



Research Brief

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Under the direction of the Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs, the UIC Office for Research on Student Success conducts translational research to improve college retention and graduation rates.

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Getting College Students Back on Track

A Summer Bridge Writing Program

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The Case for the Summer Bridge Program

Academic preparedness is key to understanding students' successful acclimation and future achievement in postsecondary institutions. Academic preparedness refers to the academic knowledge that a student possesses before entering college, e.g., writing skills, computation ability, scientific understanding, etc. (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010). This knowledge is an important piece of a student's overall college readiness (Barnes et al., 2010). While academically underprepared students are more likely to place into developmental courses (Contreras, 2011), academically prepared and college-ready students significantly outperform their peers in the first year of college (Sternberg, Bonney, Gabora, & Merrifield, 2012). According to one meta-analysis, retention rates are related to factors connected both with academic preparedness and with other aspects of college readiness, such as academic goals and academic self-efficacy (Robbins et al., 2004).

One promising intervention to prepare students academically for college is the summer bridge program. Serving as a transition from high school to the university, summer bridge programs have been widely identified as a "best practice" for universities, yet little consensus exists with respect to effective components of these programs (Garcia & Paz, 2009). Consequently, there is great heterogeneity in summer program

design across the United States: while some are residential, others are for commuters; and while some require paid tuition, others are free. Collectively, summer bridge programs have been shown to be effective with respect to earned credits and retention rates (Cabrera, Miner, & Milam, 2013; Douglas & Attewell, 2014); increased GPA (Cabrera, Miner, & Milam, 2013); greater academic self-efficacy and academic skills (Strayhorn, 2011); and increased academic and social engagement during the first two years of college (Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008).

Though a substantial body of research supports the efficacy of summer bridge programs, gaps still remain in the literature. One deficiency has been the lack of longitudinal studies of summer bridge programs, with the Douglas and Attewell (2014) study being an exception. Their study found that students who participated in summer bridge programs were ten percent more likely to graduate in six years than matched peers, and that summer programs were particularly influential for African American, Latino, and first-generation students (Douglas & Attewell, 2014).

Also, though summer bridge programs have the purported aim of improving graduation rates for underserved groups, there is little research in which graduation is the outcome of interest. The dearth in the literature of descriptive and comparative evaluations of summer bridge programs, most likely a function of the heterogeneity of these programs, has left us without clear evidence upon which to design new initiatives.

The Current Study

This study addressed the research question: What was the effect of a summer bridge writing program on student success Indicators (i.e., end-of-first-year GPA, first

year credit accumulation, first-to-second-year retention, four- and six-year graduation rates)?

To answer this question we evaluated Summer College, a five-week, non-residential summer bridge writing program for students at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) that has been in existence for over fifteen years. Summer College is designed for first-year students who have been placed in a

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developmental writing course because of their performance on the writing placement test. The Summer College writing workshops are intensive as students meet with instructors for three-hour class sessions three times

per week, for a total of 45 hours of instruction over five weeks—the same number of hours that are required during a semester. During the program, students receive structured supports to help them improve their writing skills.

The stated goals of the summer bridge program are to: (1) offer students a revised placement into a credit-bearing writing course during their first semester, (2) provide students with college-level work prior to their first semester, (3) familiarize students with the campus, and (4) help students build relationships with their peers so that they can collectively support one another as they transition into college.

Methods

For this study, several outcomes were assessed: (1) 6-year graduation rates for the 2006-2008 cohorts ($n = 1569$); (2) 4-year graduation rates for the 2008-2010 cohorts ($n = 1565$); and a range of outcomes for the 2011-2013 cohorts, including first-to-second-year retention rates, first-year credits earned, grade in the first credit-bearing writing course, and end-of-first-year GPA ($n = 1688$). The overall dataset included all students in

the 2006-2013 cohorts who were invited to participate in Summer College because they placed into a developmental writing course. Within the 2011-2013 cohorts (the data for most of the analyses), 37% of those who were invited to participate in Summer College actually did, while 63% did not. Of the participants, 52% were women, 38% were first-generation college students, and 70% were eligible for Pell grants. They were also diverse: 36% Latino/a, 28% Asian American, 18% Caucasian, 10% African American, and 8% other.

Study measures included demographic data, pre-matriculation factors (high school GPA and ACT scores), a binary-coded variable for participation in the Summer College writing program, and college success indicators (first-year GPA, grade in first credit-bearing writing course, credits earned at the end of the first year, first-to-second-year retention, 4-year graduation, and 6-year graduation). All data were accessed through the university data warehouse.

Results

In terms of the outcomes assessed in this study, the Summer College program was a success. Eighty-three percent of participants received a revised placement and started fall semester with a credit-bearing writing class. Participation in Summer College was also correlated with improved long-term outcomes. Both 4-year and 6-year graduation rates were significantly higher for Summer College participants than for their peers who were eligible for Summer College, but did not participate. These results held when analyses controlled for pre-matriculation factors such as high school GPA and standardized test scores (See Figure 1). Summer College

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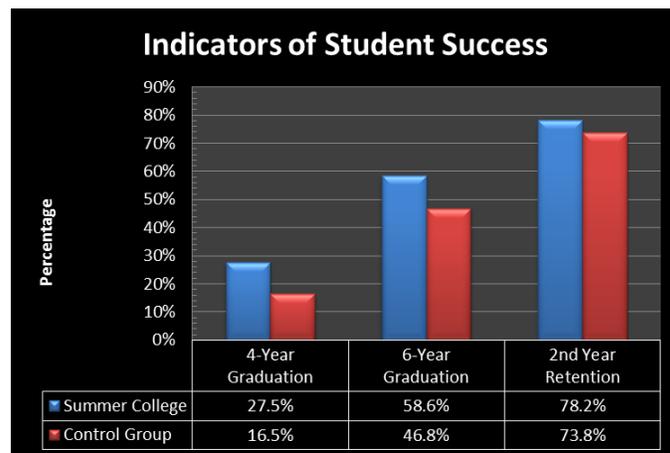


Figure 1. Comparison of Summer College and Control Group on Indicators of Student Success. Four- and Six-Year graduation significant at .001 level, retention at .05.

participants also had a higher GPA at the end of their first year and a higher grade in their first credit-bearing writing course than did their non-participating peers (Figure 2).

Discussion

In an era of diminished funding for higher education, it is essential that

programs be scrutinized to determine if they are worth the investment. By all indications, the Summer College writing program was a success because it accomplished its stated outcome of helping participants improve their levels of academic preparedness as they entered their first year. This is important because academic preparation is particularly critical for the success of first-year students (Reason et al., 2006).

Conclusion

As colleges and universities seek methods to improve student success rates, there are clear benefits to offering a quality pre-college, summer bridge program that provides developmental students with the additional academic support they need to

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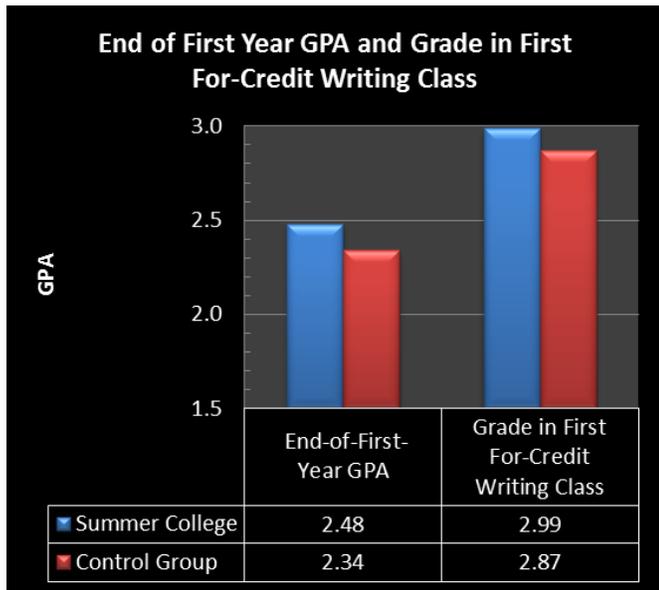


Figure 2. End of First Year GPA and Grade in First For-Credit Writing Class. *T*-test for End-of-First Year GPA significant at $p < .01$, Grade in First For-Credit Writing Class at $p < .05$.

be successful. Summer bridge programs, such as the one examined in this study, show promise in reducing the proportion of students in developmental courses, thereby setting students on a course for college success. Lessons learned from this study will inform UIC's efforts to develop a cohesive and comprehensive set of supports for first-year students and might encourage other universities to pilot similar programs at their institutions.

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