A CYCLE OF RETENTION
Peer Mentors’ Accounts
of Active Engagement and Agency

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This qualitative study explores the academic and social development of peer mentors who worked in a summer retention program. Findings suggest that peer mentors developed a greater sense of belonging, new skills, and an understanding of institutional structures, theories, and people that promote their success as students. Ultimately, peer mentors are influenced by their peer environments while at the same time actively (re)shaping that environment for themselves and others.

Retention initiatives have evolved in an effort to address the needs of rapidly diversifying student populations. Recent literature on retention programs reflects this evolution and highlights the importance of building inclusive campus communities to increase student retention (Kinzie & Schuh, 2008; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Oseguera, 2008). One way higher education institutions work toward creating inclusive campus communities is through peer mentoring programs, which are particularly impactful for students of color (Haring & Freeman, 1999; Lee, 1999), and whose demand is stronger than ever (Williams, 2011). While researchers have documented the positive influences of peer mentor relationships on mentees (Astin, 1996; Crisp, 2008; Harmon, 2006; Tinto, 1975), little research has focused on the influence of the peer mentoring role on students who serve as mentors (Wawrzynski, LoConte, & Straker, 2011). The few existing studies that have examined the influence of the mentoring role on peer mentors have found the effects of peer mentoring to be positive (Kiyama & Luca, 2013; Monte, Sleeman, & Hein, 2007; Wawrzynski et al., 2011). Some of these positive effects include gaining additional knowledge about academic subjects and...
developing new academic success skills (Williams, 2011). Two studies in particular have begun to examine the impact of retention programs on student mentors and subsequent benefits in terms of social, emotional, and academic gains (Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Harmon, 2006). The National Peer Educator Study found that peer mentors experienced gains in practical competence, intra and interpersonal outcomes, and knowledge acquisition (Wawrzynski et al., 2011). What remains is a gap in understanding how structured peer mentor experiences play a role in undergraduate student engagement and college retention.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of college students who are employed as peer mentors in a summer bridge program. Although summer bridge programs have existed since the 1960s, with institutions allotting substantial resources to enhance student participation and retention success, little research of these programs has been conducted (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole et al., 2008). Specifically, Strayhorn (2011) notes that research on summer bridge programs “rarely examines the academic and social benefits of economically disadvantaged ethnic minorities” who participate in such programs (p. 146). We argue that insufficient research is particularly lacking when seeking to understand the academic and social benefits that student staff (i.e., peer mentors) employed by such programs experience. This study is guided by the following research question: How does engagement in a structured peer mentor role influence students’ academic development, social engagement, and retention? The significance of this study rests in the framing of how retention is understood. This study is one of the first that seeks to understand student development and retention of the peer mentor as opposed to the mentee, with specific attention focused on a peer mentor role structured within a summer bridge program. Findings suggest that the mentoring role facilitates opportunities for peer mentors to develop awareness of the college environment and to play a more active role in their own retention process. This study draws conceptually from an adapted version of the comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence (Reason, 2009).

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

It is vital for students to be engaged academically and socially with their campus (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Early retention research (see Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993) primarily focused on how students integrated themselves into their environment, taking into account a variety of personal and institutional characteristics with two domains of integration most often referred to with respect to student retention—navigation of social and academic networks. There is no question that these factors continue to impact student attrition; however, most early researchers failed to take into account the differential experiences of diverse student populations including the impact of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). More recent retention research argues that students of color connect to their environment differently than their white peers and suggests that a culture of diversity and inclusivity is the greatest factor contributing to successful student transition and increased retention (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kinzie & Schuh, 2008; Locks et al., 2008; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Thus, it is equally vital for colleges and universities to create environments that value inclusivity of diverse student populations.

Campuses that have a variety of religious, community, social, and cultural groups were found to have climates which were viewed more positively by students from underrepresented groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Furthermore, a sense of belonging is fostered when students experience positive interactions with diverse peers (Locks et al., 2008). Sense
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of belonging is important when considering successful transition into and through college and represents the extent to which a student feels relevant, connected, or part of a campus (Strayhorn, 2008). Sense of belonging represents both cognitive (assessing one’s role in relation to a group) and affective (resulting behaviors) elements (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008) and has been related to important educational outcomes like academic achievement, retention, and persistence to degree attainment (Rhee, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008). Conversely, students of color who reported negative experiences related to campus culture were less likely to be retained and attain degree completion (Museus, et al., 2008; Solorzano, et al., 2000). Institutions that have faculty of color, programs of study that incorporate culturally diverse groups, and working relationships with community agencies, report positive racial climates (Kinzie & Schuh, 2008). These climates fostered a greater sense of belonging amongst its diverse student groups. To combat departure, particularly for students of color, it is essential for colleges and universities to support retention initiatives for these groups. Such initiatives have existed for several decades and work to establish positive and supportive educational environments for students of color (Oseguera, et al., 2009). Summer bridge programs are one such retention initiative that work to create supportive environments.

Summer Bridge Programs

During the 1960s, the federal government recognized the need for students of color to receive additional academic services because of their lower retention rates (Walpole et al., 2008). One of the solutions created were summer bridge programs (Walpole et al., 2008). These programs have been utilized as a means to increase college retention for students of color (Gándara, 2011; Walpole et al., 2008). Kezar (2000) noted that there are a number of components that contribute to the success of summer bridge programs. She stated that “model programs are individualized, have strong faculty support and involvement, are tied to the institutional mission, have partnerships with area K-12 schools, are supported by senior administration, use small group collaborative learning, build community, and conduct student assessment/evaluation” (p. 5). It is also recommended that such retention initiatives serving students of color employ faculty, staff, and students with diverse backgrounds, especially in the area of mentoring (Lopez-Mulnix & Mulnix, 2006). Many first-year retention programs, including summer bridge programs, include elements that support students by building academic skills, providing cultural programming, tutoring, counseling, and peer mentoring (Lopez-Mulnix & Mulnix, 2006; Gándara, 2011; Oseguera et al., 2009). We are specifically interested in the role of peer mentoring within summer bridge programs.

Peer Mentoring Programs

Peer mentoring programs have been touted as a vehicle to improve retention for students of color (Budge, 2006; Lee, 1999; Rodgers & Tremblay, 2003). Peer mentoring programs have been successful in assisting students with academic deficiencies and transition problems especially during their first-year of college (Budge, 2006). Mentored students who continued to participate in a mentor-mentee relationship midway through the second semester had significantly higher final grades than nonmentored peers (Rodgers & Tremblay, 2003).

Although a common definition of mentoring does not exist, we draw upon the following definition of peer mentoring, “a form of peer education where students serve as role models to fellow students and provide them with support and guidance” (Harmon, 2006, p. 56). Other aspects of the peer mentor relationship, like networking, can also influence student retention (Haring & Freeman, 1999). Lamb (1999) reported on the success of the Holmes Scholars Network, a mentoring program aimed at assisting African American and Hispanic
students in attaining their professional goals through a nationwide network of mentors. Haring and Freeman (1999) praised the Networking Model of peer mentoring in which each individual helps another to transition into the college climate. Once integrated into the environment students commit to mentor others, thus creating a network of support. These models introduced the notion that peer mentoring can build off of group strengths and has inherent benefits for the mentors as well as mentees.

Few researchers (Good et al., 2000; Harmon, 2006) have studied these powerful benefits of peer mentoring and their subsequent impact on retention. However, those that have reported on peer mentor benefits have seen meaningful student gains, including enhanced listening skills, direct job experience, high grade point averages, and increased retention rates (Monte et al., 2007). Other research documents the expanded interpersonal and communication skills, increased maturity and compassion, and sense of responsibility developed by peer mentors (Budge, 2006; McLean, 2004). Peer mentors have also been found to seek leadership experiences, develop increased appreciation for diversity, enhanced listening skills, and experienced a stronger sense of connection between personal and learning development (Peck, 2011). However, much of this research focused on the retention program itself and those students who were mentored. The focus of the research was often not on the peer mentors, and benefits to the peer mentors were only mentioned in passing.

Good et al. (2000) studied the academic and interpersonal benefits reported by upper level African American engineers participating in a retention program as peer mentors. Students reported academic benefits including improved study skills and gains in critical thinking and problem solving. Good et al.’s (2000) study included data in the form of peer mentor reflection journals which documented their mentoring experience. Reflection journals revealed that mentors reported personal development in the form of communication, confidence, and identity. In particular, mentors cited gains in leadership skills, responsibility, and a sense of self-satisfaction and belonging (Good et al., 2000).

Harmon (2006) found similar benefits garnered by peer mentors serving students in a first-year retention program. Harmon (2006) reported that, “peer mentors internalize learning experiences and immediately apply them to their own personal development while discovering practical career-related applications for how to use what they learn” (p. 53). Specifically, peer mentors experienced gains influenced by the network of peers with whom they worked. It is apparent that support and collaboration garnered from a network of peers assist mentors in attaining their own student development and learning. As demonstrated, studies are limited that focus specifically on the academic, professional, and social benefits experienced by student mentors. Furthermore, researchers often note the lack of research available to confirm the nature of peer relationships and the academic and personal development that results from the peer mentoring role (Braxton, McKinney, & Reynolds, 2006; Budge, 2006; Wawrzynski et al., 2011). Thus, we designed this study with the specific intent of learning about how retention, inclusive of academic and social development, is influenced by engagement in a structured peer mentor role.

**A Conceptual Model**

We look to one summer bridge retention program as the context of our study. Because of our particular focus on the organization (i.e. the program) and the context it provides for students of color, we look to Reason’s (2009) adapted version of Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence. The original model proposed by Terenzini and Reason synthesized retention and persistence research into one conceptual model that provided a lens from which researchers could examine the various forces influencing student outcomes.
The model incorporates the influences of four constructs: students’ precollege characteristics including sociodemographic traits, academic preparation, and student dispositions; the organizational context; and the peer environment and individual student experiences on student persistence (Reason, 2009). Reason (2009) presented an adapted version of this model when reviewing the most current understanding and literature in each of these four areas. Reason’s (2009) adaptations focus on examining how college experiences influence student persistence. We draw on this adapted version of the model to incorporate the latest research about retention and persistence into our project. We focus on the peer environment and individual student experiences within this environment, examining the peer-to-peer experiences noted by mentors in a summer bridge program. The peer environment, found within campus racial and academic climates, encompasses a “sense of place,” inclusive of values and expectations that influence behavior and impact educational aspirations (Reason, 2009). Embedded within the peer environment are opportunities for individual out-of-class, curricular, and engagement experiences. We explore these concepts through the smaller peer environment of one summer bridge program.

**METHODOLOGY**

This article is based on a larger study examining the influence of peer mentor roles on social development, social capital, and student retention. This study focused on a summer bridge retention program at a very high research activity university located in the southwest. This particular program, which we call Summer Bridge, employs approximately 40 peer mentors each summer. We invited 25 former peer mentors to participate in our study. We employed an intrinsic single case study design (Stake, 2005) and collected two phases of data during the spring of 2009. The first phase consisted of collecting text narratives in the form of online essays from peer mentors, with the second phase consisting of four focus groups with peer mentors. We drew upon narrative text analysis (Reissman, 1993) and thematic analysis to make sense of the data.

**Case Study Research**

Case study methodology was appropriate for this study as peer mentor experiences were represented and bound by a single subject, the Summer Bridge program (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). We conducted an intrinsic case study which allowed us to explore a distinct case. That is, we did not undertake this research because the case represented other cases; the experiences of peer mentors employed in the Summer Bridge program warranted further exploration and understanding without the expectation of generalization or theory development (Stake, 2005). Further, we employed an intrinsic single case study design for main two reasons. First, the study’s research question addresses units of analysis within the case that required in-depth understanding of peer mentor experiences within contextual factors like the program and university in which these experiences are bound. Second, an intrinsic case study design allowed us to honor the “holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2003, p. 2), an important factor in case study research. Yin (2003) suggests that case studies must include multiple forms of evidence and offers six forms of data collection as appropriate sources. Of these six, we employed two methods—documents (collected as online essays) and focus group interviews. Finally, case studies should demonstrate a chain of evidence, suggesting that links are made between questions asked, data collected, and conclusions drawn (Yin, 2003). We followed a chain of evidence pattern as preliminary findings from online essays informed the questions posed during focus groups.
SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

Summer Bridge

The Summer Bridge program was created in 1969 after students of color came together and demonstrated the need for services for low-income and ethnic minority students. We chose to focus on the Summer Bridge program because it was founded by students and maintains a long tradition of involvement from student staff. In the program’s history, the experiences of peer mentors have never been formally studied. The program serves approximately 250 incoming first-year students each summer. Students have played an active role in the program since its inception, serving as student recruiters, peer advisors, resident assistants, and tutors. Peer mentors help to staff the academic, orientation, and residential components that incoming first-year students experience during the program.

The first, a residential component is staffed by six to eight peer mentors each summer. The orientation component, a daily workshop focusing on academic and social transition topics, is staffed by 18 to 24 peer mentors. Finally, students enroll in a Math, English or Anthropology course in the academic component, which includes an undergraduate tutor in each course.

Peer mentors participate in a structured, 3-week training session prior to the start of the program. Training begins with an off-site retreat where peer mentors participate in team building and communication exercises and social justice training. Training continues upon returning to campus where peer mentors are led through paraprofessional development with exposure to counseling skills, classroom facilitation, and issues of educational (in)equity. Training is accompanied by readings and reflections on issues of college access and opportunity, retention programs, and diversity and social justice. Once the program begins, training sessions continue in the form of daily staff meetings and weekly professional development. Peer mentors then demonstrate their knowledge of such topics by incorporating them into daily classroom presentations and residence hall programs.

Participants

Since we were interested in understanding how the peer mentor role impacted subsequent experiences, we invited former peer mentors who were currently enrolled as either undergraduate or graduate students at the institution to participate. Forty-eight peer mentors were invited to participate in this study. Of those, 25 students responded. Students were invited via listserv messages, Facebook messages, and direct individual conversations. A total of 25 students participated in Phase 1 of data collection (online journals prompts), including nine males and 16 females, representing a range of academic majors. Twenty-two students participated in Phase 2 of data collection (focus groups) including six males and 16 females. We encouraged students to select all of the racial and ethnic groups with which they identified. This resulted in 3 Asian/Pacific Americans, 3 African Americans, 16 Latina/os, 4 Native Americans, 4 White students, 1 biracial student, and 1 multiracial student. These self-identifiers are included when presenting the student quotes that follow. We felt it important to honor the racial/ethnic identities they shared with us, especially given our focus on retention of students of color. We have not substituted their identifying information for any other terms. Finally, while it is not a requirement of the peer mentor position, over half of the participants were former students of Summer Bridge.

Important limitations exist in the selection of site and participants. We are limited to one program at one institution. Our goal however, was not to generalize to other institutions or programs, as Creswell (2007) reminds us is not the intent of qualitative research. We aimed to capture the experiences of peer mentors through their own voices and words. We also recognize that our participants represent a group that has taken the initiative to be
involved. One might expect an obvious interest in sharing since students experienced tremendous gains during their time as a peer mentor.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted two phases of data collection for this study. In Phase 1, we asked students to respond to online questions creating narrative texts. These questions focused on their own transition into college, experiences as a peer mentor, and the role of retention initiatives. We were especially interested in how students made sense of their experiences as peer mentors (Chase, 2005) and used narrative text analysis to analyze the online essays (Reissman, 1993). Specifically, we focused on the narratives as “stories of experience” (Squire, 2008, p. 41) with particular emphasis on peer mentors’ social settings and resources, like shared trainings and work environment, which were influenced within the similar organizational and cultural context of the retention program (Chase, 2005). In doing so we acknowledge that narratives are “re-present[ing] experience, reconstituting it, as well as expressing it” (Squire, 2008, p. 41). We were able to further understand peer mentors’ experiences by following up with focus groups.

Phase 2 of data collection consisted of four focus groups concentrating on the peer mentors’ academic and social development as student employees. We chose to use focus groups because of the opportunity to create a community space and dialogue with collective sense making based on peer mentors’ shared experiences (Mertens, 1998). While cautious that focus groups may limit individuals from sharing their experiences because of embarrassment or discomfort (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), we felt this format was useful because of the relationships and trust that participants had already established by being peer mentors together. Focus groups were conducted over a 5-day period and consisted of between four and seven participants in each session. The focus group interview protocol was informed by peer mentor research conducted by Harmon (2006) and Good et al. (2000). We specifically asked participants about their expectations of their role, influential people and moments, personal challenges and growth, and the development of social and professional networks.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coding for both essays and focus groups included inductive and deductive analysis. Data analysis began with an initial read of all of the online narrative texts and four focus group transcripts by each member of the research team. The research team included one faculty member, one professional staff member, and two graduate students. We began with a list of a priori codes developed by retention and peer mentor literature. We coded specifically for examples of sense of place and belonging, reciprocity, skills, resources, and education terminology. After extensive discussions, the team reached consensus about the final coding structure which resulted in further organizing the data into themes and sub-themes. We ended with data tables (Creswell, 2007), which included a table for the narrative essays and a table for the focus groups. Our multistep data analysis process helped to insure intercoder agreement and consistency in preliminary findings and provided an important element of trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007).

Trustworthiness

We employed multiple validation strategies to establish trustworthiness. First, we employed member-checking by delivering preliminary findings and drafts of papers to participants, a step noted as critical to the credibility process (Creswell, 2007). Researcher bias was reduced by consulting with outside colleagues who provided peer review and debriefing (Creswell, 2007). This helped to verify existing themes and provide feedback. Finally, because two of the authors have a pre-existing relationship with many of the participants, an initial level of trust was present when collecting data. While this preexisting relation-
ship may present a possible limitation, we included two additional coauthors, both of whom work with peer mentoring programs outside of Summer Bridge. This allowed for an additional check of biases while maintaining the rapport originally established with participants (Creswell, 2007).

**FINDINGS**

The following themes illustrate the ways in which the peer mentor role facilitates academic and personal growth. We contend that such development leads peer mentors to be active agents engaged in their own college experience and retention. We begin by highlighting how a sense of belonging and acquisition of new skills occurred for peer mentors, setting the foundation for them to engage in their own retention efforts. We present these themes by sharing examples of peer mentors’ knowledge of retention initiatives and terminology, and how they cultivated their sense of agency within these initiatives.

**A FOUNDATION FOR RETENTION**

**Sense of Belonging**

Past research has noted the importance of peer mentoring in the retention of students of color (Haring & Freeman, 1999; Lee, 1999; Lopez-Mulnix & Mulnix, 2006; Oseguera et al., 2009). These programs are particularly important in nurturing the sense of integration and belonging that program participants feel on campus. As Strayhorn (2008) points out, examining “sense of belonging affords researchers an opportunity to understand factors that facilitate students’ affiliation with college” (p. 507). Unique to this study is the sense of belonging that was also experienced by peer mentors who credited feelings to their affiliation with program staff. Many peer mentors highlighted the importance of developing these feelings as essential to their own persistence, which supports Reason’s (2009) argument that peer environment factors like normative values conveyed by a sense of place influence student persistence. Here, Derek connects his sense of belonging to the community fostered among peer mentors.

> The community that is built among the staff in the program is amazing and is one of the best parts of working in [Summer Bridge]. It’s a wonderful, inspiring, educational experience and I hope I can continue to work with programs like it. (Derek, White/Asian senior)

Peer mentors were active participants in creating a sense of place and belonging for the students they mentored and for one another. Julissa explains how a sense of belonging was initially established at the formal training since peer mentors were willing to share vulnerable elements of themselves thus, highlighting the important sense of trust that is built among the staff.

> The activities [the coordinating staff] make us do—some of them are silly and some of them are really serious. They make us cry or they make us laugh. I think they’re really intentional, and some are so valuable because you get to open the peer advisors to a degree that they feel exposed, but not insecure that they’re going to be hurt by anything…. The people [peer mentors] are not afraid of showing who they are. They even learn through the process who they are. (Julissa, Mexican American/Native American junior)

Julissa’s comment highlights what can result from examining oneself and developing self-awareness. Through a deeper level of sharing and vulnerability, a greater sense of connectedness and belonging was cultivated amongst the peer mentors. Javier added:

> Not only did the program empower me to become a mentor and help others, but it has allowed me to influence others in the way that creates a cycle for I am sure they will become future leaders and help the lives of others here at the [university]. (Javier, Hispanic senior)
Creating a sense of belonging as it relates to students’ racial and academic environments is critical to enhancing retention (Reason, 2009). What is significant about these findings is that retention programs like Summer Bridge facilitate a sense of belonging for both program participants and program staff. Further, findings demonstrate that peer mentors are committed to developing that sense of belonging between one another, thus reminding us that we cannot overlook their important role as active participants in their environments. Peer mentors drew upon their newfound skills to create that sense of belonging for themselves and others.

**New Skills**

Similar to the peer mentors in both Harmon’s (2006) and Good et al.’s (2000) studies, peer mentors in this study enhanced their personal and professional skill sets. Additionally, peer mentors spoke about how these new skills were critical in their feelings of empowerment, navigation of institutional structures, and appreciation for social justice and diversity. Felisha, a Mexican senior, shared, “I think [the program] gave me more confidence in not only my presentation skills but confidence in being a student here at [the university].” Felisha’s participation as a peer mentor facilitated the skills needed to be successful in various university settings. The next quotes specifically address the development of skills in communication, which support the findings of Monte et al. (2007), who suggest that peer mentors developed better listening skills as part of their role. Candice shared, “One thing that stands out to me is the role of being a mentor and being a better listener. The whole act of listening is really important.” She went on to say,

> I would just like to stress how important the training was to me in terms of my college experience…. It’s usually more obvious to see the benefits of being a mentor for the students I had but working with the other peer mentors in the training was also really beneficial. (Candice, White senior)

Sara expanded on this by sharing how the training and experience as a peer mentor benefited her in future paraprofessional opportunities.

> This program pushed me every year to develop as an individual. I was challenged on a personal and professional level by individuals that have become my advisors and mentors. The students that I have taught and supervised pushed me to grow as a teacher and supervisor. (Sara, Persian graduate student)

Perhaps the most striking element of skill development was reported in the area of diversity and social justice. What became apparent in conversations with peer mentors was how important these competencies were in negotiating other elements of their lives on campus.

> You become aware of these jokes that you didn’t realize before are pretty stereotypical and are negative jokes. I think as a student, going through Summer Bridge, you just brush the surface. You get a taste of it [as a student], but it’s not enough to really influence your decisions until you’re an actual employee of Summer Bridge. Then that’s when you’re really emerged into it. (Elsa, Mexican American sophomore)

Peer mentors participated in many hours of training and discussion on topics of diversity, social justice, and equity. These topics were embedded within various aspects of the program from training to curriculum and student presentations. Important however, is Sara’s comment below where she compares the social justice training she received in Summer Bridge to trainings in other departments. She described the role of staff training in providing these skills and knowledge of social justice.

> Other people’s training is not the same. I work in other departments, and I’ve gone through other people’s social justice training and diversity training, and I leave and I think “that was it?” I don’t feel moved. I don’t feel changed. I don’t feel like I want to stand up
and fight the injustice in the world. (Sara, Persian graduate student)

We argue that the intentionality behind the social justice training structured future experiences and opportunities for peer mentors (Kiyama & Luca, 2013). For example, Aleena translated that knowledge of educational equity and social justice into her next peer mentoring role working with girls in a local community agency.

It starts at a young age in elementary school, whether to go to college or not, what to do with their life, being in a program that helps empower young girls into more leadership roles… It has to start at a young age. For some of these students who get into college, they didn’t have that, but it’s good to work in that environment and see that eventually some of these girls— their self confidence is built, their interests are built, and it’s a great program. (Aleena, Latina senior)

She finished her thoughts by saying, “I feel really blessed to be in [Summer Bridge] because I’ve taken the knowledge into the program” [referring to her current role with the local community agency].

We present these two themes as the basis for what became an awareness and facilitation of peer mentors’ own development. By belonging to an established community and enhancing their skill sets, peer mentors reflected on college experiences, as well as broader retention processes, including the terminology and issues that accompany it.

Awareness of the Context of Education and Retention

Of particular significance was peer mentors’ development of a comprehensive understanding of the context of education and retention processes. As part of their training, peer mentors were exposed to articles and reports that introduced them to college retention language, theories, and statistics. Unlike formal classroom settings, the preexisting rapport with one another allowed peer mentors the opportunity to work together to consider the broader context of their work and frame discussions to reflect that. Creating a safe space to have reflective discussions was key to helping peer mentors make connections from their collective educational experiences and see themselves as active agents of their own and their mentees’ retention.

The peer mentors’ application of this knowledge extended beyond the scope of the summer job, leading some peer mentors to articulate their experiences from both a practical and theoretical perspective, and understand the role that institutional structures play in their experiences. Finally, this knowledge led to recognition of the power of individual agency.

Retention programs, in my humble opinion, are great ways to get kids involved on campus and give them a sense of belonging. It is through these programs that their transition to the college atmosphere can be eased especially if they are unfamiliar with the area. Based off my experiences, the students seem enthusiastic that there is a support system already in place to help them, and are open to attacking the challenge that is higher education. (Rolando, Hispanic junior)

Not only did peer mentors articulate what they believed the purpose of retention initiatives were, they did so using theoretical language introduced during their training. Specifically, Rolando brought terms like “sense of belonging” into his response. Likewise, Alyssa incorporated “capital” into her comments.

I think programs like this exist to provide capital, either social capital or cultural capital, to students to kind of bring them up to the same playing field as other students. You make those networks and those connections and you learn like how to play the game. (Alyssa, Black graduate student)

Alyssa’s reference to “the game” is significant because she recognizes that dominant values and expectations exist within the institution.
Furthermore, her use of the terms social capital (Bourdieu, 1973) and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) demonstrate that she not only recognizes these dominant systems, but can explain them in a way that positions her to be an agent of capital for herself and others. St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010) also refer to this as “academic capital” or the family knowledge important to support successful college and career transitions. Interestingly, these forms of capital originated not in peer mentors’ families, but were cultivated through Summer Bridge, demonstrating that one’s capital can change over time as one is exposed to different environments and individuals. Other peer mentors spoke about the purpose of retention initiatives with regard to issues of campus climate.

I think [Summer Bridge] has to do with comfort, because for a university that promotes diversity, I think a lot of people have issues with that. Summer Bridge, it’s not just like you have all Black kids right here, all Hispanic kids. Everybody’s mixed together so that when you do go out, it’s like you have a connection with all different kind of people. (Tanya, Black sophomore)

Tanya’s quote highlights the significant role that campus climate plays in the retention of underrepresented students. Researchers have long noted the importance of inclusive and welcoming spaces on campus (Hurtado, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Additionally, Reason (2009) summarized that although the influence of campus racial climates are often indirect within students’ peer environments, being valued within these environments plays an important role in outcomes like persistence. In our study, peer mentors began to articulate ways in which their passion aligned with their knowledge and future career plans.

I got to see a different side of how to help students develop and become leaders and work through problems of helping others, which was a different level that I hadn’t thought of. That summer was when I decided that I wanted to go further on in this career path. I didn’t know that path existed. I didn’t know student affairs was a real job. (Sara, Persian graduate student)

Peer mentors began utilizing their knowledge to work toward educational equity and change. These processes occurred during and after their employment with Summer Bridge. Many peer mentors worked with other campus outreach and retention programs, as advocates for cultural centers on campus, and as student admissions recruiters for prospective students of color. Shaina, a Mexican/Apache sophomore summarized, “I never realized that they [her passion for social justice, education, and a future job] could all be related.” At least five of the peer mentors were attending graduate programs in higher education or student affairs.

Finally, reciprocity and agency were represented in many of the peer mentors’ comments. Reciprocity provides opportunities for group cooperation and is based on the assumption that acts of good will be repaid at some point in the future (Newton, 1997). Alicia expressed,

I knew I wanted to come back and give to a program that had given so much to me. It was not hard for me to see just after my first semester that it was because of Summer Bridge that I continued with my college career. (Alicia, Asian American senior)

Peer mentors noted the ways that they developed a sense of agency, particularly when in reference to giving back to Summer Bridge and their own cultural communities.

I’ve been encouraging other people to apply for [peer mentor positions]. I’m trying to get other Native students to apply for the position because you never get many Native American students in these positions. I think it plays a role. I didn’t feel really connected to anybody when I went through Summer Bridge. I didn’t get to know my [resident assistant]. I didn’t get to know my peer advisor. I feel like I tried to change that when I had students when I was working. I try to reach out to the
Native students when I worked for the program. (Melina, Native American senior)

These examples highlight a number of important factors in the experiences of peer mentors. Most importantly, peer mentors began recognizing the power of their individual agency, that they can create inclusive spaces for themselves and students, and that their new skills, and knowledge can lead to leadership and career opportunities that will help in continuing that cycle of retention.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of peer mentors employed by the Summer Bridge program, a 6-week transition program for incoming first-year students. Findings from this study illustrate the tangible benefits peer mentors experienced as part of their active participation as a staff member. Beyond these benefits is a development of the understanding of institutional structures, theories, and people that influence their success as students. Peer mentors articulate that knowledge and serve as agents of change for future students, in some cases venturing into a career path of education. Even though the peer mentors were not the intended audience of Summer Bridge’s retention objectives, they gained a great deal from their engagement with the program.

As the findings demonstrate, Summer Bridge represented an organizational structure, an environment in which peer mentors developed a sense of place and belonging (Reason, 2009). Program trainings provided a space in which self-awareness was fostered and a sense of community developed. Being a peer mentor also led to developing new skills and knowledge, specifically an awareness of the educational context in which the peer mentor role was embedded. This awareness was illustrated through peer mentors’ use of retention terminology such as, sense of belonging, forms of capital, and campus climate. We also observe how peer mentors’ own forms of capital—social, cultural, and academic—were cultivated as part of their peer mentor role. Thus, Summer Bridge represents a peer environment (Reason, 2009) that develops and exchanges different forms of knowledge and capital, leading to enhanced peer mentor engagement and retention. Finally, important to the experiences was the fact that peer mentors were thinking beyond their own academic success and retention; they were committed to giving back to their communities in an effort to foster academic success for others.

This study is particularly noteworthy because very few examples exist that document student gains as a result of participation in a structured peer mentor role. Findings suggest that peer mentors are influenced by their peer environments while at the same time actively (re)shaping that environment for themselves and others. In doing so, they become confident about their educational journey, illustrating their knowledge by the language they choose to use and future initiatives in which they participate. In turn, the peer mentors become active agents in their own education, leaders on campus, and became part of creating a cycle that continues to foster successful engagement and retention of underrepresented students.

Implications

Given our findings, we urge researchers and practitioners to keep in mind implications when working with retention initiatives that involve peer mentors. We suggest that structured peer mentor roles can effectively serve as retention and leadership initiatives for college students in their sophomore through senior years. Rather than focusing resources on developing new retention programs aimed at upper class students, we encourage practitioners to examine existing programs in an effort to include upper class students as peer mentors. When coupled with formal training, these peer mentor positions represent opportunities for both the mentee and mentor. As previously mentioned, over half of the peer mentors in
this study were former Summer Bridge participants. Thus, another cycle is taking shape as many of the first-year students with whom these peer mentors work may return as employees of the program in the future. It is important that even first-year students begin to understand their potential to (re)shape opportunities. It was clear that the peer mentors in this study articulated the academic experiences that contributed to their college persistence. We encourage researchers and practitioners alike to include students in projects to develop and examine retention programs and student experiences. An often overlooked source of knowledge, students can serve as powerful participatory partners when collecting and analyzing data. Our findings suggest that undergraduate peer mentors were capable of learning new material (i.e., retention theories and literature) and seeing the real-world implications of these trends in the experiences of their peers and students they were interacting with as part of Summer Bridge. This is a powerful example of the nexus between theory and practice. As we see here, peer mentors extended this knowledge to actively shape their experiences and contribute to a supportive campus environment.

Finally, that many of students in this study moved into a different career path because of their peer mentoring role. Specifically, five of the peer mentors completed degrees in student affairs or higher education programs. Therefore, we must consider the important role that these positions play in developing future higher education professionals. We should further explore establishing partnerships between student affairs divisions that house such retention programs and higher education programs that may offer academic credit for participating in a formalized undergraduate course addressing many of the components covered in peer mentor training—social justice, academic success and retention literature, and an introduction into the field of student affairs.

Future research should include a collection of both reflective (qualitative) data from peer mentors as well as institutional data. Such findings would more appropriately highlight the specific link between peer environments and student persistence (Reason, 2009). Additional research should follow peer mentors into their postbaccalaureate experiences in an effort to understand how their experience as a peer mentor influenced future opportunities. Finally, as mentioned above, because of the demonstration of agency exhibited by peer mentors in this study, it would be appropriate to include them as participant action researchers both during and after their peer mentor roles. Doing so would provide a depth to the data collection and analysis that moves beyond traditional interviews and focus groups as data.

Underrepresented student persistence remains a challenge despite several decades of retention research. Findings from this study offer another element to consider when studying this important topic and suggest that retention programs can serve as activating forces through organizational structures for peer mentors. As demonstrated, the tangible benefits that peer mentors experience coupled with the agency that is cultivated as a result of their roles cannot be overlooked when considering the future of retention programs.

REFERENCES


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