EIP) and peer mentoring groups for different student types. For EIP, students are put on a pathway to college prior to entering high school, being groomed and mentored for success on a timeline that precedes STEP. For the peer mentoring group of EIP, students are already in college, past the timeline of STEP's summer dates, and are connected to an established peer network for support. George Mason University gives the EIP staff an office to work out of throughout the year, and allows the peer mentoring groups to apply for student funding as a student group.

Participants seemed very reluctant to offer any critique of the STEP program. This could be because they had no critique, but it could also be that they felt such loyalty to the program that hindered them speaking more frankly about the program.

Though six students agreed to participate and were asked to participate in interviews, it is possible that a much larger student group or a different group would have identified different themes related to student experiences in the program.

Conclusion

In conclusion, summer bridge programs can offer distinct yet comprehensive services to first-generation college students, which include community support, mentoring relationships, and academic preparedness. Institutions of higher education should be responsible for the retention of at-risk college students by promoting and supporting the summer bridge programs hosted at their campus. It is also the campus leaders' responsibility to acknowledge the institution's obligations to first-generation college students as well as the benefits they can bring to the institution, for example, alumni support and positive testimonials. There can be potential motivation for students to finish their college education, while creating a supportive base of alumni that cherish their time at college for supporting their interests in completing a college education.

Whether students entering college at George Mason University took advantage of the mentoring opportunities through the Student Transition Empowerment Program offered by the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education, or whether they found mentors on their own based on directions STEP provided, developing a mentor figure has been shown to provide the student with a great source of support. The interview data concluded that the mentor's background did not matter. Students were knowledgeable of different support resources available. If an institution of higher education does not provide support for programs to integrate first-generation college

students into their campus by developing mentoring relationships, it is the responsibility of individual programs and services to develop these relationships with students.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Timeline

Tentative

June 20 th	STEP Orientation
June 28 th	STEP Begins
August 9 th	STEP Finishes
October 27 th	Begin mid-semester interviews

Appendix B: Interview Questions

It is to be noted that the researcher may ask questions that are not listed within the questions detailed below. This is a result of responses that the interviewee may give that could further give a better perspective of the data to be collected.

Initial Interview Questions

These questions aim to get a sense of the student's belonging and gauge where they see themselves going. The aid of this program will redefine or re-establish that sense of belonging.

- Tell me about your process in choosing this university.
 - If location was a factor:
 - What is it about this area that encouraged your decision to go here?
 - If family was a factor:
 - Can you tell me more about your relationship with your family?
 - Which members of your family do you feel have the greatest impact in your decision to attend this university?
 - Additionally:
 - What are your perceptions, or ideas, about what a college should offer students whom are the first in their families to attend for a degree?
- What factors brought you in to STEP?
 - What was the appeal of the program?
 - What are your expectations of the program?
 - What are you most excited for in this 5-week program?
- Do you have any current goals for school, and could you explain your answer?
 - Mention of their "major":
 - Why did you choose this major?
 - Mention of a career during/after college:
 - Why did you choose this career?
 - What resources do you intend on using?

End-of-Program Interview Questions

- What did you learn about yourself after attending this program?
 - How prepared do you feel for the upcoming school semester?
 - Did the program meet your expectations? If so, please explain how.
 - What aspect about this program benefited you the most?
- Can you explain what you learned about the university and your choice to attend here?

- How do you feel the relationships you have made during this program will progress?
 - How is your connection with the university staff and faculty?
 - Do you think these relationships will affect your future? How?
- What are your current goals for school after taking this program?
- Would you recommend this program to others? Why?

Fall Mid-Semester Check-In Interview Questions

- What has this program done to help the process of achieving your goals?
 - Can you describe the university's role in achieving your goals?
- How do you feel about college so far?
- Do you still keep in contact with those who participated in the program?
 - To what extent are these relationships helping with school?
- What resources on the campus are you using to support yourself through your first semester of college?
 - Include the examples of the following for clarification:
 - Financially? Socially? Anything else to mention?
- Do you have a mentor figure to look up to as support?
 - If "Yes" or a positive response:
 - In what ways have they helped you in the transition to your first semester of college?
 - If "No" or a negative response:
 - Why do you feel a mentor figure has not been declared?
- What advice would you tell others who were in your shoes before attending STEP?

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Student Transition Empowerment Program: Discovering Trends on First-Generation Latino/a College Students

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to gain first-generation Latino/a college students' opinions and reactions to attending a summer bridge program (college preparation before officially starting). The purpose is to understand the effectiveness of relationships built while participating in STEP, the Student Transition Empowerment Program. If you agree to participate, you it is because you fit the research criteria of being a first-generation Latino/a college student and will be asked to be interviewed for about three (3) instances by a researcher at George Mason University for a minimum of 15 minutes about your experiences through STEP. These interviews will take place at the beginning of the program, at the end of the program, and during the middle of your Fall 2014 semester at George Mason University. Audio recording will be used as another way to get notes about the interview.

RISKS

There is no more than minimal risk associated with this study.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in the area of mentoring programs and knowledge of resources for first-generation college students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will have access to consent forms, audio recordings, and notes. STEP participants will only be referred to in any writing afterwards through pseudonyms, or aliases, and after audio recordings have been created into written text, or transcripts, they will be erased. The informed consent form will be one of two documents that contain your real name, with the second document being the identification key that links your name to your pseudonym. All paper records will be stored in the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education, in Student Union Building 1, room 2400, in a secured lockbox. Digital copies of transcripts will be kept on a private Dropbox cloud storage unit. Data will be stored for 3 months after the successful defense of thesis study. All paper data will be shredded, and

any copy of identifiable information on participants will be disposed of, including digital cloud storage (Dropbox).

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.

AUDIO RECORDING

If you agree, the researcher will record your three (3) interviews. The purpose of these recordings is for the researcher to have a way to get quotes and other portions of the interview that may not be caught by paper note-taking. The audio files will be kept in a locked storage, and the only person with access to these files is the researcher. As soon as the audio files are moved to text files, or transcribed, they will then be erased.

CONTACT

George Yanez at George Mason University is conducting this research. He may be reached at 571-215-9127 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact his chair of this thesis, Jan Arminio, at 703-993-2604. 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. I also agree that I am a first-generation Latino/a college student, and a minimum of 18 years of age.

_____ I agree to audio recording.

_____ I do not agree to audio recording

Print Name

Date

Appendix D: Enrollment Data Trends for Demographic

Data from 10 Year Enrollment Trends for Hispanic/Latino/a Students at George Mason University

Fall Census	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors
2004	137	35	33	7
2005	191	39	33	7
2006	144	48	49	0
2007	124	41	22	4
2008	96	33	23	7
2009	222	71	84	13
2010	229	67	78	5
2011	230	93	118	10
2012	240	68	127	4
2013	334	82	143	13

Appendix E: Schedule of Programming for STEP 2014

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						28 Move-In Opening Reception JC Dewberry Hall, 2pm
29 Who Am I? Get to know Small Group Bridge Project ODIME MFR Campus Tour Town Hall: Pre-Survey	30 Who Am I? Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: What's My Personality Type? 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	1 Who Am I? Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Self-Regulated Learning 3:30-5:30, Innovation 205 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	2 Who Am I? Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Personal Identity Profile 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	3 Who Am I? **No classes** College Etiquette 2:00-3:30pm Game Night SUB I Patriot's Lounge Movie Night	4 Who Am I? **No classes** 4th of July Parade BBQ Hanover Hall Watching Fireworks	5 Who Am I? 10AM -4:00pm The Edge: Challenge Yourself Movie Night
6 Creating Community Art Project 2:00-4:00pm ODIME MFR Study Hall 4:00-6:00pm Dinner 6:00-6:45pm Town hall 7:00pm	7 Creating Community Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Creating Community 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	8 Creating Community Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Registered Student Organizations 3:30-5:30, Innovation 205 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	9 Creating Community Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Storytelling 3:00-4:15, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	10 Creating Community Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Running for Office 3:30-5:30, SUB I 3334	11 Creating Community **No classes** STEP Scholar Panel 10am ODIME lunch 12pm Hanover Hall Scavenger Hunt 1:30pm	12 Creating Community SOEL Activity 10:00am Field Day 4:00-9:00pm
13 Self Care Breakfast With The Dean 10:00am-12:00pm Study Hall 4:00-6:00pm Dinner 6:00-6:45pm Town hall 7:00pm	14 Self Care Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: CAPS 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	15 Self Care Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Help-seeking 3:30-5:30, Innovation 205 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	16 Self Care Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: WAVES 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	17 Self Care Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Grit and Gratitude 3:30-5:30, SUB I 3334	18 Self Care **No classes** Dr. Yu's Basketball Tournament 2-4pm, The RAC Movie Night	19 Self Care STEP OPTIONAL WEEKEND HOME (Surprise for those who stay)
20 Cultural Competency STEP OPTIONAL WEEKEND HOME (return by 3:30) Study Hall 4:00-6:00pm Dinner 6:00-6:45pm Town hall 7:00pm	21 Cultural Competency Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Gender 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	22 Cultural Competency Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Self Talk 3:30-5:30, Innovation 205 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	23 Cultural Competency Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Gender Box Activity 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	24 Cultural Competency Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Code Switching 3:30-5:30, SUB I 3334	25 Cultural Competency **No classes** Community Service Day Child Development Center (Morning & Afternoon shifts) Evening Outing (Tentative)	26 Cultural Competency Smithsonian Museum Study for Finals
27 STEP Forward Study Hall 3:00-5:00pm Dinner 5:30-6:15pm Talent Show 6:30-8:30pm Hanover Hall	28 STEP Forward Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Scholarships/ Fellowships 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	29 STEP Forward Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: North Star Essays 3:30-5:30, Innovation 205 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	30 STEP Forward Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Career Services: Professionalism Letter 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	31 STEP Forward Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Seminar: Graduation Letter 3:30-5:30, SUB I 3334	1 STEP Forward **No classes** Hershey Park	2 STEP Forward Service Day - Fairfax County Animal Shelter or Great Falls Hiking
8 Yoga 3:30-4:30pm Study Hall 4:00-6:00pm Dinner 6:00-6:45pm Town hall 7:00pm	4 Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Workshop: Learning Services: Finals Prep. 3:30-4:30, SUB I 3334 Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	5 Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	6 Classes 9:30am-1:30pm Study Hall 7:30-9:30pm	7 Exam Day (check schedule)	8 Post Program Survey	9 Move-out Transition Reception JC Dewberry Hall, 1pm

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BIOGRAPHY

George Yanez graduated from Thomas A. Edison High School in Alexandria, Virginia, in 2006. He received his Bachelor of Arts from George Mason University in 2010. He was employed as a career advisor at George Mason University for two years and will receive his Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from George Mason University in 2015.