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Evaluating an Academic Bridge Program Using a Mixed Methods Approach

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Abstract

As the demand for college degrees has increased, college enrollment has grown significantly, and economic forces have applied greater pressure on the higher education environment to produce more degrees and better post-graduation outcomes. Many public colleges and universities have felt these pressures distinctly because of their state funding environments and the specific expectations that exist within them. While college aspirations and attendance have broadly improved, achievement gaps persist along cultural, generational, and socioeconomic lines. In an effort to navigate and negotiate institutional goals, public expectations, economic needs, and educational ideals, institutions engage in diverse approaches to recruitment and retention. Academic bridge programs are one type of intervention used to help incoming college students relatively at risk of attrition to transition to college. This mixed-methods, multiphase study evaluates one year of a new comprehensive bridge program serving first-generation and low-income freshmen from the Arkansas Delta region at the state's flagship university. Retention and academic performance of participants and eligible nonparticipants were quantitatively analyzed and compared to assess the program's effectiveness. The participant experience was explored using quantitative and qualitative methods to capture their assessment of the program's helpfulness and their personal reflections about it.

Findings indicate that the bridge program served students who were relatively disadvantaged as incoming college students even compared to similar students more at-risk than the general student, and that the program was associated with a very small positive effect on one-year retention. More and deeper investigation is needed to fully assess the influence of the program and whether it constitutes a cost-effective strategy for improving diverse enrollment and retention.

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Dedication

This dissertation and the larger body of work it represents is dedicated to my professional family in the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education, comprising the students and staff who build our programs and inform their progress, outcomes, and change; and in the Office of Student Success. To Charles, whose administrative efforts made our scholarship and retention program dreams real; to Don, who facilitated the ASAP program and to Trevor who helped make that happen; to the countless students who breathe life and purpose into our programs and make it all worthwhile; and to Brande, Adrain, Sarah, PJ, Jackie, Lauren, and Amber, with whom I have loved, laughed, and learned a great deal.

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I. Introduction

Context of the Problem

The social and political fabric of the American dream is woven with thick threads of individualism, self-improvement, and socioeconomic mobility reflecting confident, widely held assumptions of equal opportunity and meritocracy. Public education is fundamental to this value system because schooling is perhaps the only primary factor affecting mobility that is not defined entirely by inheritance (Chetty, Hendren, Kline & Saez, 2014). It is higher education that persists as a statistically promising vehicle of upward mobility, an implied social contract that depends on affordability and accessibility (Yankelovich, 2009).

The meritocratic power of a college education is indeed strong and may be growing; the bachelor's degree has a robust association with mobility in social class, occupation, earnings and household income (Torche, 2011). But family background, comprising these and other birthright qualities – the location and resources of the community one is born into or raised in; parents' educational attainment and career, etc. – is a powerful predictor of educational access, achievement, and outcomes (Bastedo, 2016). More students are enrolling in college today than ever before, but gaps in access to and success through college persist nationally; college attendance has increased among minority, low-income and first-generation populations, but it has done so at significantly lesser rates than it has among majority students – students of color and those from low-income families lag significantly in college-going behind their white and wealthier peers (Aud et al, 2011; Bastedo, 2006; Perna and Swail, 2001). In the context of the American ethos of equal opportunity and rewards for hard work, this is a formidable catch that presents a compelling and important public policy problem.

The American economic climate in the new millennium, with its deep recession and

slow recovery, has propelled significant change in the landscape of higher education with the growing demands for educated adults and resultant rising college-going rates and increased college costs for students and for schools. A shared sense of urgency among a large and diverse population of stakeholders – federal and state governments, cities and communities, industry and innovation, colleges and universities, students and families – is shaping the definition of this problem and setting the policy agenda in terms of higher education access, affordability, achievement, and accountability.

A long-growing body of literature on student persistence and academic retention presents numerous obstacles to college completion, ranging from academic under-preparedness for college-level work, financial and other external hardships, low expectations for achievement, lack of commitment to goals, and a variety of other cognitive and noncognitive factors. According to Bettinger, Boatman, and Long (2013), the chief barrier to college completion is academic under-preparedness for college-level coursework, and students with college readiness deficiencies are also likely to experience financial and other hardships that imperil their success in higher education. Low-income, first-generation and minority college students are disproportionately likely to have attended high schools with less rigorous academic standards and environments of lower expectations regarding college attendance and achievement (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009; Walpole et al, 2008).

Across decades of student affairs research and practice, matters of academic competence and academic support are considered alongside psychosocial, socioeconomic and other factors in the leading theories and models of retention. Tinto's especially salient theory of student departure (1975) suggested that colleges and universities must engage and support students academically and socially and nurture their students' institutional commitment in order to retain

them. Astin's (1984) similarly influential theory of student involvement emphasized the importance of college students' academic and social engagement as a function of the time and intensity of their involvement and the quality and relevance of in-class and co-curricular learning opportunities. Conceptual models and broad reviews of the literature on opportunities, interactions and outcomes between students and college generally consider the institutional environment, students' incoming and demographic characteristics, academic skills and competencies, and psychosocial factors as key dimensions of what affects retention; their scope and complexity reflects the multiple dimensions and layers of the problem, which are likely best with interventions that take into account the complicated interactions of those forces and factors rather than reduce and isolate them into more discrete variables (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2008; Reason, 2009).

Summer bridge programs, generally defined as transitional experiences for first-time freshmen whose incoming characteristics indicate relative risk for attrition, are one increasingly common and comprehensive intervention that colleges and universities facilitate to improve the retention rates of those student populations through a diverse range of academic, social, and other support (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Kezar, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole et al, 2008). However, there is significant need for research into the effectiveness of such programs (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Garcia and Paz, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011).

Context of the Study

Increasing retention and graduation rates is a key priority for the University of Arkansas, a land-grant institution and the flagship campus in a state where college completion rates in four-year public institutions rank near the bottom among all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The state is largely rural, a characteristic associated with low college attendance and completion, and in this millennium has suffered the highest rate of children in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty 2004). Among its primary natural regions is the Arkansas Delta, which has some of the lowest population densities in the American South and continues to be plagued by poverty, unemployment, low-performing schools and poor educational attainment. Arkansas' historical and continuing struggle with these demographics – rural isolation, low-income families, relatively few college-educated adults – that are strongly linked to poor college access and very low college completion rates have left it ripe for policy innovation regarding retention and graduation.

The University of Arkansas graduates more students with more degrees and demonstrates greater retention and completion rates among all demographics than any other four-year public in the state. But with a current 61.2% six-year graduation rate, a growth of three percentage points since 2010, it has not met its goals to reach 66% by 2015 and 70% by 2021. Retention and graduation rates at the University of Arkansas reflect national demographic trends, with minority and low-income students continuing and completing at lower than average rates.

Among a growing number of programs and interventions designed to improve retention among underrepresented and under-resourced students at the University of Arkansas is the Accelerate Student Achievement Program (ASAP), a four-year summer bridge pilot serving diverse cohorts of low-income and first-generation new freshmen from 26 counties representing the Arkansas Delta. The most recent first-year retention rate among all incoming UA students from that region was 83%, with first-generation and low-income students from that area retaining at a first-year rate of 75%. In 2016, the 4-year graduation rate of all incoming UA students from the 26-county ASAP region was 48.2%, and the 6-year rate was 62.9%; for low-income and first-

generation students, these rates are 34% and 50.4%, respectively. In 2015, students of color from these counties achieved a 4-year graduation rate of 27.3% and a 6-year rate of 45%.

Each summer for at least four years, a diverse group of 100 incoming low-income, first-generation freshmen from across the Delta region will be selected to participate, enrolling in seven credit hours in the summer before their first fall semester. Courses will include math, composition, and assertiveness training, and the program covers the cost of tuition, books, room and board, staff support, and activities. ASAP is a comprehensive bridge program designed to support participants' social and academic transition to college by easing into foundational college coursework, receiving mentoring from current students and staff, and early connections with critical campus resources. The program goal is to achieve for each cohort higher academic performance, retention and graduation rates than similarly situated students from that region have demonstrated in recent years.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the first ASAP bridge summer program and subsequent academic year, according to the program's stated objectives and relevant student outcomes. These included quantitative assessments of the bridge cohort attendance, participation, and retention; first-year retention and academic performance based on student course completions and grades and persistence at the University of Arkansas; quantitative comparisons to eligible first-generation and low-income students from the same region who did not participate but who matriculated to the same institution; and quantitative and qualitative data regarding students' experiences with the program and their assessment of its effectiveness as an intervention for improving college readiness.

Research Questions

1. What is the academic and demographic profile of the first ASAP student cohort and how does it compare to the cohort of ASAP-eligible nonparticipants?
2. Before beginning the ASAP bridge program, how do students in the first ASAP cohort self-assess non-cognitive skills associated with college readiness and success?
3. How does first-semester and first-year academic performance and retention among the ASAP students compare overall to ASAP-eligible nonparticipants?
4. After participating in the ASAP summer bridge and experiencing college as full-time students, how do students appraise the value of the program?

Definitions

Bridge program: A high school-to-college transition program, generally with academic and social support components, designed to improve college readiness and retention at a given institution (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Kezar, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna & Swail, 2001; Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole et al, 2008).

Persistence: In higher education, a measure of student success and a reflection of individual student goals for educational attainment, via progress toward a degree at or across any college or university (Reason, 2009; Black, 2001; Tinto, 1999).

Retention: In higher education, an institutional metric of student success reflecting a student's matriculation and continued progress toward degree completion at one college or university; retention is an institutional goal to keep and graduate students (Reason, 2009; Black, 2001; Tinto, 1999).

Success: Success is a subjective and variable concept. In this study and in the relevant literature, success is defined by the institutional, student, and/or programmatic context and

constituents; i.e. retention, as noted above, is an institutional metric of success; persistence is a student success measure; program success is determined by its stated goals and metrics relative to outputs and outcomes (Reason, 2009).

Assumptions

Multiple assumptions of philosophy and practice underlie this study. First, it is framed by the principal assumptions that achievement gaps relative to postsecondary attainment are a problem deserving of research, resources, and policy solutions; that college completion represents a successful outcome; and that ideally prospective college students should be adequately prepared for college, enroll and persist toward graduation. The emphasis on retention assumes that generally speaking and definitely within the context of academic support programs like the bridge program being evaluated here, persistence and retention are compatible ideals that can serve the interests of both students and institutions in higher education. Eligibility criteria for ASAP program participation were defined by geographic, demographic, and academic characteristics of incoming students and the assumption that certain qualities, including relatively lower grades, ACT scores, pre-college completion of college-preparatory or college-level coursework, low-income and first-generation status, are associated with relatively higher risk of student success in college. This bridge program evaluation study assumes that early exposure to college coursework and intensive, ongoing academic and personal support are likely to contribute to higher college achievement for students relatively at risk of academic attrition. Methodologically, I am operating under the assumption that a combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides meaningful insights that would not be captured by singular methods and research designs.

Limitations

This program evaluation study was limited to the first year of a four-year pilot program serving a socioeconomically and geographically defined cohort of students from one region of one state attending the same public university. The participants were limited to first-generation and/or low-income high school graduates of 26 counties in East Arkansas who made the University of Arkansas their college of choice and who opted to participate in the bridge summer program (N=82), and the comparison group is limited to the pool of program-eligible students who chose not to participate but who also matriculated to the University of Arkansas (N=86). The students and regions served by the program represent unique cultural, educational, industrial, socioeconomic and other environmental factors that limit the external validity of findings.

Significance of the Study

The current state of summer bridge program research and evaluation is inadequate, with few campuses engaging in complete evaluation processes sufficient to demonstrate evidence that such programs are meeting their stated objectives (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Perna, 2002; Strayhorn, 2011). Some bridge studies have focused on programs at two-year colleges (e.g. Ackermann, 1991; Kallison & Stader, 2012), where commuter culture and close collaborations with local high schools yield very different conditions than at four-year universities. Others focus on very small cohorts targeting specific demographics or academic interests. Very few examples of rigorous summer bridge program studies exist, and there is a particular dearth regarding first-generation and low-income students from rural communities. Despite this, summer bridge programs are touted as auspicious scaffolds

for improving retention and graduation among at-risk students, but reputation and rhetoric alone will and should not propel bridge programs into perpetual funding and continuation.

The potential of the summer bridge intervention, along with its growing application and high cost but concomitant lack of evidence demonstrating effectiveness present a significant need for further and rigorous inquiry. This study, focused on first-generation, low-income and minority students from rural, under-resourced schools and communities, will help to fill a significant gap in the research. As an evaluation of the first year of an important pilot initiative at a large comprehensive research university and land grant institution serving many first-generation and low-income students in a state with relatively low educational attainment, this study should have meaningful implications for institutional research and practice regarding diversity and retention efforts. Despite its limitations regarding larger generalizability, this study has the potential to reveal important insights regarding the academic and psychosocial college transition of relatively at-risk freshmen.

Conceptual Framework

In their extensive review of research on how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that in general studies on student outcomes have been framed narrowly by theories of behavior that focus on individual or few factors at a time; they called for a broader and more integrated approach to studying student change in college: "…the evidence suggests that these outcomes are interdependent, that learning is holistic rather than segmented, and that multiple forces operate in multiple settings to shape student learning and change in ways that cross the 'cognitive-affective' divide…change in any given area appears to be the product of a holistic set of multiple influences" (p. 629). "Such complexity suggests that studies focused

narrowly on one or another discrete dimension of the college experience are likely to present only a partial picture of the forces at work" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 630).

Tinto's (1975, 1987) model of student retention and departure centered on social and academic integration. Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement focused on student development as a function of their co-curricular engagement on campus. Berger and Braxton (1998) contributed to the literature the concept of organizational behavior, meaning the policies and actions of administration, faculty and staff, and its influence on undergraduate retention. Perna and Thomas (2008) discussed various discipline-centered approaches to studying student success, criticizing most as highly segmented and overly simplified and proposing for a broader and more holistic definition of student success. They operationalized success across ten indicators of college readiness, enrollment, retention and post-graduate achievement (Perna & Thomas, 2008).

Against that vast landscape, Terenzini and Reason (2005) crystallized the need for a more comprehensive approach to studying college student outcomes with a synthesis of salient theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Reason (2009) further applied it specifically to the study of student persistence and academic retention. This framework, a "comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence," incorporates students' precollege experiences and incoming characteristics, as well the influence of organizational context and peer environment on the individual student experience, in considering what leads to persistence and retention (p. 661).

I applied Terenzini and Reason's (2005) framework and Reason's (2009) conceptual model to my study of the ASAP summer bridge program, using the framework's four constructs (the sociodemographic and academic characteristics incoming students bring to college; the

academic and administrative context; the peer environment; and the experience of student participants during and after the summer bridge program) to examine the bridge program design and to contextualize the results of the program evaluation. My research employed a mixed-methods approach to explore and describe characteristics of students, their experiences, and the organizational and social contexts that frame the program, and to analyze program effectiveness according to its stated goals and metrics. Using Reason's (2009) comprehensive model is especially relevant given the comprehensive retention supports and goals of the ASAP program, which comprise academic skills, the social environment, and the institution's culture of diversity and access in service to its land-grant mission. In considering the interactive and interdependent forces influencing retention relative to this program, and in comparing ASAP summer bridge completer outcomes to those of a socioeconomically and geographically matched nonparticipant comparison group, I hope to contribute to the body of knowledge about summer bridge programs and indicate directions for further research.

II. Review of the Literature

Introduction

American higher education is a powerful and promising vehicle of upward mobility, with "the potential to lift people from one social stratum to another" (Swail, 2000, pp. 85-86). More students are enrolling in college today than ever before, but socioeconomic achievement gaps persist nationally. Higher education aspirations and realizations have increased among minority, low-income and first-generation students but have done so at significantly lesser rates than among those with inherited legacies of financial resources and college completion (Aud et al, 2011; Perna and Swail, 2001; Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009; Walpole et al, 2008). With a large and growing share of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or further education and specialization, which also guide career opportunity, mobility and earning potential, college completion is an understood and important goal, and low persistence and graduation rates are salient problems demanding policy attention and action (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Throughout the latter half of the last century, national public higher education policy was focused on college access issues; now attention and urgency has shifted toward retention and graduation rates (Tinto, 2004). The charge to better ensure college retention and completion sits largely with public institutions, from community colleges to research universities, which educate the majority of American students seeking degrees after high school. Both performance and market-based accountability metrics direct public attention and policy to retention and graduation rates. Colleges and universities are under intensifying pressure from both public and private constituents and stakeholders to serve more students and produce more degrees, all while improving access, affordability, and amenities (Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013). Since the 1990s, the

interactions between government and public institutions of higher education have become increasingly tense, with "governmental authorities…no longer as receptive to the traditional self-regulatory processes that have dominated university development for centuries" and states increasingly driven by the economic climate to fine-tune their demands of institutions with respect to accountable, efficient and productive use of public resources (Alexander, 2000, p. 411). "As the gap between higher education's rhetoric about its public purposes and the reality of its current performance grows, the special place of higher education – a place supported by the public because of the benefits it receives in return – is imperiled" (Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2010, p. 4).

At the same time, those public resources have been in sharp and steady decline for several decades, in terms of both state and federal funding. Institutional needs to counterweigh those losses through tuition increases have presented alongside lower purchasing power of federal Pell grants and a general emphasis on federal loans over grants, which shifts the burden of financial aid expense from taxpayers onto students and families (Smith, 2001). While college affordability have been increasingly illuminated as significant obstacles to higher education opportunity, the new era in financial aid policy emphasizes merit over need and "has shifted from students who need assistance to pay college costs to those who often do not have need but whose parents vote" (Smith, 2001, p. 50). The interaction of educational and economic factors relative to college access and achievement have produced an environment of need for affordability and student success.

What constitutes merit is an important question in a socioeconomic environment in which education is a gateway opportunity and the topography of the political and educational landscape is defined by meritocratic values of individual talent and effort. These ideals are deeply rooted in

American consciousness, which believes in fair competition on a level playing field (Alon & Tienda, 2007). In a meritocracy, "social status becomes increasingly dependent on an individual's level of education" (Liu 2011, p. 384). At this time in higher education, as more and more students pursue this ideal via college aspirations against a backdrop of unevenly distributed educational resources and persistent achievement gaps, definitions of merit have powerful implications for distributive justice (Liu, 2011). How students' individual characteristics – including both ascriptive traits and also qualities of effort and achievement – are weighed within the systems and processes that provide access to higher education and support through college matters a great deal.

Colleges and universities are uniquely situated to create, facilitate and evaluate interventions to increase matriculation and improve retention and graduation rates. Cabrera, LaNasa and Burkum (2001) have advised that these should be designed and implemented to serve students, families, and K-12 educators in multiple domains. Higher education professionals, the authors argue, can best explain what college is like, how to prepare for it and navigate the bureaucratic workings of admissions and financial aid processes; can most effectively work with schools on alignment of curriculum standards and skill expectations; and can design and implement pipeline programs that broadly connect all of these objectives. They suggest that universities too often focus only on short-term institutional measures of success (year by year retention) rather than on student-centered metrics (longitudinal persistence and achievement), which leads them to invest in short-range solutions that do not move the needle for student outcomes, research or best practices (Cabrera, LaNasa & Burkum, 2001).

Early college enrollment programs designed to bridge the summer between high school graduation and the first year of college are one type of intervention that universities can invest

and engage in pursuit of institutional success and to contribute to college readiness and retention research. These summer bridge programs, which typically provide transitional experiences for first-time freshmen whose incoming characteristics indicate relative risk for attrition, are a targeted intervention now commonly facilitated by colleges and universities for several decades to improve the retention rates of low-income, first-generation, and otherwise underrepresented student populations (Ackermann, 1991; Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Kezar, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole et al, 2008). Unfortunately, rigorous assessments of program effectiveness are more rare (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Garcia and Paz, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011). Still, a survey of extant studies on bridge programs yields valuable insights and indications of demonstrated promises, successes, and directions for growth. What follows is a review of existing literature on educational meritocracy and its implications for college access; retention issues that summer bridge programs are commonly designed to address; examples of existing summer bridge programs, and problems and opportunities in bridge program evaluation.

Meritocracy in Higher Education

The concept of meritocracy has ancient philosophical roots in Plato's aristocracy, but the word is itself a modern invention. The term first appeared in Young's (1958) dystopian novel about a society in which the power structure is founded purely on intellectual merit, and the less talented comprise a disenfranchised class. This premise satirized the British Tripartite education system and its use of a gatekeeper placement test administered to all students at age 11 and used to determine their subsequent educational paths; the novel reflected concerns about the use of public education to create rigid class divides between a privileged intellectual elite and an immobile working class. Though the term was intended ironically and pejoratively, meritocracy

instead came to be associated positively with aspiration, ability, and work ethic, and this connotation has persisted.

This positive notion of meritocracy is deeply engrained in American social consciousness, wherein the United States is a land of equal opportunity stratified by Jefferson's (1813) natural aristocracy of intellectual virtues and talents rather than one founded on wealth and birth, which he warned against. A true meritocracy creates equal opportunity and mobility because "talent, unconstrained by social origin, rises to the top" (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 489). This concept is complicated by historical, social, economic and educational contexts, however, because ascriptive variables such as wealth, class, ethnicity, family engagement and background have been found to structure educational access, participation, and success (Liu, 2011; Breen & Johnson, 2005; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Lucas, 2001; Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). It is important to investigate and evaluate the construction of merit-based systems because inattention to the social inequalities that frame ideas of achievement buttresses the notion that individuals succeed or fail fully on their own terms (Mijs, 2016; Liu, 2011). In a society where social status and upward mobility are largely determined by education, and if access to higher education is competitive on terms of merit and performance, then a meritocratic system of education will reproduce, rather than deconstruct, inequality (Mijs, 2016; Liu, 2011; Alon & Tienda, 2007). Mijs (2016) argued that its equalizing promise is therefore not simply unfulfilled, but is unfulfillable.

According to Mijs (2016), among the reasons for this are the inconsistencies and inequalities inherent within a system of different schools with varying resources and processes. Not only do students have access to different qualities of instruction, tools, and peer environments, but they are grouped and tracked into higher- or lower-standard academic

pathways based on subjective assessments that are associated with objective social inequalities (Mijs, 2016; Lucas, 2001). Lucas (2001) found evidence of class conflict at multiple stages in the education system and proposed that social background maintains inequality in education across multiple dimensions — in terms of the type of education students receive, aspire to, and attain.

The question of what constitutes merit is also critical. (Mijs, 2016; Liu, 2011; Alon & Tienda, 2007). It is generally understood to mean something good and worthy of pride and reward, and is associated with ideals of effort, skill, talent, and intelligence. These are not objective evaluations, and neither can they exist outside of a socioeconomic context; as Mijs (2016) emphasized, merit has no neutral definition. Its meaning may be contentiously debated where access to scarce resources are concerned, such as increasing demand and selectivity in higher education (Baez, 2006). Merit is the product of norms, shaped by history, empowered and applied by institutions (Mijs, 2016; Liu, 2011; Baez, 2006). What subjective characteristics define merit inevitably contradict the spirit of meritocracy. Mijs (2016) described this as a race that starts from unequal starting line because natural endowments such as intelligence, good lucks and particular skills are not equally distributed among people nor earned through hard work. When the illusion of equal playing fields and the promise of solid effort persist, we see a minimizing of the importance of need and equality in education.

Alon and Tienda (2007) have emphasized the competitive pressures that support meritocratic processes in higher education as it has become an increasingly rigid gateway for career opportunity and economic mobility. The demand for college education grew dramatically over the last three decades of the 20th century along with college enrollment, and with it selectivity and competition for university admissions. The most selective institutions, those offering admission to fewer than half of all applicants, received 37% of all fall 2015 applications

and ultimately enrolled 22% of all first-time freshmen that term (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017). University rankings, for example and most notably *U.S. News & World Report's* "America's Best Colleges," also lean on criteria such as test scores as well as other metrics of academic achievement often associated with selectivity and student "quality." While the most selective institutions may be especially reliant on student test scores, even less selective institutions use test scores as a measure of merit in awarding scholarships.

According to Baez (2006), merit as an institutional construct. It is used, according to Liu (2011), "to create and legitimize difference" to select students (p. 386). The ways in which higher education administrations specifically define, measure, and award merit carries significant implications for college access, admissions, and not only the academic composition but also the demographic makeup of university's student bodies (Liu, 2011; Alon & Tienda, 2007). In an examination of admissions selections at three Ivy League colleges, Karabel (2005) related definitions of merit as manifestations of power dynamics and distributions. According to Alon and Tienda (2007), what we're seeing is "the emergence of a test-score meritocracy amid pervasive test-score gaps" that exist along racial and socioeconomic lines (p. 489). This brand of meritocracy may raise the academic profile of an institution and simplify admissions, but it is not reflective of what are perhaps the most powerful predictors of college student success, the academic skill and work ethic reflected in high school grades, which capture both achievement and behaviors associated with college success (Hiss & Franks, 2014; Alon & Tienda, 2007; Mattson, 2007). Alon and Tienda (2007) argued that using class rank rather than test scores is a more race-conscious and equitable approach to admissions that may be more insightful and have more predictive power than does using scores on college entrance exams.

Academic retention problems and predictors

The road to college success is in many ways paved long before students enroll in postsecondary education; "rigorous, intensive precollege academic preparation" is critical for their later success (Kuh, Kinsie, Buckley, Bridges, & Haye, 2006, p. 89). Academic unpreparedness for college-level coursework is a principal barrier to academic retention and college completion and a problem that disproportionately affects first-generation, low-income and minority students (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Cabrera, LaNasa & Burkum, 2001). Low-income and minority college students are more likely to have attended under-resourced secondary schools with less access to rigorous and college preparatory coursework and lower expectations for college readiness and attendance from educators (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009; Walpole et al, 2008). Too many depart high school without the math, reading, and synthesis skills requisite for college success (Kallison & Stader, 2012; Kirst & Bracco, 2004). Cabrera, LaNasa and Burkum (2001) found that only a quarter of low-income high school students achieved above-average grades in high school and were therefore considered academically ready for college, and only half of them went on to four-year colleges. By contrast, about 60% of higher-income students performed at the same college-ready levels in high school and 40% of them went on to four-year schools.

While the college transition is broadly challenging for all new college students, "underprepared students confront more urgent problems" as they must adjust both socially and academically, often while facing significant financial obstacles and competing priorities (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013, p. 94). Their and other students' precollege experiences and characteristics have profound influences on their academic competence in college in ways that cannot be fully addressed by the postsecondary environment; student attributes are beyond

institutional control (Tinto, 1999). These are often used as control variables to help study factors of change and outcomes that college and university environments can manipulate through policies and programs.

Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) seminal review of research on how college affects students indicated that a large share of their cognitive skills and knowledge development takes place during the first two years of their college experience. From 2004-2010, however, more than 20% of first-year students of American four-year public institutions departed the college they began before the start of their second year (NCES, 2012). First-year departure is more pronounced among first-generation, low-income and minority student populations (Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). This highlights the critical importance of the first-year college experience, the first set of conditions in which institutions place students and a common focal point of retention research and practice (Tinto, 1999).

In an especially comprehensive analysis of institutional organizational factors and college student experiential and variables associated with first-year academic competence, Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006) identified four factors that students reported as most strongly related to their learning growth. These include students' perceptions of the degree that their institution supports their academic, social and personal needs; the extent to which they reported their in-class engagement through asking questions and participating in discussion; the degree to which students reported that their coursework expected or required higher-order thinking; and the degree of emphasis students felt their institution placed on academic work and study time. Some of these are also represented among five "conditions [that] stand out as supportive of retention" that should be especially cultivated for purposes of first-year student retention according to Tinto (1999): setting high expectations for student achievement; providing

academic and social support; offering academic feedback; building educational communities that engage students in learning; and encouraging integrated (i.e. academic and social) campus involvement.

According to Jamelske (2009), 95% of American institutions of higher education have some type of first-year experience program. Specific designs vary, from extended orientations to first-year seminars, coursework cohorts, living-learning communities, and other structures and interventions. Virtually all share goals of improving student performance, retention and graduation by engaging them socially and academically in a smooth transition from high school to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many studies have presented evidence that first-year experience programs positively affect student engagement, satisfaction, achievement and retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) warned that much of the research lacks rigor but reviewed two studies, one with matched control groups and another using an experimental random assignment design, which both indicated significant positive effects for first-year experience program participants. Studies of first-year experience programs at single universities by Potts, Schultz, and Foust (2004) and Jamelske (2009) did not find meaningful positive results for all cohort participants but saw promising growth for students identified as "at risk" or "below average" as incoming freshmen.

Psychosocial factors, which in educational research settings are most often referred to in terms of noncognitive skills and qualities, also bear strong associations with persistence, retention, and academic success. This has been a focal point of retention research and practice in first-year experience support and overall retention interventions since the introduction of Tinto's (1975) seminal student integration model, which suggests that college students' social connection and engagement with their campus community increases commitment, leading to

retention and ultimately graduation. This has meaningfully shaped decades of retention research and practice, particularly in the field of student affairs, and theories of student integration have since evolved to include motivational variables (Swail, 2004). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have reviewed over several decades thousands of studies that investigate how college affects students, and their synthesis of the research considers psychosocial factors as a critical domain. Many studies of these noncognitive qualities suggest that the most critical indicators of retention and success in college are related to academic self-confidence, motivation to achieve academically, and relative goal-setting and commitment (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Le, Casillas, Robbins, & Langley, 2005; Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth, 2004). These have recommended that institutional interventions designed to improve retention and graduation scaffold not only for academic support but also for students' goal-setting, confidence, assertiveness, and social engagement.

Robbins et al. (2004) performed a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies to integrate educational persistence and motivational theory models as applied to research on college success. Their analyses examined cumulative grade point average as a measure of academic achievement and academic persistence as a measure of retention, and they reviewed the literature for associations with these outcomes relative to nine constructs: achievement motivation, academic goals, institutional commitment, perceived social support, social involvement, academic self-efficacy, general self-concept, academic-related skills, and contextual influences. They found meaningful relationships between retention and academic goals, academic self-efficacy, and academic-related skills (such as study skills, time management, communication and discipline); academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation were most predictive of higher grades earned. Significantly, and especially promising for practitioners designing interventions

for at-risk students, the researchers found that the influence of these factors was more important than were socioeconomic status and entering college student characteristics (GPA, college entrance exam scores) in predicting these academic achievement and retention outcomes.

Le, Casillas, Robbins and Langley (2005) expanded on the work of Robbins et al. (2004) in their development of a college readiness inventory that could be used to measure these psychosocial and academic-related skills and predict students' academic performance and retention in college. Four factors, including academic discipline, general determination, communication skills, and emotional control, emerged that the researchers felt were significant and not represented in Robbins et al.'s (2004) meta-analysis of the extant literature.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks regarding student success can help to guide researchers, policymakers and practitioners in defining and understanding issues in academic retention and in designing and evaluating useful interventions to improve it. Reason (2009) has argued that across the vast landscape of college student success research, most studies "fail to consider the wide variety of influences that shape student persistence, focusing instead on discrete conditions, interventions and reforms" (p. 659). In this context, Berger and Milem (2000) contributed to the literature the concept of organizational behavior – the policies and actions of administration, faculty and staff – and its influence on undergraduate retention. Terenzini and Reason (2005) crystallized the need for a more comprehensive approach to studying college student outcomes with a synthesis of salient theoretical and conceptual frameworks that addressed both student growth, a matter of individual and internal change, and also college impact, a measure of institutional influence on student growth. Reason's (2009) framework, a "comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence," incorporates students' precollege experiences and incoming characteristics, as well the influence

of organizational context and peer environment on the individual student experience, in considering what leads to persistence and retention (p. 661). Reason's (2009) framework emphasizes the critical and complex importance of students' interactions with their environment, ultimately recommending that because student persistence and academic retention are multidimensional problems, no shallow or singular solution is well matched to address them. Rather, Pascarella and Terenzini recommend a shift of focus to "the pronounced breadth of interconnected changes" that may take place as the result of more comprehensive attention to multiple factors influencing retention and a broader network of interventions designed to increase success outcomes (p. 578).

Summer bridge program purposes

Entering college students who have qualities and experiences associated with early departure "benefit from early intervention and sustained attention at key transition points" (Kuh et al, 2006, p. 94). Academic bridge programs represent one strategy for providing additional college readiness, transitional, and ongoing retention support. Summer bridge programs, defined as transitional programs for recent high school graduates who have been admitted to a college or university as new freshmen, are facilitated by colleges and universities to "attract, assist with the transition of, and retain underprepared students" (Walpole et al, 2008). They may seem especially promising because they reflect institutional priorities of recruitment and retention while also serving student needs (academic support for positive outcomes) and the public interest (cultural and economic imperatives for broadly increasing higher education access and attainment), a perspective illuminated in Reason's (2009) framework for understanding retention interventions.

Summer bridge programs are generally designed to reinforce and further develop academic skills among students who have been quantitatively assessed as not quite ready for college-level work; to provide intensive orientations to college living and campus life for students who are especially unfamiliar with the college environment; and to equip them with the soft skills understood to be important for college success, such as academic confidence, work ethic, resilience and self-efficacy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail & Perna, 2002; Walpole et al, 2008). Even Tinto (2004) has suggested that "carefully planned" summer bridge programs can yield "substantial benefits" for academically underprepared new college students (p. 9). But aside from including for-credit courses in courses such as composition or college algebra – chosen because they represent broadly fundamental skillsets or are known predictors of later course success, or both – and aiming to create connections to engender belonging and community among the student participants, summer bridge programs have no blueprints. They are usually about five weeks in duration, and include mentoring, targeted advising, and faculty and staff networking (Sablan, 2013. Inherent in their design is the assumption that they might help students to overcome deficiencies they have developed across primary and secondary school, and the confidence that a supplemental experience can make a transformative difference (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail & Perna, 2002; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005).

In terms of both curricular design and target population, the scope of summer bridge programs varies widely (Kezar, 2000; Sablan, 2013). They may be characterized by a variety of purposes: Some are designed to help remedial or conditionally admitted students overcome academic deficiencies via remedial or developmental coursework; others are designed to help students who are fully admissible but who are at relative risk of acute challenge, attrition, academic and/or cultural isolation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sablan, 2013). Summer bridge

programs can also be classified by population, with some serving very specific demographics (women in engineering; students of color in STEM fields; students demonstrating needs for academic skill-building in specific disciplines, such as writing or math).

Comprehensive bridge programs – those at four-year institutions serving diverse cohorts of newly admitted high-need students with multifaceted academic and social support – are especially compelling from a research standpoint because of the potentially broad and powerful implications of their successes, failures, and transferable insights. Four-year universities graduate students at higher rates than do community colleges, but first-generation, low-income, and minority students are especially underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities relative to two-year community colleges. Comprehensive summer bridge programs broadly serving that population are of particular interest in this context, where the goal of equal opportunity and the problem of achievement gaps persist in public higher education.

Bridge program models and examples

Summer bridge programs, generally defined as transitional experiences for first-time freshmen whose incoming characteristics indicate they may struggle in adjusting to college learning and campus life, help students to ease into college during the summer between graduation and their first full-time semester (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Kezar, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna & Swail, 2001; Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole et al, 2008). Broadly, their purposes are to increase participants' academic readiness for college-level work, familiarize them with campus life and resources, and equip them with the noncognitive understood to be important for college success, such as grit, resilience and self-efficacy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail & Perna, 2002; Walpole et al, 2008).

Inherent in their design is the assumption that they might help students to overcome deficiencies they have developed across primary and secondary school, and the confidence that a supplemental experience can make a transformative difference (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail & Perna, 2002; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). Even Tinto (2004), a veritable founding theorist of retention and attrition, has suggested that "carefully planned" summer bridge programs can yield "substantial benefits" for academically underprepared new college students (p. 9). The main thrust of summer bridge programs is to provide equal opportunity for success among students while improving their likelihood to retain at the hosting college or university, but their target populations and specific purposes vary a great deal, and they comprise a vast range of activities (Barnett et al, 2012; Kezar, 2000; Walpole et al, 2008).

Some bridge programs serve broad demographics of at-risk student populations, comprising low-income, first-generation, and minority students; others serve specific ethnic or gender groups, or students entering specific fields of study known to be especially demanding. Developmental bridge programs are an especially common model targeting students who require remediation or developmental coursework; their admission is often conditional on summer bridge completion (Kezar, 2000; Walpole et al, 2008). Other models identify target student populations and invite them to participate, staging the summer bridge experience as a special opportunity and incentivizing participation (Thayer, 2000). The following program summaries highlight notable examples of especially well known or long-running summer bridge programs at four-year universities and reflect their diverse scope.

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program is a scholarship and retention program started through private giving in 1988 at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County to stimulate the interest and achievement of African American students, particularly young men of color, in STEM

majors (Maton, Hrabowski, Schmitt, 2000). The program opened to include students of all ethnicities in the late 1990s, in a preemptive reaction to changing affirmative action policies in higher education (Maton, Hrabowski, & Ozdemir, 2007). Meyerhoff Scholars transition to college at UMBC through a summer bridge program, during which they take math and other courses for credit, settle into a living-learning community that continues through their first full year of college, and also begin to meet for required study groups and other activities. Students earn positions in the program through a highly competitive selection process that assumes a record of academic achievement (to be considered, students must have earned a B or higher in all high school math classes, and AP coursework is prioritized) and begins with nominations that are whittled down to interviews for the top 10% of candidates; ultimately 2-4% of the total pool are awarded (Maton, Hrabowski, Schmitt, 2000). The Meyerhoff Scholars Program represents bridge programs that are focused on specific fields of study and on students underrepresented in those fields, but not on students who are academically unprepared for college-level work.

Upward Bound, a federally funded TRIO program foremost among the longest-running college readiness programs, has been continuously funded by the U.S. Department of Education for more than half a century. Upward Bound programs are typically hosted by colleges and universities, and all states but Rhode Island have multiple programs. Summer bridge programming is a well-recognized but optional component of Upward Bound grants, which are required primarily to provide supplemental college awareness and readiness support to high school students and their families through a 3- or 4-year commitment (Myers, Olsen, Seftor, Young, & Tuttle, 2004). Remarkably, despite the longevity and abundance of Upward Bound programs nationwide and the significant public investment in it – more than a quarter billion dollars allocated each fiscal year – only one large-scale randomized evaluation of the programs

exists. It found evidence that Upward Bound increases educational aspiration and reach, suggesting that it combats under-matching among first-generation and low-income students, but is not associated with significant differences in student performance or completion (Meyers et al, 2004).

A number of summer bridge programs serve relatively small numbers of incoming students demonstrating some characteristics associated with academic need. The Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) at George Mason University serves 25 incoming freshmen, all first-generation and mostly minority students. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Summer Bridge serves 40 students, all graduates of under-resourced high schools. Programs of this size and nature typically include six credits of core coursework, involve summer residence and mentoring, and are free to participants; they are often also the product of recent campus initiatives that have not yet been evaluated or funded enough to scale up.

Other larger bridge programs targeting at-risk students also commonly offer two or three college courses for credit, develop for students a living and learning community, and create social and academic resource structures meant to support students through their first full year of college. The University of Michigan and University of California, Berkeley house two such programs, notable for several reasons: they have existed continually for decades; today they serve relatively large cohorts of at-risk students; they serve resident and nonresident participants, an unusual characteristic of bridge programs at state universities; and they are not free. At the University of Michigan, where the summer bridge program began in 1975, the summer bridge program is required for the 240 or more students identified for participation based on indicators of college (un)readiness, and last year the student cost ranged from $6,650 for in-state students and $14,000 for others, with financial aid available to needy students. The University of

Michigan emphasizes that it does not offer remedial courses or programs of any kind, but the mandatory attendance takes on the appearance of conditional admission. At the University of California, Berkeley, a summer bridge program established in 1973 and which has grown 300% in the last three years, each year now serves 400 students, 70% of whom are both first-generation and low-income students. The cost of this program is up to about $6,500, with subsidized costs for financially eligible students. This program is described in terms of transitional support and early networking and connection that highlight benefits more than needs, and is not exclusive to academically at-risk students.

The University of Texas at Austin serves 250 students each year in its summer bridge program, which is invitation-only based indicators of academic need, free to participants, and has a built-in $1000 scholarship for successful completers. This is a particularly interesting program to watch in the current political and policy climate in public higher education. College completion is a powerful leader on the national and state policy agendas, where there is a public and political expectation of accountability to the public investment and to the social contract of equal opportunity and mobility through education (Bastedo, 2016; Harnisch, 2011). The bridge program at the University of Texas at Austin is an especially compelling model because it is both academically comprehensive and individualized, including tracks tailored for STEM and other majors; because it serves so many at-risk students and represents such an investment of institutional resources; and also because it incentivizes high academic effort and performance through a modest one-time scholarship that rewards not participation but the achievement of a 3.0 GPA in summer bridge courses. These qualities illuminate this program as broadly relevant with greater potential for inferences and the development of general best practices than some of the other well-known and long-running programs.

One consistency across this wide field of summer bridge programs is an unfortunate lack of rigorous evaluation (Sablan, 2013; Bir & Myrick, 2015; Strayhorn, 2011). Few colleges and universities facilitating bridge programs engage in assessment processes sufficient to demonstrate evidence that such programs are meeting their stated objectives (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Kezar, 2000; Perna, 2002; Strayhorn, 2011). Given the prevalence of bridge programs on university campuses, there is surprisingly little scholarly research into the most common bridge models and functions, and their characteristics and effects. Some studies examine fairly distinct bridge programs, for instance ones serving narrow demographic cohorts, such as women or men of color in STEM fields, or programs targeting very high-performing underrepresented students through competitive selection. Programs of this nature likely serve important purposes and may achieve powerful impacts, but these are not broadly generalizable (Kezar, 2000). A review of the literature also indicates, however, a promising surge of attention to larger and more comprehensive bridge programs and their more empirical assessment.

Assessment of effectiveness in summer bridge programs

Summer bridge programs are a prevalent intervention, but there is no concomitant abundance of evaluation studies. Instead, the landscape of summer bridge program research and assessment is inadequate, with few campuses engaging in complete evaluation processes sufficient to demonstrate evidence that such programs are meeting their stated objectives (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Perna, 2002; Sablan, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). A review of the research on bridge programs reveals a clear and significant need for systematic evaluation (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Garcia, 1991; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Kezar, 2000; Perna, 2002; Strayhorn, 2011).

Largely because of descriptive studies, bridge programs have become associated with higher academic achievement, retention, and graduation rates than would be expected of the students who participate (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013; Myers, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Muraskin and Lee (2004) concluded that summer bridge program studies are "almost unanimous in showing positive effects on college retention" (p. 18). But many scholars are skeptical of such associations and declarations because most are assessed without the use of control groups, and studies typically examine only one program or type of program, precluding generalizability (Kezar, 2000). For example, numerous bridge studies have focused on programs at two-year colleges (e.g. Ackermann, 1991; Kallison & Stader, 2012), where commuter culture and close collaborations with local high schools yield very different conditions than at four-year universities, and the studies rarely track persistence beyond two-year degree attainment. Others focus on very small cohorts targeting specific demographics or academic interests.

Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales and Albano (2008) answered this criticism with a study on student outcomes over two academic years following their participation in a summer bridge program and including a comparison with a control group. Their key finding was that second-year retention rates were higher among the bridge participants than the control group, though they did not achieve higher grades or complete more credits. Wathington, Barnett, Weissman, Teres, Pretlow and Nakanishi (2011) engaged in a large-scale random-assignment evaluation of developmental bridge programs at eight different two- and four-year institutions in Texas, where students requiring remediation participated in various bridge interventions. Their initial findings showed that students who completed the bridge program earned higher grades on subsequent math and composition courses during their first fall semester but were ultimately not more likely to retain to the second semester than the control group.

One quasi-experimental evaluation of a comprehensive bridge program serving low-income and first-generation students at a large public university focused on non-cognitive indicators of retention or attrition, finding that participants' felt greater senses of belonging and academic self-efficacy than a control group, that their summer melt rates were lower and first-year retention higher (Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley & Perry, 2012). The summer bridge program assessed included a one credit-hour course specifically designed to increase non-cognitive skills associated with student success. Both the bridge program and evaluation were guided by Tinto's model of institutional departure, which lent both a systematic theoretical framework to use in both program design and assessment.

Attewell and Douglass (2014) used propensity score matching to assess the effectiveness of summer bridge programs at multiple institutions, finding that students who participated in summer bridge programs at both two- and four-year institutions graduated at significantly higher rates than similar nonparticipants. This is an especially compelling study and conclusion because of the analysis of multiple programs and program types. Their use of propensity score matching, perhaps a practical alternative to randomized experiments in measuring bridge program success, helps to account for selection effects while still estimating the bridge program treatment effect. This is a promising approach in the field of educational program evaluation, which according to Howe (2004) is often not the best fit for standards of randomization and experimentation because they encourage researchers and practitioners to engage in oversimplified and easily manipulated interventions that bear less promise for policy and practice. Howe (2004) recommends mixed methods evaluations prioritizing qualitative approaches to better capture the behaviors, environments, and rich social contexts that also produce causal mechanisms and relationships.

In that vein, some of the less purely scientific summer bridge studies have also analyzed

specific program elements and drawn conclusions that are helpful to practitioners developing bridge programs or evaluations. Strayhorn (2011) investigated the effectiveness of one summer bridge program on four non-cognitive variables (academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic and social skills) and their relationship to first-semester performance among program participants, all students of color. According to this study, the bridge program influenced academic self-efficacy and academic skills more than social skills and belonging, and academic confidence was found to predict grade performance during the first semester. This suggests that bridge program designs might specifically aim to increase academic self-efficacy among participants.

McCurrie's (2009) case study on a renovated summer bridge curriculum emphasizes high standards and expectations, endorsing bridge experiences as an intensive introduction to college, "not a make-up for a bad or disappointing high school experience" (p. 39). In discussing program assessment, the author underscores the importance of varying definitions of program success by different constituents and stakeholders. The way the faculty envision program goals and success in developing and facilitating academic curriculum differs from the paradigms of college administrators and student affairs professionals, for instance. At least as consequential are students' definitions of success and their objectives as participants, as their expectations are powerful predictors of outcomes, and their ongoing engagement is critical to their retention (Astin, 1993; McCurrie, 2009).

This field of literature especially lacks comparative studies (with treatment and comparison groups within individual bridge programs, and also between/across different bridge programs) and clear typologies of program designs (Sablan, 2013). Few examples of rigorous summer bridge program studies exist, especially of comprehensive bridge programs serving

broadly diverse cohorts of first-generation and low-income students. This critique resounds across contemporary studies and reviews, however, and summer bridge program research appears to be growing in number, rigor, and depth. For now, those that do exist are fairly distinct and solitary; the field must be expanded with additional studies and replications to continue measuring program effectiveness and also to continue exploring and testing best practices for program frameworks, goals, and designs.

Conclusion

The potential of the summer bridge intervention, with its growing application and high cost but concomitant lack of evidence demonstrating effectiveness, presents a significant need for further and rigorous inquiry. A review of the literature reveals that randomized experiments, prized by the education evaluation community, are compelling, but the careful use of comparison groups also holds promise for summer bridge program assessment. Qualitative approaches to investigating the bridge student experience and mixed method strategies to measure non-cognitive skills and traits are also emphasized as important insights and perhaps meaningful predictors of success. The thoughtful application of theoretical frameworks might help program facilitators and evaluators structure interventions and measurements of their effectiveness. Perhaps the greatest need is for more longitudinal studies of consistently implemented programs over multiple cohorts of students.

Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley & Perry's (2012) and Strayhorn's (2011) studies examining the non-cognitive skill growth of summer bridge program participants and its effect on their retention provides an evidence-based emphasis on academically oriented non-cognitive qualities, such as academic confidence and resilience. The consistent call for empirical evaluations of how summer bridge programs affect academic performance and retention may seem focused on

quantitative measures, but a mixed methods approach allows for a greater depth of inquiry, richer insights, exploratory and confirmatory power, and convergent validity in program evaluation (Howe, 2004; Mertens, & Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Relative to the strengths and weaknesses of existing program evaluations, a review of the literature indicates that the ASAP summer bridge program should be guided by a theoretical framework, designed and implemented systematically to include both academic skill-building and non-cognitive development, and evaluated with methods that are sensitive to the program inputs, outputs, metrics and surrounding social and policy environment. In their extensive review of research on how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that in general studies on student outcomes have been framed narrowly by theories of behavior that focus on individual or few factors at a time; they called for a broader and more integrated approach to studying student change in college: "…the evidence suggests that these outcomes are interdependent, that learning is holistic rather than segmented, and that multiple forces operate in multiple settings to shape student learning and change in ways that cross the 'cognitive-affective' divide…change in any given area appears to be the product of a holistic set of multiple influences" (p. 629). "Such complexity suggests that studies focused narrowly on one or another discrete dimension of the college experience are likely to present only a partial picture of the forces at work" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 630).

This mixed methods evaluation of the ASAP summer bridge program assesses program effectiveness by examining multiple forces in multiple settings, using qualitative and quantitative designs for purposes of triangulation and complementarity. As a study of a comprehensive and holistic bridge program, this evaluation seeks to measure program effectiveness in a way that

will add value to the body of summer bridge program research and add dimension to institutional discussions on enrollment and retention goals.

III. Methods

Introduction

This research uses a mixed methods approach to an evaluation study of one year in a new high school-to-college bridge and retention intervention program. Mixed methods research strategies combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis in various degrees, priorities, and progressions. The underlying assumption and guiding principle of this approach is that the complementary strengths of the quantitative and qualitative methods serve to minimize or counterbalance their respective weaknesses while expanding depth and clarity: Quantitative methods and their tools allow us to define and measure variables, track trends and patterns, and refine comparisons; qualitative inquiry contributes an important sensitivity to values, meaning construction, context, and lived experiences. Individually and combined, these methodologies are grounded by research paradigms and philosophies of reality and knowledge.

Mixed method research has distinct and inherent strengths in considering multiple perspectives and frameworks for investigating and understanding a problem, reflecting on multiple purposes for engaging with both quantitative and qualitative research tools, and using those to pursue multiple validities. Paradigms guide our thinking about methodological decisions (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2013). In presuming dialectical reasoning and the thoughtful inclusion of emic and etic perspectives, mixing methods creates multiple ontological vistas onto the panorama and prism of reality. “Quantitative and qualitative methods of knowing cross-check one another” (Howe, 2004, p. 341). Using both quantitative methods, which so value external validity, and qualitative methods, which focus on internal validity, helps the evaluator to achieve a balance of quality inferences and confidence that the causal relationship that those inferences

suggest will persist in other, but similar, settings and populations. By definition, the combining of multiple methods of observing and examining problems acknowledges that reality is not fixed or singular and reflects a range of ontological perspectives which, when applied consciously, can represent a richer and more detailed natural landscape of inquiry, from framing to findings.

Research Paradigms and Methodological Philosophy

It is important to understand not only the practical applications of mixed methodology but also more fundamentally its philosophical bearings on the nature of reality and what can be known. These ontological and epistemological questions frame research and direct inquiry. By examining the paradigms that guide research, researchers can reflect more carefully on the complex social world they operate in (Mertens, 2014). Philosophical orientations, theoretical perspectives and personal experiences all inform researchers' attention to problems and their definitions, understandings of reality and what can be known, what questions should be asked and what combination of methods and tools can answer them (Cresswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003; Mertens, 2014).

Research practice in the social and behavioral sciences has long been commanded by two opposing forces in the "paradigm wars": the positivist paradigm, which assumes a singular reality that can be discovered through objective, value-free inquiry and is associated with quantitative research; and the constructivist paradigm, which holds that only subjective inquiry is possible and guides qualitative research (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Feilzer, 2010). This rivalry produced meaningful qualitative challenges to the tradition and supremacy of pure quantitative research, and then the proposal of mixed methods research to resolve the formerly irreconcilable differences between these two leading and dichotomized paradigms (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Proponents of mixed methods disputed the

notion that quantitative and qualitative methods are fundamentally incompatible and suggested instead that integrating numeric and narrative data is a desirable, improved or even necessary alternative to choosing only one or the other (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). They advanced a different paradigm, pragmatism, which assumes multiplicity in truth and reality as they are understood and experienced and values conflicting theories and different forms of inquiry (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Johnson and Onquegbuzie, 2009).

The pragmatic paradigm is centered along the positivist-constructivist continuum as a dominant mixed methods approach, using abductive logic, intersubjective points of view, and recognizing values as important not only in the act of inquiry but also in the interpretation of data and results (Morgan, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). In practice, pragmatism seeks causal relations but draws those conclusions tentatively, assuming their complexity and transience. As an approach that attempts to rectify the twoness of positivism and constructivism and qualitative and quantitative methods, pragmatism values internal and external validity. Pragmatism accomplishes both "contextual sensitivity and tangible processes for how inquiry and credible evidence are achieved" (Hall, 2013, p. 17).

Pragmatism lends itself to the transformative or transformative-emancipatory approach, which also values the compatibility of nomothetic and idiographic stances, both objectivity and researcher-participant interaction, and abductive reasoning. The way causal relationships are viewed is a critical difference between the pragmatic approach, which suggests that causal relationships might exist but are temporary and hard to identify, and the transformative perspective, which assumes there are causal relationships that can be elucidated and should be understood within a social justice framework (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009, p. 93). The transformative philosophy of research not only recognizes the social construction of values and

their influence on inquiry and interpretation but also holds that research should be "guided by social injustice" and focused on the dynamics of oppression (Mertens, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 88). Transformative evaluations are ideologically framed, "such that no matter what the domain of inquiry, the ultimate goal of the study is to advocate for change" (Cresswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003, p. 176). The outcomes- and advocacy-driven purpose of transformative research contributes an added impetus for external validity because "transformative scholars attempt to link results from a specific study to broader issues of social justice" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 93).

Greene (2013) has advised that mixed methods inquirers must "be explicit about the paradigmatic assumptions that frame and guide their work" (p. 111). Ontological assumptions about the nature of the social world, epistemological assumptions about what is "warranted knowledge," and assumptions about "defensible methodology, and about the role of social inquiry in society" speaks to the purpose and character of the research (Greene, 2013, p. 111). It is a "critical responsibility of the inquirer to make these assumptions explicit and to justify the values they invoke – values of distance, engagement, inclusion, objectivity, generalizability, contextuality, social action, and so forth," especially in evaluation contexts, "because they are saturated with values" (Greene, 2013, pp. 111-112).

My research beliefs and assumptions are pragmatically oriented but meet the further specific standards of the transformative approach: My research interests in equal access to higher education and to socioeconomic indicators of college retention and completion are framed by social justice values and priorities and are focused on marginalized populations. I believe there may be causal relationships that can be specifically understood as a matter of social justice and that where possible, these should be transferred to other cases and proposed for generalization

for the purpose of improving inequality and promoting justice. I am not an objective or neutral outsider, but an involved researcher with knowledge of the subject population from experience (as a first-generation, formerly low-income student from a community with very low educational attainment), research and practice (in the field of college readiness, enrollment management, and targeted retention programming). In other words – Stanfield's (1999) as referenced by Mertens (2003) – I am concerned with, and feel able to achieve, "relevance validity" (p. 79).

Research Design

This program evaluation uses mixed methods for the purposes of triangulation, complementarity, development and expansion. The evaluation took place in multiple stages, beginning immediately before the program began in July and continuing through one full academic year (August-August), and it employed sequential, parallel and embedded design elements at different points.

Triangulation, often regarded as the first mixed method strategy, is a broad term that generally refers to the use of multiple data sources, methods, investigators or theories in the study of a single problem and reflects a multi-dimensional investigative interest (Denzin, 1978). Olsen (2004) defined it very basically as "the mixing of data or methods so that diverse viewpoints or standpoints cast light upon a topic" (p. 103). Agreement or convergence between different theories, data sets, research methods or analyses is understood to improve the investigator's confidence in what they suggest or reveal. In this way, triangulation is "largely a vehicle for cross validation when two or more distinct methods are found to be congruent and yield comparable data" (Jick, 1979, p. 108). Its effectiveness relies on the underlying assumption of mixed method research: that the potential weaknesses or biases of each method will be offset by the strengths of another, so that there are complementary assets but no overlapping flaws.

Multiple measures of different types taken independently provide convergent validation when they reach the same conclusion.

Complementarity is a mixed approach "to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon;" the results of one method serve to elaborate, elucidate, and augment the results of the other (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989, p. 126). Development refers to a sequential approach, where the use of one method directs the development of the next. The purpose of expansion as a mixed method evaluation strategy is to increase the scope of a study "by selecting the methods most appropriate for multiple inquiry components," such as qualitative methods for assessing a program's processes and experiences and quantitative measures of program outcomes (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989, pp. 127-128).

This ASAP program evaluation applied a mixed method approach primarily for the cross-checking purposes of triangulation and also the exploratory and illuminating strengths of complementarity, development and expansion. The program's services and interventions occur along a planned timeline but are designed to shift and flex to meet unanticipated needs. In a complementary fashion, the research design leaned on the adaptability, resourcefulness, and richness of insights that mixed methods provide and that an evaluation of a young living, breathing program can benefit from. This study evaluated the effectiveness of one year of ASAP programming using mixed methods to maximize their strengths, using quantitative analysis of enrollment data to track, measure and compare student performance and persistence; using quantitative measures via pre- and post-tests and surveys to assess students' non-cognitive college readiness; and using qualitative methods through open-ended survey questions and focus groups to elicit richer insights regarding students' perceptions of themselves and their experience, and the program's purposes and outcomes.

The evaluation occurred across several phases, beginning with quantitative description and analysis of the sample, a population of first-generation and low-income students from a defined geographical region who opt into an intensive college bridge and retention program. The program participants were compared quantitatively to eligible nonparticipants also matriculating to the university before enrollment and throughout the academic year using incoming and continuing student data such as financial aid and first-generation status, high school GPA, standardized test scores, high school coursework, college courses and completion, grades earned, etc.; this quantitative data collection and analysis took place across and during other phases and alongside other mixed methods of data collection and interpretation, a parallel design. Program surveys asking for participants' reflections on their program experience and its helpfulness represented an embedded mixed methods design by including open-ended questions that expounded upon scaled items. The survey results were used to shape later focus groups and further explore insights, representing a sequential structure. Taken together, these elements of the research design reflect the mixed method purposes of broadening and diversifying the scope of inquiry and understanding.

The first phase of research was a quantitative demographic and academic profile of the ASAP student cohort compared to eligible students who did not opt to participate in the program. In the second phase of research, upon arriving to campus but before beginning the bridge program, participants completed a quantitative self-assessment inventory of non-cognitive college readiness factors. The third phase comprised end-of-first-semester mixed method surveys of continuing student experiences alongside quantitative assessments of first-semester performance and retention. Insights and questions generated from these data shaped the fourth phase and a fully qualitative strand, participant focus groups designed to elicit further feedback

regarding students' perceptions of the program's effectiveness. Concurrent to the third and fourth phases was a fifth phase that involved the collection and analysis of quantitative first-year academic performance and retention data and comparisons to the eligible nonparticipant group.

Program Design

The Accelerate Student Achievement Program (ASAP) summer bridge is a college readiness intervention for up to 100 recent high school graduates who are first-generation and low-income new freshman at the University of Arkansas and who represent 26 counties in the Arkansas Delta, a rural region with high poverty and low educational attainment rates, and a significant share of the state's lowest performing high schools according to math and literacy scores. University of Arkansas students from this region achieve lower retention and graduation rates than does the general student body. ASAP represents an effort increase matriculation, retention and graduation among U of A students from east Arkansas. Participants take at no personal expense three courses to earn seven credit hours that will count toward graduation. These will include two three-hour university core courses (composition, college algebra, sociology, etc.) and a one-hour course on assertiveness development. Students who complete the summer component are eligible to receive up to $2,500 in incentive stipends across their first and second full academic years, receiving $625 per semester based on their academic performance and continued engagement with ASAP staff and support. During and for the two academic years after the ASAP summer bridge, students are mentored by a group of current UA students, advised by staff with personal experience and professional expertise regarding the first-generation and low-income college student experience, and broadly supported with a network of campus resources for community engagement and academic success.

Participant selection and population profile

The program and the associated evaluation study used purposive sampling. All ASAP-eligible students (defined as first-generation and/or low-income students graduating from high schools in the 26 east Arkansas counties served by the program) who applied and were admitted to the University of Arkansas were invited to participate in the ASAP summer bridge program. The invitation emphasized ASAP as a free opportunity to earn seven credit hours that will count toward a degree; to build relationships with students, faculty and staff that would continue far beyond the summer program component; and to earn stipends during the first and second full academic years based on engagement and academic achievement. The first 100 students who responded with interest by a priority deadline were to be accepted, and later applicants were to be considered as space allowed. In the first year of the program, the total eligible student pool comprised about 250 students, and 82 students participated. Among the eligible students who did not opt in, 86 matriculated to the university.

The program evaluation therefore considered the 82 program participants and the 86 nonparticipants, other students who were program-eligible (i.e. first-generation and/or low-income students from the same geographical regions) and matriculated to the university but did not participate in ASAP. This total sample received direct invitations to participate in the summer bridge and associated programming, with emphasis on academic opportunity and financial incentive. Incoming student characteristics reported during the university's admissions and scholarship processes were used to develop a profile of the participant and nonparticipant cohorts, incoming academic and financial data such as high school attended, GPA earned, ACT scores, AP/IB coursework completed, college credits transferred, enrollment date, first-generation status, federal financial aid eligibility, and scholarship awards. These were used to

compare the participant and nonparticipant groups using incoming student characteristics associated with various predictors of success according to institutional retention and graduation data and assessment and the general body of literature on college preparation and college retention. Prior to contacting participants for the purpose of this research, the project received approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board.

Research Questions, Sampling, Instrumentation, Data collection and Analysis

Research question 1: What were the incoming student characteristics of the first ASAP student cohort and how do they compare to the cohort of ASAP-eligible nonparticipants?

The first research question addresses the academic and demographic descriptors of the ASAP participants and nonparticipants. The sample included all 82 incoming freshmen at the University of Arkansas who were eligible and invited to participate in ASAP, accepted program admission and ultimately attended the five-week summer bridge program in summer 2016; this sample was compared to 86 incoming freshmen who were also eligible and invited to consider joining ASAP but did not elect to participate and enrolled at the University of Arkansas for their first full-time semester in fall 2016. Data collected during the admissions process and stored in the university's internal student information database were used to compile each group's mean ACT composite score, mean GPA and subgroup breakdowns, mean number of credit-earning AP tests completed, mean number of credits transferred into the first fall term, and the percent of each group that was Pell eligible and self-reporting as first-generation college students.

Research question 2: Before beginning the bridge program, how do students in the first ASAP cohort self-assess non-cognitive skills associated with college readiness and success?

The sample for this question included the 82 ASAP program participants, all who were asked to complete a quantitative assessment of non-cognitive skills and behaviors associated

with college persistence and success. The instrument is ACT's Engage College, a nationally normed 108-item self-report inventory designed to measure student motivation, social engagement, self-regulation, and other qualities believed to indicate risk of low grades or dropout. These are measured according to three domains associated with ten scales: motivation/getting work done, including academic discipline, general determination, goal striving, commitment to college, communication skills and study skills; social engagement, including social activity and social connection; and self-regulation, including academic self-confidence and steadiness. As these are qualities that students bring to the college environment, they are along with other incoming student characteristics part of the first phase of research.

I administered this assessment to students in an online format at the beginning of the summer bridge component. After briefly describing the Engage College inventory, I e-mailed all 82 ASAP participants a link to the assessment, which must be completed online. ASAP students had access to a campus computer lab or could use personal computers and were asked to set aside about 30 minutes to complete the ACT Engage before attending the first program meeting. All students indicated they knew they were not required to participate, consented to the study and submitted complete inventories. The assessment was immediately scored by ACT, which provides individual and aggregate mean percentile scores and comparisons referencing ACT's national norms from peer four-year institutions.

Research question 3: How does first-semester and first-year academic performance and retention among the ASAP student compare overall to ASAP-eligible nonparticipants?

The sample here included the total participant and program-eligible population. The Office of Retention and Graduation, which helped to design and facilitate the ASAP Bridge program, drew from academic records in *UAConnect*, the university's internal student

information database, a variety of quantitative data for analysis, including specific course performance (including completion rates or withdrawal and grades earned) and term GPA and compared these among the participant and nonparticipant groups. Overall academic performance and retention was assessed and compared in terms of average hours completed and grade point averages earned for the first semester, second semester, and full academic year, and also student persistence and departure.

Research question 4: After participating in the ASAP summer bridge and experiencing college as full-time students, how do students appraise the value of the program?

The total possible sample for this phase of the study included the total population of 82 program participants, and the instruments included mixed-methods surveys as well as focus groups. The actual sample included the 50 ASAP students (60%) who completed a program effectiveness survey and the 14 (17%) who participated in focus groups. The research questions were first addressed with both closed- and open-ended questions about participants' perceptions of program effectiveness. Students were asked, using Likert-type questions, to rate the helpfulness of the program regarding their academic transition to college; social transition to campus; identifying and encouraging their use of helpful campus resources; giving them a sense of support; their experience with both peer and professional mentoring; and program requirements such as tutoring and study hours. Open-ended questions asked for their reflections on what was most and least helpful about the program.

For survey analysis, I calculated the mean response of each Likert-type item. I also calculated the median and mode of each for central tendency as well as frequencies for variability; I was interested in all of these descriptive statistics, as there has been debate in the scholarly community regarding which analyses are most appropriate for ordinal scales such as

Likert-type. Sullivan and Artino (2013) found that parametric statistics (these make assumptions about the defining properties of a population, for instance that it follows a normal distribution) are appropriate or even recommended for analysis of Likert-type scales.

For the qualitative survey component, I used content analysis and simultaneous/multiple coding techniques to analyze open-ended questions in order to capture descriptive and inferential meaning (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This included descriptive, in vivo, process and emotion coding because the study explored themes surrounding participant perspectives, experiences, feelings and behaviors and the interactions of those dimensions (Saldana, 2009). I analyzed the quantitative and qualitative survey data together to allow for potential meta-inferences to emerge and also to elicit primary themes and guiding questions for the later focus groups.

The survey by its nature framed the participant respondents' attention to the overall purpose of ASAP and its programmatic elements. I used the survey results to further direct my inquiry into ASAP participants' appraisal of the program's value to their transition to college and first-year experience. I also wanted an opportunity to explore their sense of the program's effectiveness in a broader way that did not always specifically direct their feedback toward a specific program component, to refine certain lines of inquiry through follow-up questions, and also to be able to gauge variation or patterns in their feedback.

Directed by the results of the first-semester program survey, I facilitated three focus groups representing 14 students total to more fully explore and gain greater insights regarding their broad reflections on the bridge program experience; how it did or did not aid in their high school-to college transition; whether they perceived that the summer bridge program improved their readiness for full-time college attendance and/or college life; what about the program was perceived to be especially valuable or unproductive; whether they appreciated and used peer

mentoring; and whether if they could "go back" they would again choose to participate. The first focus group, including six students, took place late in the spring semester. The remaining two occurred during a summer term.

All ASAP participants were invited to express interest in participating in a focus group. I asked program staff to identify students representing various levels of program engagement and students with different levels of academic performance in their first full-time semester, so that among the students interested I could diversify the groups and avoid asking the most involved and best-performing ASAP students. Because initial program eligibility is geographically defined, I also aimed for a diverse group in terms of high schools and counties represented. Ultimately, the 14 students who participated included six young women and eight young men, three ethnicities, and 13 high schools in 12 counties. Four student participants earned mostly A grades, three earned mostly Bs, and the remaining students had a C average or lower in their first college courses. One student participant was known to be considering departing the University.

Each focus group was recorded, and I took notes during each to note nonverbal cues, group dynamics, and other observations representing the tone of the dialogue. I also employed immediate respondent validation to confirm my initial interpretation of their reflections because I sought deep reflections on student experiences, feelings, and behaviors. Notes during and analytical memos that I wrote immediately after the focus groups served to track the participant responses, nonverbal and other cues, and my perceptions of the participant dynamic (Patton, 2002). I transcribed each focus group and read them as related but distinct texts to allow both unique insights and common themes to emerge. In the context of the fourth research question regarding the students' perceptions of the program's effectiveness, I analyzed the transcripts for

key words and phrases relevant to the fourth research question, again using in vivo, process and emotion coding to assign open codes, then grouping them according to themes that emerged.

IV. Results

Research question 1: What is the academic profile of the first ASAP student cohort and how does it compare to the cohort of ASAP-eligible nonparticipants?

All students admitted to the University of Arkansas for the fall 2016 term, who were first-generation and/or Pell-eligible students, and who graduated from high schools in 26 counties across the Arkansas Delta region were invited to apply to participate in ASAP. The program invitation for applications was extended to 330 admitted students in mid-March of 2016, during the prospective participants' senior year of high school. Applicants were asked to write a statement of interest and to commit, if selected, to attending the free summer bridge program and to enrolling in seven credit hours during a five-week summer term.

Of the total population of 330 prospective students invited to apply to participate, ultimately 168 matriculated to the University of Arkansas for the fall 2016 term. Among that group, 82 students participated in ASAP and began college at the University of Arkansas during a summer academic session in July. The remaining 86 students did not pursue participation. Incoming student characteristics for both groups were pulled from application and admissions data collected by Enrollment Services and stored in UAConnect, an institutional database containing admissions and enrollment data, and which include high school GPA, average ACT score, Pell eligibility and self-reported first-generation status. Table 1 presents a comparison of the participant and nonparticipant groups according to their incoming student characteristics.

Table 1
Incoming Student Characteristics, ASAP Participants and Eligible Non-participants

Characteristic	ASAP Cohort Percent (*n* of 82)	Eligible Non-participants Percent (*n* of 86)
First generation	67.1% (*55*)	66.3% (*57*)
Pell-Eligible	79.3% (*65*)	68.6% (59)
AP tests for credit	0.30	0.45
Transfer credits	6.0	6.9
Mean ACT	23.9	25.0
Mean HS GPA	3.59	3.69
GPA <3.0	8.5% (*7*)	4.7% (*4*)
GPA 3-3.79	59.8% (*49*)	49.9% (*43*)
HS GPA ≥ 3.8	31.7% (*26*)	45.4% (*39*)

The ASAP cohort was 79.3% Pell-eligible, compared to 68.6% for the nonparticipant group; 67.1% of ASAP students reported they were first-generation college students, as compared to 66.3% among the nonparticipant group. The ASAP participant group had overall a lower mean GPA and ACT score than did the eligible nonparticipant group; further, the ASAP participant group included more students reporting high school GPAs under 3.0 and fewer students reporting a 3.8 or higher. The eligible nonparticipant students earned credit-earning scores on Advanced Placement tests at higher rates than did the ASAP cohort (a per-student average of .45 compared to .30.) and also transferred more credits by the first fall term (an average of 6 credit hours for ASAP students and 6.9 for eligible nonparticipants). These pre-college characteristics represent academic, financial, and other resources generally understood to be associated with college success, and in the context of this research I am assuming that higher

grades, greater exposure to college preparatory courses, and less financial need are likely associated with greater college readiness and likelihood of college success. Interestingly, based on these group demographics, it appeared that eligible students with relatively greater academic and financial need elected to participate. The participant cohort may have been more enticed by the free introductory coursework and opportunity for stipends; the students who chose not to pursue ASAP participation may have felt more college-ready and less in need of the special introduction to the university.

Research question 2: Before beginning the bridge program, how do students in the first ASAP cohort self-assess non-cognitive skills associated with college readiness and success?

All 82 students participating in the first ASAP summer bridge program took the ACT Engage College, a nationally normed 108-item self-report inventory designed to assess the non-academic college readiness of incoming traditional college students according to ten scales across four domains: motivation and skills, social engagement, self-regulation, and other behavioral qualities believed to indicate risk of low grades or dropout. I administered this assessment after the students had arrived on campus, attended New Student Orientation, begun moving into on-campus housing, and attended an introductory ASAP cohort meeting but before they had participated in any summer programming or coursework. All students were invited to complete the ACT Engage, and all completed it on the same day. When all students reported having completed the assessment, I retrieved an aggregate report showing all scale and index scores with comparisons to the ACT's national sample of students attending four-year institutions who have completed the Engage College inventory. Using multiple regressions, this instrument also uses the ten scales in combination with students' self-reported scores from

college entrance exams to generate scale scores from 1-100 (higher being better) for academic success and retention indices. (Definitions of each scale are listed in Appendix B.)

Table 2 and Figure 1 show ASAP students' average percentile scores (*N*=82) on the ten ACT Engage College scales and academic success and retention indices as compared to the average scores for the national sample of students who had also completed the ACT Engage inventory (*n*=48,232). The results indicated that in ASAP students scored significantly higher overall than the national peer comparison group in both retention and academic success indices. ASAP students scored significantly lower on two scales, communication skills and social connection.

Table 2
Average ACT Engage Percentile Scores, ASAP and National Sample

	ASAP Population (N=82)	National Sample (*N*=48,232)
Retention Index	64*	52
Academic Success Index	65*	51
Study Skills	62*	52
Steadiness	55	51
Social Connection	48*	52
Social Activity	47	52
Goal Striving	56	53
Determination	57	57
Communication Skills	42*	53
Academic Confidence	51	52
Academic Discipline	60*	52

*Notes mean scale or index score significantly different from that of the national sample ($p \leq .05$)

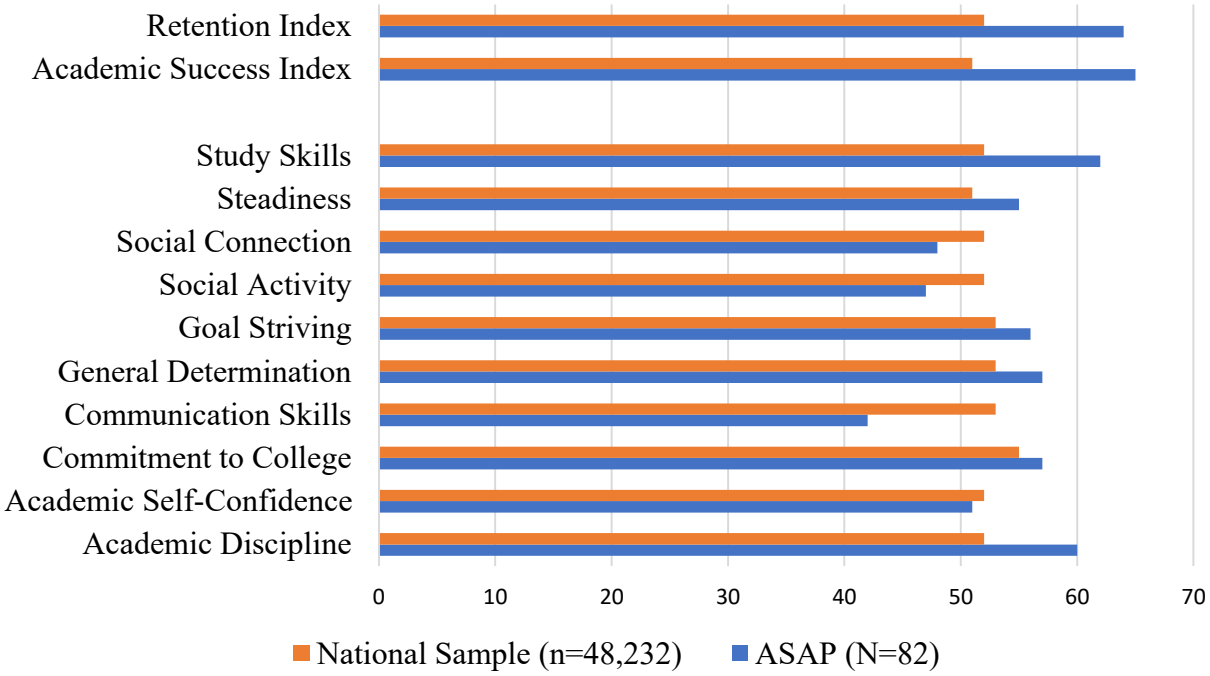

Figure 1
Average ACT Engage Percentile Comparison, ASAP and National Sample

The ASAP Bridge cohort percentile scores outpaced those of the national sample in the areas of academic discipline, commitment to college, general determination, goal striving, steadiness, and study skills; ASAP students scored lower than the national percentile scores for academic self-confidence, communication skills, social activity, and social connection. However, the only statistically significant differences between the two groups' scale scores were in social connection and communication skills, with ASAP students scoring significantly lower than the national sample; and in study skills and academic discipline, with ASAP students scoring significantly higher. The ASAP cohort's scores were significantly higher than ACT's national comparison group in both retention and academic success indices.

For the purposes of this study, I was most interested in exploring challenges to academic retention and programmatic interventions that might support student persistence. The scale scores most relevant to this line of inquiry, then, are those where the ASAP student population

reflected average scores that were significantly lower than the national average, regarding communication skills and social connectedness. ACT's Engage College instrument defines communication skills as attentiveness to others' feelings and flexibility in resolving conflict with others. The social connection scale reflects students' feelings of connection and involvement in their college community. ACT associates the communication skills scale to the motivation and skills domain, comprising qualities that enable student success by helping them to focus their energy consistently on goal-related efforts. The social connection scale is aligned with the social engagement domain. The ASAP bridge program was designed to help students develop skills and comfort in both domains during the transition to college, when motivation, college-ready skills, and connection to the college community are critically important and potentially challenged, particularly for students with relatively less rigorous academic preparation and less familiarity with the college environment. Figure 2 shows ACT's analysis of ASAP student's scale scores in three broad ranges indicating high, moderate, and low risk of academic difficulties in college. Overall, according to ACT's percentile score analysis within the group, more students in the ASAP cohort demonstrated moderate than low or high risk. The greatest share of ASAP students scoring in a low-risk range occurred in social activity, communication skills, and academic self-confidence. While only one of these group scale scores was significantly lower than ACT's national comparison group, the broad ranges reflect interesting and potentially important characteristics of the ASAP student population.

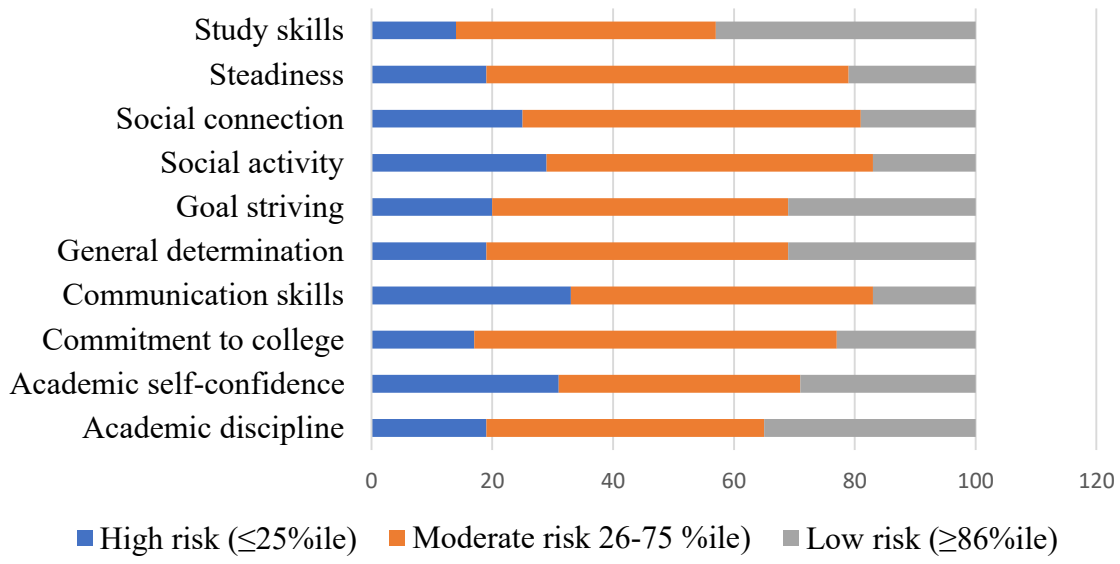

Figure 2
Percentage of ASAP Students with ACT Engage Percentile Scores by Broad Range

Research question 3: How does first-semester and first-year academic performance and retention among the ASAP student compare overall to ASAP-eligible nonparticipants?

I requested and received from the University of Arkansas Office of Retention and Graduation's graduation analyst raw data reflecting ASAP participant and eligible nonparticipant course performance, completion, and grade point averages, with cumulative GPA and continuation in college at the University of Arkansas representing the primary inquiry and measure of success. Group means were used to compare the participant and nonparticipant cohorts accordingly. Two internal reports (2018, 2017) from the Office of Retention and Graduation comprising more sophisticated statistical analysis provided further insights regarding comparisons of the group outcomes.

During fall 2016, 82 ASAP participants and 86 eligible nonparticipants entered their first full-time semester at the University of Arkansas. The ASAP cohort began the fall term having had the opportunity to complete seven credit hours during the summer bridge program. All 82

participants completed the bridge program, earning an average GPA of 3.3, and enrolled in the fall term. Of the 82 ASAP students, 16 students (6.5%) dropped, withdrew from, or failed a summer course, and 64 (78%) earned a GPA of 3.0 or higher. The purpose of the summer bridge program was to help prepare students academically for full-time college attendance and retain them at the University of Arkansas. In this way, exposure to college course rigor was a primary aim, with successful course completion and potentially positive contributions to student GPAs via a head start and potential GPA "boost" as important program goals. For students who struggled academically during the summer term, it was hoped that the exposure would prepare them to better manage those challenges in the fall.

During their first full-time semester in fall 2017, the ASAP cohort did not outperform the eligible nonparticipants. The ASAP cohort earned an average fall GPA of 2.56, with eligible nonparticipants earning an average 2.63. About one-quarter of the ASAP group dropped, withdrew from, or failed a fall course, compared to 21.8% of the eligible nonparticipants. Just less than half of each group earned an average fall GPA of 3.0 or higher, including 45.1% of ASAP students and 48.8% of the eligible nonparticipants. Table 3 shows both groups' academic performance in the fall 2016 semester.

Table 3
ASAP and Eligible Non-ASAP Academic Performance in the first full-time semester, Fall 2016

	ASAP (N=82)	**ASAP-eligible nonparticipants (N=86)**
Mean Summer GPA	3.30	N/A
Mean Fall GPA	2.59	2.64
% Fall GPA ≥ 3.0	45.1%	48.8%
Mean Cumulative GPA	2.90*	2.65
% Cumulative GPA ≥ 3.0	50%	48.8%
Fall Course DFW rate	25.4%	21.8%

*The ASAP population's cumulative GPA includes grades earned during the summer bridge

The ASAP group's mean summer GPA of 3.3, representing an average of almost 7 credit hours completed, was much higher than their fall average of 2.56. It appears that the ASAP summer bridge program created an opportunity for a meaningful GPA boost. While the ASAP-eligible nonparticipant group earned a higher mean fall term GPA, and more of the students in this group earned fall term GPAs of 3.0 or higher, the ASAP group still earned a higher cumulative GPA at the end of the first fall term because of the inclusion of the summer term GPA. In spring 2017, both groups' academic performance was lower, and the difference in the two groups' average second-term GPAs was greater. The ASAP cohort earned an average spring term GPA of 2.25, and the eligible non-ASAP group earned an average spring term GPA of 2.36. In their second full-time semester, ASAP students dropped, withdrew from, or failed fewer courses than in the fall term, while eligible nonparticipants demonstrated higher DFW rates. Table 4 shows spring 2017 performance for both groups.

Table 4
ASAP and Eligible Non-ASAP Academic Performance in the second term, Spring 2017

	ASAP (N=82)	**ASAP-eligible nonparticipants (N=86)**
Mean Fall GPA	2.59	2.64
Mean Spring GPA	2.25	2.36
% Spring GPA ≥ 3.0	40.2%	47.7%
Mean Cumulative GPA	2.80	2.62
% Cumulative GPA ≥ 3.0	50%	48.8%
Spring Course DFW rate	24.4%	25%

After the spring 2017 term, students from each group enrolled in summer coursework in similar numbers, likely for purposes of improving GPA, making up for dropped, withdrawn or failed credit hours, and/or maintaining scholarship eligibility: 11 of the 82 ASAP students (13.4%) and 12 of the eligible nonparticipant group (14%).

The final and perhaps most important inquiry into first-year performance of the ASAP population and eligible nonparticipant group is regarding first-year retention to the university. Of the 82 students in the first ASAP cohort, 57 (69.5%) returned for their second fall semester. This first-year retention rate was 67.4% for the ASAP-eligible nonparticipant group, with 58 of 86 returning. More ASAP participants than eligible non-ASAP participants were retained to the second year. This is especially meaningful given that the two groups' incoming student characteristics indicated that the ASAP cohort had greater academic and other needs suggesting challenges to college success than did the eligible nonparticipants who opted out of the program and its opportunities and interventions.

A 2018 report on ASAP retention from the University of Arkansas Office of Retention and Graduation supports this, finding that "in terms of several incoming student characteristics that together predict one-year retention, the first ASAP cohort entered the university disadvantaged relative to ASAP-eligible nonparticipants" (p. 1). In addition to the lower mean GPA, higher rate of Pell Grant eligibility, fewer AP and college credits reported earlier in response to the first research question, the report indicates that even despite the early and intensive summer engagement with their university of choice, ASAP students overall had on average a later first fall enrollment (58.7 days before the fall term vs. 66 days for eligible nonparticipants). The Office of Retention and Graduation uses this proximity of enrollment date to term start as another indicator of retention. This same report detailed deeper first-year retention comparisons between the ASAP and ASAP-eligible nonparticipant groups by the incoming student characteristics that predict retention (2018). According to the report:

- ASAP participants continued to their second year at higher rates than their eligible nonparticipant peers at every incoming GPA below 3.8.
- Pell-eligible ASAP participants continued to the second year at a rate 6.7 percentage points higher than that of Pell-eligible nonparticipants.
- ASAP participants who entered college without AP credit continued to the second year at a rate 6.9 percentage points higher than did eligible nonparticipants without AP credit.
- Among ASAP and eligible non-ASAP students with college credit earned in high school and among those without, ASAP participants retained at higher rates than the nonparticipant group.

- Among students who enrolled in college for their first full-time semester fewer than 60 days before the term began, ASAP participants retained one year at rates higher than those of eligible nonparticipants.

The university's Office of Retention and Graduation developed a predictive model to project one-year retention rates using the five incoming student characteristics cited above. According to the report (2018), this model predicted a one-year retention rate of 76.6% for ASAP-eligible nonparticipants and 71% for the ASAP participant group, absent any interventions. Both groups were ultimately retained at lower rates than the model predicted, but the ASAP cohort persisted at the University of Arkansas 1.5 percentage points lower than the model projected (69.5% actual vs. 71% predicted), while the ASAP-eligible nonparticipant group returned for their second year at a rate 9.2 percentage points lower than projected (67.4% actual vs. 76.6% predicted).

Research Question Four: After participating in the ASAP summer bridge and experiencing college as full-time students, how do students appraise the value of the program?

Data collection for this question occurred in two stages and processes. At the end of the fall 2016 term, at a meeting all ASAP participants were invited to attend, I asked those present to complete a survey comprising 10 Likert-type questions and three open-ended questions. The survey was framed with the overarching thematic question: "How helpful has ASAP been in preparing you for and supporting you through this fall?" The questions asked respondents to rate on a four-point scale (not helpful, somewhat helpful, helpful, and very helpful) the degree to which 10 program purposes or components were effective in this regard. The 10 questions specifically asked students to report how helpful the ASAP program was in their academic and social transitions to the University, identifying campus resources for help, encouraging them to

use those resources, giving them a sense of on-campus support, peer mentoring and coaching, staff mentors, tutoring, academic workshops, and required study hours. The open-ended questions asked students to expound on what about the program was most and least helpful, and to offer additional thoughts or recommendations.

Of the total 82 ASAP students in the cohort, a sample of 50 students (60%) completed the survey. Students responding to the survey completed every Likert-type question except two that addressed optional program offerings, tutoring and workshops, which some students did not opt to use or participate in (7 students did not respond to the tutoring item, and 5 students did not respond to the workshop item). I calculated the mean scale response for each Likert-type item to get a sense of the group response. Because Likert-type items fall on the ordinal measurement scale, I also calculated the mode and median for central tendency and used frequencies to examine variability among the responses.

Overall, respondents indicated the program was very helpful to their college transition, with results showing that the highest scale score, a 4 for "very helpful," was the most common response. Students responded most favorably to staff mentoring, with a mode of 4 and a mean response of 3.8. The next highest scoring item was the regarding the degree to which the program was effective in identifying helpful campus resources, with a mode of 4 and a mean score of 3.78. Encouraging students to use those resources was the next highest, followed by the program's general helpfulness regarding students' academic transition to college. Rated least helpful were the two items associated with optional programming, tutoring and workshops, which were also the only questions some respondents did not answer. The lowest-rated program element was the study hours, 10 per week, required of each participant, which still saw a mode of 4 with a mean score of 2.98. As reported in the survey, nearly all (between 48 and 50 of n=50)

student respondents assessed staff mentoring, the program's identification of helpful campus resources, its encouragement of students to use those resources, and the program's efforts to give them a sense of on-campus support, as being helpful or very helpful. Ninety percent, 45 of 50 students, reported that the program was helpful or very helpful in their social transition to campus. Between 34 and 38 of the 50 students rated the remaining items as helpful or very helpful. Table 5 shows the mean score and mode for each item in decreasing rank order. Figure 3 shows the frequency of scale scores for each of the 10 items.

Table 5
Mean score and mode for each Likert-type ASAP survey item

Item	**Mean score (1-4)**	**Mode**
Staff mentors	3.8	4
Identifying helpful resources	3.78	4
Encouraging use of resources	3.76	4
Academic transition	3.72	4
Sense of on-campus support	3.68	4
Social transition to campus	3.5	4
Student mentors	3.0	4
Study hours	2.98	4
Tutoring (optional)	2.88	4
Workshops (optional)	2.64	3

1=not helpful 2=somewhat helpful 3=helpful 4=very helpful

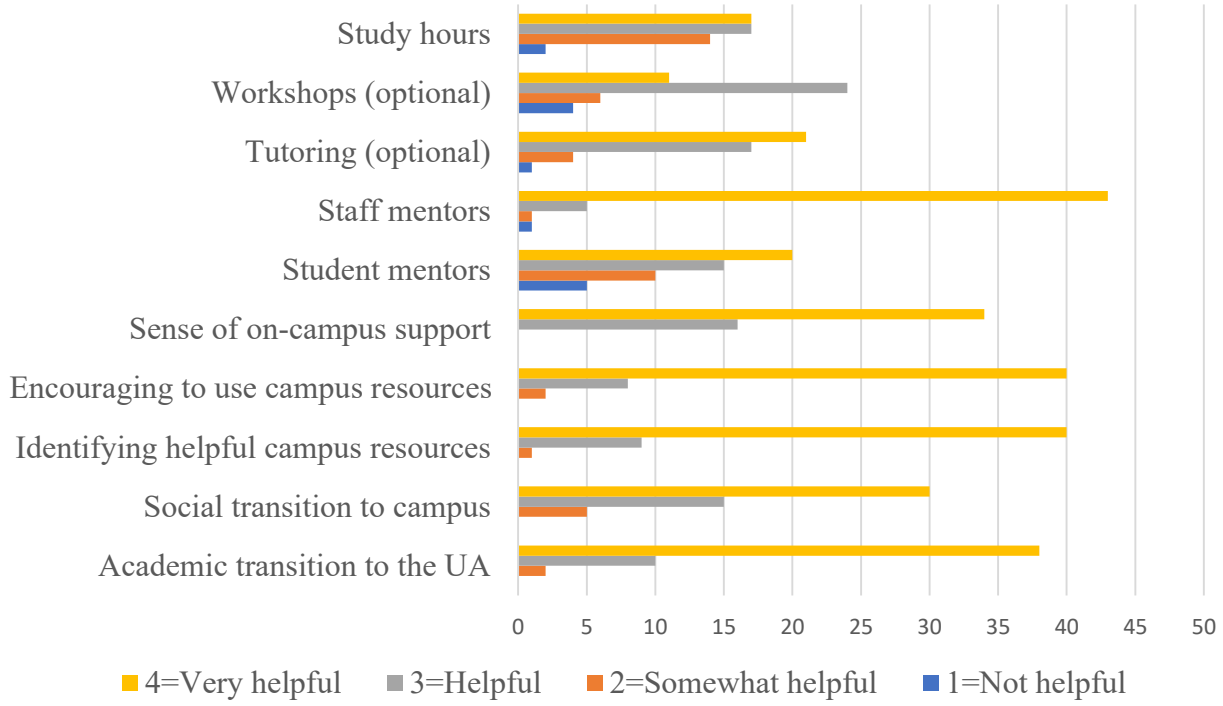

Figure 3
Frequency of each Likert-type item score rating the helpfulness of ASAP program components

Across the board, the most common rating on the program survey was "very helpful," with required study hours being the only program component receiving "very helpful" and "helpful" ratings in equal numbers and the optional workshops being the only component earning more "helpful" than "very helpful" ratings.

The survey included three open-response questions asking ASAP participant respondents to share in their own words what about the ASAP experience had been the most and least helpful; a final question invited additional thoughts or recommendations. I compiled their responses and analyzed them together as a single text representing what parts of the ASAP program they felt were most effective in preparing them for and supporting them through their first full-time semester of college. I examined their responses for key words and phrases, assigned open codes to participant responses using descriptive, in vivo, process, and emotion

coding and then grouped them according to four broad themes that emerged (Patton, 2002). The students responding to the survey identified as most useful those experiences that helped them get familiar with campus, transition from high school to college, develop social connections, and build a sense of support on campus. These themes emerged from patterns of key words and phrases relating to navigating campus, getting accustomed to a new place, getting a sense of college coursework, meeting friends and developing relationships before beginning college full-time, getting a head start on college, connecting with helpful staff and campus resources, and getting help from a peer mentor. Table 6 details the participant responses, open codes and corresponding themes.

All 50 ASAP participants who completed the survey answered one or more of the open-ended questions. Of all students responding, 27 did not opt to offer additional comments or make recommendations beyond the first two questions regarding what about the program was most and least helpful. Ten respondents did not answer the question regarding what was least helpful; 14 used that question to assert that ASAP was thoroughly helpful (e.g. “Nothing! Everything about ASAP was helpful.”). The most common program component identified as least helpful was the optional interaction with a new mentor during the fall semester (in addition to the continued ASAP mentor), with 8 respondents reporting this additional mentoring as unhelpful. Five students responded that the 10 study hours per week, a requirement of continued program participation and stipend eligibility, were inconvenient or undesirable. The remaining responses to what was least helpful were specific and unique.

Table 6
Open-ended survey responses, open codes, and themes

Theme	Open Code	Response
Getting familiar with campus	Getting to know campus	Getting to know the campus and resources
		Getting to know the campus during the summer
		Getting to know campus (2x)
		Learning the college structure
		Familiarity to campus
		Learning a way around campus
	Navigating campus	Allowed me to find my classes more easily
		Staying on campus, learning where everything is
		I had a sense of where everything was
		Having a feel of the college experience before the semester started
	Getting a head start	Being able to experience college life before beginning the semester
		To get acclimated and experience the college workload before everyone came in the fall
		The most helpful part was the opportunity to start early in the summer
		We all had an advantage on other incoming freshmen…
		Getting to know people before the semester
		I was able to find friends before school started and we can study together
		Knowing people on campus already instead of having to out not knowing anyone

Table 6 (cont.)
Open-ended survey responses, open codes, and themes

Theme	Open Code	Response
Getting familiar with campus	Getting a head start	Starting the school year knowing people and having friends from ASAP
	Identifying campus resources	Learning which resources are available to students
		The exposure to on-campus resources
		Getting to know resources that are available on campus
Transitioning to college	Academic courses, readiness	Taking the classes
		The classes (2x)
		A sense of how classes would be
		Having to take two classes, walking to them, studying
		Actually getting to experience a class before the fall semester
		Being able to see how classes were
		It helped me to prepare for college-level classes instead of just being thrown into them
		Experiencing college courses with few people
		Academic transition
	Transitioning smoothly	Helping to transition to the UofA both socially and academically.
		My roommate didn't do the ASAP program and she struggled a lot. I was able to help her and knew a lot more than other freshmen.
		Being able to transition into the college environment in a smooth way

Table 6 (cont.)
Open-ended survey responses, open codes, and themes

Theme	Open Code	Response
Transitioning to college	Transitioning smoothly	Helped me transition to college smoothly
		It was a great way to start my freshman experience
		I would argue that the academic and social transition was most helpful
Connecting socially	Meeting people	Meeting with new people
		Meeting people
		Making friends
		Connections made
		Meeting new people and increasing my social life on campus
	Getting comfortable socially	Meeting new people and becoming friends with the ASAP people has helped me a lot
		Socially, because coming in I wouldn't talk to people first but now I will
		Being interactive and having connections
		The most helpful experience was getting ASAP students to interact with each other
Gaining a sense of support	Peer mentors	Mentors are a great support group / amount of support from mentors
		Mentors help / having a mentor
		Building a good mentor relationship is very helpful for a good start

Table 6 (cont.)
Open-ended survey responses, open codes, and themes

Theme	Open Code	Response
Gaining a sense of support	Peer mentors	Helping put us together with mentors that continue to help us through the semester
		Mentoring was the most helpful
		Staff mentors and CLASS+ staff (4x)
	Staff support	I think staff mentor connections are the best because they have helped me with some of the most stressful situations.
		The staff
		Meeting helpful staff
		Staff mentors are extremely helpful, they make sure we have the right resources and information we need
		All of the resources and staff help the Multicultural Center offered. It was nice having a place to go.
		Getting to connect with staff members
		Support system
		The ASAP program provided a community where I felt like I had a family of friends and staff at the University of Arkansas.

Between April and June of 2017, after the students had completed one or two full-time semesters, I facilitated three focus groups of 3-6 ASAP participants to further explore their experiences with the program and to get a more specific sense of how students value the program. Each focus group took place for up to one hour in a conference room of the Center for Multicultural and Diversity Education, a space that had become familiar to most participants

through programming, required study hours, and staff and mentor resources. The total focus group participant sample included 14 ASAP students, comprising 8 young men and 6 young women broadly representing the geographic, demographic, and academic makeup of the ASAP cohort. The students were not incentivized to participate in the focus group, but their participation was indicative of continued engagement with the ASAP program.

I prepared seven questions to ask during each focus group and planned on asking follow-up questions as needed. I engaged in immediate response validation in order to clarify and confirm my understanding of participant feedback and also to summarize multiple responses to a single question before moving on to the next. I transcribed each focus group and read them as related but distinct texts to allow both unique insights and common themes to emerge. In the context of the fourth research question regarding the students' perceptions of the program's effectiveness, I analyzed the transcripts for key words and phrases relevant to the question, again using descriptive, in vivo, process and emotion coding to assign open codes, then grouping them according to themes that emerged.

Four themes addressing the final research question emerged from the focus group data. In the context of their appraisal of the program's value, focus group participants spoke about the program's overall helpfulness, how it helped them to build early social connections on campus, the value of supportive relationships with staff and mentors, and the way it helped them to prepare for college in the fall. These themes were common across responses in both the open-ended survey questions and the focus groups. The importance of supportive relationships emerged as an especially strong common thread in the focus group data. Every focus group participant rated the program as helpful in multiple ways and expressed they would choose to

participate in ASAP if they had the decision to make over again. Table 7 details the themes, open codes, and corresponding responses from the focus groups.

Table 7
Responses from focus groups, open codes, and themes

Theme	Open Code	Participant response
ASAP is helpful overall	Prepares you for college	Overall, ASAP prepares you for college
		ASAP definitely prepared me for freshman year
		It gave us a really good transition to college life
		An accurate depiction of what the fall was going to be like
		They help you get a feel for everything before the big rush of the fall semester
	Gives you an advantage	So many advantages you have doing this program…just the most helpful thing we could have done
		It also just gave me an advantage
	Head start	It was a jump start on the college life experience. Overall really helpful
		It gave me a head start on how to use my resources
		Being able to get familiar with the campus was a big deal
	Navigating campus	Knowing what's around campus
		ASAP was really helpful. It helped me know what was around campus, what resources to use, how to use those.
		It allowed us to…get accustomed to campus
		Figuring out just how tall "The Hill" actually is
	Generally helpful	It's the most helpful program for freshmen
		The program was really helpful
		I feel like the program itself was a big positive

Table 7 (cont.)

Theme	Open Code	Participant response
Building social connections	Meeting people	You come in and you meet people before the freshman year
		It allowed us to meet new people
		…when I first got here I was already a little panicked…about not knowing a lot of people
		Knowing people
		Knowing other students on campus really helped
		Faster network. We get to know people
	Social comfort, belonging	Just hanging out with people and knowing people from the same region made me comfortable going to the fall semester
		I think the program was really helpful, especially for kids coming from the Delta region where we came from. ASAP really helped bridge the gap between that transition…I know I wouldn't have been able to…stay here without ASAP. Because I would have panicked and gone home and stayed.
		If you came here [with ASAP] you had a lot of people that you know… you felt you did have some connection
		Made me way more outgoing and braver…it made me make more connections
		The relationships we developed
		Community building
		The community that you got exposed to
		Knowing people from the same region made me comfortable going to the fall semester. It just made me more comfortable, more confident in my college career.

Table 7 (cont.)

Theme	Open Code	Participant response
Supportive relationships	Caring staff	We had the meetings, constantly meeting, like y'all going out of your time to meet with us and keep us engaged with the program, tells you that someone out there cares, and gave you this feeling that you want to make them proud
		Knowing there are staff and faculty members here to help you…knowing you can talk to anyone and have connections
		The community that you got exposed to at the [multicultural] center, staff and student wise, is something you can't find anywhere else
		Getting to know all the people in the office around here
		The fact that they invested all this time in you
		The MC staff, it's where I go for every problem
		Having somebody tell me they were there for me
		You hold us accountable
		You know there's a place you can go for help
		Everyone [in the multicultural center] is so welcoming
		Especially the staff…they were really helpful in getting us accustomed to college life
		I feel like all of the MC staff basically was there for me…Because of ASAP I met the MC staff, and I don't think if I had not done ASAP, I wouldn't have met them
		Helped me, motivated and encouraged me
		It was really helpful just to have someone to talk to
		I could tell she really cared

Table 7 (cont.)

Theme	Open Code	Participant response
Supportive relationships	Mentors	I just really rely on him
		She's been able to keep me on track
		Just connecting with a mentor…led to making my summer, fall, and freshman year easier
		I basically get my encouragement from her…she helps me keep it focused on the stuff I'm supposed to do
		I would say mine is pretty motivational
		It was more like a personal connection with her, she was like a big sister, so I needed that
		A couple of ASAP mentors I got really close to in a family sort of way
		My ASAP mentor used to call people together for study sessions, to help us really get together to study. She was always there for a help for a ride around town, make connections, stuff like that
		I used my mentor to set goals and to reach them, to achieve them
		They all took care of us as a collective
		And a lot of times our mentors lead us to y'all, to y'all. That's how we come to y'all. Just any hard times they can't help us with, they send us to y'all.
		My mentor was kind of just always there, like staying on top of me about recommendation letters, just stress level, anything I would need, all of that, she was just completely there…I really appreciated that when I needed someone to give advice, she was always there. She's from near where I'm from, too.

Table 7 (cont.)

Theme	Open Code	Participant response
Preparing for college	Learning to be independent	It was my first real experience away from home
		Come in with all this freedom
		Independence, like from my family in an independent situation where I had to do things on my own
		And the freedom prepared me, too
		Being made to make connections [faculty]
	Learning to interact with faculty	You get acquainted with campus, with professors, to learn to talk to them, how to like send e-mails properly
		Just knowing how to approach a professor. And also just formulating an e-mail you need to send
	Learning college skills	The workshops, they really helped me with time management and procrastination, staying on time for due dates, all the extra things I needed
		The group meetings, talking about things we should expect and things we shouldn't do to remain successful, and not allow yourself to be distracted by so much of the stuff you would encounter later during the fall semester. That was most helpful to me, preparing my mind for anything that could come about.
		Getting a head start on time management for the fall semester was a real big help
	Learning to use resources	Academic coach…it was really productive
		They told us about CLASS+
		You all would tell us there was nothing wrong with getting a tutor
		You're on your own now, so you have to use your support system

The focus group data rendered very similar results to the qualitative survey data, and both confirmed the results of the quantitative survey. This suggests that the triangulation of methods and data used to answer the final research question regarding ASAP participants' appraisal of the program's value enhanced the internal validity of the approach. The survey was completed at an internal return rate of 60%, and it was distributed at a meeting that all ASAP participants were invited to. They were not required to attend, but continued engagement in ASAP programming is required for continued eligibility of participation stipends; as such, the survey sample likely captured responses from students who were diversely motivated and engaged, which supports the credibility of the results. That the results were confirmed later and through different instrumentation also suggests their dependability.

Overall the ASAP students surveyed and those who participated in focus groups appraised the program as being very helpful to their transition to college. The primary mechanisms they reflected on were preparation for college through early exposure through which they gained familiarity, the development of social connections that made them more comfortable, and supportive relationships through peer and professional mentoring that helped them to navigate the challenges of college. The staff mentors were the highest-rated helpful program element in the survey, and references to staff were among the most common key words and phrases in the open-ended responses. In the focus groups, student participants spoke at length about the significance of their relationship-building with staff and the importance of feeling they had approachable and helpful staff to talk to and to get help from. The data collected and analyzed in response to the final research question indicates that the ASAP program effectively created a supportive environment that gave participants an early and comfortable entry into college.

V. Discussion and Recommendations

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate one year of a comprehensive bridge program designed to ease student participants' transition to college and to support their retention at the University of Arkansas. The Accelerate Student Achievement Program comprised a broad network of retention interventions for student participants whose eligibility was determined by geographic and socioeconomic variables. Students graduating from high schools across 26 counties in the Arkansas Delta who were admitted to the University of Arkansas for the fall 2016 term and who were Pell grant eligible, would be the first in their family to complete four-year college degrees, or both, were invited to participate because students with these qualities have retained and graduated from the University of Arkansas at lower than average rates. Of the students invited, 168 matriculated to the university, including 82 participants and 86 eligible-nonparticipants. This study employed a mixed-methods and multiphase approach using parallel, sequential and embedded design strategies to investigate the influence of the program on first-year retention and other student success outcomes. I analyzed the relevant incoming student characteristics of the program population and of the eligible nonparticipant group for comparison; quantified the participant student dispositions using a normed assessment of non-cognitive qualities associated with college student success; examined first-term and first-year outcomes of participant and nonparticipant groups; and explored student participants' appraisal of the program's effectiveness.

Contextualized by the increases in individual, professional-industrial, and economic demands for higher education and the intensifying pressures on public colleges and universities to produce more degrees more efficiently, a review of the literature on meritocracy in higher

education, academic retention problems and predictors, and summer bridge programs framed the purpose and relevance of this study. The body of research on bridge programs indicates widely shared assumptions regarding the potential of bridge programs to positively affect retention and student success but also a need for more rigorous program evaluations to measure their effects. This bridge program evaluation weighed various incoming student characteristics in describing the program population, made comparisons to a similarly situated student population who did not receive the program treatment, and employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to generate conclusive findings regarding student outcomes and to develop rich insights regarding the participant experience.

Descriptive statistics were applied to incoming student data pulled from the institution's internal student information database to develop profiles of both the participant and eligible nonparticipant populations. The students electing to participate in ASAP were found to demonstrate more indicators of risk of departure than did students who were program-eligible but did not pursue program participation. The total cohort of ASAP students completed an assessment of non-cognitive factors believed to be associated with college success; they scored significantly higher than the national average on academic discipline and study skills and significantly lower in the areas of social connection and communication. Course performance and enrollment data were analyzed to compare the ASAP participant and eligible nonparticipant groups in terms of first-semester and first-year academic performance and retention; the ASAP students earned lower grades and dropped, withdrew from, and failed courses more often, but ultimately they retained one year at higher rates than their eligible nonparticipant peers. When asked to reflect on the program, its helpfulness and value through mixed-method surveys and focus groups, samples of ASAP students reported that the program was very helpful in easing

their transition to college and their navigation of the first year by giving them a preview of college life, helping make them comfortable and familiar with campus, and learning and connecting them with supportive staff, peer mentors, and other resources.

Conceptual Framework

Terenzini and Reason (2005) proposed a conceptual framework encompassing the many and interactive human and institutional dynamics that influence student success to direct research on college student outcomes because other models were overly narrow and did not adequately address that "multiple forces operate in multiple settings to influence student learning and persistence" (Reason, 2009, p. 661). While the body of literature regarding student development and departure acknowledges the breadth of the human and organizational forces acting on related outcomes – e.g. "the greatest impact appears to stem from students' total level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually reinforcing" – previous theoretical frameworks did not integrate them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 647).

Terenzini and Reason's (2005) comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence broadly considers students' incoming characteristics, the institutional context, the students' social environment and their individual experiences. A comprehensive bridge program such as the University of Arkansas' Accelerate Student Achievement Program fits this conceptual framework because it is designed in consideration of all of these influences and factors and of their interactions. Reason (2009) defines student precollege characteristics and experiences in terms of their sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and their dispositions. ASAP eligibility was determined by certain sociodemographic characteristics known at the University of Arkansas to be associated with early departure, and

this program evaluation took into consideration additional academic incoming student characteristics in measuring program success. Student dispositions were explored using a normed assessment of incoming non-cognitive skills associated with student success. An important intended element of the ASAP program experience was to cultivate among participants a community and concomitant sense of belonging on campus, a purpose that addresses the peer environment and individual student experiences within it. The ASAP students' early exposure to college courses and the introduction to extra-curricular learning supports and opportunities for peer and programmatic engagement was designed to nurture students' sense of support and assist in their academic and social transition to college life and learning.

According to Reason (2009), "upon enrolling in college, students enter environments that have the power to shape their behavior and influence their success" (p. 666). These environments are framed by an institution's structural demographics, organizational behavior – the structure of their regular functions and decision-making – and by organizational culture, which speaks more broadly to institutional values and climate. Situated as a large public research university, a land-grant institution and the state's flagship campus, the University of Arkansas heralds both access and achievement and touts diversity and student success among its utmost priorities. Reason's (2009) application of this comprehensive conceptual model to literature on college student persistence and retention draws on Berger's (2001) examination of persistence relative to colleges and universities' organizational behaviors, which may be primarily bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, or systemic. I would suggest that the University of Arkansas is bureaucratic (characterized by formal and hierarchical administration and decision-making) but also systemic (comprising a network of subsystems and recognizing that organizational and individual behavior is influenced by internal and external factors and forces), and that ASAP was

designed to enhance the productivity of the institution's systemic behaviors in order to help students navigate its larger bureaucracy. According to Reason (2009), what an institution does is more important than what structural-demographic factors define it; "specific internal organizational structures, practices, and policies, through the kinds of student experiences and values they promote or discourage, are more likely than institutional features to influence student outcomes" (p. 668). This speaks directly to the purpose and to the potential of the ASAP bridge and retention program.

ASAP was designed to serve incoming students bringing certain socioeconomic, demographic, academic and non-cognitive characteristics to their college experience. Based on institutional goals and knowledge relative to those student qualities and student success, ASAP program leaders developed transitional programming and retention interventions that addressed the university's organizational behavior and culture by making efforts to deconstruct potential bureaucratic obstacles and to develop accessible networks of campus subsystems in an effort to connect students to resources and to surround them with systemic support. The program's intentional facilitation of a residential community served to establish students' sense of place and social integration (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Reason's (2009) exposition of the student peer environment emphasizes also the importance of the campus racial climate. Because of the eligibility parameters of the ASAP bridge program, its student population was far more ethnically diverse than the larger student body, and this was a leading consideration in ASAP programming, in the selection of student mentors, and in the program's deliberate interconnection with the university's multicultural center and staff. ASAP provided students with direct opportunities for in-class experiences through free and credit-bearing coursework and scaffolded that experience with various out-of-class experiences supporting both academic

success and also campus engagement with peers and programming. All told, this comprehensive bridge program and its consideration of various student needs and qualities neatly fits Reason and Terenzini's (2005) conceptual framework regarding comprehensive influences on retention. In this evaluation study, student participants reflecting on their ASAP experience confirmed the importance of these multiple and interacting dimensions.

Discussion

The stated goal of the Accelerate Student Achievement Program was to serve incoming University of Arkansas Students relatively at risk of attrition with transitional, social, and academic and financial resources intended to support retention. ASAP offered an early introduction to college living and learning through an academic summer bridge component, human resources through peer and professional mentors, and participant stipends to incentivize continued engagement with staff, students, and retention programming. The program succeeded in serving students with incoming characteristics associated with early departure, as even among the eligible student population that matriculated to the university, those who opted into the ASAP program entered college at a disadvantage relative to their non-participating peers. This is an important insight into student motivation to participate, one that produces questions for further study among multiple program cohorts. The differences in outcomes between participants and nonparticipants did not appear to be skewed by participants who were relatively more prepared or better resourced in their transition to college. The relationship between students' academic aspiration and achievement, and their decision to or not to engage in a retention-focused bridge program, is likely complex.

The aggregate results of the ASAP students' ACT Engage inventory indicated that they were least prepared for college with respect to their social connection and communication skills.

Among the many ways it was designed to support students' transition to college, the ASAP bridge program was intended to help students build college preparatory communication skills and to develop a sense of community and social belonging through the summer residential living experience. In program surveys and in focus groups, participant respondents commonly reported that becoming comfortable with campus, socially connected, and prepared to navigate the academic environment through communications and interactions such as e-mailing and meeting with faculty were among the most helpful learning experiences the program provided them.

The supportive guidance of both peer and professional mentors was intended to help ASAP students navigate their new college environment in a variety of ways. Participants responding to a program survey rated professional staff mentors as the most helpful program component; ranked second and third were the program's effectiveness in identifying helpful campus resources and encouraging their use of those. The importance of meaningful relationships was perhaps the most frequent and powerful theme that emerged from focus group data. Participants reflected especially deeply about their relationships with supportive staff members, describing feelings of being cared about ("the most important part is knowing somebody you can go to when you're not doing so well, or needing somebody to talk to to make sure you know which way to go and how") and feeling accountable ("someone out there cares…you want to make them proud;" "you did have some expectation to hold up, the fact that they invested all this time in you"). Multiple focus group participants drew connections between staff mentors and campus resources and opportunities. One student said he "utilized them more than anybody on campus, to just, like, talk to" and then described a staff member helping him attend a leadership conference in another state, "which was just amazing. It was eye-opening." There were multiple references to getting help with recommendation letters, gaining confidence

about interacting with a broader network of campus staff and faculty, receiving personal advice, and feeling individually attended to.

> During the spring semester, I went to Don at least, like, four times a month to his office and just stayed there an hour a day and just talked to him…He helped me with recommendation letters. And he also helped me, or motivated and encouraged me, to do this internship in the summer, to be an intern during the summer…I was really scared of doing that, and he pushed me, really pushed me to talk to the director of…the geoscience program. He pushed me, he threw me in to those situations. He just, it was really helpful just to have someone to talk to…And there were other situations where he would be thinking of me. Like he read this article about a tree falling. And I was taking a tree course in the spring semester and he, he just sent me an e-mail with that article and was like 'I was just reading this and I thought about you.' It was like a therapy session. It was a very nice chill-down. I could debrief with him. It was very nice…And then there were others…

Interestingly, peer mentors ranked in the lower half on the quantitative program survey, after the program's helpful role in easing the academic transition, giving participants a sense of on-campus support, and aiding their social transition to campus. However, the highest possible score was still the most common response regarding mentoring, with greater variance than other survey items. Perhaps this speaks to the very personal nature of the peer mentoring relationship, and the difficulty of achieving ideal mentor-mentee pairings. According to the focus group data, the helpfulness of the peer mentoring depended on a complicated convergence of factors – personal connection, having similar interests or backgrounds, helping to build other connections, exposing them to new resources and experiences. Focus group participants on many occasions described ways that peer mentors referred them back to staff mentors and supported larger goals of the program through helping them learn to navigate the campus and community, and generally get the lay of the land. I inferred that ASAP students who had strong connections and positive experiences with their mentors found peer mentoring very helpful, but students whose mentor associations were weaker rated it as less helpful. Still, the focus group dialogue overall revealed

that students had a very positive response to mentoring and seemed confident of its value relative to retention, expressing an energetic eagerness to mentor their younger peers.

Also revelatory was an element of the program that students did not reference in the open-ended survey questions or in the focus groups: the financial benefit of the participation stipend. As previously indicated, some focus group participants mentioned staff help with scholarship applications and recommendation letters. Some respondents referenced the free summer classes in the survey and during the focus groups and seemed to value that the program represented a significant opportunity at no personal cost to them. However, not a single response mentioned the participation stipends ($625 after the summer term and each of the following three semesters). I do not speculate that this signals that the financial award is insignificant from the student perspective, but rather that it illuminates the importance of the human and social capital invested in and developed through the ASAP bridge program.

According to the student participants' reflections, the provision of peer and professional mentoring resulted in meaningful relationships that grew their comfort on campus and their awareness and use of helpful resources. Relative to the tuition and fees associated with the academic component of the summer bridge program, which students rated as somewhat less powerful and which did not seem to meaningfully increase their academic performance in terms of first-year course performance (though the summer coursework did significantly increase their first-year cumulative GPA). This investment in human capital is a relatively low-cost intervention that may be particularly influential to student success.

Ultimately, the ASAP cohort's first-year retention rate (69.5%) was just 2.1 percentage points higher than that of the eligible nonparticipant group (67.4%). The difference in first-year retention was especially pronounced among Pell grant recipients, with Pell-eligible ASAP

students continuing at a rate 6.7 percentage points higher than Pell-eligible students in the nonparticipant group. A predictive model designed by the university's office of retention and graduation to explain first-year retention of 2016 freshmen who were Arkansan, first-generation students, and/or Pell-eligible projected higher expected retention rates than the participant and nonparticipant groups demonstrated, but the ASAP cohort was much closer to the target (1.5 percentage points) than was the non-ASAP group (retained 9.2 percentage points lower than predicted). Both groups achieved fall and spring GPAs of meaningfully less than 3.0, with the eligible nonparticipant cohort earning higher grades overall during both terms. However, the ASAP students' grades from summer courses – a group mean GPA of 3.3 – amounted to an important GPA boost that brought their first-year cumulative GPA to 2.9 compared to 2.65 for the eligible nonparticipants. This is an important difference insofar as it may indicate that the ASAP group is better positioned to retain and/or compete for scholarships. Assuming that higher grades are more positive outcomes, achieving an average GPA close to a 3.0 is comparatively favorable to one close to 2.5.

It is an understood goal of comprehensive summer bridge programs to help prepare students for the academic rigor of college-level work. Based on the results of one year of ASAP programming, it does not appear that the summer bridge courses meaningfully prepared participants to more effectively navigate the demands of a full-time college course load in the fall. While the ASAP cohort earned an average summer term GPA of 3.3, the group fared worse during the fall semester, when ASAP students earned an average 2.59 GPA, with fewer than half earning a 3.0 or higher, and ASAP students dropped, withdrew from, and failed more than one-quarter of all of their fall classes. (Eligible nonparticipants earned slightly higher grades and demonstrated lower DFW rates.) I interpret the data to indicate that the summer coursework was

more impactful as a cumulative GPA booster than as a realistically preparatory immersion into the college classroom.

In the program surveys, some students reported favorably on the opportunity during the summer bridge to take college classes, reporting that it helped them to prepare academically, to get a sense of what college coursework would be like, etc. ("actually getting to experience a class before the fall semester"). But some also noted that the summer classes were not representative of the real college experience. Several focus group participants shared at greater length about the difference between summer and fall courses and the course load, noting that while it was good to get a sense of college class expectations, the fall semester was still a shock:

> "…those classes were every day…nothing like what I experienced in the fall semester"
>
> "…the summer classes are structured a lot differently than fall semester"
>
> "…in the fall your classes are going to be way larger than in the summer; in the summer it's more like a high school classroom set up, maybe 20 students, then you get to the fall, and it's like 300 students in the classroom."

Across the common themes that emerged, regarding the program's primary value the students reflected most often on how ASAP helped them to gain social and academic comfort, connection, and confidence through early exposure to and supportive relationships within the college environment before the bigger crowds and busier demands of their first full-time fall semester. As one student reflected in a focus group:

> That's not saying it doesn't help in academics, cause like social help inevitably helps the academics. Because, like say you're having trouble in a class, if you didn't have those social connections already, you're likely to just sit in your room and cry about not being able to do this calculus homework. But, like, we already know Don at CLASS+ and we've already met a lot of the people down there, and we know people in here that can get us – that will like drop everything they're doing to get us connected to a tutor for help, and that's extremely helpful to our academics.

On balance, ASAP students didn't perform better academically than their eligible peers who didn't participate. Yet despite entering college at what looked like relative disadvantage according to academic and ascriptive characteristics, the ASAP cohort retained from the first to second fall term at higher rates than the nonparticipant group. The bridge program seems to have been difference-making, even if the differences at first glance – 2 percentage points between the two groups – are small. But absent any interventions and based on their incoming qualities, the two groups were predicted to perform much more differently, with the nonparticipant group projected to retain nearly 6 percentage points higher than the ASAP cohort. The 60% of participants who responded to the survey reported that the program was very helpful, and in focus groups students spoke somewhat dramatically about the difference it made for them. One student, an engineering major who earned a first-year GPA of 3.6, explained:

> …immediately when I first got here, I was already a little panicked about how big the campus was, about getting lost, about not knowing a lot of people. And then with the program, and how they make community building, they help you meet everybody in the MC [multicultural center], they help you meet with your college, they help you get a feel for everything before the big rush of the fall semester – without that, like, *padding*, I would have fell face first and not known what to do and freaked out and gone home. Just knowing myself, I know that I would have. Without ASAP…

One comparison that this study cannot quantify or speculate about is how the ASAP cohort might have fared without the program. Would the same students have retained and departed without its proactive support? Was the "padding" a difference-maker for many students? Because the total eligible population self-selected into participation and nonparticipation seemingly along lines associated with academic and financial need, with the ASAP cohort being relatively disadvantaged, it is also difficult to fully interpret the weight of the 2 percentage-point difference in the two groups' one-year retention.

Implications and Recommendations

A diverse and complex network of education policy and practice, organizational behavior, institutional culture, student qualities and experiences influence college student success (Kuh et al, 2006). If, as Reason (2009) suggested, the college environment can shape the college student experience and influence student success, then forces of policy and practice can act on the college environment in pursuit of improved outcomes. Policymakers and practitioners are limited in their capacities to help underprepared and under-resourced students to overcome academic and socioeconomic obstacles to college access and attainment (Kuh et al, 2006). Effective student success support and interventions must strategically "fit an institution's educational mission, its students' characteristics, and its campus culture…[and] also be aligned with key elements in the external environment, such as local community, state, and regional economic conditions, needs, and priorities." (Kuh et al, 2006, p. 89).

A review of the literature on the effectiveness of academic bridge programs for retention support and intervention indicated a need for more rigorous evaluations of such programs. Implied in the call for more empirical and comparative studies is an interest in more reliable and generalizable results. But any one institution of higher education comprises a complex and dynamic policy environment that directs goals and practice somewhat uniquely. As Reason (2009) argued, "increasing student persistence must be an institution-specific enterprise. To fully and effectively address student persistence, any intervention must consider the local organizational context and the student peer environment...for an intervention designed to increase engagement to be effective, it must meet the specific needs of the students within a specific institutional context" (p. 678). In this way, while interventions such as the ASAP summer bridge program may help to confirm evidence of some generally promising elements of

comprehensive academic bridge and retention programs, the unique policy contexts and aspirations of specific institutions and the diverse dynamics of the students they seek to better serve should shape such programs very distinctly.

ASAP was designed considering the socioeconomic and educational landscape of the Arkansas Delta and that region's students; the institutional context of the university's enrollment, retention and graduation goals; and the organizational and the peer environments. The qualitative elements of this evaluation study revealed that many ASAP participants experienced positively the program's attention to these contexts. The quantitative threads of the study demonstrated the unique and complicated challenge of designing rigorous evaluations of programs of this type. A truly experimental study with a randomized control trial is not realizable for evaluating interventions that are not modifications or alternatives to standard practice; ASAP constitutes a significant commitment that cannot be assigned or required of incoming college students. While this program assessment compared participant and nonparticipant groups that seemed similar at the outset, analysis of the two groups' incoming academic and demographic factors showed that they were meaningfully different in terms of common college readiness indicators. Nonparticipants performed somewhat better academically than ASAP students overall, but they retained at a slightly lower rate. This could support the reliability of those indicators regarding academic performance in college while also signifying a potential positive effect of the program on the student transition and experience via community building and support systems.

Kuh and Love (2000) have recommended that research on student departure should apply a more culture-conscious lens, which seems relevant here. Especially regarding incoming students from groups underrepresented on campus, they emphasize matters of cultural origin, the distance between that and the culture of immersion at their chosen college or university, and the

balance of immersion in the new college culture with continued engagement with their cultures of origin, which requires the cultivation and inclusion of those cultures in the new environment. Students who are socioculturally connected and who comfortably identify with and belong to one or more subgroups on campus are more likely to persist, "especially if group members value achievement and persistence" (p. 201).

This study scratched this surface by inquiring about whether the ASAP bridge program influenced student's sense of belonging, helped them build social connections, and gave them a broad sense of support. Many of the ASAP students who participated in focus groups described the perceive cultural distance between home and campus and the ways that their ASAP peer community and their relationships with caring staff members and mentors who were like them were especially helpful. Some students also reflected on the critical timeline for establishing supportive and social relationships, sharing their perceptions that students who don't engage early can become isolated and detached.

The previous body of research indicated a broad confidence in the promise of academic bridge programs aimed at improving students' transitional experience and retention outcomes. The results of this study indicate a very small positive effect on first-year retention and academic outcomes for its first cohort but suggests that the program shaped participants' social connections and their sense of belonging on campus in meaningful ways. The qualitative data and analysis revealed the special importance that students placed on the supportive relationships they developed with peer and professional mentors, whom they associated with investment, accountability, expertise, community, care and concern. This illuminates the critical value of the human capital invested in ASAP and of the specific power it can hold for the student experience.

Examining the ASAP bridge program through the lens of Terenzini and Reason's (2005) comprehensive conceptual framework affirmed that many interacting and interdependent contexts and experiences meaningfully influence student persistence and retention. The cultural, sociodemographic, and academic experiences and exposures that students bring with them to college matter, and these incoming characteristics are forces that act on the student experience within an institution's organizational context, the student environment, and learning in and out of the classroom. Considering this, one recommendation from this study is an intentionally culture-conscious approach to developing student and staff mentoring and to evaluating programs such as ASAP.

I tentatively join the ranks of other scholars and practitioners who have viewed academic bridge programs as promising interventions for college retention and student success. I find that their potential influence may be more navigational than academic and may be most impactful for subsets of students with similar challenges and experiences, or whose cultural and educational backgrounds and resources have been carefully considered in the shaping of the program environment and support. This program evaluation study has presented compelling mixed-methods data and analysis that through use of a comparison group achieved enhanced internal validity. The use of both qualitative and quantitative data for program assessment allows for measures of effectiveness and also offer rich insights about the student experience that can direct future directions of research and practice. The results are not intended to be generalizable, but they have relevance and importance within the context of University of Arkansas priorities and policies regarding recruitment, retention, and scholarships for Arkansans; the further development and evaluation of the ASAP program could affect college access, attainment, and community capitals.

Continued and further research is needed to determine whether the ASAP academic bridge program and retention supports achieve their goals of improving retention and on-time graduation. More precise quantitative inquiry into the student subpopulations where predicted retention rates seemed most affected by ASAP – Pell-eligible students, for example, and students in certain GPA ranges – would add value to this early and exploratory program evaluation and perhaps direct the program toward greater success. Qualitative investigation into ASAP student attrition would provide greater insight about how students who did not retain experienced the program and what motivated their departure. A qualitative exploration of the eligible nonparticipants' first-year experiences and their academic and social dynamics would add considerable value to the group comparisons. This initial research, along with further evaluation directed by these early findings, can help to refine the ASAP bridge and retention program to maximize effectiveness and to determine whether long-term investment in the program is ultimately worthwhile.

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Appendix A
IRB Approval Letters

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

June 24, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Leslie Yingling Suzanne McCray
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	New Protocol Approval
IRB Protocol #:	16-06-805
Protocol Title:	*Accelerate Student Achievement Program - Summer Bridge*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Approved Project Period:	Start Date: 06/24/2016 Expiration Date: 06/23/2017

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 90 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

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UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

June 2, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Leslie Yingling Suzanne McCray
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	PROJECT CONTINUATION
IRB Protocol #:	16-06-805
Protocol Title:	*Accelerate Student Achievement Program - Summer Bridge*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Previous Approval Period:	Start Date: 06/24/2016 Expiration Date: 06/23/2017
New Expiration Date:	06/23/2018

Your request to extend the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. If at the end of this period you wish to continue the project, you must submit a request using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation on or prior to this new expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

This protocol is closed to enrollment. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more participants, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

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Appendix B

ACT Engage College Scale Definitions from ACT Engage College User Guide

ACT Engage Scale Definitions (Grades 10–12, College)

To provide a more complete understanding of the content measured by each scale of ACT Engage, expanded scale definitions and sample items are featured below.

Motivation

Academic Discipline

Definition	The amount of effort a student puts into schoolwork and the degree to which a student sees him-/herself as hardworking and conscientious.
Interpretation	Perhaps more than any other characteristic measured by ACT Engage, this scale is essential for academic success. Students demonstrating high levels of *Academic Discipline* place great value on schoolwork and will make academic tasks, projects, and assignments a high priority. In contrast, low-scoring students may avoid schoolwork, cut classes, and view other aspects of their lives as more important than the completion of school-related tasks and assignments.
Sample Interventions	Goal setting, time management, organization, and prioritization skills, as well as use and mastery of learning strategies.
Sample Items	▪ If I don't feel like going, I skip classes (reverse-scored). ▪ People describe me as a hard worker.

Commitment to College

Definition	One's commitment to staying in college and getting a degree.
Interpretation	Individuals who score high in *Commitment to College* feel determined to complete college regardless of obstacles and appreciate the value of education. In contrast, low-scoring students may have difficulty identifying how college may benefit them and may feel ambivalent about completing a degree. *Commitment to College* is a strong predictor of retention in both high school and in college.
Sample Interventions	Helping a student to identify a career of interest that requires coursework beyond high school, providing assistance with a college search and/or financial planning, drawing clear connections between college majors and careers, and exploring professional life values.
Sample Items	▪ A college education will help me achieve my goals. ▪ I am committed to attend and finish college regardless of obstacles.

Communication Skills

Definition	Attentiveness to others' feelings and flexibility in resolving conflicts with others.
Interpretation	*Communication Skills* measures how well a student knows how to handle interpersonal problems effectively and can work cooperatively with others in team/group settings. Students low in *Communication Skills* may have difficulty working in teams and may exhibit some rigidity in decision making.
Sample Interventions	Conflict resolution training, listening skills, and sensitivity training may serve to enhance *Communication Skills*.
Sample Items	▪ I'm sensitive to others' feelings. ▪ I'm willing to compromise when resolving a conflict.

ACT-https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Engage-user-guide.pdf

ACT Engage College Scale Definitions from ACT Engage College User Guide (cont.)

General Determination

Definition	The extent to which one strives to follow through on commitments and obligations.
Interpretation	Characterized by dependability, students high in *General Determination* have a strong sense of responsibility to their commitments and often are perceived as trustworthy and likely to fulfill their promises. This is reflected in *General Determination's* relation to GPA, with higher scores correlating to higher grades.
Sample Interventions	Helping students to recognize the value of meeting their commitments and trust-building skills.
Sample Items	▪ I give my undivided attention to something important. ▪ I am serious about fulfilling my obligations.

Goal Striving

Definition	The strength of one's efforts to achieve objectives and end goals.
Interpretation	Individuals who score high on *Goal Striving*: (a) set important goals, (b) make efforts to achieve their goals, and (c) are confident about their abilities to succeed. Research supports the relation between academic goals and retention; students with clear academic goals are more likely to stay in school.
Sample Interventions	Goal-setting activities, career/major identification and planning.
Sample Items	▪ I bounce back after facing disappointment or failure. ▪ Once I set a goal, I do my best to achieve it.

Study Skills

Definition	The extent to which students believe they know how to assess an academic problem, organize a solution, and successfully complete academic assignments.
Interpretation	*Study Skills* items focus on traditional studying techniques and problem-solving skills. Development of student *Study Skills* improves students' ability to complete assignments effectively and consequently improve their academic performance.
Sample Interventions	Interventions aimed at improving note taking, outlining tasks, problem solving, and reading skills.
Sample Items	▪ I summarize important information in diagrams, tables, or lists. ▪ I organize my thoughts before I prepare an assignment.

https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Engage-user-guide.pdf

ACT Engage College Scale Definitions from ACT Engage College User Guide (cont.)

Social Engagement

Social Activity

Definition	One's comfort in meeting and interacting with other people.
Interpretation	Students scoring low in *Social Activity* typically report feeling shy and nervous when talking with others, avoiding social activities, and feeling isolated. Very low or very high levels of *Social Activity* are associated with lower GPAs and rates of retention.
Sample Interventions	Interventions for low scorers may include exercises in assertiveness and overcoming social anxiety, while those for high scorers might include exercises in prioritization and handling social pressures.
Sample Items	• I avoid activities that require meeting new people (reverse-scored). • I make friends easily.

Social Connection

Definition	One's feelings of connection and involvement with the school community.
Interpretation	The degree to which a student feels connected to the school community may influence his or her decision to stay there and complete a degree.
Sample Interventions	Identification of and encouragement toward involvement in extracurricular activities of interest and organized school-sponsored social events.
Sample Items	• I feel part of this school. • I have a sense of connection with others at school.

Self-Regulation

Academic Self–Confidence

Definition	The belief in one's ability to perform well in school.
Interpretation	Students who score high on this scale tend to have confidence in their ability to do well in school, which may help them persist through challenging tasks. Students high in *Academic Self-Confidence* also have higher levels of both retention and GPA.
Sample Interventions	Interventions to increase confidence could include exercises to overcome pessimism, reduce test anxiety, and reduce negative self-talk.
Sample Items	• I am a fast learner. • I am less talented than other students (reverse-scored).

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ACT Engage College Scale Definitions from ACT Engage College User Guide (cont.)

Steadiness

Definition	One's responses to and management of strong feelings.
Interpretation	Students who score in the middle of the *Steadiness* scale report that they can effectively manage their emotions and keep those emotions from negatively impacting other activities. However, both high and low scores are associated with poor academic performance, as high scorers may be over-controlling their emotions and subsequently failing to provide an outlet for stress, and low scorers may be easily frustrated or overwhelmed.
Sample Interventions	Interventions to improve *Steadiness* for low scorers may include finding positive outlets for frustration. For both high and low scorers, interventions may include relaxation techniques.
Sample Items	▪ I get easily irritated (reverse-scored). ▪ I stay calm in difficult situations.

How to Use the Success Indices

Schools can use the ACT Engage Success Indices found on the advisor and roster reports to proactively identify students who are at risk for academic difficulty and/or dropping out. Although cutoffs for identifying at-risk students have been initially set at the lowest quartile (e.g., lower probabilities of retention and academic success), a school may choose to modify this cutoff depending on (a) the portion of at-risk students the school wishes to target and (b) resources available for intervening with such students.

The Retention, Graduation, and Academic Success indices are included on the Advisor Report and the Roster Report. Each index is based on a scale from 0 to 100, with larger values representing increased likelihood of success (i.e., less risk of dropping out or of poor academic performance—GPA < 2.0). The indices are each based on multiple regression models using ACT Engage and self-reported prior standardized achievement or aptitude measures. Thus, it is possible for students who have moderate to high scores on ACT Engage scales to obtain low scores on the success indices. Conversely, students who score low on some ACT Engage scales but have moderately high standardized achievement scores may receive moderate or high scores on the success indices.

The percentile rank scores, as well as the probabilities of academic success, retention, or graduation, can be used to make appropriate interpretations. Because they are normative, the percentile ranks are useful for understanding a student's standing relative to his/her peer group. The percentile ranks are also useful for explaining scores to less experienced users because of the universal understanding of percentile ranks in educational contexts. The probabilities of academic success or retention are criterion-referenced and useful for interpreting how scores relate to chances of future educational outcomes. More advanced users of the data should understand the interpretation of scores from both normative and criterion referenced perspectives.

https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Engage-user-guide.pdf

ACT Engage College Scale Definitions from ACT Engage College User Guide (cont.)

Academic Success Index

This index indicates the likelihood of obtaining a GPA of 2.0 or higher in high school (grades 6–9) or after the first semester at a postsecondary institution (10–12 and College). By using this index, the rate of identification of students at risk of academic difficulty is increased over random prediction by as much as 56% in high school, 20% at two-year postsecondary institutions, and 16% at four-year postsecondary institutions.

Graduation Index (ACT Engage 6–9)

This index indicates the likelihood of graduating from high school within 4 years of starting 9th grade. Using this index, the rate of identification of students at risk of dropping out of high school is increased over random prediction by as much as 25%.

Retention Index (ACT Engage 10–12 and College)

This index indicates the likelihood of persisting through the first year of college and into the second year (ACT Engage 10–12 and College). Using this index, the rate of identification of students at risk of dropping out is increased over random prediction by as much as 32% at two-year institutions and 31% at four-year institutions.

Since baseline retention, graduation, and academic performance rates vary across schools, these indices should not be interpreted as explicit predicted probabilities of retention or academic performance for an individual student; rather, these indices are approximate measures of how each student's psychosocial factors lend themselves to persistence and academic performance through the first year of college.

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Appendix C

ASAP FALL 2016 STUDENT REFLECTION SURVEY

How helpful has ASAP been in preparing you for and supporting you through this fall?	1 = Not helpful	2 = Somewhat	3 = Helpful	4 = Very Helpful
Your academic transition to the UofA	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Your social transition to campus	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Identifying campus resources for help	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Encouraging you to use campus resources	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Giving you a sense of on-campus support	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Student mentoring/AEP coaching	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Staff mentors (CLASS+, Multicultural Center)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Tutoring	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Optional AEP Workshops	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				
Required study hours	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments				

What part of your ASAP experience has been the ***most*** helpful?

What part of your ASAP experience has been the ***least*** helpful?

Please include any additional thoughts or recommendations:

Appendix D
Focus Group Questions

We'd like to start with your broad reflections on your ASAP experience in the summer and as a first-year student. Overall, what are your impressions? Positive/negative? Helpful/unhelpful?

What are some things that the ASAP summer bridge provided that you all would identify as most or especially effective/helpful?

Did you use your ASAP and/or AEP mentor/coach to help you navigate your first full-time semester? If you did, how?

Did you seek academic, personal, or other help from a professional staff member?

What are some of the greatest challenges you've encountered this year, and how did the program help or not help you overcome those?

We want to hear about what you did not find effective, whether a program experience, requirement, or other offering. Talk to us about what you would say does NOT help you. How would you change the ASAP program?

If you had the decision to make again, would you choose to participate in ASAP?

Appendix E
Analytic memos after focus groups

Reflections on Focus Group 1

The first focus group included six ASAP students. They seemed at ease and in good spirits before we began the recording, and they showed no hesitation in responding from the very first question. There were only very brief pauses after each question, while they glanced at each other to make sure they were taking a turn and not speaking over one another. They nodded in agreement very frequently, sometimes murmuring agreement but most often nodding quietly. In response to the first question about the helpfulness of the program overall, they spoke broadly and positively about its basic elements – early introduction to campus, experiencing classes, developing relationships with staff. They also demonstrated early in the focus group a willingness to offer constructive criticism, which was focused most often on the peer mentoring not being sustained consistently after the summer or peer mentors not keeping up with their students, and on the one-hour course that all ASAP students took. There was an interesting dialogue regarding how much students should value the program and how the program can encourage participants to respect and value it. Notes I took highlighted the students' positive reflections on relationships, especially with staff and relative accountability; and community and social connection; critical notes emphasized academic year mentoring structure and the way the students in this group panned the one-hour assertiveness course. I also noted that participants reflected on summer courses being different from fall courses, that one student emphasized that a bridge program is equipped to help with social support, not with academic skills, and that two felt strongly that future ASAP students should be made to better value the program and its offerings.

Reflections on Focus Group 2

The second focus group was small – three students – and again very comfortable, at ease and quick to respond. The students had similar broadly positive reflections on the program as a whole and its help in easing the transition to college via early introduction, social connection, and support. These three participants also reflected a lot on ASAP's human resources, this time talking positively and in detail about their peer mentoring experience, referring to "family" and talking about the staff in the multicultural center. Students felt that peer and professional mentors were both important. Similar to the first group, they students expressed frequent agreement with one another, nodding and making affirmative murmurings. This group also addressed to some extent the change from peer mentoring in the summer to peer mentoring in the fall, but they felt that time scheduling and time commitment of mentoring is harder to maintain during a regular full-time semester. My notes taken as the focus group was taking place emphasized support through the transition, getting comfortable in a new place, being fearful, gaining confidence, meeting supportive staff, good mentor relationships, and using resources.

Reflections on Focus Group 3

The third and final focus group, which included five student participants, was interesting in its differences from the other two. One participant spoke less often than all others; this student did not seem uncomfortable, and gave thorough and thoughtful answers when responding, but did not often express agreement or other feedback verbally or nonverbally regarding other students' responses. Another respondent spoke often about being exhausted by the program, which was not expressed by any other participants. In this way the group had two students whose reflections seemed significantly different from the rest – whose experience with the program was expressed differently. Interestingly, both of these students expressed one of the most common

themes among all three focus groups: that supportive, encouraging relationships with professional staff mentors were very meaningful to their college transition and first year. The other three participants also created somewhat of a different dynamic than I observed in the other two focus groups – they spoke at length and very energetically about their ASAP experiences, both good and challenging. They laughed often and interjected and expressed agreement more vocally than the other two groups, though general agreement was common across all three. In this group my notes also highlighted caring, safely leaving comfort zone, independence and confidence.

Overall reflection on focus groups

Each of the focus groups and all three taken together provided interesting and important insights. The participants seemed as willing to provide constructive criticism as they were to reflect positively on the program, and I was encouraged regarding the authentic and organic nature of their responses. Each group had a different dynamic, but every participant seemed comfortable and generally showed interest in responding to every question. The questions were deliberately general, particularly early on, so as not to be leading; it was interesting that thematically they addressed the primary purposes and associated program components without being prompted directly by the question's contents or context. Even against the backdrop of some of the participants' criticisms of the program, they made clear their appreciation of the program and the opportunities and resources it offered. They placed a high value on ASAP.

Appendix F
Interview Transcripts

Focus group 1
Tuesday, April 11, 2017, 12:35-1:36 p.m.
LY: Leslie Yingling, Facilitator
P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 : Focus group participants

LY: Okay, we want to start with your broad reflections on your ASAP experience so far. That encompasses the whole thing, okay: summer, last fall, last spring, and in your interactions with each other, with mentors, with staff – or a lack thereof. We want to know overall, as a first-year student who participated in this program, what are your impressions? Has it been positive or negative overall, useful or not useful overall?

P1: Overall, ASAP prepares you for college. The classes we took – I took a class where my teacher wasn't so good, so I had to utilize other resources to make sure I could get what I needed to learn, however I needed to learn it. It prepared me for that. And the freedom prepared me, too.

LY: The freedom of the program…Coming to college and being away from home?

P1: Yes, yeah.

P4: It also just gave me an advantage. During the summer we got to go to office hours, and I know my roommate still hasn't gone to office hours, so just knowing how to approach a professor. And also just formulating an e-mail you need to send – some people don't know how to do that properly. The workshops really helped.

P6: Getting to know all the people in the office around here and knowing other students on campus really helped, too. If you need help with any specific class, you can be like, 'I know this guy from ASAP who's also taking BLAW and doing way better than me.' Or if you need something you already know people here in the office, so you're not like nervous about approaching them. Like, I feel like if someone came in and didn't know that Ms. Brande is so nice and whatnot, they'd be like 'oh, she's in charge of my scholarship' and be intimidated, you know.

P2: I agree with everyone – obviously I think no one can disagree that the initial month was very positive. But touching on, since you're asking about the entire year, I think the progression over the last year there hasn't been enough of it. At least 95 percent of what I got from it was from the summer semester. Which makes sense because it's a summer program, but the last two semesters, just growing from the program it was all from the summer.

LY: Can you think of thinks you wish the program had done more of across the academic year or that you think it could do more of or better?

P2: I feel like there's somewhat of a disconnect between the administrative standpoint and the mentor standpoint and the students who participated in it, all those bridges, because a lot of

students did very well over the summer – some didn't do as well but they did better than they expected – and then they came into the semester and from my experience, a lot of it went downhill really fast, because they got adapted to what it was over the summer, and those classes are every day, it was nothing – at least from my experience – it was nothing like what I experienced in the fall semester. And I feel like with the lack of involvement, maybe after a few months, you touch base with students who weren't actively in the office, it was almost too late to save them – you realize they're failing the classes. Obviously they had the resources there, but a lot of people need guidance. Not to be spoon-fed, but they needed a helping hand, and I feel like that wasn't there like it was in the summer. Obviously you can't help them through their entire career, but there could have been more than the drastic drop off from the summer, where we talked about our grades or how we were doing with our groups upwards of once a day, and later that was just over.

LY: And when you're talking about your group you're talking about your mentor group, right?

P2: Yes.

LY: And so the conversations you're talking about, did they happen within your mentor group or with staff or both?

P2: A little bit of both.

P6: I think like what could really help with that is not dropping off the number of meetings with our mentor so quickly. It was every day, but then when the fall semester started it was once a month. So like maybe for the first month or two of the fall semester, a weekly meeting, just so we know, the mentors know what students are on top of and who needs help.

P5: Razorbacking off of what they said…So, during the summer time I would say I wish we would have had more study tips. Because like coming from high school, when I didn't have to study, here I had to study everything, step by step. I know that some mentor groups had study groups or whatever, but mine wasn't like that. On what she said, I think I do know how to communicate better with my professors and I built good connections, so I think that was a positive.

P3: They pretty much said all… but being able to get familiar with the campus was a big help, too. When I saw my [fall] schedule, I was like oh I've been to that building, I've been to that building. I just had to go to the room and it was easy to find the classes and be on time. That actually helped a lot.

LY: What are some things that the ASAP summer bridge provided that you all would identify as most or especially effective/helpful? You may have just touched on those and you could say that again, or whatever you want, but this is in terms of most helpful or effective, on the positive side.

P1: To me, the group meetings, talking about things we should expect and things we shouldn't do to remain successful, and not to allow yourself to be distracted by so much of the stuff you

would encounter later during the fall semester. That was most helpful to me, preparing my mind for anything that could come about.

LY: And you felt like it was real talk that spoke to you?

P1: Yeah, I did.

P5: I would say, like, our meeting where we got to meet the Chancellor and stuff like that was pretty, like a positive thing, because they're the people behind everything and you don't really see them unless you're in trouble or something like that, so seeing them on a positive note. That was kinda good.

P2: What was it, every Thursday afternoon or something like that there was a large conference presentation thing in Kimpel that we had, like in the first week went over the syllabus and things like that and the next one it was resources (P6 interjects "e-mails"), yeah e-mails, I found that really helpful. Yeah, I thought overall that was really good.

(Nods of agreement around the table.)

P4: Just having those meetings and having those set times that we had, it kinda helped out with our time management that we had to learn to do, because like in high school I did not have to study, so time was just, you know, time back then, but whenever you came up here, since you had seven credit hours and you had to manage your time from going to mentor meetings to 1-1 meetings to going to the whole group meetings and then back through and socializing, so getting a head start on time management for the fall semester was a real big help.

P6: It may sound kind a like a joke, but figuring out just how tall "the Hill" actually is over the summer helped out a little bit because when fall came I wasn't like surprised that I had to walk up a mountain every day to class. I was used to long walks uphill already to go to class, so it wasn't so terrible.

LY: It was literally an uphill battle, but one that you knew.

(Nods and murmurs of agreement, laughter from the group.)

P3: I feel like program itself was a big positive role. Cause like, when I got the call when they said the spot was open if you want to join – like, the idea that someone, like there's a lot of people out there trying to 'seize the sea' gives you the motivation to go through it. The fact like, that we had the meetings, constantly meeting, like ya'll going out of your time to meet with us and keep us engaged with the program, tells you that someone out there cares, and gave you this feeling that you want to make them proud, I guess.

LY: So you felt like you built relationships in that way, it sounds like? You wouldn't necessarily be motivated by just anybody but by people who paid attention to you or expressed some interest in making sure you were successful and wanted you here, wanted you to be here?

P3: Yes.

P5: So like, through ASAP I felt like the friends we made there that would be then, and then it would be over with? But like, I see you guys all the time, and it just brightens my day. It wasn't just then.

LY: So, you made real friends?

P5: Yes.

(P3 says "definitely," a couple of 'yeahs' around the table, nods)

LY: Great. Okay. So did you use your ASAP or AEP mentor or coach – and if you don't mind saying whether you had one or both or used neither of them, that's fine – to help you navigate semester last fall? your first And if so, how did you use that person? So we're talking about the peer mentors that you met over the summer, or some students opted into having an AEP coach in addition to that. So you could talk on both if you had both.

P3: I used both. I used my ASAP mentor to just you know, keep me going spirited and positive about the classes I'm talking even when I'm not doing as good as I want to be, and I used my AEP mentor just to set goals and to reach them, to achieve them.

So for encouragement AND accountability?

P3: Yes, and both works very well for keeping me on track.

P4: I had two as well, but my AEP coach kinda slid off the rail and I haven't met with him since October of last semester, so I've been really relying with my mentor from the summer and I meet with him probably every week, and it's not a scheduled meeting it's just a kind of we see each other kind of meeting. And I just really rely on him for like, so at the beginning of the semester I had trouble because I needed an extra class, and so we actually sat down and went through the whole list of together trying to find an open spot, so now I go to him if I have problems, you know, addressing a professor or you know, trying to pick out classes and what his experiences are in those classes. He also contacts his friends if they've been in classes he doesn't know any information about it.

LY: And that's your ASAP mentor. (P4 nods.)

P5: I just had an ASAP mentor, and I would say mine is pretty motivational because she's an engineering student, and a lot of classes we take are pretty hard. I'm not engineering now but I was, and she can relate because she's taking the classes to. Just having someone tell you don't worry, you'll get through it. You may not have an A, but you'll have a successful grade.

P2: I also had two mentors and a similar situation. My AEP mentor slid off the rails, it just isn't happening, but with the ASAP mentors, the fact that you did split us into groups, your mentor was assigned based on in your major and that was really helpful because all the times it's

difficult to see help from other people. They obviously can give you advice and encouragement but if they're not in a smiliar field than you there's only so much they can do. So personally having another STEM major as my advisor, who had taken the classes I'm taking and can give me some foresight was really helpful.

LY: What does everyone else think about that, in terms of having mentors in your major or at least in your field, broadly?

P6: Uh, my ASAP mentor actually isn't the same field as me, but really it's helped a lot anyway because she's in the Honors College like I am, so she knows a lot of the teachers I'm having to take to get like honors credit and stuff, so she's been able to say like "That guy is really weird, keep your head down in his class" and stuff like that. And my AEP mentor is my major, so she's been able to keep me on track for the core requirements for my major. My ASAP mentor's been able to help me with like the broader, like the school more so than my major.

P3: My ASAP mentor, she basically, I get my encouragement from here. She checks up , makes sure I'm still getting through classes and stuff. And my AEP coach, she's like a checkpoint basically. Like makes sure I did all my stuff last week, and how did I do, help me evaluate and make sure I'm ahead, not just go through it and say 'I'm done. Just leave it alone." She helps me keep it focused on the stuff I'm supposed to do.

LY: Did you seek this year, so far, in a significant or meaningful way, academic, personal, or other help or advice from a professional that you met through ASAP? That would include people in CLASS+, people in the Multicultural Center, or to some points you've already made, professionals or faculty members or staff members you met on campus?

P5: Yes. I've talked to Dr. T and Don, a lot last semester about changing my major, they were like a big help in that area or whatever. They liked really helped me deciding, like I was in engineering, my heart wasn't in it, I was like 'oh okay they make more money,' but then when I talked to them I realized I really want to be a teacher, that's what I really want to do, and they helped me. I didn't know how to break it to my parents that I was changing my major, but they helped me.

P1: Last semester Don was very helpful because I was in this online class and there was a collaborative session we had to attend, and my computer wasn't compatible with it and he walked me through getting it fixed so it would work. Stuff like that, really helpful.

P4: I've also gotten help from Don, Leslie and Brande, and I'm on a first-name basis with my advisor from Fulbright's so I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, she probably hates me as much as I e-mail her. And I go to all my professor's office hours after each test, even if I got the grade I wanted to or didn't, just because I want to be able to see what I missed, and that helps because they're able to talk you through it and they end up kind of telling you their test format, so that's also very helpful when I'm studying and that helps with my performance on the test, so.

LY: Did you already know about office hours when you came to college? Was there anything about the program in particular that encouraged you to use that resource?

P4: I knew that they had office hours but coming in I was thinking oh, I'm never going to go to office hours, I'm never going to need to build that relationship with my professors, I know I'm going to be on top of my game. But even if you are on top of your game here, you still need to go and talk to them and have that reassurance. And that Thursday session about office hours really helped. Actually after that session I went to office hours because that Monday we had just had a test.

P6: I know last semester I went to Ms. Brande when I had trouble with another scholarship, not about ASAP, and knowing someone who I knew had lots of experience scholarships, that really helped. Also I meet with Adrain all the time. That's more, I guess, personal help, but if I need to know what to wear to an interview or a presentation, I go to him.

P3: I go to Adrain, Brande, Lauren…I met with Brande when I had to get my requirements for my financial aid to go through and stuff. And Adrain, like, we had a meeting, just like an introduction meeting, introducing ourselves formally -- we had said what's up but never had real talk -- being able to talk to someone who had the same mindset when he came to college, he related. He told me he came in with all this freedom, and that's how I felt, freedom…he was kinda, he was doing good, then he would fall behind, and then, it took messing with the things around him that we now have around us. Got him on track, to see him now, I'm like, if he can do it – I can do it. We got a lot of tools to utilize to get to that point. With the advancement of technology, we have a lot tools that they didn't have back then. It was tougher for him, now we have all this help so we should be able to get through the same things.

P2: An overall thing, I'm sure everyone here would agree about it, I felt like my main thing with ASAP was the community that you got exposed to at the center, faculty wise and student wise, is something that probably you can't find anywhere else on the campus, and I know I feel personally that if people were exposed to such a thing they'd probably be doing better than they were.

LY: And you're talking about the Multicultural Center?

P2: Yes.

P6: Kind of the opposite of what he said…I know that people from ASAP, not people from ASAP but people from my high school who weren't exposed to this community, they got in and they didn't have anyone to go to, and one of them already dropped out. They didn't know anyone to got to and so they felt all alone. I never felt like that because I knew everyone here [in the Center].

P2: A lot of people didn't take the opportunity to come to ASAP, out of my school on the guys side, six of us came to campus, and two of us did ASAP. Out of the four who didn't do ASAP but came, three of the four dropped out after one or two months.

LY: What do you think – can you separate what you think is more important between the social/cultural administrative support in having people to go to ask questions of versus the academic part? Does one seem more important than the other?

P6: I think really they social preparation is probably more important. Because, like, the academic preparation helps a lot, but I think like someone said earlier, the summer classes are structured a lot differently than fall semester, so while it does help, that's not really why ASAP sets its students apart from everyone else, it's that they have their social network set u where they know who to go for help in certain categories .

P2: I feel like that a lot of it was the social aspect which helped because if you do come up here – a lot of us came here from, for example my town is like 20,000 people and campus is what, 30,000 – so like, you do come here and you can feel alone but along with that comes also almost zero accountability, so you have the freedom and there's no one here that you know. So it's like, what do you do. But then if you came here [with ASAP] you had a lot of people that you know or even if they didn't know you personally you felt you did have some connection and you did have some expectation to hold up, the fact that they invested all this time in you. That was the reason that three of those four people who came from my school who didn't do ASAP dropped. It wasn't academic. It was 100 percent social. They just came here, that freedom, zero accountability, they forgot what they were here for, got lost in it, and then they were gone.

LY: So at least the two of you feel that the program helped with the sense of belonging and familiarity and accountability that was difference-making? Familiarity, accountability, and some belonging, getting used to being here…

P2: I feel like, the education standpoint, you can start off with that, but the overall majority of that is up to you. You guys can give us programs and seminars but none of that's going to make the difference of if you sit down and read the book or not. But like I said, accountability and relationships, you can't spawn that on your own. I feel like that is the value.

LY: So you feel like the program has a greater capacity to help socially and support-wise, non-academic support, than academic?

P2: Yes.

P4: That's not saying it doesn't help in academics, cause like social help inevitably helps the academics. Because, like say you're having trouble in a class, if you didn't have those social connections already, you're likely to just sit in your room and cry about not being able to do, this calculus homework. But, like, we already know Don at CLASS+ and we've already met a lot of the people down there, and we know people in here that can get us, that will like drop everything they're doing to get us connected to a tutor for help, and that's extremely helpful to our academics.

P2: I don't know if it's the social aspect of it, but I just know, I think the most important part is knowing somebody you can go to when you're not doing so well, or needing somebody to talk to to make sure you know which way to go and how to do so, that's the most important. That's still the social network of it.

LY: It's non-academic support, essentially, so you're talking about a person, a relationship?

P2: Yeah. A relationship.

P6: And knowing you guys helps with academics because like he said, you hold us accountable. Like I had maybe, maybe a slight attendance issue in one class, and I got like 10 conferences in a day, so. But, I mean, it is funny, but it actually helped a lot, because now I go three times a week because I know I'm going to get it if I don't.

P5: So, like, I think that like he said the relationships we developed kind of made a big difference. Because say that one of our roommates was an ASAP person or whatever and you can kind of feel like they disconnected from their mentor, from everybody else, that led to their downfall, their disappearance. So I think relationships affected everything.

P4: I actually think they both help. Because just like you know, it takes a village to raise some one. College, you're on your own now, so you have to use your support system that you make, But you also need to know that there is someone you can go and talk to academically. Like, just a few weeks ago I went to a professional mentor's office and was discussing a class, and just by that one discussion, I went home, I restructured how I was doing that class, which ties into the academic aspect of it, and then now, you know, bumped that grade up and working to succeed in that class to get the grade that I want. And it's just like, that one conversation you have with your support group can make you rework everything you've been doing and realize 'oh okay, that's not going to work for this class.' So that's tying into the academic side, where you learn the different study patterns you need for the different classes that you take.

P2: Just as a final note on what I was saying, because I feel like If you took what I just said out of context it almost makes the program sound like a summer camp, the fact like we're talking about relationships and things like that, the relationships and things you created were academically oriented and things like that. IT wasn't just like someone to go watch TV. It was about if you need help you have that. I feel like that reaches far past anything just straight up academic advice you can get.

LY: So you're saying the context of the social or relationship component was still academic? It's function was to help you navigate things, not to teach you basic academic skills that you needed for your classes, right?

P2: Yep, exactly.

LY: What are some of the greatest challenges that you encountered this year, and how did the program help or not help you to overcome them?

P1: Mine was staying positive even when I was down. This summer, I took algebra 1 and like in the beginning I wasn't doing so good; I was persistent and just kept doing it. And in the fall I took B Law, that was probably my hardest class I ever took. But I had the skills that I needed to

just stay focused and make sure I get a passing grade, make sure I didn't fail that class, didn't have to drop it. So that was a help and a challenge, staying persistent and positive.

P5: I came in with a torn ACL, this summer, so having somebody tell me they were there for me, if I needed anything like even rides for my physical therapy and stuff. I was down about that stuff, it was affecting my grades, but after I could talk about it with someone I felt a lot better and did well.

P4: Something I learned over the summer but have yet to master would be again, going back to the time management. Just having to manage, like in the summer all the meeting and socializing with everyone that was brand new to you, and then in the fall semester, and in the summer you had 7 hours, well in the fall you had 16 – it's just like you had to reorganize everything that you did. Where you could have gone and hung out on the weekends with this person, you know on Sunday, or you could study for your test on Monday, you know, just knowing how far in advance you need to study. You can try to study two nights before, but it's not going to matter if for your other classes you have 50 things in your other classes. Just you know learning to just have some type of time management really helped to balance out your schedule and make things seem less overwhelming. Because things are going to be overwhelming – I have mental breakdowns like three times a week – but that's okay because I can get my life back in order.

P2: I think what helped a lot of people was exposure to tutors at CLASS+ that was really helpful. Even now as a tutor at CLASS+ I tell people that I work there and a lot of people, like, they ask what CLASS+ is, like they don't even know what it is. So their perspective of the campus I feel like is really different. If someone knows about CLASS+ you know there's a place you can go for help. You don't have to pay any money – I mean, fees, but you don't directly pay any money – and it's there. But a lot of people don't know about it, don't use it.

LY: Okay. I want to hear, too, about what you didn't find effective. So, whether it was a program experience, a requirement, an offering, something ASAP related that simply does not help, that you do not find helpful or effective. What is NOT helpful. What would you NOT do?

P5: Okay, here's the thing. You know how we had the study hours? A lot of us live in Maple and stuff like that. Once you get to your dorm, I want to stay and go to a study room in my dorm or whatever. I think if it was open to different areas where we could study, because we have like really nice study rooms, I think that would be helpful.

LY: Do you find the study hours helpful? Tracking your hours?

P1: I think it's helpful because like I'm not going to study on my own. I like the motivation.

P4: Um, I don't want to offend anyone, but the assertiveness class we took this summer was really just like a blowoff class. Our teacher, no one paid attention to her because it was an assertiveness class, but she herself wasn't assertive. And the things she was teaching us was just common knowledge. So that's something I choose to forget. It was my only negative experience about ASAP.

P6: Also about the assertiveness class…Like, I hate to belabor a point, and I actually had a good teacher, she was fine, but the stuff we learned in there was basically the same stuff we learned about on Thursday night (echoed by other student). So we'd learn on Thursday night how we sould talk to a professor and the way we should speak to them and write our e-mails to them and then we'd go to class on Monday and Cameron would be like "Okay. You don't need to be afraid to e-mail your professor." And I'd be like (sarcastically) thank you for that insight."

LY: So it sounds like from both of you that you like the workshops, you've talked about finding them useful, but the most important stuff can be delivered much faster? Not through a whole class, even a one-hour class?

P5: I think it matters what instructor you have. I think we talked about…our class went pretty deep. It was kinda helpful.

P3: Study hours. It's not bad, it was just pretty tough. I had to do so many study hours for finite down in Champions and for ASAP. It was tough to get them all. To get them both simultaneously.

P2: Two things. One I'll just cover quickly because it's been beaten enough. The assertiveness course, obviously being a one-hour course, is going to be a hit or a miss. I think it's an understatement to say it was a miss. I had the same instructor as E, and um, more than half the time my experience was, walking from Humphreys to there is like a 15-minute walk, you get there, you're sweaty, it's like 1 in the afternoon, you sit down for like five minutes and then class is done. Get up, walk back, that was 35 minutes and you're just sweaty. I think it was a missed opportunity…one-hour courses can be helpful, but that one was a waste of funding. I wouldn't try again with that. Again, that was just a waste.
A second thing was I feel like the, might be a little bit broader and be a bit more general, but what I experienced in my group was for the first week – I think it was the same for all the groups – there was for the first week a lot of activities, and a lot of, just a lot of things going on to incorporate people. Cause the overall majority came there not knowing anybody, so they're in a big different town, different place, different world, different people, and the first few days were really focused on, full of activities to incorporate everyone. Or the first few days, Friday through Monday. Then we started classes on Tuesday and obviously you want to get people transitioned to classes, and pulled back the throttle on that. But I think maybe it was stepped back a bit too far because the, through the first week and a half, obviously it was like survival instinct. You found a friend and sort of stuck with them. So pretty clear, like factions were formed – so as anyone knows you're in a new place, new relationships forming. After two weeks, it's, it's hard to go back start again when you know…relationships are already established. For my group, only two of us stayed active. Obviously you can't require, can't force people to go to things, but it was strongly recommended the first few days, or the first two weeks. That went away, and they sort of stepped back into their shells, sort of. So after that first week or two, when teambuilding things came out, they felt like outsiders, they didn't have their group. After the first two weeks, personally I saw the same probably 30 every single day. Then on move-out day I'm standing in the lobby and looking at people I felt like I hadn't even seen. I felt like the throttle was pulled back too fast after classes started.

LY: So it sounds like given that you can't make people show up to everything, still you would recommend the program facilitate more all-group activities where everyone is expected, or hoped to participate?

P2: Yeah, more so, focused at the beginning. Even if you have people who don't really want to go, once you have two or three people like "the three of us will go," that's a lot easier than just going by myself. So if the two options are just stay in your room and watch tv for an hour or go to a seminar by yourself, more than likely the students are going to stay in the room.

LY: If you had the decision to make again, would you all choose to participate in ASAP?

All: YES. Nods, laughs, emphasizing the affirmative.

The last question addressed, for those who answered, what you would change about it. But I'd like to hear more about what you would change about the program.

P6: This is kind of the opposite of one of things J said. Maybe make the baseball game optional? Because I was fine, it was fine for me, but there were a lot of people who just called Ubers and left because they just weren't into it. That's a baseball game ticket, they're not like $100 like an MLB game, but if you have six people who don't want to go, that's six people you don't have to buy tickets for.

D5: I liked to go!

P4: Something I would have changed is I, like, I would have liked to know my mentor in advance. Just you know, maybe take one Saturday out of the month of April and everyone who was accepted into the ASAP program and have the mentors come up and you know like have a meet and greet day, and take them around and actually like tour campus and stuff. Just so whenever you come in it's not just like this is your mentor and this is where your classes are and these are your books, not like every single thing one thing after another, just so you already have a feel for what you're getting yourself in to.

LY: Do you think that relationship could be built differently, if there wasn't a way to bring people to campus, maybe through social media, or some other way to connect?

P4: Yes, I think that would be helpful. I only knew one other person coming here, and then I talked to Ms. Jessica a lot, like I would e-mail her like "okay how would I register for classes?" and learn I was already put in classes, well why was I put in this certain classes? And you know, stuff like that. So coming into it those were the only contacts I had.

LY: What was it like transitioning from Jessica being your contact person to not being? Most of you who had ongoing questions while you were being recruited and admissions, worked with Jessica, but then after that she was around but there were new people. How did that go?

All, simultaneous: Nods, two participants "good," one "fine," one "great."

P2: So, you're saying like with the earlier contacts with your mentor would be a nice thing, but also I think I'd be a bit scared to have the on-campus one. Because again, eastern Arkansas, for some of us its 3,4,5,6 hours to get here. And with some of the thing I touched on earlier, with some relationships being already established versus the ones that felt a little on the outer of the group – I feel like personally if the majority of my group came up here and they met and they hung out for that x amount of hours and then they left, and then I showed up and everyone knew each other and I didn't, I feel like that would not be good. But as for like a social media approach, I mean overall majority will have it. Or e-mails or a postcard, like a name, or a Facebook – you could do that.

P5: Or you know how we have a ASAP web site coming, you know we're doing a little profile, we could do pictures of mentors on there just like they do for Orientation leaders.

LY: Anything else with respect to what you would change about the program if it were yours?
P2: One thing, one of the larger problems I saw, I felt like that were two sectors of people – people who respected the ASAP program people who didn't resepct the program, some who saw it as a summer camp, who saw it as a game. So a lot of people came up, like within the first week, and they had no intent of actually taking the summer classes, they just wanted to social aspect. So as you saw, like x amount of weeks into it people were dropping classes. There was very little hesitance to drop it because it wasn't their money. I feel like they um, like the value and the actual rarity of getting anything free in college, let alone thousands of dollars worth of free that was given, so I feel like obviously you wanted a friendly environment, but I feel like, maybe not repercussions but we need more credibility. Like obviously you guys we appreciate you came here but you have to realize this is an opportunity most people don't have. So I feel like if you could have stressed how like much of a value it was people would take it more seriously. Cause, when I saw it, Jessica came to my school and talked to a few people who had already applied to come to here. And I was like, that sounds great, I applied like right away. But my roommate, he got a call about it like the week before, like the Friday, he woke up to a call, 'hey, you want to do it,' and six seven days later packed his stuff and came up here. So like my view of what the program was is obviously a lot different than his, I guess he was like oh, it was just handed to me, wasn't so much they were begging for me to come but the thing starts in the week and they have an open spot. It gives you some predisposition to what's going on. So, I feel like some, like, I don't know just more information so people actually know how good they have it before they waste it.

LY: If you had to sell it, how would you state it? If you had to explain that value, how would you explain it to high school seniors?

P2: Just quickly, I know there's a lot of ways you could go about it, personally I'm a numbers guy, so I feel like just a flat-out number about it would have been helpful. Because a lot of people they don't know how expensive college is. So if you say hey, seven credit hours is worth *x* thousands of dollars, the housing is worth this much, books are worth this much, you have this in context and it gives you a value. As a kid, how long would it take you to make this many thousands of dollars? On a smaller note, a lot of came here and transferred after the first semester because they didn't know how expensive it would be. They just didn't know. So the actual value…and like a precursor to it, I don't know what the application is like now, but when I

applied it was first name last name birthday social security number and like one sentence, submit. That sets a different tone than a couple pages of like why you want to do it, more things like that.

P6: The application for like doing ASAP should be more like the application for being an ASAP mentor. Why is diversity important to you? Why do you feel like getting this early access will help? And going off telling them the value, not necessarily the monetary value but the academic value, cause you're only taking 7 hours. You're going to be able to get a decent GPA if you're actually serious about it, and getting a 4.0 or a 3.8 there is going to help when like in fall, say you get a 3.0, 2.8, that 4.0 is going to put you up to a 3.4, 3.6, so getting that high GPA for the summer is going to give you a cushion, you're going to be a whole lot more competitive…you don't have to stress if you don't get a 3.6 here. It's a big help on that GPA boost.

(End recording.)

Wednesday, August 2, 2017, 12:01-1:00 p.m.
LY: Leslie Yingling, Facilitator
P7, P8, P9: Focus group participants

LY: So, we'd like to start with your broad reflections on your ASAP experience in the summer and as a first-year student. So this conversation is covering all of that today. Overall, what are your impressions? Positive/negative? Helpful/unhelpful?
Please, when you take turns responding, identify yourself for the purposes of the recording.

P7: I'm [P7], and my overall perception of ASAP is mainly, it's helpful, that it's the most helpful program for freshmen coming in, and I feel like it's so many advantages that you have doing this program – you come in and you meet people before the freshman year, you also get to take classes for free, just to get the feeling of how the fall is going to be. I feel like overall it was just the most helpful thing we could have done.

P8: I'm [P8], and I feel as if the program was really helpful, as it gave us a really good transition to college life, and the classes really helped, and it allowed us to meet new people and get accustomed to campus before basically being freshmen. IT was a jump start on the college life experience. Overall really helpful.

P9: I'm [P9], I also think the program was really helpful, especially for kids coming from the Delta region where we came from, a lot of us came from smaller communities and things like that, and the jump from smaller communities to giant communities like this, ASAP really helped bridge the gap between you know, that transition. And then for me, specifically, I know I wouldn't have been able to, you know, stay here without ASAP. Because I would have panicked and gone home and stayed. But of course the free classes, of course all the relationships with the MC staff, and all that really helped I think all of us in our freshman year in terms of getting help with scholarships and stuff like that.

LY: So you feel like ASAP helped with your retention already, in terms of you staying at this institution?

P9: Yeah because I immediately when I first got here I was already a little panicked about how big the campus was about getting lost about not knowing a lot of people, and then with the program and how they make community building, they help you meet everybody in the MC, they help you meet with your college, they help you get a feel for everything before the big rush of the fall semester, without that like *padding*, I would have fell face first and not known what to do and freaked out and gone home. Just knowing myself, I know that I would have. Without ASAP, I'd be back at ASU. So.

LY: What do you all think about that? Do you think it was deal-making in anyway? Or do you think you would have persisted anyway? Without it would it have been harder?

P7: I feel like it uplifted my confidence more. It's the confidence of knowing people. So when I got here, like my first day of class, after class I went to the Union, and like I seen people I already knew. And then them being around other people I got to meet more people, so it's like if

I hadn't done ASAP, after class my first time going to the Union just trying to get to know people myself, being in ASAP just boosted my confidence more.

LY: So you had a faster network because of that?

P7: Yeah.

P8: Same. Faster network. We get to know people. Cause I'm usually quiet, like I'm not like that, that good at new transitions. But this helped me be more open.

LY: What are some things that the summer bridge specifically provided that you all would identify as most or especially effective/helpful? Specific to the summer.

P7: I say the mentors. Me personally, I know I didn't just connect well with my mentor I connected with another mentor too, and just like connecting with a mentor period, not only my own but other ones, that led to making my summer, fall, and freshman year easier. I still had contact with him. Just like, I didn't have a car my first year, so like I know a mentor helped me go get a haircut, things like that. I feel like the mentors came in, and they were very special to me cause I connected with them, and that led to making my first year like a breeze.

P9: Um I agree. The mentors were an extreme help. Not even like…They helped us with classes and things like that in the summer and the fall, but they helped us with personal problems if you had an issue, and other thing is they were really fluid with their mentees, they weren't possessive of their mentees, so if I was in one group I could also be in somebody else's, and they all took care of us like as a collective, so if you didn't click with one mentor, maybe you clicked with another one like he said, you could go to another one instead. The other thing added onto the mentors is, like, the staff, so you and Don…you know, because you guys, any time we had a problem, we knew exactly who to turn to, and that was you guys if our mentors couldn't help us, and that was one of the most valuable things I got out of the ASAP summer was knowing you before we came in.

P8: I agree, especially the staff, cause Don and all the other staff, they were really helpful in getting us accustomed to college life. Cause I had no idea. I feel as if my high school didn't prepare me enough. So they were good academic advisors, built good personal relationships with them.

LY: So did you then use your ASAP or AEP mentor, so some people had both, some people had one, some people didn't have much of a relationship with either, so all of that's on the table -- Did you use your ASAP and/or AEP mentor/coach to help you navigate your first full-time semester? And if you did, then how?

P7: Yes I did. I used my ASAP mentor more, I connected with her more, but I still talked to my AEP coach a lot too. But I think with my ASAP mentor it was more like a personal connection. She helped me with psychology before, she helped me go get haircuts, to go grocery shopping, she helped me meet new people, she let me stay the night when I needed to, when my family couldn't get here, and she let me stay with her. It was more like a personal connection with her,

she was like a big sister, so I needed that. And my AEP coach, so she did, she talked to me about study abroad, she has me kind of thinking about doing study abroad. I think me and her have more of an education connection.

LY: You had exposure to new ideas about what you could do?

P7: Yeah, that.

P9: I agree, like my ASAP mentor, a couple of ASAP mentors I got really close to in a family sort of way, like the sister thing he said. Like the ASAP mentors, you got the educational side because they do have similar majors to you, they can help you, they can tutor you, but they also can help you with your personal stuff because they are close to you. And the AEP mentors, though we didn't get a lot of time with them before they just became our mentors, you know, it's more like a professional thing. They're there to help you with education, academics, involvement, things like that, so even though I had a good relationship with my AEP mentor, it wasn't like, as personal. And I feel like honestly, I would have rather like have had my ASAP mentor come in as my AEP coach. That connection was already built, that relationship was already built, and once that happens you take what they say…it's, it's, it means that much more, it means more you know.

P8: For me it was my ASAP mentor that was more helpful. My ASAP mentor used to call people together for study sessions, to help us really get together to study. She was always there for help for a ride around town, make connections, stuff like that.

LY: Did you seek academic, personal, or other help from a professional staff member in addition to whatever mentoring or coaching relationships you had?

P7: I feel like all of the MC staff basically was there for me. Um, I know I went to Lauren more as a personal, from a personal standpoint because me and Lauren came from the same thing, you know, so I kind of like connected with her, she was the main person I went to. But I still went to PJ a lot, too, as well, if I needed just like to talk. Also Adrain. I feel like the MC staff was there for me. Because of ASAP I met the MC staff, and don't think if I had not have done ASAP, I wouldn't have met them.

P8: Same. PJ, Adrain, Don, I used my academic advisor to help me transition from high school to college. I talked to Don a lot, he would really help me with my academic decisions, with my classes.

P9: I agree with both of them too. The MC staff, is, it's where I go for every problem even if it's not academic, you know if you're thinking about something in life and you just need to talk it out with someone who has more experience than you coming in here talking to PJ or Adrain or Don, just helps clear everything, because we are like a really close family because since ASAP we did get to know each other so well and then we had the entire fall and spring…I don't think that like they said without ASAP I would have came to the MC because personally I wouldn't have thought this place was for me anyway.

LY: So it sounds like you had to have a mentor, the program set you up with a mentor. And then you also, the program set you up to meet these professional staff members. The ways you've described your relationships have been different, with the mentors being more personal, more peer, but the staff being more experienced – and you meant more relative to mentoring, relative to your peers' experiences?

P9: Yeah, because you know all the MC staff have been through their degrees, have had, like they've had a lot more life to live. So even with academics, things like that, you've been through degree plan, they know the ins and outs of college. And also just through life in general you've just had a lot more life experience than we do or than our mentors do.

LY: So do you think it takes both types, so that you need professional mentors – like the Dons, the Laurens, the PJs – and also peer mentors that are current students and that they fill or meet different needs?

All: Students begin nodding, speaking emphatic "yes" while I was still asking the question. Yes from all respondents.

LY: I think sometimes we have the idea that students know because they're in the experience, but there are other matters, right, bureaucratic matters, how you get your scholarship, what the rules are, how you get your transcript, financial aid, those are the types questions that your mentors may not be able to answer?

All: Simultaneous, Yeah, yeah…

P7: And a lot of times our mentors lead us to y'all, to y'all. That's how we come to y'all. Just any hard times they can't help us with, they just send us to y'all.

LY: What are some of the greatest challenges you've encountered this year, and how did the program help or not help you overcome those? … And you might even have examples of both.

P9: I think mine was balancing my involvement with my academics because my degree plan is sort of rigorous considering I'm engineering, so but that doesn't excuse me from getting involved with things, so I did try to get involved with UP and other RSOs and things like that, and it was hard to do because I do have that like really heavy courseload, so um ASAP, with my mentor, I would call her and be like 'how did you do this' – cause she was involved – "how did you do this, how did you set this apart" and she explained to me how she went through her freshman year trying to get involved and do all this and help me like break down how to set up, like, meetings with each of my clubs while also getting everything done and like work and having all these things that I had to do you know like every week and still getting high grades in all of my classes. And she was really helpful, and I talked to Don about it several times, I talked to PJ about it several times about balancing all that stuff and they all helped me figure it out how to schedule it in a way that I could still be successful in both.

LY: So what I'm hearing you say is that your greatest challenge was this balancing of your need to focus academically so you could achieve the success you want to while also being a campus

community member, being involved, making friends, and that it was the human resources of the program that were most helpful?

P9: Yes, and the other thing about ASAP was that I didn't have to come into fall blind. I already had some notion of what the RSOs were and what I wanted to do. So I didn't, I wasn't going in like "I don't know what any of these are," I knew what they were and I knew what I wanted to do, so I just had to go in and find the people to help set me up with that. I also knew campus very ell so that helped with the time and not having to struggle with figuring everything out.

P7: I would say that um in one of my classes I was, I started off bad for the first exam, and I feel like ASAP, they helped me think in a positive way of getting a tutor. Like, I know in high school I never needed a tutor, so like, it was just like, when I came to ASAP, I heard a lot of people saying 'I had a tutor," even my mentors were like 'I had to get a tutor in this class, I had a tutor' and you all would also tell us just, there's nothing wrong with getting a tutor, so I feel like once I came into the fall and did that, and got a bad grade on my first exam, I knew I could get a tutor and there was nothing wrong with that. I feel like college is another level up in education, so I think that was the most – well, one of the positive things in ASAP, I got my mind on straight. I can always get a tutor.

LY: So the big challenge would have been academics, potentially one big challenge would have been for you, but the program made you feel comfortable getting help, asking for help (P7 interjects "yes"), and took away the stigma ("yes"), maybe, that you might have associated with that?

P7: Yeah yeah.

P8: My biggest problem was time management and procrastination. And the ASAP program and the Academic Enrichment Program, the workshops, they really helped me with time management and procrastination, staying on time for due dates, all the extra things I needed.

P7: I was going to say, um, doing the 10 hours a week, I feel like that was helpful – even like, I know sometimes I would sign in, go get something to eat, then come back and study, and even just coming in here just to sign in, I feel like every time I'd come to the MC I'd see other people doing work, that had me thinking 'Oh, I need to do this, like I need to do this assignment, I need to do that,' so even just coming in here to sign in, I seen other people doing what they're supposed to be doing and that had me thinking like 'I need to do this, I need to do that,' I feel like the 10 hours were helpful to me in my eyes because just seeing someone doing what they're supposed to do makes you want to get on your game. So that was really helpful. That was one thing I got from ASAP.

LY: So it introduced you to a community, an environment, with expectations that you wanted to hold yourself to? Yes. Accountability. That you're not sure you would have? Yes. Right, accountability.
Um, I really want to hear too about what you did not find effective about the program, whether it's a program experience, a requirement, an offering, um, talk to us about anything you would say does not help you about the program. What would you change about it if you could?

P7: I would say, I would say the meetings that we had, they were helpful, but I feel like sometimes that they were too long. Like --

LY: Like the group meetings? The workshops?

P7: Yeah, the weekly, I feel like they were kind of longer. And like, It's a lot of meetings. Cause like you have to meet with your mentor, you may have a group meeting with your mentees and mentors, and then you have a group meeting with everybody in ASAP, and it's just like, sometimes like, you want that day that you don't have to worry about nothing but classes, and like that. So I just feel like every day, it's always something, some meeting, it was kind of getting overwhelming sometimes. And I know like, they have short attention spans. Even now, I see they have short attention spans. People start getting on their phones and stop paying attention and things like that. I would stay like, meetings would be better if they were shorter, just get to the point.

P9: Yeah I agree with that, because you know, mentors get their discussion topics from things that we need to talk about from things that we may even talk about later in our big group meetings, so if we could either like eliminate our group meetings or even our individual meetings, even, I think that would be better. Because sometimes in our individual meetings the information we give is repetitive. Because they'll hear it once, and then they'll hear it another time later in the week from you know, like, Don. And kind of like, they're getting the same bout of information twice.

LY: And that's – you're reflecting on this summer –

P9: It was the same for me.

LY: So was it the same last year in your own experience?

P9: Yeah. (P7: yeah, yeah) It just, gets really repetitive and all you want to do is tune out, cause you've already heard the information.

P7: (nods agreement) Yeah, and it's also like, even when we're not in the meetings, and we might be just chilling in the lobby, it still comes up. So like, they hear it then, then in the meeting again, or Groupme, so it's like always out there for them to know, even if it's not in a meeting, just a one-on-one, or anyone playing spades, like we may bring it up. It's just …

LY: Do you think it would be helpful, then, for the staff and the mentors to kind of pool these ideas about what has to be covered and then divide it up differently so that you know, there may be things that you talk about over spades or over group me or in small grou meetings, like mentor family meetings that could be addressed in the larger group meetings and have them be different?
P9: I think the two that are honestly the most similar are tour small group meetings and the big meetings. Cause in the individual meetings like they would talk about things they don't want to talk about in front of everybody. Grades, how you're feeling, cause in a group a lot of people won't open up like that. So I think the individual meetings have something unique about them,

and I think that they're fine. But having a small group meeting for like 30 minutes a week, and then going a couple days later and hearing the same thing, was kind of, it kind of annoying to me because I like, I know this information because I'm one who's going to remember what you tell me. And so, I was like, I'm hearing this twice, like I don't understand why…but individual meetings, talking about grades, and how your'e feeling, stuff like that, I feel like those were fine. But having the two group meetings was…because we have Groupme for that. We have sitting in the lobby playing spades. Like, we talk about it groups all day every day anyway. So.

P8: And I also agree…in that, I think that, the full group meetings and the individuals fill more purpose than the small group meetings. Most of the stuff's covered, like the students are already asking those questions….

LY: Okay. Anything else? Less, least effective?

P9: Do you want to know, like, something about the fall, too?

LY: Yes, Sure. That could be not only the summer but the whole academic year. Including mentoring, structuring, whatever.

P7: Okay. I feel like the mentors should still, like, connect with the mentees during their first freshman year. Like I know me personally, me and my mentor, we only talked like maybe three times throughout my freshman year, and twice it was probably about sports. It was just one time checking on me. SO like, I feel like, a personal standpoint I wanted toa connect with him more but at the same time I wasn't going to force it if he wasn't going to try. So I feel like that would have been a better thing the mentors could have worked on. Some mentors did connect with their mentees and other mentees throughout their freshman year, but I feel like it should have been something that was mandatory.

LY: So earlier when you were talking about a mentor that was like a sibling, a big sister, was that not your mentor but someone else, another mentor you connected with?

P7: Mmmhmm.

P9: See, I didn't have the same problem with my mentor because I connected really well with mine and we became really good friends. So I always talked to her, and I also made two other friends that were not my mentors that I'm really cloes with that I can call for absolutely anything. Something I didn't' find very helpful were the AEP meetings. Because one, they seemed really long for me anyway because I had meetings with my ASAP mentor that weren't every week but they were sometimes every other week, and then I had AEP meetings and then I have something called Freshman Engineering peer mentoring. So with all three of them I was getting the same information three times in a row.

LY: And the AEP meetings were the workshops, what Brande calls workshops?

P9: No, it was my coach. With my coach.

LY: Oh, your AEP coach.

P9: The workshops I liked. The AEP coaching meetings were the ones that were…because he would be telling me things that I either learned mostly from ASAP, because ASAP taught me the majority of the things he was telling me, which I felt bad because he was repeating things I already knew, and then if I didn't hear it from ASAP I was hearing it from engineering, so for me at least, it was kind of, I don't want to say useless, cause he did help me with some things but it just wasn't as helpful as I'd want it to be. And I feel like for kids that are going through ASAP, since they do have a little bit more knowledge than just freshmen coming in, they should have maybe a different structure of what they talk about with their AEP coaches, and if their ASAP mentors were their AEP coaches, I think that would be easier.

LY: Easier because they would already know?

P9: They would already know. They would already know because they were there, they don't have to repeat anything, nothing has to get repeated multiple times.

P8: I have a question, was it required for the ASAP mentors hold group meetings throughout the semester?

LY: Yeah, it was. Last year, you're asking? Yes, it was a requirement they were supposed to. I know that that didn't happen consistently with everyone.

P8: Yeah, mine tried to do that, but the way everyone's schedules were set up…

LY: Well, and I will say just for your knowledge, the idea was a mentor family meeting requirement. If that were not possible, the next thing would be individual meetings or smaller subgroup meetings. But the meetings had to happen however it was accomplished. And I know that they did not always. It was too hard.

P9: Sometimes even through the fall in I know in my group, the majority of them were supposed to be engineers because our mentor is an engineer, right, so that's fine, that makes sense, we should have similar schedules at that point. But the thing that started happening is that a couple, maybe two or three of our group changed majors, so with that their schedules changed, so she was overwhelmed with her courseload – she's a sophomore in engineering, we're freshmen in engineering, we don't, you know – so she tried to do individual ones, but it kind of just kind of broke off. So I think scheduling is kind of difficult to get all of us together in one.

LY: So it sounds like what is one challenge is also one of the strengths that you talked about – the mentoring is important, that was the most important, it sounded like, resource provided by the program was both professional and peer mentoring, but at the same time the real semester, like the real college life, makes it difficult for the mentoring to take place regularly?
P9: I don't think it's like squarely on the mentors even. Because some of the students – it takes effort from both sides. When they ask for your schedules, you have to give it to them promptly so that they can figure out with their schedule how it's going to work. If nobody responds, if nobody's giving them that feedback, they can't do anything with it. And I think…That was why,

I know at least in my group I was one of the only ones that would meet with my mentor regularly. Because I told her, like, when I was free we would go get lunch you know stuff like that, it wasn't anything super structured but we did meet regularly. So I mean, it takes effort on both sides. IT's not squarely on them.

LY: Okay. If you had the decision to make again, would you choose to participate in ASAP?

All: Yes, laughter, nodding, "obviously yes," "of course."

LY: And you stayed with it. … What have I not asked about, if anything, that you think gives us important insight about the program, what it does, where it should go, anything we need to be concerned about.

P9: I mean, I think, nothing to be concerned about, it's a good thing – but like, how you guys decided that even though you're giving these free classes, you're giving free housing, you're giving free food, that wasn't the only thing you were going to do. That you were going to go outside of that and give us Fayetteville outside of the UofA as well. You took us to a baseball game, you took us to all these spots, you told us about all these things and gave us activities to do and paid for them so we had the opportunity to do and see things to do in Fayetteville that were outside this campus. You didn't just, you didn't put us on this campus and just 'well you're here to get an education and that's it,' you let us experience this entire town for what it is. And that was really helpful because I didn't know anything about Fayetteville when I showed up, after I was done with ASAP I knew almost everything about ASAP.

P8: I agree.

LY: Part of the program as you know very well is that students who go through it can later mentor their younger peers, as you are and will be doing. How do you think you'll deal with some of the challenges that you experienced as mentees last year and what you saw about the challenges of the mentor also needing the students to say yes to the meetings and be receptive to the communication, and knowing that there's no way to do it perfectly, of course.

P9: I know already with mine, I have all boys because I'm the only engineering major, so it was immediately, you know, I had to take on this thing – they're going to come in and they're going to see me, and I know like there's a stigma around women engineers as it is. So I was like, 'how many fo you know this is a male-dominated field and how many of you thought you were going to have a dude mentor.' And they all raised their hands, so I'm like, 'are you shocked?' And so after that they had like immediately warmed up to me. When I first met them they weren't like that and then when I said that, they were like 'okay, she knows what she's in and she knows how to handle it. She's in charge of her own, like life.' And all of them o were before kind of like, 'I'm in engineering and I'm a dude and it's going to be easy,' now they really respect other people and their majors, and they really respect me a lot, and I have like, no problem getting them to come to meetings because I've built like, this friendship with them as far as, you know, joking around with them like that, and getting them to learn these things like, you know, the world around them isn't what you think it is, and so now they really respect me in a way like, yes you're my friend but you're older than me and I can learn from you. And a lot of them told me

like, ‘I didn’t expect to get this much from you and I did,’ so I think, I told them that I would probably, at least hopefully still be their mentor in the fall, and I told them you’re going to have to show up to these meetings and you’re going to have to give me cooperation. And if we have like issues with scheduling we can fix it but you’re going to have to like work with me. And they said, ‘we’re not going to have a problem showing up. Like, we’ll be there. You’re going to be one of the resources we have, we’ll be there.’ I think just building that friendship and that respect like immediately, out of the gate, so that they know that you’re a person that one cares about what they’re doing and will help them with what they’re doing, they’ll show up. But you have to build that respect first.

P7: I agree with her. Um, me personally, I used my being a mentee experience to drive me to be a better mentor this year. Because like, I know like with my ASAP experience, once the summer was over, I didn’t connect with a lot of my group. So this year I have all girls and one boy. Me and the guy we connected like off the bat, but the other girls, like they weren’t responding to GroupMe at first, so like I had to just go to their room, just talk to them, get to know them, just like little things like that, to let them know you know, I’m here for you, and uh, anytime you need me jus tlet me know and everything. And I kind of like built it into like a family thing. Like at first, through their first exam, they wouldn’t even tell me their grade. And I’m like, I need to know, just so I can know, and like so I can update Don and everything. And at first they didn’t want to tell me and then like now, after the exam as soon as they get their grade they come and tell me just like off the bat. So like, it was just like more of a thing where I had to go into their room in the dorm, just talk to them get to know them. With the girls I had to do that, just to make them feel comfortable with me being their mentor. I feel like I just used my experience of ASAP to just boost me to be an even greater mentor.

P8: Same here. I had to, I had to reach out to my mentees specifically because they weren’t really responding. And right now they love to be around me, they invite me just about any time they go out, we try to eat together, basically.

P7: I also went and got my first pedicure. That was cool. That’s one of the things I did.

P9: I know like this group, our experience with ASAP was fantastic and everything about it was great, and not to dog on that experience, but this group of not only mentees but mentors like together has been the most cohesive, and well like l bonding thing, like every

P8: And competitive (laughing)…spades (laughing)

P9: We’re also competitive but it’s in like a family way. Like, there’s not one of those mentees I don’t know the name of that wouldn’t say like, hi to me. Like ever. And all of the mentors are of course like really close. And I think they saw that from us and were like, oh this is, like, it’s a family thing. You get really close.
LY: How much do you think that has to do with that you actually experienced this together as students who were actually in their shoes?

P9: It has EVERYTHING to do with it.

P8: It gives you more ideas about what you should do for your mentees.

P7: Yeah, I know I didn't have a signature for my email. Because I didn't have mine until spring of my freshman year. So I know it just gave me more ideas just to give for them how to have a better freshman year.

LY: And I wonder if that's why it feels like there's so much duplication, it feels like with meetings, because you had this unique experience of living through it and becoming a mentor, so you're probably better equipped than even other typical mentors at being ready to do this, right, which is an interesting issue from a planning standpoint.

P9 (interjecting) yeah, nodding, yeah. I think that like, us going through it and being the inaugural group and stuff like that, we can explain tot hem when they come to us like 'why are we doing this, why are we having all these meetings, why, you know all of this' we can explain to them this is why. This is why you should do it. And you can see the 17 of us, the majority of us here did this, did everything they asked, and now we work for the same program that got us here in the first place. So obviously there is something worthwhile about what you're doing, and you should do it. It's going to help you, it's never going to harm you to do this, so, you know, you should do it. And I think us going through that makes them take what we say as more important. They think like 'they went through this, there must be something worthwhile.'

LY: So you know from your cohort, the first year, we have about 20 percent attrition, meaning that about 20 percent of that group at this time is not continuing at the UofA. It'll probably be a little bit more than that three weeks from now. So what you do think are the biggest root causes of students who participated in the program and left, if you were just to speculate on that or if you have some insight?

P7: Me personally, I would say it's just, a lack of effort on them, maybe. I know that in college whatever you put in, that's what you get back, basically. So like, I had to learn to try more, to try harder. So like, Some people don't have that, and they don't have a background, or like, so like my parents, my parents were on me personally, if I need to do better, if I need to go talk to my professor. Not everyone has that background. So like, I would say basically just, it's not all dealing with ASAP or any mentors or anything like that. It may be like personal things, or personal problems back at home. Cause I know someone who had to go home because their parents had broke up. Like little things like that. Somebody like went to the Air Force, like. It's just different things like that. It could be personal. I don't feel like it's just more of like an ASAP or a mentor thing that messed it up or anything. It's just…things happen.

P9: I think also there are some people who come to college being wrong about college. You know, you come in during the summer and the course-load is a little lighter, sometimes summer courses tend to be a lot or a little easier than fall courses, things like that, so they think they can goof around and go party and do this stuff, and they end up realizing that's not what, like, they can make it through the summer like that, but then they try to jump into the fall and that's not how a full course load of 15 hours goes. You have to put in a lot of effort to keep that up. And I also agree with P7, there were some I know in our group that just had like personal things that came up. And some of them aren't even negative like he said, some of them just decided they

wanted to go through the Air Force, or things like that, or maybe just got an offer to go somewhere else, some of them weren't negative, and some of them were, but I mean, I think it's the majority of it is that they had the wrong idea of what they were coming into, and they didn't put in the effort that they needed to.

LY: What about financial obstacles?
P9: I think that had something to do with it as well. Like, I know there were some people who you know, they came through ASAP and they were, you know, still trying to find the money to stay at the UA, and then through the end of ASAP couldn't find the money to stay at UofA, so they went back home.

LY: Which I guess is still a matter of underpreparation, right?

P7, P8: Yeah, yeah, nodding in agreement.

LY: So what you're talking about are various types – there are personal issues that maybe are unforeseeable that happen sometimes, that can happen, and there are other issues that were, you weren't ready for one way or another, financially, academically, work ethic-wise or…

P7: I just feel like before college they probably, they maybe didn't have an exact plan about how they were going to get through their first year or anything, like. With me I know, like, my dad is military so I had VA, I have like backup, so like I kinda had an idea of what I needed to do and how I was going to get this and how I was going to get that, even before ASAP. And ASAP boosted that and helped me with another scholarship, basically. So like, it's just more of like some people didn't have an exact plan. They may have just seen an e-mail and though 'oh, I just want to go here, that'll be helpful for me so I'm going to do this,' but they didn't worry about FAFSA or like, things like that that, like what they probably should have done in high school.

P9: I know yeah, like some of them looked at the e-mail and said well 'oh this is neat, I know this' but they hadn't really looked into the college they were going into. So maybe, like I know the UA is one of the greatest for engineering, but I know it isn't the greatest for everything. So they may have gone on a different path and thought 'this isn't the best school for this' maybe I should just go somewhere else and they just didn't put the research into it that they needed to.

P8: It didn't rest on the program.

P9: Yeah I honestly don't think it rested on the program. I think most of it was personal – like you don't have work ethic or personal issues or stuff like that. And maybe it was they didn't know how to ask for help from their mentors because they weren't connecting with their mentor. That may have been part of it too.

LY: We're about up to time. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about that I didn't ask about? …

End recording.

Wednesday, August 2, 2017, 1:05-2:10 p.m.
LY: Leslie Yingling, Facilitator
P10, P11, P12, P13, P14: Focus group participants

LY: Okay! I would like to start with your broad reflections on your ASAP experience last summer and as a first-year student. Overall, what are your impressions of the program? Positive/negative? Helpful/unhelpful?

P10: Well, ASAP like definitely um prepared me for freshman year, it kinda gave me a like head start, kinda just knowing what's around campus, how to use my resources, that kinda stuff. So. Helpful.

P11: ASAP was really helpful, like she stated, it helped me know what was around campus, what resources to use, how to use those. But then there was also the reality of being alone in college. Like, you knew it was coming, but it was still a shock --- you're really alone.

LY: And when you say that you're saying independent from your family, away from home?

P11: Yeah, it was like my first real experience away from home, no family really around at all. And it was kind of scary. ASAP overall was a great experience, but, my first semester, I felt like I was drained. Like, ASAP took all my energy away from me. I didn't think, like towards the middle of the semester I was exhausted. I had no energy left to even want to do school much. So winter break was well needed for me. Felt like I was in school the whole year. I went straight to high school, straight to college…it was exhausting. That was probably the biggest downfall of ASAP, was that first semester.

LY: So do you think overall that it was helpful or not so helpful? I mean, do you have an idea of how that first semester would have gone if you hadn't been here vs. being so tired from having been here all summer?

P11: I think, I think my first semester would have been …I'm not sure how it would have been. Um, I know my second semester was way better. But I was exhausted after ASAP. I had no breaks from school, went home for 10 days during the summer. I was exhausted. I don't know. I can't say how I think the semester would have been without ASAP.

LY: Because you did it.

P11: Yeah.

P12: I feel like I didn't make ASAP a positive experience for myself. I like, I came in as an Honors kids, so I full force tried really really hard in all my classes – I had like 99s in all of them – and so I completely didn't do the social aspect of ASAP. I made some friends, and I branched out some in fall and spring semester, but in ASAP pretty much I stayed in my room and just did homework and reading. Both of my classes were really really reading based, and I read the whole, um, history book and all of the philosophy book for reading that I had to, and it was a lot. It was quite a bit. I stayed up until like 2 every morning. Reading. And then, but that's…I didn't

want to mess up. But I could have definitely been more lenient and I realized that in my fall and spring semester. And so, um, I mean out of ASAP, yeah I was tired but I bounced back pretty quickly. I was kind of used to it. I love learning, I love school, Everything about it. So that wasn't a big issue for em. But I wish I had been more social and stuff. And I came in with my best friend from high school, so I was fine. We were roommates, and I was fine just staying in my room, which wasn't a good thing. And I felt really, like, isolated. And once I realized that I wanted to branch out, everyone had kind of made friends, and were in their own group, and I felt kind of by myself. And I always wish in the fall and spring that I had hung out in the MC more. Everyone seems to know everyone. I think that really pushing staying in the MC and getting to know everyone here would be a really helpful point. Yeah, I wish I had done that. But, um, I think getting to be an ASAP mentor and really branching out and being in here more, I'm excited to do that. Yeah. (Laughs)

P13: ASAP like in the summer last year made me way more outgoing and braver than I usually was in high school. Because like P11 said, it put me in this, like independence, like from my family in an independent situation, where I had to do things on my own. So I felt brave to do other things. It made me make more connections, it made networking way easier for me into the fall and spring semester. And like, it just, it made me more brave to go and do opportunities – like, things most students wouldn't do. Because of ASAP. Because they put me in situations that I had to do. Like making friends or talk to this person or this professor or this faculty member.

P14: I can give two sides to the spectrum of ASAP. The positive is first. You get acquainted with campus, with professors, to learn to talk to them, how to like send e-mails properly. Because in high school I really didn't have to e-mail my teachers because I saw them every day. But in college it's not consecutive, like you don't meet every single day. So you're out one day, you have to send an e-mail saying like, you're not going to be in class. So, uh, get acquainted with campus, meeting other students in the program, uh, yeah jus that social aspect of meeting other people before the fall, before all the freshmen rush in for the fall. But then on the other side of the spectrum, you look at ASAP, it's like 100 students that you don't know. Like it's so easy to alienate yourself from everybody because you don't know these people. So in my hometown, I only had like one person, like, that I knew one person in ASAP. So it's not easy at first instance to just be like 'this is who I am' it takes time. You're in a whole different environment. It's crazy.

P12: It's also like a problem like when you know too many people. There were I think like six people from Cabot, my hometown, that were there, and I pretty much almost only hung out with them. And so, I feel like not having anyone that I had known, especially having my best friend there, I feel like I definitely would have branched out more, um, in ASAP if I didn't know anyone. Maybe you could, like if, like for the future, recommend, like, not picking a roommate? And being like 'I really think it would be more to your advantage to have a random roommate until you get to know people and branch out, and you'll still see that person, or your friend, very often, you'll be in very close quarters, but…' I think that would be, that would be really positive.

P13: Bouncing off hometowns, it was really great for ASAP going through the fall semester, because I'm the only one from my school who came to the UofA, but there was like, there was someone who was from Newport or Tuckerman that was like 45 minutes from my school, and I

had no idea about that. So, like just hanging out with people, and knowing people from the same region, made me comfortable going to the fall semester. Because we're coming from like a tiny town into a giant city that is Fayetteville. It just made me more comfortable, more confident in my college career.

P10: Like what she said, I was the only one in my class who came from my town, and so it was like, I either had to get to know people or I was just going to be by myself. So it definitely made me branch out for sure.

LY: What are some things that the ASAP summer bridge specifically, the summer component of the program, that you would identify as most or especially helpful?

P10: The first thing that popped into my head was the seven free credit hours that were classes that people could actually, you know, pass, or that you set up fro us to take passable classes. That was good, yeah.

P12: I also think that getting to know your professors well. Because you're there every day, and it really allows you to make a connection with the professor and makes it easier down the line to talk to professors. I really liked getting to know the professors and just the campus in general. Cause you get to be here when no one else is here. So you see all of it.

LY: So the familiarity with the college environment…

P12: With everything, yes.

P13: Um, just like being forced – or like quotations 'forced' -- to make connections and knowing that there are staff and faculty members here to help you, and just that idea just settles into the mind and know you can talk to anyone and have connections. And that will pass on to fall and spring, where you just make connections with professors, or outside or inside your field or anything, just knowing that you can make connections. Being made to make connections.

P11: I felt the best part for me was that ASAP, they told us about CLASS+. That was probably the best part for me because during ASAP I would always go there to get help like with essays, whatever help, they would always help. Like twice a week.

LY: So tutoring and the writing center?

P11: Yeah.

P14: I guess what ASAP in the summer time, I guess gave you somewhat of an accurate depiction of what the fall was going be like, with the professor and the classroom setting. But like, I say somewhat of a depiction because in the fall your classes are going to be way larger than in the summer, in the summer it's more like a high school classroom set up, maybe 20 students, then you get to the fall, and it's like 300 students in the classroom. So it's kind of like that's bigger than my graduating class. So it's an adjustment you have to make from the summer to the fall.

LY: So, free classes, and not only free but because they were passable, so GPA boosting too? (P10 interjects "Yeah") Getting off on a good foot. Um, building faculty interactions, comfort with faculty and staff and networking, um and being made to do it so that if you otherwise would have been too shy to do it, you sort of had to and then realized it was helpful. Being introduced to tutoring resources and being encouraged to ask for help and actually do that…and then getting some sense of college academic life, even though it's still different from your first full-time semester?

All: Affirmative nods, "yeah, yeah."

LY: Okay, great. Did you use your ASAP and/or AEP mentor/coach if you had one to help you navigate your first full-time semester last fall? And if you did, then how?

P11: I used my ASAP mentor probably a lot more than my AEP mentor. Alejandra was my ASAP mentor and Tyler was my AEP mentor. Ale was my main source whenever I would like, want to know something she would help me out. For instance she told me about this law program, a sort of law club, I went to a couple of meetings with her because of that. She was just helpful. She gives me a lot of social insight about the UofA.

LY: So it was mostly social?

P11: Yeah, I'd say.

P13: I used my ASAP mentor rather than my AEP coach more. I always texted Kaleb or called him, like for recommendation letters, like, he would help me with like building up my resume, or what he would do in this situation…and then, like that was in the fall semester when I was building up scholarships and stuff and thinking ahead. And then in the spring, I took Chem, and he helped me with that. He helped me with studying tips, book readings, all that.

P10: Um, I actually used both of my mentors kind of equally. Kaleb was definitely there for me, just kind of like phone call or text, we didn't meet up much, we were busy, but he would definitely text me back, when we would see each other he would want an update. Then in the spring my AEP mentor, we were meeting up probably like every other week, just because I had Kaleb talking to me too, so she didn't want to put meeting every week on me, but she was definitely helpful like academically. And even if I was just feeling down, about like discouraged about a class or something, she was always there to help me out and stuff. Yeah, I used them. I was so thankful to have them both semesters.

P14: Mine is kind of different, because I used my AEP mentor way more than my ASAP mentor. I wouldn't say that my ASAP mentor was apathetic to my progress, but it felt more like a job she was doing. And my AEP mentor was kind of just always there, like staying on top of me about recommendation letters, just stress level, anything I would need, all of that, she was just completely there throughout that whole process. I really appreciated that when I needed someone to give advice, she was always there. She's from near where I'm from too.

P12: My ASAP mentor was distant to me, I didn't see him much during the spring semester, he would text me like "happy thanksgiving" and stuff, but my AEP coach I met with every week in the fall and every other week in the spring, and I would go to him with any questions I had. It was more academic based, it wasn't social or anything, but it was really helpful to know I had him to answer any questions I had.

LY: Um, what about professional staff. So did you seek academic, personal or other types of help from any of the professional staff? So not the peer mentors you were set up with through the Center, but people who work here or in Class+, etc.

P13: OH yeah. (Laughs) Um, oh yeah. During the spring semester, I went to Don at least like four times a month. To his office and like stayed there an hour a day. And just talked to him. Because, okay. He helped me with recommendation letters. And he also helped me, or motivated and encouraged me to do this internship in the summer, to be an intern during the summer. And like, I was really scared of doing that and he pushed me, really pushed me to talk to the director of my, of like the geoscience program. He pushed me, he THREW me into those situations. He just, it was really helpful just to have someone to talk to, especially with Don. And there were other situations where he would be thinking of me. Like he read this article about a tree falling. And I was taking a tree course in the spring semester and he, he just sent me an e-mail with that article and was like 'I was just reading this and I thought about you.' (Laughs). It was like a therapy session. IT was a very nice chill-down. I could debrief with him. It was really nice. And then there were others, like Sarah, you, Brande, that I could just come and talk to.

P11: Um, one, I seeked an academic coach, my spring semester, and she is very helpful. I would meet with her every other Friday, and she would map out my progress throughout the semester. She…it was really productive to have someone else besides me on my classes. Really cared, I could tell she cared. She would keep up with my test scores IT was just a load off my feelings…I didn't have to do it myself. She would map out my day, how I would go about my day. Go to class, study time. She gave me a schedule to study, like five days ahead of time. It was also in the MC my main two sources were Adrain and Sarah. I went to Adrain, Adrain helped me out a lot. It was like, he was there professional and social. Whenever I would talk to Sarah it was just to express my thoughts. Thoughts I wouldn't just share with any person. Actually intimate thoughts about politics, what I want to do career-wise, just opening up my mind. Having an intellectual conversation. Especially during the presidential election.

P14: I utilized them more than anybody on campus, to just like talk to. I would first just do my hours in the MC, go to a desk, come back here and check out. But then in the spring semester, that's when I really just started to branch out. I didn't even know Brande was watching me, like she, but she sent me an e-mail about a leadership conference in New Orleans. Which was just amazing. It was eye-opening. So I started building more relationships. I guess she just saw who I was…and I feel like building even stronger relationships.

P10: I definitely built relationships with…I think everybody in the MC. Definitely go-tos, of course Ms. Leslie, Don, Lauren…I kind of started building relatinoships with Adrain and PJ in spring-ish, I met Ms. Sarah and introduced myself, met a few times. But everyone in here is so welcoming, I can definitely just talk to anybody. Like recommendation letters? I feel like anyone

in here could and would do it for me. Yeah, it's just very helpful.

P12: I talked about this a little bit before, but I didn't come to the MC at all at first, so I didn't really branch out, but I really wish I had. I, like, every issue that I had, I had Ben or someone or I could deal with it myself. I don't know, I feel like, coming to people with my problems, like it's not…but I realize now that I definitely can, and I definitely will.

LY: Somehow you must have met Brande, because she definitely talked about you last year. I don't know why or how, but definitely she did. So somehow you and P14 both made secret impressions on people who you didn't know were watching you!

(Laughter.)

LY: So what were some of the greatest challenges you've encountered this year, and how did the program help or not help you to overcome them?

P11: I want to say…I was just so tired. I mean, it was kind of caused by the program, because I was just so exhausted by it, but once I got to my spring semester, I was rejuvenated. I came in with a strong mentality that I wasn't going to do the same that I did the first semester, and I did it. I was very proud of myself.

P12: The biggest help that I got was, or like the problem I had the most, was with the social aspect, and having a group of people that even though I wasn't super close with, there was still like the connection that we were both in ASAP, and I definitely was still friends with the people I met, um, and like the mentors here and things like that, but, um, it really helped me to like have friends that weren't just from my high school. Having that connection, was really nice.

P13: I think my biggest problem was that I spent so much of my time with my ASAP friends during the summer, and once going into the fall I had like the need to be tied to them constantly. It, that stuck with me a couple weeks into the fall semester, like I wouldn't branch out with like my housing neighbors in my dorm. I would always be at like my, like Natalie's dorm just hanging out with here, and that transition of like slowly not just hanging out with my ASAP friends and going out with other friends, it was a struggle, because they had a grudge on me, they gave me some backlash. It was rough.

Hm. So you, it created sort of a new comfort zone for you? Initially you felt like ASAP helped you be brave and make social connections except then you got really comfortable with those and were not as willing to go outside of them when the school year hit?

P13: Yeah, yeah.

LY: Anyone else? Greatest challenges? Ways that the program did or did not help? …
Okay. I also really want to hear about what you didn't find effective, in the summer or in the year, some of it you've said already, but whether it's a program experience, a requirement, an offering, tell us about something you would say the program does but does not help you, and how you would change the program if you could.

P11: The only part of ASAP that I felt that just was unnecessary was the monthly meetings. I felt that they were just forced.

LY: During the summer?

P11: No, during the school year.

LY: With your mentor?

P11: Yeah with my mentor group. I felt like they was forced. Just sit there and talk for a few minutes…it felt like a class reunion. We're not friends like we were. Laughter.

P12: I feel like if you asked me to name one person who was in my group I couldn't…like we never met! It wasn't, like…Like with ASAP now, it's more…I meet with my group every week, they definitely know each other, we have a group chat, but it wasn't like that.

P13: I think, um, it was the structure, like, of how everything was like structurally made, throughout the…it was really great in the summer, but as the fall and spring came, the structure sort of like fell apart. But like this summer, we've got it down! Laughter. And I feel like that's going to progress more, but just during my freshman year, that structure…I know it was newly made, it was all still coming together…but the structure.

LY: How much do you think that has to do with – so you know the whole idea was for this program that could produce, through its students who were in it, mentors for the next round of students coming in, which you know very well – how much do you think that has changed the structure and the way that it's working, that it's staffed with students who have actually experienced the program, versus last year staff of students who hadn't ever had that opportunity?

P12: I think the mentors now take it way more seriously than the mentors did last year. They didn't seem to care as much as we did…that's what I got from my mentor. I don't want to say that's all, everyone's experience, because I definitely isolated myself in ASAP last year, so I don't have the best opinion for things like that.

P11: I feel that I can relate to them more than my mentor did to me, because I was in their position. So I actually do talk to the guys on my floor about what they encounter in ASAP. And tell them about different experiences that I had, and how to not make the same…not the decisions, I didn't really make bad decisions, but how to not run into those circumstances. What are you going to encounter in the fall, in the spring? I try to just help my students. Different scenarios, I talk to them.

P13: I don't think it's as helpful to have mentors to didn't experience and aren't in the same place as we are. That wasn't as helpful. Like, if a mentor just transferred here. Like, if I had known a mentor who's from the same small town, or the same region, with the same attention to issues, the same financial area that I'm from, I could totally relate more and make more connections.

P10: Yeah I agree. Like last year, it felt like they were all from the same kind of place. Not from like, real small towns. They really couldn't like…I don't know if they could relate. This year is better.

LY That was sort of a sub question…is there anything else you want to say about things that were not helpful besides mentoring, other issues?

P10: No, but one thing I was going to say about what P11 said about ASAP draining him, you know before the fall semester, I know some mentees here now, they were doing summer classes in June! Some of my mentees, summer session in June, then boom right in here to ASAP, then boom, they're on the edge – they cannot wait until it's over! I mean, you know. I'm really interested to see, you know, how fall…

LY: So they were students taking summer classes at other institutions before here?

P10: Yeah.

LY: So not taking a summer break.

P10: Yeah.

P12: I think that…I'm not sure how well this will be considered, but um, being more aware of the classes that they are taking. Cause I took um philosophy and history of American people from 77 to present, and those were both very heavy reading based, and I would like, if I didn't have to read the whole history book and have another class, um, that would, it would have lightened my load and made my ASAP experience more positive, but I'm not sure how you would know exactly what's going on in each class, like the professor, but being more aware, and not making both classes really like the more difficult ones.

P14: I want to go back to the previous question about like, the structure. The structure of ASAP could have so many cracks to fall through, if no one takes the initiative to check up on you, or if you never act on that help. If you've had the experience and you know as a mentor what they're going through, you're more likely not to let that happen. I as a mentor am concerned about students who might not even be my mentees. Some people, different types of people, might not vocalize things like how they're doing in their classes. You have to ask anyway. Connect students with others who are thriving in their classes.

LY: It sounds like overall we're talking about relationships that are deal-making or maybe deal-breaking. That that really matters, the human component of the program. The resources that through those people you're introduced to, but were it not for the people there in the middle, you might not have exposed yourself to or gone to use, you know, you might not have gone to CLASS+ or to visit with your professor…

All: Nods affirmative, "Yeah, yeah."

LY: Um, if you had to do it all over again, would you choose to participate in ASAP?

All: Nods affirmative, general laughter, P13 wide-eyed YES, yes.)

P13: I remember during like the fall semester we would be sitting, or I would be sitting with my friends from ASAP, going 'I wish I could go back to summer' laughter from the group.

LY: When I only had seven credit hours, and there weren't all these other people, and there were not lines at Starbucks…

P13…and that campus wasn't nearly as crowded. Not as loud. Laughter.

P12: Even though I didn't have the best ASAP experience in the summer summer, it wouldn't have been, like, it wouldn't have made my fall and spring semesters as good. Obviously I wouldn't be in this program, I wouldn't made the connections that I have, I wouldn't have all the resources here. So yeah, it's just been really positive.

LY: Is there anything else anybody wants to talk about the program that I didn't ask about, and that didn't come up?

P13: I feel like last year it was kind of last minute but this year it's all really planned. Like the mentors, we just have a good mentor bunch.

P10: I feel like relationships kind of formed faster this year than they did last year, cause I know last year, I was social and stuff but like, I didn't really start getting to know people until the end…

P13, P11: Yeah, like the fourth week! The fourth week. The fourth week is like when it started.

P10: Yeah! And then I was like super sad because it's over!

P12: But I think, even like just with the mentors, like, we definitely made relationships more, faster. Even like within themselves.

P13: Even within the mentor groups. Like, we have relationships with each other. That helps.

P12: True that.

P11: They are way more social!

P12: Yeah…I think it honestly has something to do with the setup of the building?

P11: Of the building, yeah, yeah.

P12: Yeah! Cause like in Humphreys the elevator was like right there, and the common room downstairs was past that. And now the common room is right by the door, even upstairs you

have to walk past it to get to your room, and you see someone – a mentor, a group of friends talking – and you just chime in. You sit down and you make relationships. Nothing now is behind a shut door, it's visible.

LY: Yeah that's a good point. We might really have to think about that, the physical spaces that we're putting…

P10: (Interjects) Yeah because you can't like walk into Hotz without somebody being like 'hey!'

P11: Yeah, yeah.

P13: That's true.

P11: It really was. That's a big difference, the common area – there's more, there out there in the middle in the open.

P13: Yeah! There's two tvs..

P12: Yeah, we sit out in the common room, we make connections, it forms so quickly. Like within a week you have friends.

LY: You mention that they're way more social, and I wonder if that's because of as you've said the mentor group, their experience, the space…what is your perception of how they're set to perform academically this summer? How are they going to do? Are they doing well?

P13: They're doing really well.

P11: They are. They have good study habits. They study together, they study alone. It's always a fragile thing, messing with study habits. I think they're doing good. I don't have any concerns.

P10: I have all girls, so that's interesting for sure, but um, it was like sometimes maybe during midterms when I had to get on them, or not get on them, but push them – like it wasn't hitting them necessarily, for sure, but yeah.

P12: I only had one person drop one class. And other than that it's all Bs and As, they're all doing super well, and I think that will continue because now they know what to expect. I think every single one of them, they have talked to their professors outside of class.

P13: These students --

P12: They study SO much.

P13: They do. I have a mentee who had like an 83 during the midterms. I was like, 'I'm going to talk to a mentee in another group, you know make connections and stuff,' and so she brought that like 83.7 up to an 89.4, and she's going to bring that up to an A! Like, you go girl! So I think they're doing really great. And because we know each other, we know the mentors and mentees

really well, we can ask like, who has a student who's doing really well in this class and we can make the connections.

LY: So you're pairing them up for studying and sort of peer tutoring. That's great.

P14: My students had to form…like, they didn't like, their study habits in high school weren't going to work in college. So I had to like take the time to meet with them two times individually and a group meeting, to study with them, always being open to having study sessions with my time. Trying to form a stronger study habit. So.

P12: The public health class? A lot of students found it not…not helpful.

LY: This year or last?

P12: Maybe both? I mean they seem to like yoga…they seem pumped about yoga. But in class, I know they're just kind of like meh. I haven't heard that much positive feedback about that.

P10: Even last year, I just wasn't all that crazy about it…and we had like the director of the program.

P11: Me too…

LY: Actually there was an effort this year, it's different, it was combined with a resilience and thriving class, that students like better.

P14: I feel like it's a GPA booster.
(agreement from group)

P11: Is there any way you all could do a UP, a University Perspectives?

LY: Um, that's been discussed, that was the original idea actually, so maybe in the future. We may try that, or…

P13: (Interjecting) That'd be great!

P12: Yeah, yeah.

P11: I mean it's useless also.

P10: But it's required, so…

P13: Because we took it in the fall and it was like, I already know all this.

P11: I had it the second 8 weeks.
P13: I did too. I'm like I KNOW all this just give me an A!

LY: So it's a great idea not because you think it's useful but because you figure if you have to do it anyway, at least do it first?

P12: And when you don't already know all the stuff. It can be useful then.

LY: Um, the other – I've had other students suggest, I don't think any of you have taken effective college learning, but there's a study skills and memory kind of class, how to study, how to read, committing things to memory…

P13: That sounds like a really great class.

P11: Yeah, that would be more helpful.

P12: Some UP classes are like that. My honors one was.

LY: Okay, anything else that occurs to you that we didn't talk about?

All: General nods, shrugs, P13 Nah, no, that's pretty good.

LY: Okay, well thanks to everyone!

(End recording.)