

CASE
STUDY

How Summer Programs Aid Persistence and Retention

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A key goal of the Berea College summer bridge program is creating a sense of belonging. Here participants pose for a group photo in July 2022.

O

ne recent semester, a University of Mississippi student carried his laptop in the rain. Water damaged it beyond repair. The student didn't tell anyone, tried to do all his homework on his phone, and fell behind in his studies.

A university counselor had a stack of reconditioned laptops in his office for students who needed one, and if the student had asked, he could have immediately gotten a replacement laptop.

“What I’ve seen is that the students who aren’t successful in college — especially students of color, especially low-income students — often need help that is not necessarily related to their economic status,” says E. Gray Flora IV, director of the university’s Grove Scholars program for low-income students who are pursuing a STEM degree or a health-related profession. “They just don’t realize they can ask for it.”

What might have tipped the student into asking for help, Flora believes, would be participation in a summer bridge program. Then, he thinks, the student would have had the relationships to make him feel comfortable opening up about his obstacles and asking for help.

Summer programs are being strengthened at some universities, in part due to the realization that the height of the Covid-19 pandemic weakened many students' preparation for college, especially students of color and low-income students.

Summers are seen as a key time when student-success offices can improve incoming students' skills and help rising sophomores overcome hurdles, such as failed or incomplete courses.

"For all students, we know that the summer component is really critical," says Kimberly Jones, executive vice president at the Council for Opportunity in Education, a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding college opportunities. "But even more so for our lower-income, first-generation students, because they are fighting a lot of different battles on their way to college." Those students often need to learn some college basics, she says. What is a syllabus? What are office hours?

The most common form of summer programs to promote student success — bridge programs between the last year of high school and the first year of college — appear to date to the late 1960s. Some colleges use customized placement tests or, if students have them, SAT or ACT scores to determine what academic preparation they need most.

The summer programs vary from a week to six weeks. Some are invitation

only, while students must apply to get into others. Berea College, in Kentucky, holds a lottery for interested students.

CONNECTING STUDENTS EARLY TO SERVICES

One of the oldest summer bridge programs in the country is at the University of Arizona. About 350 students out of a first-year class of 6,000 in-person students enroll in the university's New Start program. New Start targets first-generation, Pell Grant-eligible students who take a mathematics, English, or anthropology course that will

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count toward general-education degree requirements. Counselors try to make sure that prospective science and engineering majors will be fully prepared for their math courses, particularly calculus.

All New Start students take a course focused on strategies for being a successful student. The required portion of course-work ends at 12:15 p.m. every day, leaving students free to work at part-time jobs or

stay on campus for extracurricular activities, with themes that can involve personal health, cross-cultural communication, or social or presentation skills.

The students can start tapping into university services while the campus is quiet, says W. Patrick Bryan, associate director for mentoring and the New Start program. Students can meet tutors at Think Tank, the university tutoring service, get to know librarians, or visit the writing center. All bridge students attend the same two-and-a-quarter-hour lecture on Fridays, and meet with a peer mentor once a week. Peer mentors are vital, says Bryan: “It’s really important that they’re connected to people who are further along than they are but were in their shoes only a year or two before.”

The New Start program concludes with a two-day academic conference. Administrators try to make sure the event has professional features, with a unifying theme, keynote speakers, and time limits on presentations. Except for the keynotes and lunch speakers, students make all of the presentations. Students also select the top presenters, who win scholarships.

“This is not necessarily something the students would choose to do, but I think they definitely see the value of it when they do it,” says Bryan.

The New Start program measures its success by the proportion of students



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U. OF ARIZONA

who return for a second year. New Start students return at a rate about 6 to 10 percent higher than peers who didn’t participate.

PROVIDING AN ON-RAMP

Berea College is famous for its “[no tuition](#)” pledge and its work requirement of 10 to 15 hours a week for students. The median student-loan debt for 2018-19 graduates was [\\$305](#).

The college also has generous summer support. Any student can apply to join Berea Bridge, a four-week free program to ease students’ transition into the academic and social aspects of college life. “One of the things we assess for at the end of the program,” says Chris Lakes, director of the Office of Student Success and Transition, is “Have we created a sense of belonging?” The answer is overwhelmingly yes, he says.

The program uses a lottery to fill the 60 available slots from the 140 or so students who apply each year. A typical first-year class has about 400 students. Berea has tried to expand the summer program but found that it didn't work well in the larger size.

The students take a quantitative-oriented class, such as physics, and a humanities-oriented class that involves writing. They have at least two hours of homework a night, attend a required study hall, where teaching assistants are present, and work six hours a week. "We try to show them in this micro environment that this is what college is going to look like," Lakes says. The best way to help students in the summer, he says, is to challenge them a lot and support them a lot. In a decade of assessments, he says, all students have said the program helped prepare them for the rigors of college.

Lakes says he succeeds in convincing students they can seek out help: "I have students who come to my office, I think solely because they met me in Bridge. When something goes wrong, they know 'I have people I can ask.'"

The importance of human connections is confirmed by counselors at other institutions. At the University of Mississippi, Jacqueline A. Vinson is the program manager for a summer-bridge program for students from underrepresented groups interested in STEM-related majors. She says she encourages students to get to know their professors, not just to ask for help. A conversation with the professors about how they got to where they are, and how the students can follow in their footsteps, can motivate the students, she says, and break the ice with professors who seem intimidating.

Berea also runs an eight-week Summer Success program for about 15 students



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEREA COLLEGE

Berea College summer students take part in a printing class in 2022.

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who are between their first and second year and are struggling academically — typically with a grade-point average of 1.5 to 2.25. They take two regular courses and a “Strategies for Academic Success” course. Berea tries to distinguish between helping students who may be on their way out no matter what, and those who can thrive with more help. Lakes thinks of them as the “if only” students.

BLENDING RIGOR AND SUPPORT

Matthew Taylor, associate provost at Rice University, says that he and a colleague monitored student attrition in the years before 2010 and noticed a clear pattern: Those dropping out tended to be low-income, first-generation students in STEM majors who were either Black or Hispanic. They often came from underresourced high schools where they might not have had access to adequate college preparation.

“They were just sort of being thrown into the super-academically demanding Rice community and being told ‘sink or swim,’” says Taylor. He and his colleague felt that was unethical. The provost at the time was responsive to their concerns and told them to come up with a solution.

In the summer of 2012, Rice started its Emerging Scholars Program. Building on research by others, the university created an academically rigorous

summer program in which students learn how to study efficiently in groups. The program soon added one-on-one academic advising that Taylor describes as “intrusive, comprehensive, and long term.” The students

must meet weekly with advisers who check on their emotional, financial, and academic well-being. Rising sophomores in the program can take summer courses free, since they often enter with fewer Advanced Placement credits than other students have. Administrators help the students seek out internships and research positions.

Christopher Harris, associate director of the program, says it also emphasizes the importance of self-care to the students, such as getting enough sleep and eating nutritious food. When it comes to counseling them, he uses a drowning metaphor, and tells the students to come to him when they feel water at their feet, not when it is up to their neck.

At the moment, 90 percent of the Rice Emerging Scholars graduate in four years, and they stay in STEM majors at a higher rate than other students do. They’ve gone on to jobs at Google, Intel, Chevron, and Goldman Sachs. “They’re doing pretty well,” says Taylor.

A CORNUCOPIA OF MODELS

Four-to-six-week bridge programs are not the only way summers can promote student success. At Georgia State University, one bridge program is the culmination of summers spent with high-school students beginning in



Sam Vallagomesa and Ciara Pino-Recovo, members of the Emerging Scholars' first cohort in 2012, at their Rice U. graduation ceremony in 2016.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RICE U.

ninth grade, part of the federal TRIO programs that reach out to disadvantaged students. The first-generation students in the program, which is known as Upward Bound, come from families whose income is no more than 50 percent above the federal poverty line. For a family of four this year [that level is \\$45,000 annually](#). The students spend summers in standard academic courses, learning financial literacy, and working on projects in which they can apply academic skills, like drone videography or robotics.

Michael Maxwell, project director for the Georgia State program, says it retains

96 percent of its students through to college. Seventy-seven percent of them complete college six years after they begin. The program checks in with students who enroll in college — either at Georgia State or elsewhere — and helps connect them to resources when necessary. “We tell them, ‘You are in our family for life,’” says Maxwell.

West Virginia University Institute of Technology has a one-week summer bridge program, boot-camp style, that helps students shake the academic cobwebs from their brains and gives them other college-survival skills: making meatball sliders or dressing up ramen noodles in residence-hall microwaves; using money-saving apps when shopping; learning time management; and understanding their financial-aid packages. This past summer, 15 students attended. “We’re competing against summer jobs, family vacations, and athletics,” says Scott Robertson, assistant dean of students. The most important boost in the students’ ability to survive comes through the relationships they build during the week, Robertson says.

While the difficulties of student retention, especially for low-income, first-generation, and minority students, will not be solved by any one program, the human connections that can take place in summer bridge programs appear to help.

Among other issues, if the students’ laptops break, they will know whom to turn to.

Questions or comments about this case study? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

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