

“I Know That I Should Be Here”: Lessons Learned From the First-Year Performance of Borderline University Applicants

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Abstract

At many higher education institutions, admissions decisions often rely on standardized test scores and high school grades; yet, they are less reliable predictors for applicants falling slightly below cutoff points, what we call borderline applicants. Since borderline applicants are often from underrepresented backgrounds and diverted to 2-year institutions, this may potentially jeopardize efforts to increase campus diversity. Using a mixed-methods approach, two studies investigated an “admissions experiment” designed to increase campus diversity by admitting 34 borderline applicants into a summer bridge program. Study 1 compared program participants’ performance to two comparison samples of regularly admitted students ($N = 912$). Compared with a matched sample, borderline students performed better after the first semester and comparably after the first year. Study 2 identified program components that helped or undermined participants’ college adjustment and performance. Results suggested several program improvements that might enhance underrepresented students’ performance and experiences on 4-year campuses.

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We studied way more, we're getting better grades than [our classmates], they're slacking off, they don't care. But, we're the ones that aren't supposed to be [at the best university in the state]. Like, that frustrated me...because I know that I should be here...I don't understand how they picked the kids that they did in that [admissions] process.

Jessica, Borderline Applicant & Bridge Program Participant, 2014

Could Jessica be correct? There is something critical at stake in her claim. She and 33 other in-state low-income or first-generation college students, 65% of whom are students of color, were on the “cusp” of qualifying for admission to a 4-year university but were ultimately denied. For students who fall just below the cutoff of admission to a 4-year program, what we call *borderline applicants*, diversion to a 2-year institution is a likely path (Breland, Maxey, Gemand, Cumming, & Trapani, 2002). If Jessica is right, drawing strict “admission cutoffs” could be complicating institutional efforts to increase diversity on 4-year campuses by increasing diversion to 2-year programs. Indeed, only a small number of students who begin at 2-year institutions (16.2%) complete a 4-year degree within 6 years (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014).

Two studies investigated this issue through a “natural admissions experiment” designed to increase campus diversity at a state university. The initiative admitted 34 borderline applicants, provided they participate in a summer and first-year support program, what we call the *University Scholars Program (USP)*. Study 1 compared demographic diversity, high school grades and test scores, and university performance of borderline applicants relative to two samples of regularly admitted students. Study 2 explored their first-semester experiences.

Admitting Diverse Students: Challenges and Solutions

Despite mixed findings on whether high school grades or test scores are most predictive of college performance (Atkinson, 2001; Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, Mattern, & Barbuti, 2008; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Noble & Sawyer, 2002; Zahner, Ramsaran, & Steedle, 2012), both components remain the most commonly used measures in college admission procedures (Breland et al., 2002). Yet, past work has highlighted the racial and income bias of standardized measures that disadvantage low-income and ethnic-minority students (Jencks & Phillips, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995). As such, relying on

these tools for admissions decisions potentially creates problems for campuses seeking to increase diversity. That is, students from more diverse backgrounds may disproportionately be labeled as “not prepared” for a 4-year college program.

Indeed, a disproportionate number of low-income, ethnic-minority, first-generation college—neither parent has graduated from a 4-year university—students begin at 2-year institutions (Choy, 2001; Hagedorn, 2008). Only 14% transfer to a 4-year university with 5% obtaining a bachelor’s degree within 6 years (Bradburn, Hurst, & Peng, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wine et al., 2002). In contrast, high-income and continuing-generation students—at least one parent has graduated college—who begin at 2-year institutions are five times more likely (24%) to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Low-income, first-generation college students are seven times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree if they start at 4-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wine et al., 2002).

Students who begin at 4-year institutions also encounter challenges. When compared with middle-class White students, low-income, first-generation, and ethnic-minority college students are less prepared academically for college (Bui, 2002), report lower belonging on campus (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007), and earn lower grades (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Across public and private institutions, these students also demonstrate higher attrition rates and lower educational attainment (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sirin, 2005; Wine et al., 2002). Approximately 60% of these students leave after their first year, a rate four times higher than their counterparts. Moreover, only 11% of these students obtained a bachelor’s degree after 6 years, whereas 55% of their counterparts did so.

In response to these disparities, summer bridge programs were created to make a difference in student retention. Specifically, 2- to 6-week summer bridge programs, such as the one used in the studies reported here, offer selected students the opportunity to adjust, both academically and socially, to the campus before the start of the academic year (Adams, 2012). Bridge programs vary considerably in what they offer, with a focus on course work, exposure to campus resources, leadership training, and social activities among other services. Reviewing the literature on the varying types of summer bridge programs is beyond the scope of this article; instead, we discuss a few selected articles that include similar components as the program reported on here.

In general, bridge programs appear to improve student retention and reports of campus belonging for samples of predominantly Latino and African American students (Ackermann, 1991; Rita & Bacote, 1997). Myers and Drevlow (1982) found similar positive effects on retention with underrespected students, with 20% of their sample being admitted to the university without meeting general admissions requirements. Specifically, compared with non-program participants, that is, those who chose not to or were unable to attend the program, bridge participants demonstrated the lowest attrition rates at the end

of the first 3 years in college. Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007) also targeted bridge participants—mostly from African American and Latino backgrounds—who were conditionally accepted to the university if they passed summer coursework and who were first-generation college students. In a pre- and posttest design, researchers found that participants experienced increases in peer support, but that no differences in resiliency were found, perhaps due to the high resiliency levels of the students before participation. No data on college GPA or retention rates were reported on these samples.

Available studies are helpful, but there are limitations. First, none utilized both quantitative and qualitative measures to explore bridge programs. We argue that a mixed-methods approach gives a holistic picture of the effects of such programs. Second, while the majority of the work on bridge programs focuses on underrepresented students already accepted to the university, very few (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Myers & Drevlow, 1982) focus on borderline applicants. In focusing on borderline applicants, we can closely examine how university admissions criteria may or may not exclude capable samples of diverse students by comparing their performance with two varying samples of admitted students.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the impact of the USP on the performance of students identified through the regular admissions process as not “prepared” for a university workload. The USP was designed to offer the preparation and support program administrators believed necessary for unprepared students to succeed in the university environment. To assess the relative performance of the Scholars, two comparison samples were constructed based on conventional admissions criteria, for example, high school grades and SAT/ACT scores. Sample 1 matched the USP Scholars on these conventional criteria, while Sample 2 represented students with slightly better criteria—higher test scores and high school grades—than the Scholars and Sample 1. It was expected that the Scholars and Sample 1 would perform at comparable levels, but that both would earn lower university grades than Sample 2.

Method

The USP Setting and Structure

The USP was operated during the 2014 to 2015 academic year at a mid-size state university (approximately 17,500 students) in the eastern United States. In Fall 2014, the racial breakdown of the undergraduate population was 75.7% White, 7.1% Hispanic, 5.1% Black, 4.4% Asian, 0.1% Native American, 3.9% International, and 3.7% Two or More Races or Unknown. The majority were

female (57.8%), and a small number of students were from first-generation college (9.7%) and low-income (7.7%) backgrounds.

As a result of discussions highlighting a need to increase campus diversity efforts, the USP was designed to assist an ethnically diverse group of in-state low-income or first-generation college students in their transition to the university. The program targeted students denied admission using standard criteria, but who were on the cusp of qualifying. Borderline applicants were further scrutinized for acceptance to the USP. Admission to the university and the USP was contingent on successfully completing a summer program focused on readiness for university life and academics. The summer component was a 2-week program that took place just prior to the Fall 2014 semester. The program included the following: (a) a one-credit first-year seminar, (2) 10 sessions of English and Math, for no credits, designed to help students prepare for the Fall semester, (c) a series of structured discussion designed to help students reflect on their personal goals and values, (d) orientation to campus resources, (e) social activities to promote peer connections, and (f) a closing ceremony for students and parents. During the semester, Scholars participated in the following: (a) a living-learning community in a residence hall, (b) a two-credit first-year seminar and a three-credit English course, and (c) one-on-one meetings with program staff to address individual needs.

Facilitating the USP was a diverse team of 17 Peer Mentors, the majority being students of color, and three Program Leaders, two of whom are people of color. Peer Mentors participated in a 1-week intensive training led by Program Leaders prior to the USP; they learned behaviors to model, messages to provide, and activities to conduct during the program. Program Leaders were two administrators from the admissions office and one administrator from a student support program. Program Leaders used a “tough love” approach believing blunt talk and strict supervision were essential to raising expectations and awareness. The 2-week summer orientation program was operated as a “college boot-camp” in which schedules were structured and supervised, with limited free time or access to family and friends.

Scholars Sample

Two Problem Leaders interviewed 34 in-state students for the USP. In addition to measures of high school GPA and core units completed, the interviews probed for non-cognitive criteria related to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, for example, coping with adversity, commitment to goals (Sedlacek, 2004). Program Leaders rated students on a scale from 1 (*negative rating*) to 3 (*extraordinary rating*) on each criterion and calculated a total score for each student ($M = 20.06$, $SD = 2.34$; range 16 to 24). A total of 19 students with ratings of 24 to 21 were marked for “automatic acceptance” into the program and 12 students with ratings of 20 to 17 were marked to be “waitlisted.” One student with a

rating of 16 was marked as “denied acceptance.” Two students did not have selection data. Because of low recruitment numbers, all 34 students were invited to participate. At the time of the summer program, all but three students were of consenting age (18 years old) to participate. Parental consent and assent to participate was obtained for the three minors. One invitee dropped out in the first few months of the first semester for financial reasons, and another was expelled from the university for personal reasons. The remaining 32 invitees (hereafter Scholars) constituted the sample for the study reported here (*Mean* age = 17.94, *SD* = .35). See Table 1 for relevant demographic data.

Comparative Samples

To assess the representativeness and relative performance of the Scholars to other non-program students at the university, we included two random samples of students generated by the admissions office. Similar to the Scholars, these samples of students were also residents of the state. Students were matched based on their final rankings—calculated from SAT/ACT scores and high school grades—recorded in their university admissions portfolio. This ranking, in addition to other ratings of application materials, for example, personal statement, letters of recommendation, and so forth, determined whether an applicant met admissions standards.

Sample 1 consisted of 130 undergraduate students (*Mean* age = 18.08, *SD* = .41). The final admissions rankings of Sample 1 (*Mean* ranking = 67.50, *SD* = 2.73; range = 55 to 70) matched the rankings of the Scholars (*Mean* ranking = 66.94, *SD* = 5.14; range = 55 to 70), $p > .40$. This range of scores is on the lower end of admissions qualifications. Despite having similar final rankings to the Scholars who were initially denied admission, we make the assumption that acceptance of the Sample 1 was determined by other components of the application packet.

Sample 2 included 782 undergraduate students (*Mean* age = 18.03, *SD* = .36). The final rankings for this group were higher (*Mean* ranking = 78.19, *SD* = 4.21; range = 71 to 85) than the rankings for Sample 1 ($p < .001$) and the Scholars ($p < .001$). We included Sample 2 in our analyses to provide another benchmark for interpreting the Scholars’ performance.

Demographic and Achievement Measures

For all three samples, university records provided demographic information, for example, age, gender, ethnicity, income status, college generation status, and high school achievement measures, including SAT scores and GPAs. Official university grades were obtained for each Scholar during the Fall 2014 semester, the Spring 2015 semester, and the academic year. Because of restricted access to student records, only aggregate grade information was available for Samples 1 and 2 for the Fall 2014, Spring 2015, and the academic year.

Findings and Discussion

Sample Comparisons

Compared with the other two samples and aligning with the goals of the program, Scholars included more females, non-White students, first-generation college students, and low-income students (see Table 1).

Independent samples t-tests indicated the samples differed on measures of prior achievement. In terms of high school grades, Sample 2 earned higher grades ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .33$) than both Sample 1 ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .25$, $p < .001$) and the Scholars ($M = 3.01$, $SD = .48$, $p < .001$). Sample 2 also scored better on the SAT ($M = 1675.98$, $SD = 150.46$) than both Sample 1 ($M = 1553.39$, $SD = 117.70$, $p < .001$) and the Scholars ($M = 1405.63$, $SD = 145.62$, $p < .001$).

Contrary to expectations, and despite being denied acceptance by the admissions process, the Scholars earned higher high school grades than Sample 1, $p < .01$. The opposite pattern was found for SAT scores: Sample 1 scored higher on the SAT than the Scholars, $p < .001$. Given grades and SAT scores constituted final admissions rankings, this suggests SAT scores trumped grades for determining the admission of students on the cusp of qualifying. That is, Sample 1 may have been accepted based on their higher SAT scores compared with the Scholars.

Table 1. Study I: Demographic Information for Scholars, Sample 1, and Sample 2.

	Scholars ($N = 32$)	Sample 1 ($N = 130$)	Sample 2 ($N = 782$)
Gender			
Male	11 (34%)	72 (55%)	378 (48%)
Female	21 (66%)	58 (45%)	404 (52%)
Ethnicity			
White	12 (38%)	87 (67%)	568 (73%)
Black	12 (38%)	23 (18%)	53 (7%)
Latino/Hispanic	3 (9%)	7 (5%)	20 (3%)
Asian	0 (0%)	8 (6%)	67 (8%)
Multiethnic	5 (15%)	5 (4%)	68 (8.6%)
Unknown/not reported	–	–	6 (<1%)
College generation status			
First-generation	10 (31%)	26 (20%)	188 (24%)
Continuing-generation	22 (69%)	88 (68%)	529 (68%)
Unknown	–	16 (12%)	65 (8%)
Income status			
Low-income	22 (69%)	13 (10%)	121 (15%)
High-income	10 (31%)	117 (90%)	661 (85%)

University Performance

First-year performance indicated the Scholars performed better than expected for students identified as “on the cusp of admissions.” In the Fall 2014 semester, the Scholars average GPA was 2.79 ($SD = .66$). Of the 32 scholars, 2 (6%) were placed on academic probation, 15 (47%) earned a GPA of 3.0 and above, and 8 students (25%) were named on the Dean’s List signifying outstanding academic achievement.

How did Scholars perform compared with Samples 1 and 2? Given only aggregate means and standard deviations were available for the two comparative samples, we calculated effect sizes, using Cohen’s benchmarks (1988), to determine how large the differences were in performance among the groups. During the Fall semester, the Scholars earned higher grades ($M = 2.79$, $SD = .66$) than Sample 1 ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .73$). This was a large effect ($d = .68$). Sample 2 also earned higher grades ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .82$) than Sample 1, a moderate effect ($d = .44$). Contrary to expectations, the Scholars earned slightly better grades compared with Sample 2, the group with higher admissions credentials; yet, this effect size was small ($d = .15$).

In the Spring semester, the Scholars earned slightly lower grades ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .99$) than Sample 1 ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .85$), although these differences were small ($d = .19$). As expected, Sample 2 earned higher grades ($M = 2.73$, $SD = .84$) than both the Scholars ($d = .57$) and Sample 1 ($d = .37$); these effect sizes were large to moderate. Finally, examination of performance for the academic year indicated that, again, Sample 2 had higher grades ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .66$) than the Scholars ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .68$, $d = .32$) and Sample 1 ($M = 2.45$, $SD = .57$, $d = .48$), which varied from moderate to large effect sizes. The Scholars earned slightly better grades than Sample 1, but this effect size was small ($d = .17$).

These performance patterns highlight two important issues. First, despite being “on the cusp of admission,” how does the relatively successful performance of the Scholars inform current university admission policies for underrepresented communities? What aspects of admission processes might help better predict performance for students besides high school grades and SAT scores? These were the main two components that figured in the final ranking calculation of the Scholars who were initially denied admission but whose overall first-year performance was slightly better compared with students for whom the admission process had led to acceptance. Second, given the relative success of the Scholars, what impact did the USP have on their experiences and performance at the university? We address this second question using the focus group interviews and use the results to critically discuss current admission policies.

Study 2

Using focus groups, Study 2 examined the experiences of the USP Scholars in their first semester at the university. We explored what components of the USP helped facilitate or undermined performance and belonging on campus.

Study 2 addressed the following question: What perceptions did the Scholars have regarding their first semester in college and the role that the program played in preparing them for a learning challenge they were determined “unprepared to meet” by the admissions process?

Method

Sample

All 32 Scholars from Study 1 were invited to participate in focus group interviews. Scholars were told the purpose of the interviews was to “assess the effectiveness of the program by inquiring more about the experiences of the participants.” Of the 32 Scholars, 29 students participated. Scheduling conflicts prevented participation of three Scholars. Consent forms were provided during a class announcement and, again, at each interview. All Scholars were of consenting age (18 years or older), and all consented to participate.

Procedure

Eight focus group interviews (3–5 students each) were conducted during finals week of the Fall 2014 semester. The interviews followed a semi-structured format centered around two major themes: (a) detailing first-semester experiences, including highlights and challenges, and (b) discussing the impact of the program in shaping first-semester experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length. Students were invited to speak freely and confidentially, and to talk among themselves if they wished.

Coding Scheme Development

Two authors independently read one randomly selected interview transcript and identified prevalent themes. The review also identified recurring topics raised by Scholars during the interviews. For example, the interview protocol did not address racial problems, yet in several of the seven interview sessions, multiple Scholars offered detailed accounts of race-related incidents. The two authors reviewed the themes they identified and arrived at a common set of coding categories. Categories were dropped or merged together if they had low occurrence. The final coding scheme included 13 categories organized by four larger themes. See Table 2 for category labels, descriptions, and examples of the coding categories.

Coding Procedure

The same authors independently coded three transcripts, which were used to develop the coding categories. A code of “1” was applied if a category was

Table 2. Study 2: Coding Scheme Categories.

Category	Examples
<i>First semester experiences (Students' experiences in the first semester of college)</i>	
Academic issues	"I have to study more in college than I did in high school"
Positive transition	"College is giving me more freedom;" "I got good grades"
Difficult transition	"I did not do so well in my classes"
Family issues	"My family doesn't understand how demanding school is"
<i>Being at the university (Students' experiences with university belonging and preparation)</i>	
Identification with college	"I feel comfortable at the university"
Surprise admission	"I was not expecting to attend this university"
University peer connections	"Other students have similar values as mine"
College preparation	"I took challenging courses in high school"
<i>Program scholar connections (Students' connections with other scholars in the program)</i>	
Frustrations	"Other scholars don't take the program seriously"
Positive experiences	"The scholars are a good source of social support"
<i>Evaluating the program (Students' evaluations of the effectiveness of the program)</i>	
Benefits	"The program introduced me to helpful resources"
Criticisms	"The program was too structured and strict"
Program leaders	"The program leaders were my role models"

present in the interview, and a code of "0" was applied if a category was absent. Agreement between the two coders ranged from 71% to 100% on the larger categories, and 50% to 100% on detailed codes (overall *Mean* agreement = 87.25%). After calculating the reliabilities and determining coder reliability, the coders resolved all coding discrepancies. After reaching an agreement about the coding, one author coded the remaining four interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Frequencies of themes (see Table 3) discussed during the focus group interviews were calculated and are presented as "Lessons Learned" from the USP pilot program.

Evaluating the Program: Lessons Learned

Advantages of exposure to academic and social resources. A total of 21 students (72%) mentioned the importance of early exposure to campus resources. One White female student explained the critical role the USP played in her accessing

Table 3. Study 2: Frequencies of Themes and Categories From Group Interviews.

Category	Number of examples (%)
Evaluating the program	N = 318
Criticisms	47% (n = 148)
Benefits	43% (n = 136)
Program leaders	11% (n = 34)
First-semester experiences	N = 186
Positive transition	41% (n = 76)
Academic issues	24% (n = 45)
Difficult transition	23% (n = 42)
Family issues	12% (n = 23)
Being at the university	N = 80
Identification with college	53% (n = 42)
Peer connections with university students	26% (n = 21)
Surprise at being admitted	11% (n = 9)
Academic preparation for college	10% (n = 8)
Program scholar connections	N = 41
Frustrating experiences	63% (n = 26)
Positive experiences	37% (n = 15)

resources that she would not have otherwise enjoyed:

They opened us up to a lot of resources. Like, I probably wouldn't have even known where to find out about things... So, if it wasn't for this [program], I don't think that I would've been as successful as I have been.

Other students, like a Black female student, discussed the advantage that the exposure gave them over other non-program students. She commented: "We were given information that helped us; and, sometimes people who were regularly admitted don't even have access to such information and must work harder to get that information." For a Latino male, the advantage was obvious when he noticed classmates struggling in the classroom: "A lot of people outside of the program... definitely had a much harder time because they didn't know about the resources on campus..."

Based on these advantages, students also assumed the responsibility of helping other students. For example, a White female described using her knowledge to help a fellow classmate:

I went to seek resources... like the math center and this girl was really confused because she didn't know where to go for this specific number. I had the whole list

on my phone, like contacts that you can't get easily. I wouldn't have been able to do that if it weren't for the [USP]. It made me informed of all my resources. I know lots of people . . . that wish to be in the program because we have all these study plans, we know where everything is, and we have contacts with people who can help.

A similar experience occurred for a Black female who observed a girl in her math class confused about the process of financial aid:

[When this girl] dropped two of her classes she placed herself below the mandatory credit requirements. This is when I explained to her that we learned how to deal with these issues at financial aid services. So, there are definitely a lot of resources that we learned about that a lot of people here have not.

Exposure to resources extended to social relationships with older students, including exposure to the diverse experiences of the Peer Mentors and Program Leaders. Specifically, 16 Scholars (55%) explained how the Peer Mentors or the Program Leaders became an important academic and social resource. In general, there was strong agreement among Scholars that early exposure to campus resources provided advantages over other students, including being better equipped to deal with common problems that occurred for students.

Over-preparation lessens the college workload shock. Another commonly mentioned program benefit was that it lessened the shock of the semester course load. For example, 22 of the Scholars (76%) described how the strict summer structure, particularly long days and scheduled study hours, fostered high expectations for the regular semester. Students were surprised at how "easy" the workload seemed during the semester. One White female reported program strictness was "annoying," but something that benefited her:

[The Program Leaders] made it seem like it was going to be twenty-four, seven studying. So, it wasn't such a shock when school actually started. [It] was kind of annoying at the time because we didn't understand what it was doing for us. Now, looking back, I'm grateful for the experience.

A Black male supported the idea that the program prepared you to do well at the university: "The program does more than simply bringing you on campus, they increase your readiness to excel by showing you how to be on top of things." A White female credited the program to changing her studying behaviors:

We studied like non-stop and, at first, that kind of scared me because I thought [college] was even harder than I originally thought . . . So, then, when college

came... I would go directly after class and read all day. But, I like how they disciplined us before we came.

Students related this high expectation to their positive performance in the semester. One White female simultaneously expressed surprise and concern at the ease of the semester:

[D]uring the scholars program I felt like it was like “go-go-go!” and do your work. It’s like no down time... I was so scared coming here because I thought that it was going to be so hard... I told a Peer Mentor that I was so nervous for next semester because this semester was so easy. I got really good grades, or at least good grades for me, because the grades I have right now when compared to my high school grades are amazing... How is this really so easy for me right now?

While the Scholars may have felt overwhelmed and annoyed by the strict scheduling and excessive workload, these components “over-prepared” them for the relatively “less demanding” workload during the regular semester.

“Tough love” messaging provokes mixed reactions. One major topic addressed in all interviews was the messaging used during the summer. A “tough love” approach was used to encourage Scholars to work hard. Scholars were told that because they were not accepted into the university, using standard admissions criteria, they would need to work especially hard to “prove that they belonged.” While this message was delivered to all students with the best intentions, and coupled with more positive messaging of belonging, it provoked mixed reactions.

For example, 24 Scholars (83%) expressed strong dislike or frustration with the messaging. Specifically, Scholars felt, as one group of two Latinas and two Black females agreed, that the messaging sparked feelings of rejection: “I can still remember how I felt about [the message]. It made me feel rejected from the rest of the community.” One White female highlighted some of the lingering insecurities associated with the message:

“I feel like [the message], ‘You don’t deserve to be here,’ kind of like stuck with me and I really don’t deserve to be here and that I still deserve to be in high school. But, if they were more motivating and kept saying... you deserve to be here... I would feel more like a college student.

Another White female described similar lingering effects and feelings of rejection,

I actually feel like crap about myself right now. That kind of thing sticks with me and I think about it a lot. I walk around on campus and see people that are

completely belligerent, or like you think you work so hard but you don't deserve to be here but they do.

One Latina supported this sentiment,

[The messaging] was kind of like breaking us down and trying to build us up, but they belittled us . . . and this was an issue, too, because it was a constant reminder that made me feel as if "I'm really not supposed to be here."

Some Scholars explained the reason for disliking and rejecting the messaging was, in part, because it did not apply to them. They believed that they worked hard in high school and deserved regular admission to the university, especially when they witnessed the lack of effort among regularly admitted, non-program classmates. One White female, for example, explained:

We studied way more, we're getting better grades than [our classmates], they're slacking off, they don't care. But, we're the ones that aren't supposed to be here. Like, that frustrated me to know that because I know that I should be here definitely. I should've been first picked because all the stuff that I was in. Like, I did a lot of volunteering hours and I did everything that [the university] required . . . and that wasn't good enough. So, for them to sit there and yell at my face, "You're not supposed to be here," is just beyond frustrating. I don't understand how they picked the kids that they did in that [admissions] process.

One consequence of delivering negative messaging was its impact on Scholars' desires to be affiliated with the program. As one White male stated, "Unfortunately, some people don't like admitting that they are [USP] scholars." Another White female in the same group added, "Students feel disappointed in it." One Black female elaborated on these arguments:

It was embarrassing to say, 'I'm a [USP] Scholar.' . . . [Y]ou have to go into a whole explanation about what [USP] scholars is . . . and you have to be like, "I wasn't regularly admitted [and] I had to go through a two-week program to prove that I could be here."

Although the majority of the Scholars disliked or disagreed with the summer messaging, six Scholars (21%) found the messaging motivating. When reflecting on the messaging, one Black male indicated,

I didn't really find it discouraging, but more motivating . . . I thought okay we were specially admitted, so that's a challenge. If [the Program Leader] really wanted to discourage us, he wouldn't even have the program in the first place. He wouldn't have wasted his time on us.

Another White male shared this perspective,

I think [the message] made some people want to fight to be here . . . So, in this aspect it was motivating. It was kind of like “I want to prove you wrong and throw it in your face.”

For another Black male, the message motivated him to do well in college in order to be a better role model for his younger sister and others in his community,

I think of all the kids in my neighborhood who don’t have fathers and a lot of opportunities that other people have. Every time that they bring up that we are the first group that can pave the way, um, I just use that as motivation for me to do better.

While the messaging seemed to motivate a few of the male Scholars, the majority of female Scholars disagreed with the messaging—suggesting that perhaps the “tough love” approach is more effective for males. One White female supported this argument,

Well, I think that the “you don’t deserve to be here” tactic works for guys; and, I understand that with coaching. You tear guys down and, then, guys want to prove themselves and build themselves up. But, a girl does not.

Yet, there were two White females in two separate interview groups who agreed with the male Scholars. For example, one White female said, “I feel that it wasn’t negative at all; [the Program Leader] just wanted to get our attention to make sure that we would take it seriously and to work our hardest.” These two female Scholars were the only female in otherwise all-male focus groups. It is possible that the male members of the group, those who found the messaging more acceptable, influenced the perceptions or reports of these female Scholars.

First Semester Experience: Lessons Learned

Gaining independence as a highlight. Given the Scholars came from first-generation or low-income backgrounds, prior research suggests they likely come from homes that are more interdependent (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012) and may be experiencing independence for the first time (Lubrano, 2003). Indeed, 14 Scholars (48%) mentioned college was making them more independent or mature. One White female mentioned, “Um, the highlight would be having more independence, doing a lot more on my own, and seeing a positive result of that.” Another White female commented others

in her family recognized this transition to independence,

In my family, I was always looked at as ‘the little baby.’ I feel like everyone is finally understanding that I’m maturing and college has helped me do that . . . [I]t gives me responsibility but at the same time freedom.

For other students, however, developing independence was fraught with challenges. Eight Scholars (28%) mentioned difficulty with family misunderstandings. One White female stated her mother did not understand the workload at the university, “I don’t think that my mom understands why I’m on campus at very late times . . . She didn’t go to college, and she doesn’t realize how difficult it really is.” One Black male explained a similar challenge:

Life at home versus life at [school] is like living in two different worlds . . . Like, you could ask my mom about the major that I’ve declared at [University] and she wouldn’t have any clue; and, it’s not that she doesn’t want to help, but more of a situation where . . . she doesn’t know how to help. [T]he USP was a good experience in that although I didn’t have my mom here to help me I could rely on other people for help.

For this student, the program was able to offer the additional support that he could not necessarily find at home.

Adjusting to a different workload. One challenge that 24 Scholars (83%) reported was encountering differences in work and study expectations required in high school and in college. For example, one Black female explained how her high school failed to prepare her for college,

For me, getting fresh out of high school and coming to [University] would have been a complete disaster. There were days and practically months where I wouldn’t have homework . . . High school was more about passing than actually learning . . .

When asked if her high school let her down, she responded with, “Yes, definitely!” In general, the first semester was a positive experience for Scholars, but they still encountered challenges related to differences within the university, home, and high school environments.

Being at the University: Lessons Learned

Discussions about race. One theme expressed during interviews was being a person of color on a predominantly White campus. The racial composition of our groups included: two all-White groups, four mixed-race groups, and two all-minority groups. Perhaps not so surprisingly, only the groups with all students

of color (seven Scholars total, 24%, five Black, two Latina) discussed issues of race; thus, it was difficult to know how students of color in the mixed-race groups felt about this issue. Of the seven Scholars in the all-minority groups, only two Black females attended a predominantly White high school (64% and 65.1% White). The remaining five Scholars attended schools that ranged from 23.5% to 42.3% White.

While the majority of Scholars ($n = 24$, 83%) reported feeling happy or proud for being at the university, for students of color, this excitement was also coupled with realizations that the campus lacked racial diversity. One Black female, who came from a more diverse high school (42.3% White, 36% Black, 14.7% Latino) described:

[This] was my first choice school, so I'm happy that I'm here. But, I also didn't know what I was getting myself into . . . I wasn't aware that the population only had 4.9% African-American students. It was just weird not seeing anyone that looked like me.

Another Black female, who came from a majority Black high school (56.7%), expressed a similar conflict in looking different from others,

[W]hen I first came here I was like wow . . . That's one of the reasons I don't eat at the dining halls. I'm like where am I going to sit? Everyone else looks alike and I'm like, I'm different. I don't eat at the dining halls because there are no African Americans.

One Black female explained that diversity issues discussed in the USP's summer component were those related to stressors arising from income disparities on campus. She added that there was not a thorough discussion about racial diversity,

They leaped over the fact that there was a lack of [racial] diversity . . . and that to me was disturbing. I didn't realize how many White people there were . . . I feel that we should have been told that, so we could deal with that in the Scholars Program.

Despite the shock of a predominantly White campus, these Scholars, as this Black female indicated, found support in a cultural center on campus, "I found out about resources . . . If there are any problems, I know that there are people that I can go to."

Issues of race were also encountered in daily experiences of awkward student interactions, micro-aggressions, and racism. One Latina explained her perceptions about other students on campus,

I feel like [the students] are very judgmental and they don't try to talk to you if you don't look, act, talk, or are from the same place as they are . . . I think it's more for

minorities. Minorities still get no chance...[W]e will all know each other, yet nobody else at the university will know us...

One Black female described how awkward student interactions led to conversations about her fit at the university,

I would just feel that everyone is not accepting of the African American students. Some students would even say things like, "Oh, you must be here because of a minority scholarship." It's just disrespectful for one; and, two, you don't think I would be here unless I was a minority.

Another Black female discussed the experience of hearing racial slurs from other classmates and the stress it caused her:

Scholar: I feel like, um, [when] people look at me at this university... they're either shocked that I'm here or wondering why and how I got here...

Interviewer: How do they communicate that to you?

Scholar: Um, well, I have personally experienced racist remarks at this university. Um, just like people saying the 'N' word around me or asking me why they can't say the 'N' word around me. I ask them not to say it because it's kind of like disrespectful... and I'm questioned all the time like, 'Why can't I say the 'N' word?'

Interviewer: Do you feel attacked sometimes?

Scholar: Yes! It's just like why are you asking me why I feel disrespected by the 'N' word... why can't you just know that I feel disrespected and you just stop doing it...

One unexpected finding, given the goals of the USP, was racial micro-aggressions committed by fellow Scholars. Two Black females mentioned such experiences. For example, one was not only hurt by a comment made by a White male Scholar but also wondered how other White students felt about minorities:

[A White male] told me, 'Oh, you're here on a minority scholarship...'. He didn't know anything about my financial aid package, but he assumed that I was here because I'm Black, poor, or the school needed me to be here. That made me feel horrible and I was extremely offended. If he was someone who was close to me and had been with me in the Scholars Program for the two weeks... what did he think about all the other Black people on campus? If he felt comfortable enough to say that to me, then how do other White people feel who come from an even more privileged background than him? It hurt.

The other Black female described how she wanted more discussion about race in the program, so that there could be more understanding among the Scholars:

I know part of [the] curriculum was to deal with coping with racism, but I feel like it was never addressed seriously and I was never asked for my opinion on how I felt to be here as a minority . . . It was expressed to me by a White person in the Scholars program that they felt like they were the minority in the [USP] and that they had never been around so many minorities . . . they were kind of shocked. They were like, “Wow, there’s a lot of people who are not White right here” and I was like, “Well, that’s how it feels to be me all the time.” They couldn’t even fathom it.

The unique experiences of Scholars of color highlighted a need for the USP to discuss issues of race more extensively. These conversations might have better prepared students for the racial demographic of the campus and negative race-related encounters they experienced.

Program Scholar Connections: Lessons Learned

Frustrating and helpful program connections. In general, 15 Scholars reported frustrating experiences (26 examples) and 9 Scholars reported positive experiences (15 examples) with the USP cohort. More specifically, of the 15 Scholars who reported frustrating experiences, 14 felt disconnected from other scholars. One reason was because they believed other Scholars took advantage or did not take the program seriously. One White female said,

. . .being with the [USP] Scholars is frustrating . . . because some of them don’t study. And, it’s really frustrating to me that they ask for my notes . . . when they don’t show up to class.

The remaining Scholars felt connected to the cohort, and identified members as a source of support. One Black male, for example, explained: “[T]hroughout the semester I always had to come back to a Scholar or someone who was involved in the program and that basically helped me get through everything else.” In general, there was strong agreement among the Scholars that the connections made with the Leaders, Peer Mentors, and Scholars benefited them. Scholars were grateful for the exposure to these social resources before beginning their coursework on campus.

Concluding Discussion

The “admissions experiment” results suggested that it might be possible to increase campus diversity by contingently admitting an ethnically diverse sample of low-income or first-generation college borderline applicants.

Specifically, Study 1 concluded that, compared with a sample with matched admissions criteria, the Scholars earned higher grades after the first semester and slightly better grades after the first year in college. Using focus group interviews, Study 2 examined the experiences of borderline applicants in the USP and at the university. We found that particular program components helped the Scholars in their transition to the university, including prematriculation exposure to campus resources and a highly structured bridge program which lessened the shock of a college workload. The interviews also highlighted two major program shortcomings. First, the bridge program did not fully address the challenge of being a minority on a predominantly White campus, leaving Scholars unprepared to deal with issues of race and racism on campus and within the program (Watanabe & Song, 2015; Wing Sue, 2010). Second, the “tough love” program messaging, overall, was ineffective and even counterproductive.

There is a caveat to this second finding, however. Through a follow-up conversation, a Program Leader clarified that positive messages of belonging and encouragement were reiterated and strongly reinforced throughout the summer program. Why, then, would the Scholars be more likely to recall negative versus positive feedback after a semester in college? While we do not directly test this question in the present study, past work provides some insight. Recent work by Forbes, Duran, Leitner, and Magerman (2015; see also Forbes & Leitner, 2014) suggests that a stressful context can influence what information negatively stigmatized students remember. Specifically, when put in a stressful situation, stigmatized students, for example, women in math domains, pay more attention to negative information and, in recall tasks, recall negative information better than positive information.

These findings have implications for the USP and possibly other bridge programs. When participating in a stressful summer program, the Scholars, who are stigmatized as “back-door admits,” remembered more negative than positive messaging when asked to recall this information a few months later in a group interview. Thus, while the program messaging was indeed balanced, the larger stressful context of the program coupled with the stigma of being a “backdoor admit” could have created a “perfect storm” for remembering and recalling more negative versus positive messaging. Future work should examine under what conditions—when, how, how often, and by whom—should “tough love” messages be conveyed, particularly if programs simultaneously aim to prepare underrepresented students for the potential harsh realities of the university context and to encourage them in the transition process.

Together, the present studies contribute to existing literature on the effects of bridge programs in two important ways. First, we examine a unique subset of students who were originally denied acceptance into the university but were given a “second chance.” To our knowledge, this sample is understudied (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Myers & Drevlow, 1982). Second, we utilize quantitative and qualitative measures to examine student performance and

experiences, and to identify program components that helped and undermined student progress. There are some limitations to our findings, however. First, our study focuses on one bridge program, making it difficult to generalize its application to other institutions (Kezar, 2000). Yet, many benefits and challenges Scholars described have been supported by past work, for example, campus resources, structured scheduling, limited diversity. Second, we used a non-random, “natural admissions experiment” to compare the Scholars’ performance with two other samples. Future work should include a randomized clinical trial to augment the evidence base and should deploy a mixed-method approach. As in the present study, first-person accounts provide valuable interpretive insight into the meaning and implications of statistical results.

Given the academic performance patterns of our sample, perhaps there is some credibility in Jessica’s opening claim that some borderline applicants “study more” and “get better grades” than peers meeting standard admissions criteria. Perhaps for some Scholars, the “tough love” messaging was challenging because they showed resilience by being the first in their families to attend college and by prevailing despite attending low performing high schools. For example, the 24 Scholars who rejected negative messaging came from high schools with an average mean SAT score of 1,310 (range = 1,198 to 1,615; median = 1,287) in the academic year 2011 to 2012, which was lower than the national average of 1,498 (State of Delaware, 2016). Using non-cognitive criteria (Sedlacek, 2004) to identify the Scholars for the USP may have tapped into markers of educational resiliency—students who succeed despite various economic, cultural, and social barriers (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004)—that may be a better predictor of performance. As such, this observation and our findings, in general, suggest that admissions practices that draw “red lines” might be unintentionally ruling out an effective way to promote diversity on 4-year campuses. Instead, these policies might benefit from targeting diverse (and resilient) students who, as Jessica put it, “should’ve been first picked” provided they are supported by university programs designed to target the barriers that thwart educational opportunities for students.

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