

Developmental Summer Bridge Programs

Tags: Accelerated Learning, Basic Skills, Developmental/Remedial Education, Student Services, Time to Degree

Description of strategy

Developmental summer bridge programs are designed to help new college students prepare for the rigor of the college experience, both academically and socially. Many students come to college academically underprepared and without an understanding of how the system works and what resources are available, not to mention without ties to the university staff and culture. By providing a supported, intensive environment, developmental summer bridge programs allow students to work through their developmental coursework with built-in academic assistance, thus giving them the opportunity to start at a higher level in the targeted course sequence in their first semester. In addition, the fact that the program takes place on a college campus and includes an intentional “college knowledge” component allows students to develop a level of comfort in a college setting that they might not have otherwise had in their first semester. Thus, the theory of change suggests that students who enroll in such a program will be more likely to enroll in college, shorten or avoid time spent in developmental coursework, persist from semester to semester, and eventually achieve their academic goals.

In 2009, eight summer bridge programs in Texas participated in a rigorous evaluation conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR), in cooperation with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The programs at the eight colleges varied in the subjects and developmental levels covered, but all were intensive four-to-five week programs with the goal of helping students advance in their developmental course sequences before beginning college in the fall. The students in the evaluation were mostly between the ages of 18 and 20 and were predominantly (84.3%) Hispanic, which reflected the student population at the colleges in the study. The majority were recent high school graduates who were recruited for the program at the end of their senior year after being identified as needing developmental education courses based on their performance on college placement assessments. However, as students who were willing to spend their summer in the program, they were highly motivated to reach their academic goals.

The developmental summer bridge programs in Texas had four main components: accelerated instruction in developmental education, additional academic support, “college knowledge,” and a monetary stipend of up to \$400 for participation in and completion of the program.

The accelerated instruction element took two distinct forms across the eight programs: four colleges followed a course-based model and four were free-standing. In the course-based classes, instructors used curricula from established developmental education courses at the colleges and condensed them for the accelerated summer program. Students who passed the summer bridge course earned developmental credits for that course and could register for the next course in the sequence in the subsequent fall semester. In the free-standing model, the instructors and program coordinators created the curriculum for each summer bridge, which often included multiple developmental levels. The ultimate goal of these classes was to prepare

students to pass the Compass or Accuplacer placement exams, so that they would place further along in the developmental sequence than they otherwise would have.

The academic support and college knowledge components varied across the colleges and were delivered both formally and informally. Approaches to academic support included structured tutoring, peer mentoring, access to learning labs, and enhanced advising. The college knowledge component was formally delivered through weekly presentations or condensed student success courses, often taught by advisors or mentors. In addition, college knowledge was transmitted through less formal means such as classroom lectures, tutoring sessions, and hallway conversations.

The stipend was included as an incentive for students, as well as a way to offset the loss of earnings they may have received from a summer job. Students typically were given \$150 at the beginning of the program, and they could earn another \$250 upon successful completion of the program. According to feedback from students and staff, the stipend was a powerful recruitment tool and motivator for students to successfully complete the program.

Cost

Based on a cost analysis conducted by NCPR, the average per-student cost of these programs was approximately \$1300. However, this figure varied widely by program, from \$835 to as much as \$2349 per student. This total cost includes the \$400 student stipend as well as some startup costs that might not be necessary in subsequent years of the program. The majority of the program costs went toward staff salaries and student stipends, while other costs such as facilities, learning resources, and overhead made up the remainder. NCPR used this per-student cost to perform a cost-effectiveness analysis and estimated that program group students would need to earn 3.8 more college-level credits than the control group for the program to “break even” as measured by the ability to provide program students with additional college credits at the typical cost to the college. However, this analysis does not take into account other possible benefits of the program beyond credit accumulation.

Evaluation findings

NCPR evaluated the Texas Summer Bridge program using a random assignment design. Students who expressed interest in the program were randomly assigned either to a program group, where they had the opportunity to enroll in the summer bridge program at their college, or a control group, where they were offered the college’s usual classes and services but could not enroll in the summer bridge program. Random assignment ensured that students in both the program and control groups were similar in terms of observable characteristics like age, gender, or race, as well as harder-to-observe characteristics like academic experiences before college or personal motivation. By following both groups and comparing their outcomes, the evaluation provides strong evidence of the “value added” or *impact* of the developmental summer bridge programs on student achievement.

NCPR tracked students’ enrollment in college, progress through the targeted developmental education sequence, and overall credit accumulation. In the first semester after program participation, program group students were 5.9 percentage points more likely to have passed college-level math and 4.1 percentage points more likely to have passed college-level

writing than their control group counterparts, findings that were statistically significant. However, after two years of follow-up, the differences between the two groups were smaller and no longer statistically significant. Other key findings of this study are that, by the end of the two-year follow-up, the program did not affect persistence or credit accumulation, and there was no statistically significant impact on passing college reading.

Implementation challenges

The summer bridge programs at the colleges were mostly implemented with fidelity to the model. However, there were some challenges that occurred during the course of the evaluation. First, recruiting students for the program proved to be a bigger challenge than anticipated. Colleges' target numbers were much larger than they had been in the past, in order to enroll enough students for both program and control groups for the study. Outreach was conducted primarily at local high schools, and the college staff found that recruitment was much smoother when strong partnerships were developed between the institutions. Reaching out through high school counselors proved to be particularly effective, and the colleges developed promising recruitment strategies moving forward.

Another challenge occurred mostly in the free-standing summer bridge programs, where the students were mixed-level and the curriculum was flexible. This model offered instructors the opportunity to be innovative with their content and delivery methods, but faculty occasionally found it was difficult to teach mixed level students without added guidance or support.

Essential factors

Due to the research design, it is difficult to tease out which components of the program were essential to improving student success, and which were less important. The random assignment design tests the program as an entire package and the researchers cannot determine which pieces had the greatest effect. However, the program as a whole did help students initially progress into and through college-level math and writing courses.

Areas for improvement

There were some aspects of the Texas Developmental Summer Bridge program that could be improved in future iterations. First, although the theory of change states that students who take part in a summer bridge program will be more likely to enroll in college, there was no impact on enrollment for the program group in this evaluation. Both the program group and the control group had fairly high enrollment rates, which indicate that these students were highly motivated and likely to enroll regardless of participation in the program. In order to have an effect on college enrollments, future summer bridge programs might try to reach out to a broader group of students. For instance, it's possible that students who are undecided about pursuing a college education would be more likely to enroll after participating in a summer bridge program. However, because the students in this evaluation were largely college-bound and highly motivated, it's unknown whether the program would be as beneficial for students without that level of motivation.

Suggestions for replication

The developmental summer bridge programs evaluated in Texas are quite replicable and may have the potential to operate at scale (although funding may be a challenge). Because

summer bridges can be developed to fit into the developmental education sequence at any individual college, they can be customized to work within state, district, and college-wide requirements, or tailored to a given college's available resources.

For more information, see

Barnett, Elisabeth A., Rachel Hare Bork, Alexander K. Mayer, Joshua Pretlow, Heather D. Wathington, and Madeline Joy Weiss, with Evan Weissman, Jedediah Teres, and Matthew Zeidenberg. 2012. *Bridging the Gap: An Impact Study of Eight Developmental Summer Bridge Programs in Texas*. New York: NCPR.

Wathington, Heather D., Elisabeth A. Barnett, Evan Weissman, Jedediah Teres, Joshua Pretlow, and Aki Nakanishi. 2011. *Getting Ready for College: An Implementation and Early Impacts Study of Eight Texas Developmental Summer Bridge Programs*. New York: NCPR.

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