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Evaluating the Impact of a Summer Dropout Prevention Program for Incoming Freshmen Attending an Under-Resourced High School

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Low high school completion rates are an ongoing challenge for educators. This study provides the results of an evaluation of a ninth-grade summer transition program offered at a large public school with a high freshman dropout rate. The evaluation consisted of preprogram and postprogram surveys and interviews with 64 incoming freshman participating in the summer program. Significant gains were shown in participants' Sense of School Belonging and Academic Self-Efficacy. Qualitatively, the data suggest that students gained clarity about their career goals, became better informed about what it takes to become a successful student, connected a diploma to their own career goals, and felt more comfortable in the school and with its teachers. The implications of these findings for prevention of school dropout are discussed.

Keywords: adolescents, ethnic minority youth, school perceptions

Reducing the high school dropout rate is a topic of national concern. Although the challenge of high dropout rates has received national attention, a recent significant increase in dropout rates proves that further attention is necessary. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) reported that between 2009–2010, 514,238 public school students dropped out of grades 9–12, resulting in a 3.4% dropout rate. The most recent estimate indicated that the national calculated Average Freshman Graduation Rate for high school graduation was 78.2%, with some states having rates below 60% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). These numbers make apparent the necessity for appropriate and effective dropout prevention intervention programs.

However, examining trends in overall graduation rates does not always elucidate the fact that graduation rates vary widely by ethnic group. Graduation trends of Latina/o students have been of particular interest given this population's growing presence in schools across the country coupled with the fact that gains for these students have been relatively slow in comparison with other ethnic groups (Chun & Dickson, 2010; Hill & Torres, 2010). Evidence suggests that Latina/o students are increasingly more likely to graduate from high school than they were one decade ago. In fact, 78% graduated in 2010 compared to 64% in 2000 (note that "graduate" refers to those who obtain a traditional high school diploma and does not include students obtaining a GED) (Murnane, 2013).

School dropout trends also indicate improvement. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) reported that the high school dropout rate for Latina/os in 2000 was 28%, but in 2011, only 14% of Latina/os in this age group dropped out. Despite the overall trend indicating the improvement of retention rates, Latina/o students continue to represent the lowest rates of academic achievement when compared with White, Asian, and African American ethnic groups (NCES, 2013). Given that Latina/os constitute 16.7% of the population and exist as the largest ethnic minority group within the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2013), it is imperative to understand the factors related to the academic success of Latina/o adolescents.

Predictors of Dropout

Research highlights the fact that educators can play a crucial role in reducing the dropout rate and supporting high school completion (Doll & Hess, 2001; Ehrenreich, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012). According to Doll and Hess (2001), an understanding of ecological perspectives on student development can help to reframe dropout prevention as a "bidirectional process" in which schools and families must come together to support school completion. Thus, a plethora of research has examined individual, familial, and school factors related to both school persistence and dropout. Among some of the most relevant of these predictors are individual

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self-beliefs (e.g., Academic Self-Efficacy, Motivation), students' connection to their school environment, and the support that students receive from school during important transitions (e.g., eighth grade into ninth grade).

Among the body of research that examines student-level factors related to school dropout and persistence is scholarship that focuses on the importance of academic motivation (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Academic motivation is defined as the "intrinsic value, interest, and importance that students attribute to academic schoolwork" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 63). Overall academic motivational levels of ethnic minority groups such as Latina/os have been found to be influenced by a variety of factors such as stereotype threat, discrimination (Conchas, 2001; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), and a lack of role models who have garnered success in academic settings. Studies suggested that students' experiences within their school environment may have dramatic effects on whether they are motivated to succeed regardless of their individual abilities or senses of efficacy (Hill & Torres, 2010). A viable challenge for educators, psychologists, and other professionals working with Latina/o students is determining what factors have the potential to contribute to strengthening motivation. Such information would be useful in building more relevant and effective school retention programs.

Academic Self-Efficacy is another robust predictor of academic achievement, school retention, and dropout. Academic Self-Efficacy refers to the degree of one's expectancy of success in school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Bandura's (2001) research on self-efficacy demonstrated that confidence in one's ability to be successful is a strong predictor of behavior and that this confidence is impacted not only by one's direct experience in the classroom but also vicariously by observing the experiences of peers who are similar demographically. This suggests that if a student is a member of a peer group or community where school failure and dropout are common, the student's own sense of efficacy may suffer as a result.

However, in addition to self-perceptions, students' perceptions of the schools they attend also have relevance for understanding retention and dropout. For example, researchers found school context has a significant relation with individual levels of academic motivation and self-efficacy through studies on perceived school belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hagborg, 1998). School belonging is defined as students' perceptions that others in the school are on their side and that they matter in the school community (Wehlage, 1989). School belonging can be affected by transitions such as the move from elementary to secondary school (Eccles & Roeser, 2009), in which students may feel less nurtured or recognized as individuals, and it can also be impacted by whether one feels that the school has respect and investment in people "like me" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Sense of School Belonging significantly predicted academic outcomes, including academic motivation, effort, and absenteeism in a sample of Latina/o 12th graders (Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005). Overall, the extant literature demonstrates that students' feelings of belonging in their school environment ultimately promote positive school behaviors.

Related to the literature on school belonging, Anderson, Christensen, and Lehr (2004) stressed the promotion of student engagement as key to preventing school dropout. School dropout theories explain how student disengagement can often result from a weakened relationship between the student and school (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009). Dropout prevention research highlights interventions that aim to promote multiple dimensions of student engagement to prevent school dropout (Archambault et al., 2009), including efforts to promote school connectedness by supporting positive student relationships with peers and school personnel (Anderson et al., 2004).

In addition to promoting student engagement and school connectedness, school professionals must also support student academic achievement to prevent school dropout. Findings from a study conducted by Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) suggested that combating poor academic achievement should be a goal of all dropout prevention interventions given that early signs of school failure (e.g., grade retention, poor grades) are often strong predictors of school dropout. Complementary to these findings, Fall and Roberts's (2012) findings suggested that student academic and behavioral engagement, in addition to academic achievement, are jointly associated with a decreased likelihood of dropping out of school in twelfth grade. All of the above findings highlight the need for comprehensive and integrative supports for students who are at risk of dropping out of high school.

Transition to High School

The most recent dropout prevention literature has emphasized the importance of the transition from middle to high school and its impact on preventing school dropout (Ehrenreich et al., 2012; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The transition to high school includes new academic, social and emotional challenges for many students. During this critical juncture, there is evidence that students from lower socioeconomic groups, Latina/os, and/or females may be less prepared to cope with these challenges and less prepared for the different expectations of a high school environment (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Ehrenreich et al., 2012). As a result, this gap in preparedness can allow students to fall behind in the ninth grade or drop out entirely (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). A promising practice to help support students' preparedness and prevent school dropout is the implementation of middle to high school transition programs (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

One example of a transition program is referred to as Summer Bridge (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Programs such as Summer Bridge take place in the summer prior to starting high school with incoming ninth graders. The programs often provide academic support and enriching summer activities (e.g., career exploration, field trips) that are meant to enhance motivation to excel in high school. Although many of these programs have not been extensively evaluated for their efficacy, providing summer courses in general as a mechanism to prevent dropout has been a successful strategy for lowering course failures and dropout rates (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999).

In a 2000 monograph, Cooper, Charton, Valentine, and Muhlenbruck conducted a meta-analysis of summer school programs at all grade levels, which included Summer Bridge programs for incoming ninth graders. They found that, overall, summer school programs improve student performance on academic achievement in that the average child who attends a summer school program will outperform between 55% and 60% of comparable students who did not attend the program. The authors argued that the overall effect of summer school would be considered average when compared to effects observed in fields allied with education and child development. That being said, the authors also provided some caveats about the characteristics of children for whom summer school programs might be most beneficial.

One interesting caveat was that summer school programs appear to have a stronger effect on the performance of students from middle-class backgrounds in comparison to lower-class backgrounds (Cooper at al., 2000). They also found that summer school programs are more effective when they included a small number of classes and students and are offered either in early primary or early secondary school. Although these meta-analytic results are important to understanding the potential impact of summer school programs, they are not necessarily specific enough to speak to the direct effects of ninth-grade Summer Bridge programs, nor do they allow for a detailed understanding of the process by which Summer Bridge programs may yield positive outcomes.

One study specifically examining the results of a Summer Bridge program for eighth graders was conducted by Stone, Engel, Nagaoka, and Roderick (2005). They examined the experiences of Chicago Public School students who attended either sixth or eighth grade Summer Bridge programs as a remedial intervention for poor previous academic performance. Their findings in general indicated that Summer Bridge students reported substantial increases in academic press and personalism (i.e., motivation and relationships with teachers) between the school year and summer. Qualitative analysis revealed that over half of the students characterized their experience as substantively better in the summer than in the school year. They particularly focused on exposure to new content, increased attention from teachers, and an improved classroom climate that helped in the mastery of material.

Eighth graders had a more positive experience with the Summer Bridge program than did sixth graders. However, one factor to note about this study is that all students who were enrolled in the Summer Bridge program were required to attend in order to attend the next grade level. Thus, eighth graders who attended the program had a significant level of academic failure such that they were required to attend these programs or they would not be able to go on to high school.

Study Purpose

The dropout rate among high school students, particularly high school students from poor and/or racial/ethnic minority backgrounds is alarming and perhaps a national scandal (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Although Summer Bridge programs appear to be generally accepted vehicles to decrease school dropout in at-risk youths, there are surprisingly few studies that examine their effectiveness and the mechanisms that may best explain their success. This paper will present an evaluation of a summer program aimed at reducing the dropout rate at a predominantly Latina/o high school that has a significantly elevated dropout rate, particularly within its freshman class. The summer program presented was developed to support incoming freshman with their transition to high school by providing them with the opportunity to improve their academic skills in preparation for the academic demands of high school and gain a greater sense of connectedness to the school, all variables associated with higher rates of school completion (Fall & Roberts, 2012). This program was believed by school administration to be a particularly effective dropout prevention effort, but no previous data had been collected at this school. Hence, the focus of evaluation was to determine in what way the program may be beneficial and for whom.

We hypothesized that a successful program would yield improvements in (a) students' attitudes toward school success and (b) the importance of school to their futures as well as (c) deepen their engagement with peers and (d) connection to the school. Using a pre/post program design, the specific areas measured quantitatively were Academic Self-Efficacy, Motivation to Achieve, Sense of School Belonging, and School Relevance. Qualitatively, the areas measured were: student expectations of high school, student expectations about the summer program, definitions of academic success, post-high school plans, and importance of a high school degree to post-high school plans.

Methods

School Context

The summer program was offered to incoming freshmen students attending a large, suburban high school located in the Midwest in the summer of 2012. According to the school's 2012 State Report Card, approximately 3,450 students attend this high school, and 60.1% of students graduate within four years. The majority of students are Hispanic (82.5%), followed by African American (9.9%) and Caucasian (6.2%). Approximately 75% of students come from low-income families, 19.7% are of limited English proficiency, and 10.2% of students are chronically truant.

Program Participants

Incoming freshman students were referred to the summer program by their junior high school guidance counselors, often due to poor performance during their eighth grade year. Of the 1,400 total incoming freshman, 90 students were enrolled in the summer program either because of problematic eighth-grade performance or because the students elected to participate to earn credits toward their freshman year. Summer program participants eligible to participate in the program evaluation included all incoming freshmen

registrants to the summer program. Of the approximately 90 incoming freshman registrants, 69 (76.7%) freshmen volunteered to participate in the evaluation study, with 64 (92.8%) of these students ultimately completing all components of the pre/post data collection. Approximately 48% of participants were female and 52% were male. Seventy-nine percent of participants identified as Hispanic, 14% as African American, 3.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 3.5% as White/Caucasian. Of the total participants, 52% were recommended to attend the summer program due to poor grades, and 48% of participants volunteered to attend the program in order to earn credits toward their freshman year.

Recruitment Procedure

In the summer of 2012, university graduate students and faculty representing counseling psychology and school psychology recruited ninth-grade participants during the summer program registration process. University students and faculty established a booth at the registration and described the study and its goals to incoming freshmen and their parents. Parents and students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and those interested in the study were asked to sign a written consent form. Given the large population of Spanish-speaking families, a university faculty member or student fluent in Spanish was present at the booth at all times. Additionally, written consent forms were available in both English and Spanish. Sixty-nine parents (out of a possible 90) provided written consent for their child's participation in the study.

Summer Program

The summer program offered to incoming freshman was a six-week curriculum that ran from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. daily. The program offered seven different courses to students for 40 minutes every day. Approximately 13 students were in each class. The subjects offered included reading, math, computer skills, life skills, career exploration, and finance, all of which were taught by current freshman teachers at this school. The reading and math components of the summer program were opportunities for students to receive more personalized tutoring to improve their reading and math skills, which was important for students who had struggled academically in eighth grade. The remainder of the courses taught were arguably less "academic" in nature but provided opportunities for students to hone their social skills, learn about potential future careers, and be introduced to financial literacy concepts. Students were not tested during the course of the program, nor were efforts made to grade students' performance. Rather, the students' credits were determined by their regular attendance. Students were given one excused absence during the summer program with no consequence to their accrual of credits. Students who missed more than one day of the program were dismissed from the program and thus earned no credits. According to the summer program administrators, no students were dismissed from the program during the year that we evaluated the program.

Although the academic emphasis of the summer program was decidedly less rigorous than the regular curriculum would be for these students, a major stated emphasis of the program was to help the students to acclimate to the new school environment and provide early opportunities for students to bond. Thus, by virtue of spending four hours a day in the summer program at the high school, incoming students were able to begin to form relationships with their future freshman teachers and become acclimated to the new high school environment in general. The program was offered in the freshman wing of the high school and required students to change classes, which simulated the actual freshman environment that they would encounter when school officially began in the fall. Additionally, although not all incoming freshman participated in the summer program, the participants got an opportunity to know approximately 8% of their future peers during the summer.

Evaluation Procedures

During the first and the last week of the summer program, student participants completed both a semi-structured interview and an online survey. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the university team and were audio-recorded. Using a technique described by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007), all interviews were transcribed and coded through an inductive process. Specifically, there was a group of eight reviewers, with two reviewers assigned to each qualitative question. These pairs independently reviewed all participant responses to their qualitative question and created initial codes. They then met with their partner to compare coding categories, continuing this iterative process until 100% reliability was established. Once all pairs finalized the codes for their specific interview question, these codes were presented to the entire research team, with definitions and examples for each code. The larger team asked clarifying questions, but ultimately the original codes held in all cases.

Student participants completed an online survey during the first and final weeks of the summer program. The online survey was hosted via SurveyMonkey, and students completed the survey using school computers during the summer program. Data from the online survey were analyzed using SPSS.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to interview program participants at the start of the program, as well as upon completion of the program. These questions were designed to reflect this study's core hypotheses. The questions asked in the pre- and post-summer program interview are provided in the Appendix.

Student participants also completed an online survey during the first and final weeks of the summer program. This survey included scales that assessed students' Academic Self-Efficacy, Motivation to Achieve, Sense of School Belonging, and School Relevance. The first variable assessed was Academic Self-Efficacy (Midgley et al., 2000). Academic Self-Efficacy, or students' perceptions of their competence to do their classwork, was measured using five items from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning survey, which has been found to have

internal reliability estimates of .77 in past studies. Items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all true* to *completely true* with higher scores indicating greater confidence in one's ability to be successful with classwork.

The second variable measured was the academic motivation scale (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Academic motivation was measured by a five-item scale ranging from *not at all true* to *completely true,* with the questions designed to assess the importance that students attribute to academic schoolwork. Higher scores reflected higher levels of academic motivation. In past studies, this measure has been found to have an internal reliability estimate of .81 (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

The third variable measured students' perceptions of the school climate. The 18-item Sense of School Belonging survey (Goodenow, 1993) was administered to assess the extent that students feel accepted, respected, and included within their school environment. Items on the Sense of School Belonging survey were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all true* to *completely true,* with higher values indicating higher levels of perceived belonging. The survey authors found moderate internal reliability on this measure in past studies ($\alpha = .78$).

School Relevance was also measured in the survey. School Relevance is defined as students' beliefs that doing well in school will help them achieve success in the future (Midgley et al., 2000). Using Midgley et al.'s six-item scale, Skepticism about the Relevance of School for Future Success, students responded to the items by saying to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "Even if I do well in school, it will not help me have the kind of life I want when I grow up." Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more skepticism. The survey authors found good internal reliability on scores on the measure in past studies ($\alpha = .83$).

In addition to the scales, the survey gathered information from the students about their prior familiarity with the school (e.g., how many family members or close friends have attended the high school), whether students had volunteered for the summer program, the students' genders and ethnicities, and their plans for freshman year and the future in general.

Research Team Members

Members of the research team consisted of one faculty member in counseling psychology (E. V.), one faculty member in school psychology (D. S.), and 12 graduate students in counseling and school psychology. The counseling psychology faculty member had been working with this school for five years. The school psychology faculty member and several graduate students had joined this counseling psychology faculty member approximately nine months prior to the start of this study and participated in informal interviews with ninth-grade teachers, school administrators, and recent alumnae of the summer program. The ideas shared by these individuals informed the construction of this study. All of the research team members shared the same general desire to reduce the school's dropout rate and to provide the school with objective data as to whether the summer program appeared to be effective based on student data.

Results

Quantitative Findings

In order to determine whether the program participants' scores on the aforementioned measures changed significantly from pretest to posttest, a paired samples t test was performed. Based on these analyses, two of the scores showed positive changes. Sense of School Belonging ($t = 3.06$, $p < .01$) and Academic Self-Efficacy ($t = 2.77$, $p < .01$) scores increased for the students during the course of the summer program. No significant changes were observed on Motivation to Achieve ($t = 1.19$, $p > .05$) or School Relevance ($t = .77$, $p > .05$). The only gender difference found in these data was on the scores for Motivation to Achieve, where girls' scores were significantly higher than boys ($t = 4.38$, $p < .05$). No differences were found between the scores of students who voluntarily attended this program and those who were mandated to do so. In addition, no significant differences were observed based on ethnicity. It should be noted that the mean responses to each of these scales were fairly positively skewed with the exception of Sense of School Belonging, suggesting that the students in general had positive views about the relevance of school, motivation to achieve, and academic self-efficacy. Correlations were also run on students' observed changes from pretest to posttest and whether or not they were required to attend the program, gender, and ethnicity (with categorical data being dummy-coded). No patterns were detected that would suggest that the program had a differential impact on students based on any demographic factors.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative questions addressed all four hypotheses, as well as addressed their expectations of this specific summer program. As such, the data analysis of these interviews was divided into five topic areas: student expectations of the summer program, student expectations of the school, definitions of academic success, post-high school plans, and importance of a high school degree to post-high school plans. A summary of these content areas and associated codes is provided in Table 1.

Student Expectations of the Summer Program

Students were asked about their expectations of the program at both the preprogram and postprogram interviews. In the preprogram interviews, responses fell into three categories: learning, getting to know the school better, and unsure. Within the "learning" category, some students focused on more concrete outcomes such as gaining high school credits or obtaining a certain grade, whereas others focused more on expanding their knowledge base more broadly. An example of the "expanding the knowledge base" response was reflected in the following student's comment:

> My expectations are to be a little better in math, and to see if they can help me out, and to understand more clearly,

Table 1. Qualitative Variables and Codes

Variable	Time asked	Codes
Student expectations of summer program	Preprogram Postprogram	Learning Getting to know the school better (positive teacher connections, positive peer connections)
Student expectations of high school	Preprogram	Positive Negative
Definition of academic success	Preprogram Postprogram	Grades Intelligence Effort Positive behavior Post-high school outcomes "I don't know"
Post-high school plans	Preprogram Postprogram	College, employment, unsure
Importance of high school degree to post-high school plans	Preprogram Postprogram	Important (reason stated) Important (no reason stated) Not important

> and to give me more of a boost for high school, and not to be so nervous.

A representative comment from the "getting to know the school better category" was:

> My expectations are for (program name) to teach me, like also show me around the high school, because yeah, I'm coming in as a freshman, so I'm pretty sure I'm going to get lost. And, also to teach me responsibilities, and how to like help me be successful in high school because they've already told me a couple things like that, so I'm hoping that that advice will keep on going, and like, so it will just help me out for high school and to get ready.

Interview responses during the last week of the program were similar to preprogram expectations, with the "getting to know the school better" category expanded to include two subcategories: positive connections with teachers and positive connections with peers. Said one student in a representative comment:

> I thought it was going to be like mean teachers, and like you had to like.... I thought there was going to be a lot more homework and stuff, and I didn't think that I was going to pass summer school, but now I was wrong. The teachers, except for one, are like really nice, and helpful, and they helped me pass, so I'm very thankful for that.

Student Expectations of the School

At the preprogram interview, all participants were asked, "What do you expect it will be like to be a student at your new high school?" Responses were coded into two broad categories: positive expectations and negative expectations, with only a few students indicating negative expectations. On the positive side, many students indicated that they expected to have more challenging coursework (and that they were looking forward to this). Some students indicated that they anticipated having positive experiences participating in high school activities such as sports, clubs, etc.

A few students indicated concerns that high school would be a negative experience socially. For example, one student said:

> I think this will be pretty calm at first, but then when people get to know each other, they are going to want to separate, but then maybe problems, but I know that if you keep to yourself, you'll be fine, and if everybody does that there won't be any problems or collides.

A few other students reported a more general feeling that high school will be a negative experience. Sample quotes reflecting this theme were, "Well I know I'm going to have problems here"; "I think it's gonna be pretty hard; I think I'm a get lost on the first day 'cause it's like really big and I don't know it well so yeah. Yeah, and I think some teachers are going to be pretty mean"; and "A small person in a big village ... scared, terrified a little bit and then need more confidence to be strong."

Definition of Academic Success

At both preprogram and postprogram, participants were asked, "What does 'academic success' mean to you? What does an academically successful student look like?" Responses to this question tended to be short and concrete, such as "get good grades" or "go to college." At the preprogram interview, student responses fell into the following categories: grades, intelligence, effort (e.g., good attendance, completing homework), positive behavior, post-high school outcomes (e.g., going to college), and "I don't know." All of these categories were present in the students' responses to this

same question at the end of the summer program, with the exception being that at postprogram no student (as compared to four students at the start of the program) said "I don't know." In a representative comment incorporating a few of these themes, a student at the postprogram interview said, "I would say they (an academically successful student) are a student who got the grades, who worked hard, and was able to get their grades to go on to college, and to get a good career." Said another student at the postprogram interview, "They (an academically successful student) would look like as if they do their work, they focus on school instead of other things that are not really important." When queried for concrete examples, this student said, "They only focus on like their classes, like math and stuff, and they don't worry what people say about them or how people feel about them."

Plans for After High School

At both the preprogram and postprogram interviews, students were asked, "What are your plans for after high school?" At the preprogram interview, the majority of students reported that they planned to attend college, with many stating that they have interest in a certain field (e.g., "I want to be a doctor," or "I want to be a nurse or a beautician"). A smaller portion of students reported that they plan to seek employment, without specifying what employment they will be looking for. Additionally, some students reported being unsure of their plans after high school.

At the postprogram interview, the majority of students reported plans to attend college, with a large percentage having a specific field of interest in mind to study. In fact, some students indicated not only wanting to attend college but wanting to achieve a graduate degree, with other students indicating a desire to "invest" in their education through attending college. As compared to the preinterview, far fewer students indicated that they were unsure of what their plans would be for after high school. Between the pre- and post-surveys, students seemed to have increased their perceived value of going to college. One student said, "My plan is to go to college, and like, invest in the career that I want to be in when I grow up."

Importance of High School Degree to Post-High School Plans

At both the preprogram and postprogram interviews, students were asked to what extent they view obtaining a high school degree as important to their post-high school plans. In the preprogram interviews, students' responses fell into one of three categories: (a) important to my plans, (b) important but can't say why, and (c) not important to my plans. Students who said that getting a high school diploma was important emphasized the fact that they needed it to get a better job, go to college, or earn more money. One student stated, "Yeah 'cause you need a high school degree to do even the smallest types of job, so having a high school degree will help you a lot but college is better."

Students who indicated a degree was not important to their plans had varying reasons. One student at the preinterview stated that getting her high school degree was not a big part of her future plans. This student stated:

> Well, I don't really know if I am that kind of person to do that stuff or to know or put in effort to get that far. So I was like no 'cause if I go that far I'm not going to go with my family generation how it used to be, 'cause if I go any higher than that (meaning going to college), there's a whole point of me breaking my generation before so I gotta stay in the little generation line.

At the postprogram interview, after talking about the positive connections with teachers she had made at this program, when asked about her post-high school plans, this same student stated, "Now by me thinking about what I'm going to do and for me to take academics from (program name), I'm thinking about going to college, finally." Indeed, in the postprogram interviews, all students except one indicated that getting a high school diploma was important to their future plans, with most articulating a specific reason why this was so. Students emphasized more money, better jobs, and continuing on to college as reasons for obtaining a high school diploma, with several indicating that they felt more prepared as a result of attending this program. One student said,

> At first I thought high school was gonna be like really hard and like I was gonna really struggle. But now that I see as long as I keep my head up and do what I need to do, I'll be able to pass.

Discussion

By examining both quantitative and qualitative results, it is possible to conclude the following about the summer program. First, it would appear that students' sense of connection with school personnel and overall sense of belonging to the school increased from pretest to posttest. Second, they appear to have obtained a clearer sense of what was required to be successful in the high school environment and gained a stronger sense of academic self-efficacy from pretest to posttest. Third, the future orientation of the students with respect to seeing the importance of graduating from high school and valuing the pursuit of higher education appears to have been strengthened from pretest to posttest. In many ways, significant changes on these factors is impressive for a six-week summer program. It is possible that the introduction the students received to high school-level course content in reading and math, for example, alleviated any fears they might have had about being able to handle the material, and the fact that they learned how important being responsible is, as opposed to being inherently capable, gave them a stronger sense of academic self-efficacy over the course of the program. Given the importance that self-efficacy plays in predicting academic success (Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004), it is a good sign that the students who participated in the summer program appear to have emerged with a greater sense of confidence about their ability to do well academically as they near the beginning of their freshman year.

Despite the fact that scores on the academic motivation survey did not change from pretest to posttest, our interview data suggest that students became clearer about their future plans and the importance of a high school diploma as it relates to future planning. Being exposed to activities such as career planning and participating in a Career Fair may have been useful in helping students understand the important role of education in successful careers. In a community such as this one, where the dropout rate was near 40%, it is possible that students at best saw a mixed picture for whether school is "worth it" prior to beginning their high school experience. By being exposed to program content about how advancing one's education is critically tied to career opportunities, the participants may have seen counter-examples that helped them to reassess their own academic motivations.

Regarding the other significant change observed from the pretest to posttest periods, the positive change in school belonging was also very encouraging for such a short program. This change may be a function of getting to know the freshman teachers, and becoming familiar with the school itself and at least a small portion of their future classmates. Feeling respected by the teachers and connected to the school environment is a highly desirable outcome of a program such as this. Multiple studies have shown the relationship between school belonging and academic outcomes. In a seminal study, Goodenow and Grady (1993) investigated this construct with Black, White, and Latina/o seventh to ninth graders and found that sense of school belonging was positively correlated with students' intrinsic value, expectancies for success, and academic effort. Notably, sense of school belonging seemed to play a more influential role for Latina/o students than for other racial/ethnic groups. More specifically, the relationship between Latina/o students' sense of school belonging and academic outcomes was strongest. Goodenow and Grady posited that the marked strength of this relationship for Latina/os might be due to their collectivist orientation.

Our findings complement and extend what was found by Stone et al. (2005) with respect to strengthening potential relationships with teachers and enhancing school relevance. Although certainly not every student left this program with a strong connection to their school and with a fire in their belly to graduate and move on to the career of their choice, their qualitative responses suggested some movement in that direction among many students. In particular, many responses were consistent with the quantitative findings of a significantly higher sense of school belonging and academic self-efficacy. Both in the coded responses and in the more subjective element of being with these same students at pre- and post-interviews, the students' collective comfort level with their school, growth in their academic self-efficacy, and ability to articulate more developed postgraduate plans was evident.

Implications for School Professionals

Given that there are relatively few published articles that examine the outcomes of school bridge and summer school programs, the results of this study contain promising implications for school professionals who work with students who may be at risk for dropping out. First, this program in many ways demonstrates that potentially large gains can be reaped from relatively small investments on the front end of preventing school failure. Many of the current interventions for youths who are at risk of not completing high school arguably occur too late, after they begin to fall behind in high school credits or miss a certain number of days of school (Cooper et al., 2000). Even when individual academic and counseling services are provided for identified students, they are often too far behind to get back on track without extensive efforts, such as being retained a grade or having to go to summer school. However, this program is offered to students *before* any signs of trouble are present within their high school careers. Granted, many of the students who participated in the program were nominated by their junior high school counselors as being at risk, but at that point in time they had not had any direct experience, positive or negative, within the high school environment per se. Oftentimes prevention programs can be more effective than remedial intervention in part because prevention services do not stigmatize students for having already failed. Furthermore, they also offer services in positive, proactive ways that incentivize students to achieve and provide them with skills to be successful, rather than punish or threaten students for already having stumbled.

A second implication of these findings is that there may be real value in having nonacademic aspects of summer school programs that may have as their ultimate goal improving academic outcomes. The factors that changed from pretest to posttest—namely, having clearer plans for the future, more value on educational achievement, and a greater sense of confidence or self-efficacy—may be related to the nonacademic courses offered during the program, such as career planning and life skills. Despite the fact that efforts were also made to help students in traditional academic areas such as math and reading, the students appear to have benefited psychologically from their time in the program, whether or not their actual abilities increased. Summer school programs traditionally focus on remediating academic core areas to the exclusion of the more typically counseling-related topics that were contained in the current summer program. School professionals who are charged with designing summer bridge programs could find important benefits in prioritizing social–emotional growth in addition to more traditional academic outcomes in their planning efforts.

Third, the findings of this study suggest that the gains in school belonging and connectedness might be attributable to the fact that actual freshman teachers and future freshman students all participated in the summer program and that the program took place in the actual classrooms and buildings that students would shortly attend. School belonging is a strong predictor of many academic outcomes (Sanchez et al., 2005) and fostering this feeling may require providing opportunities for students to begin building relationships with key school actors in a smaller, more approachable environment than will be encountered when the school year begins in the fall. This may be particularly important for students who attend large high schools, such as those who participated in this study.

Despite the fact that this school, like other large metropolitan high schools, tries to facilitate a positive eighth to ninth grade transition for its freshman by having a designated freshman wing in the school, beginning ninth grade with 1,400 other students may be a logistical hurdle that is difficult to overcome, and a hurdle that may be more important for at-risk students to have help overcoming, by having smaller summer programs such as the one evaluated in this study.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that impact the generalizability of the findings. First, there are several levels of self-selection bias that affected our sample. Not only were a relatively small number of incoming freshman represented in the summer program itself (compared to the entire body of incoming freshman), but not all summer program participants volunteered to take part in the evaluation study. Although it could be argued that the students who were in the summer program were at higher risk than average freshman for school failure, the students whose parents enrolled them in the summer program may have been more likely to persist in school than those students whose parents did not enroll them.

Second, the evaluation study relied on self-report data from the students. Given that the school did not give out grades in association with the summer program, there was a paucity of objective data on which to compare summer program participants and other students who did not participate. Given the cross-sectional nature of the investigation, more longitudinal data points were not available. For example, it is not yet known if students who participated in the program, versus those who did not, actually evidenced academic gains such as higher GPAs or greater retention rates several years into their high school experience.

Summary and Future Directions

In summary, the evaluation of this summer program suggests that there are clear gains that the students attribute to the program. Students gained clarity about their career goals, became better informed about what it takes to become a successful student, connected a high school diploma (and even college) to their own career goals, and felt more comfortable in the school and with its teachers. Measurable gains were observed in their levels of school belonging and their academic self-efficacy. Several possibilities for next steps arose from these findings. First, it would be desirable to see if a year later, students who attended the program versus a random sample of those who did not are outperforming their peers who did not attend in retention rates and GPA (or other markers of academic success). Second, if there are opportunities to modify any aspects of the program, perhaps a component could be introduced where researchers volunteered to serve as individual coaches for students who might self-select (or be nominated) for individualized sessions that might focus on their motivation to succeed in school and/or their future career aspirations and plans. During these sessions students might be connected to community or school resources aimed at providing role models or additional support for goal attainment and career development. Third, it would be interesting to explore whether other mechanisms aimed at enhancing retention (e.g., programs specific to freshman) serve to supplement the benefits that the program provides the students.

This study contributes to the literature exploring the benefits of summer transition programs for students who may be vulnerable to leaving school prematurely. Understanding the mechanisms that underlie successful support programs are vital to helping schools create and maintain structures that will support persistence in their students.

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Appendix. Student Interview Questions

Preprogram interview questions	Postprogram interview questions
• What are your expectations of the summer program?	• Did the summer program meet your expectations? Why or why not?
	• What does "academic success" mean to you? What does an academically successful student like?
• What do you expect it will be like to be a student at your new high school?	• One of the goals of the summer program was for students to leave feeling more connected to other students and teachers at this school. Do you feel that this goal was met in your case? Why or why not?
• What does "academic success" mean to you? What does an academically successful student look like?	• What are your plans after high school?
• What are your plans after high school?	• Do you see obtaining a high school degree as critical to these plans? Why or why not?
• Do you see obtaining a high school diploma as critical to these plans? Why or why not?	• Has participating in the summer program changed the way that you view high school and your goals for after high school? Why or why not?