A Bridge to a Smart Start: A Case Study of Northampton Community College’s Summer Bridge Program

A thesis presented

By

Michael J. Sparrow

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Abstract

This study sought to understand how and why Northampton Community College’s Summer Bridge program—The Smart Start program—is highly successful at helping “at-risk” students transition to college-level work. For ten years, the Smart Start program has helped more than 150 incoming students acclimate to college, persist, and graduate through a 4-day, 32-hour curriculum delivered in the summer before the first semester. Using a modified version of Pierre Bourdieu’s Social Reproduction theory, this case study sought to understand the lived experience of seven graduates of the Smart Start program through semi-structured interviews. This study highlights how the Smart Start program developed personal connections, transmitted academic capital and college know-how, provided sources of inspiration, and highlighted the differences between high school and college. The development of these four factors are integral in the success of the program, and students who complete the Smart Start program boast a fall to fall retention 23% higher than similarly situated peers who did not participate in the program. This study can provide a curricular and programming roadmap for community colleges and universities interested in helping more of their students transition successfully to college-level work and life.

*Keywords: Academic capital, first-generation students, summer bridge programs, retention strategies, community college*
This dissertation represents the culmination of years of research and writing. While the act of writing is a solitary process, producing a piece of scholarship, however modest, is surely a group effort. Dr. Krystal Clemons, a second reader and a first-rate scholar, asked good questions that encouraged me to question what I thought I knew. My outside reader, Dr. Arthur Scott, admirably jumped into this process on relatively short notice and shared both his vast institutional knowledge of Northampton Community College, the site of my study, and his tremendous expertise surrounding student success initiatives. Finally, my advisor, Dr. Lynda Beltz, deserves praise and earns high marks for her keen editorial eye, exacting standards, and inexhaustible good cheer. These three readers improved my manuscript immeasurably, and I am forever indebted to them for sharing their time and expertise with me in this process. Any errors that remain in this document are surely mine to bear alone.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study and Theoretical Framework

Twenty students, strangers at first, are sitting in a classroom in July at the invitation of Northampton Community College. Promised a crash course in college life and a hundred dollar bookstore gift card, these students represent a cross-section of the incoming class at Northampton and the greater community. Over the course of thirty-two intensive hours spread over four days, these students will learn, through the Smart Start curriculum delivered in this summer bridge program, what it takes to be successful at Northampton, or as one participant pithily described his experience within the Smart Start: “It’s an education on how to get a college education.” This Smart Start program, running for more than a decade, has an excellent track record of delivering on its promise of educating college students on how to get educated, and this study was born from a desire to examine this excellent program and illuminate how and why it has enjoyed such success.

The purpose of this project is to investigate the experiences of Northampton Community College students in a small-scale, boutique summer bridge program that targets low-income and first-generation students. Specifically, this study sought to better understand how and why this summer bridge program enjoys tremendous success in transitioning these at-risk students to the rigors of college-level work and life. Knowledge from this study could inform the work of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs professionals who seek to help students acclimate and succeed at college-level work through intentional and proactive student success initiatives like summer bridge programs. This case study employed a qualitative data collection method of semi-structured interviews in order to study and better understand how and why NCC’s summer bridge program works.
For years, what have come to be known as summer bridge programs have enjoyed a fair amount of popularity, but in recent years, these programs have become significantly more popular as schools are struggling to retain more students who are increasingly underprepared. Some studies exist that demonstrate the efficacy of the summer bridge approach, and these studies detail specific approaches that work (and those that do not work), providing a road map for schools considering a summer bridge program (Cabrera, Minder, & Milem 2013; Strayhorn 2011; Kallison & Stader 2012; McCurrie, 2009). Arguably, the reason that summer bridge programs are successful is that they target the liminal period, the transitional time between the roles of high school and college student. Transitioning students through this liminal period effectively and efficiently is critical to student success (Beech, 2011; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Cultural capital in the form of institutional knowledge and academic know-how is highly effective at helping students transition through this liminal period and into the role of college student (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Dumais & Ward, 2009). Finally, many summer bridge programs specifically target first-generation and lower socioeconomic students because these subpopulations are more at-risk academically (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Dumais & Ward, 2009; Gerardi, 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011; Oldfield, 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005). As colleges recruit more “at risk” students and struggle to retain more students from these populations, understanding what needs these students have and how to meet those needs is of critical importance to administrators in higher education.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to summer bridge programs to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem
statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework—Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital, habitus, and field—that serve as a lens for the study are introduced and explained. While Bourdieu applied this social reproduction theory to the highly stratified French higher education system and subsequent American scholars have expanded his ideas into some perhaps untenable arguments, overall his ideas and theories about the American class-informed approach to higher education, the oftentimes opaque structures and organization of higher educational institutions, and the cultural, academic, and institutional knowledge gaps inherent in sizeable populations of incoming students still hold great merit and explanatory power.

**Context and Background**

Many universities and community colleges have significant academic achievement gaps for some student subpopulations, and these underperforming students share many traits including first-generation status, belonging to lower socioeconomic strata, and a general academic underpreparedness due to underfunded and underperforming high schools. Furthermore, many students who experience difficulty academically oftentimes are struggling in their transition from high school students to college students and are caught in a betwixt and between stage in their college student identity formation (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Finally, many of these students do not possess the cultural capital necessary to understand the habitus—the rules and feel of the game—and therefore have difficulty overcoming these challenges and transitioning successfully through this liminal phase, resulting in disengagement, academic failure, and a lack of persistence (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Summer bridge programs can address all of these challenges: they can provide and develop academic capital, facilitate habitus, remediate
deficiencies, and create both mentor and peer relationships necessary to transition into the role of a college student.

According to Tinto (1993) and Ryan and Glenn (2002), a student’s academic failure is less about academic aptitude and more about the commitment of the student to the institution and themselves. Summer bridge programs can effectively address this commitment issue by facilitating a high level of academic and social integration before a student even begins his or her first semester at the college and well before the first six weeks, a critical threshold for student integration and engagement (Ryan & Glenn, 2002). With this narrow window of time in mind, colleges cannot wait and take a reactive approach, waiting for students to seek out help after they realize that they are in academic dire straits. By the end of the first semester, the die is largely cast.

If integration is largely the passive act of a student being absorbed by the college environment, student engagement is the opposite side of that coin—an active approach to interact with the campus environment. Like Tinto (1993) and Ryan and Glenn (2002), Museus (2008) ties low graduation rates not with academic misfires; but instead of campus integration, Museus sees campus disengagement as the main culprit. Museus (2008) argues that associating with a related subpopulation can lead to empowerment, and summer bridge programs can be the tool by which students begin to affiliate with like-minded students, forming informal support networks. Summer bridge programs can validate the culture of first-generation students by creating programs that celebrate that status while working toward mitigating the related effects of low cultural capital and habitus. Organizations or self-identified groups of students such as those that form in summer bridge programs can be the vehicle by which campus engagement takes place,
leading to higher graduation rates, especially among at-risk populations like first-generation students (Museus, 2008).

Considering that almost half of college campuses are first-generation students, colleges must help these students solve the obstacles standing in the way of their success (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). As compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation students studied by Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke (2011) worked more hours, had more dependents, suffered greater levels of stress, felt less prepared for college work, felt less supported by parents and guardians, and engaged less on campus. This toxic academic cocktail leads to persisting and graduating from college at lower rates (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). According to Mehta et al. (2011), three approaches best alleviate the symptoms of this toxic cocktail—programs specifically for first-generation students, living-learning communities, and interactions with similarly situated peer students. All three of these approaches occur in summer bridge programs, making them an effective and comprehensive vehicle to help first-generation students transition to college students.

In short, summer bridge programs bring the right kind of academic supports to at-risk student populations, like first-generation students, at the right time, namely before the halfway mark of the first semester when irreparable academic damage starts to occur. Summer bridge programs recognize that for many students “academic success is a product of personal and environmental characteristics as well as non-cognitive variables” (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, p. 224). Furthermore, many students, especially first-generation students, need someone who can provide mentorship, guidance through college processes, and emotional support, and summer bridge programs make those student connections to college resources proactively and early. Summer bridge programs also provide peer support, which is vitally important to academic
success (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Finally, summer bridge programs can also help to shift college mindsets out of the deficit model of academic success where students who are underperforming are to blame for their lack of achievement.

Summer bridge programs are an effective approach to get at-risk students such as first-generation students through the turbulent liminal period between high school students and college students. Summer bridge programs achieve this difficult task by taking a proactive approach, giving students the information and support they need before they know they need it. The first six to eight weeks are critical for the persistence, retention, and overall graduation of all students, but especially first-generation students, and summer bridge programs get students off to the best start possible, even before the beginning of their first full semester on campus. Since many first-generation students possess little, if any, cultural capital, lack habitus—the rules of the game and how it’s played—and therefore have difficulty assuming the role of a college student, summer bridge programs are critical in building that cultural capital and habitus necessary for student success.

Northampton Community College has run a small, boutique summer bridge program for over a decade. This modest program brings approximately twenty-five at-risk students onto campus for four days in the summer preceding the first semester in college. Counselors recruit these students individually throughout the senior year of the student, targeting first-generation and low-income students with GPAs primarily between 2 and 2.5 from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities—predominantly Hispanic and African-American students—from NCC’s eight sponsoring high school districts. During their week on campus, volunteers from the counseling department and the faculty connect these students to important campus resources such as advising, tutoring, and counseling while also seeking to cultivate
academic confidence and peer supports through one on one interactions and group activities. The success of this program is unquestioned; over the past five cohorts, Smart Start students boasted a fall to fall semester retention rate of 23 points higher than the institutional average (NCC summer bridge data, 2015). Despite these unqualified successes, NCC’s summer bridge program is underfunded and undersupported, relying on volunteerism and creative financing in order to run.

Most existing summer bridge scholarship measures success outcomes and details the “what,” “when,” and “where.” This project sought to understand why and how summer bridge programs help students transition from high school students to college students effectively by examining student experiences in summer bridge programs through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus and cultural capital theories. This project also hopes to shine a bright light on the many successes of this program in order to secure reliable resources in order to bring the program to a larger scale.

**Rationale and Significance**

Like many community colleges, my institution, Northampton Community College, has significant academic achievement gaps, and African-American students are disproportionately represented within these achievement gaps. A vast majority of these African-American students, moreover, are either first-generation or belong to a lower socioeconomic class as measured by Pell eligibility. In our most recent four-year (2007-2010) longitudinal Achieving the Dream self-study, for example, African-American students underperformed against the institutional average in completion of a college-level math course (-15%), completion of a college-level English course (-9%), persistence from spring to fall semester (-8%), and four-year graduation rates (-
8%) (NCC ATD Self-study, 2014). These data obviously suggest that Northampton, like many of its peers, is not effectively helping all students succeed academically.

The temptation exists, of course, to lay the blame on inadequate secondary school preparation, especially our local, underfunded urban high schools that a majority of our African-American students attend before matriculating to Northampton (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010). While academic underpreparedness certainly has a hand in this alarming trend, a larger issue is in play, namely students do not know the expectation of college-level work and therefore fall short of those expectations. In short, they do not know how to assume the role of college students, and this inability to transition to college students is felt most acutely among African-American students (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Our most recent SENSE data, a study that examines the critical first three weeks of a student’s academic career, supports this claim. For example, data gathered from 2007 through 2010 demonstrated that African-American students were 14% more likely to turn in an assignment late by the end of week three as compared to the campus as a whole. African-American students, moreover, were 10% more likely to skip a class in the same time period. Finally, African-American students, as a racial subpopulation, felt the least comfortable on campus and were the least likely to agree that their instructors want them to succeed (NCC SENSE data, 2012). In short, a lack of confidence and comfort with college life—in other words, a lack of cultural capital and habitus—undermine these students almost from day one.

Summer bridge programs can cultivate academic and personal confidence necessary for college-level success through intensive and high-touch academic programming. Students typically live on campus, take college-level courses, remediate deficiencies in mathematics or English when required, learn college survival skills, gain institutional literacy, and build rapport
with other similarly-situated students. They also build strong mentor relationships with college administrators and faculty, and these relationships can serve as comfortable touchstones during their critical first semester of college study. Finally, summer bridge programs articulate expectations for college-level engagement and demonstrate to new students that engagement with the college in an academic and personal sense is a keystone to academic success and the best path to graduation (Linderman & Kolenovic, 2013). Summer bridge programs boast a proven track record of success, especially in on-boarding at-risk populations prone to academic underachievement (Douglass & Attewell, 2014).

Many other ancillary benefits attach to effective summer bridge programs for both students and institutions. Because many summer bridge programs involve a remediation component, students are also accelerated into college-level work more quickly. Summer bridge students also gain critical credits, allowing students to take only twelve credits in their first full semester, which provides an opportunity to get better immersed and engaged in college programming, a hallmark of college success (Tinto, 1993). Finally, summer bridge programs drive student college completion. Colleges have a moral imperative to assist students, especially ones they reasonably infer will have difficulty, to succeed through programming designed to speed and facilitate academic assimilation. Colleges, likewise, are financially incentivized to provide academic support programming like summer bridge programs, and colleges adept at executing effective summer bridge programs are rewarded with higher semester to semester persistence rates and the accompanying tuition payments.

With all of the benefits of summer bridge programs, a surprising dearth of summer bridge program studies exist. Strayhorn (2011) laments this fact in his most recent summer bridge article where he asserts that summer bridge program empirical studies are in short supply. In this
article, Strayhorn (2011) details his study of underrepresented populations (first-generation, certain minority subpopulations, and lower socioeconomic groups) and asserts that, to his knowledge, his study is the only one of its kind—no other summer bridge studies that focus on underrepresented populations exist. Furthermore, no summer bridge articles that look at the deployment of summer bridge programs at community colleges exist, probably owing to the fact that few community colleges have dormitories, making a summer bridge program difficult to execute. Considering the demonstrated efficacy of summer bridge programs and the relative lack of secondary literature devoted to the study of summer bridge programs, it appears to be a topic that is ripe and overdue for a closer examination.

This study of summer bridge programs and their potential ameliorative effects on a lack of academic preparedness among historically underprepared subpopulations is significant because my college is both morally and economically incentivized to attempt such an approach. Northampton is one of the few community colleges in the Northeast to have dormitories and is well-positioned to run such a program in an attempt to raise the persistence rates of identified subpopulations of students who historically have experienced difficulty acclimating to academic life at Northampton and have therefore underperformed as compared to other subpopulations of Northampton students. Also, this study will help inform the efforts of other institutions as they create and develop summer bridge programs. Finally, this project took a unique approach to the study of the effects of summer bridge programs by couching this study in the theories of cultural capital, field, and habitus in an attempt to understand why and how summer bridge programs work.

Research Problem and Research Question(s)
Very little scholarship that studies the positive effects of a summer bridge program exists, and even fewer studies seek to understand how and why summer bridge programs are effective at transmitting the cultural capital necessary for students to thrive in a new “field”—a college campus. In light of the increase in “at risk” populations attending college through access-orientated programs like the recently enacted Tennessee Promise, a program that made community college education free for all citizens of Tennessee, summer bridge programs designed to help more of these students enjoy success and not just access are bound to proliferate along with the concomitant study of the efficacy of these programs. The purpose of this study is to understand how and why Northampton Community College’s boutique summer bridge program is effective in transmitting this academic capital and institutional knowledge necessary for students to understand how to survive and thrive in this unique field. This study will shed light on this successful NCC summer bridge program in order to provide a roadmap for other institutions that hope to increase the academic success and retention of their students. This inquiry sought to achieve this goal through the semi-structured interviewing of previous participants in NCC’s summer bridge program in order to understand how and why this program helped a small cohort of students to acclimate and succeed at college-level work. Specifically, this project sought to answer the following broad questions through these student-participant interviews:

1. **How did the summer bridge program at Northampton Community College provide incoming students with the institutional knowledge, assumptions, and feel for the “college game” (habitus) needed to successfully transition to the role of college student?**
2. What types of academic and personal supports work best within a summer bridge program? Why did these specific supports help transmit the cultural/academic capital necessary to play the role of a college student?

Definitions of Key Terminology

Term 1-Summer bridge program: A one to six-week program run in the summer before a student matriculates to college that addresses real or perceived deficiencies of incoming students. Primarily, summer bridge programs allow administrators and faculty to connect incoming students to campus resources and to build meaningful peer relationships of mutual support. Summer bridge programs have also proven useful in addressing academic skills competency by allowing students to either take remedial courses or credit courses in a supportive and low-stakes environment. Also, because of the high touch, personalized service provided by summer bridge programs, students also see an increase in self-efficacy, a confidence boost and momentum that carries into the fall semester (Strayhorn, 2011).

Term 2-Cultural Capital: A set of cultivated, culturally relevant skills, attitudes, assumptions, and knowledge that act “as a form of currency in the social realm” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5). Cultural capital is a resource of power that allows those who possess the right kind of cultural capital (that cultural capital that is appropriate for and aligns with the field/environment) to receive awards in the form of acceptance, enhanced legitimacy, and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1996). In this study, academic capital represents cultural capital in the college campus field (environment).
**Term 3**-Field: The field is the space or environment in which one produces, gains, and demonstrates levels of cultural capital. Alignment between cultural capital and field is critical. High levels of cultural capital in a higher education context, for example, would pay handsome dividends on a college campus, but the same type of cultural capital would yield little benefit, if any, on the floor of an automobile factory.

**Term 4**-Habitus: Habitus occurs when the cultural capital of an individual aligns well with the field that the individual inhabits. For those experiencing high levels of habitus, interacting with the environment appears effortless, and the individual just appears to belong in that environment. Conversely, when the cultural capital of an individual is out of alignment with a field, the actor will feel self-conscious and appear out of place.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Cultural Capital/Habitus—description and strengths of approach**

For first-generation students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, a massive disconnect exists between faculty expectations and student interpretations of those expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007). First-generation and lower socioeconomic students tend to have poor inferential skills as they relate to college faculty expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007). This wide chasm exists largely because incoming members of these subpopulations do not effectively transition into the role of student. A lack of cultural capital and habitus complicate and frustrate this transition to the role of college student. First forwarded by Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital is a possession of the understanding and appreciation of high culture, and the higher social status that this understanding and demonstration engenders (Dumais & Ward, 2009). According to Collier and Morgan (2007), successful students master the role of college
student, and the possession of cultural capital helps in the development of this role. These student role experts, according to Collier and Morgan (2007), are overwhelmingly non first-generation students precisely because cultural capital is necessary in the development of this role, and most of these non first-generation students receive the necessary cultural capital at home.

College success is tied not only to explicit knowledge but to the implicit understanding of how to demonstrate that knowledge, a type of college student performance. Dumais and Ward (2009) built on Collier and Ward’s theory, arguing that two conceptions of cultural capital exist: operationalized, which is the traditional definition of cultural capital as the understanding and appreciation of high culture; and strategic interactions, which is the timely demonstration and deployment of this cultural capital at advantageous times. College-educated parents inculcate their children with both the operationalized and strategic forms of cultural capital so the cultural capital exhibited by these middle/upper class, non first-generational students appears self-evident and natural, and faculty pick up on this effortlessness and frequently overprivilege these students and overestimate their academic performance (Dumais & Ward, 2009).

Taken in total, this combination of multiple forms of cultural capital, the understanding of how to deploy it, and the knowledge of college and its systems leads these privileged students to understand the rules of the game, what Bourdieu refers to as habitus (Dumais & Ward, 2009). As students with neither cultural capital nor habitus witness those who possess both, confidence erodes. Many of these students will ultimately self-select out of college because they see how effortless it appears to be for others, even if that effortlessness is pure affect and largely illusory. While a lack of cultural capital and habitus can be a significant impediment to the transition to the role of a college student, the effects of this shortage are mitigated the longer the student is in
college (Dumais & Ward, 2009). The challenge facing colleges is transmitting enough cultural capital and habitus to students to get them through the liminal period between high school and college student, preferably before the halfway point of the first semester, where irreversible psychological and academic damage starts to occur (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). As a proactive approach that targets students before their arrival to campus, summer bridge programs can profoundly empower students by providing them with the cultural capital and habitus necessary to transition effectively and quickly to college.

Pierre Bourdieu, a scholar who made his mark in modern sociological theory, conceptualized and refined the ideas of cultural capital and habitus in his 1977 work “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.” After two decades of developing both concepts, Bourdieu applied these theories to higher education in his seminal work The State Nobility. In both works, Bourdieu outlines cultural capital and habitus and describes how these concepts, both invisibly and visibly, consciously and unconsciously, privilege one worldview and set of sensibilities over another. In essence, the accumulation and display of cultural capital allows for certain members of society to be insiders with privileges above and beyond the rank and file, and colleges, according to Bourdieu, are excellent transmitters of cultural capital and cultural battlefields where insiders win and outsiders fail. “Art and cultural consumption,” according to Bourdieu, “are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 7).

Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, cultural capital, and field are critical to understand in order to comprehend the modern higher education system in the United States. Modern colleges and universities are largely conservative and are among the biggest transmitters of upper-middle and upper class sensibilities and culture, and as such, they also privilege those insiders who are
comfortable in that environment over those who are not. As a result, those students who possess high levels of cultural capital understand the habitus of higher education, feel comfortable in that environment, are perceived by faculty as “belonging,” and, consequently, typically perform better. Those who possess high levels of cultural capital or have access to it through parents, siblings, or mentors also have a better grasp of the hidden rules of higher education and the opaque structures within which they operate. On the other hand, those with low levels of cultural capital feel like outsiders, have a poor grasp of higher education habitus, have college acclimation issues, believe they do not belong, and perform poorly. Effective summer bridge programs help students with low levels of cultural capital develop the feel for the game of college in order to facilitate the transition to college. Studying how these summer bridge programs effectively transmit cultural capital and why this cultural capital helps students acclimate to college is a fruitful avenue of inquiry.

Besides Bourdieu, other higher education scholars have applied the theories of cultural capital and habitus to the study of modern colleges. While Bourdieu’s theories bubble under the surface of many studies (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011), two studies explicitly undergird their research using Bourdieu’s seminal theories. Collier and Morgan (2007) used the lens of cultural capital to understand why many first-generation and lower socioeconomic students had difficulty understand a course syllabus or discerning the expectations of college faculty, oftentimes to their academic detriment. Dumais and Ward (2009) built upon the work of Collier and Morgan (2007), stating that it was not the mere possession of cultural capital that matters, but rather the proper demonstration and deployment of that cultural capital at appropriate times that ensured student success in college work. Unfortunately, very few studies of summer bridge programs exist today (Cabrera, Miner,
& Milem, 2013; Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Kallison & Stader, 2012; McCurrie, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011), and no summer bridge study has examined the effect of summer bridge programs through a cultural capital or habitus lens.

**Critics of Cultural Capital/Habitus**

Even though most 21st century students are attending college in order to secure meaningful employment and not as an avenue of edification and refinement, college structures and sensibilities have remained stubbornly traditional, and the sociological theories of cultural capital, field, and habitus are excellent tools with which to understand the higher education environment and why some students struggle to acclimate to the rigors of college life and academics. Some weaknesses with the application of these theories, however, exist. First, what exactly constitutes the “high culture” that Bourdieu highlighted as necessary in the accumulation of cultural capital? If agreement on what is and is not high culture does not exist, how can administrators and faculty identify what to transmit? Second, it appears that conflation of cultural capital and academic preparedness is possible. In other words, are prep school graduates better at college because they possess high class sensibilities or because they undertook more challenging coursework? Or, is it possible, that the undertaking of more challenging coursework (i.e. high school work that better resembles college-level inquiry) is just another representation of cultural capital and the participation in this more challenging high school curriculum provided college habitus? Finally, some might argue that the theories of cultural capital and habitus and their application to the study of higher education are simply too fatalistic and deterministic. Post-structuralist scholars especially take issue with Bourdieu’s theories. Adrianna Kezar (2013) defines post-structuralism as an examination of how “existing practices, policies, and structures embed certain normative and dominant values” (p. ix). Post-structuralism is effective in
understanding issues of class and socioeconomics as well as shining a light on hidden assumptions and sites of oppression. Post-structural scholars seek to build the case that institutions and their visible and invisible student obstacles, not “deficient” students, are to blame for the lack of academic success among low-income students. In other words, if students do not know how to navigate a college environment then colleges should change the way they do business, not expect students to learn a foreign environment that conspires to fail them at every turn.

Individual student agency is difficult to find in any study that employs Bourdieu’s theories. Instead, students are empty vessels, and administrators and faculty fill the lucky few with cultural capital and habitus. But while post-structuralism rightly raises the question of the power of institutions to be part of the solution by changing oppressive structures that better match the cultural capital of incoming students, most administrators and faculty are not in a position to push change on the scale necessary to revamp entire college organizing structures. In other words, if field and cultural capital need to come into alignment, administrators are more likely to find success supplementing incoming student’s cultural capital than attempting to modify the field in which these students operate. Acknowledging these inherent weaknesses in Bourdieu’s theories, cultural capital and habitus are the best lenses with which to study the ameliorative effects of summer bridge programs.

Rationale

The problem of practice tackled in this research project was a lack of cultural capital and habitus among first-generation and lower socioeconomic students and the poor college achievement that typically follows this dearth of cultural capital and habitus. First-generation and lower socioeconomic students oftentimes attend secondary schools that do not prepare students
for college, academically, culturally, and emotionally. These students, moreover, often do not have access to mentors who have graduated from college and can share tips on how to acclimate and thrive in a higher education environment. This lack of access to (or possession of) cultural capital and habitus has a negative impact on student acclimation efforts and academic success, and by the end of the first semester, the damage is usually done and irreversible (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Summer bridge programs can help provide this missing cultural capital and college knowledge on the rules of the game, and this study sought to understand how summer bridge programs can help transmit cultural capital and habitus to students proactively and acclimate them to college while the chances of success are best—before the halfway point of the first semester.

**Conclusion**

First-generation and lower socio-economic students oftentimes do not possess the college knowledge necessary to succeed in college-level work, and summer bridge programs can help close the gap between these students and those who understand how to “do college.” As transmitters of culture, higher education institutions privilege upper-middle/upper class knowledge and sensibilities and those who both possess and understand how and when to demonstrate that knowledge. On the other hand, those who do not possess this form of cultural capital find themselves outsiders in a strange environment, unclear on the rules or how to play the game (habitus). Students who do not gain this habitus quickly will likely find themselves struggling to succeed and may ultimately drop out of college altogether. The timeframe to gain this knowledge is short; academic damage is done in as short a time as six weeks into the first semester (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Summer bridge programs can proactively put cultural capital and habitus in the hands of students early in order to compensate for a lack of
college knowhow, giving these students the best chance to succeed in college. This study, by
taking a novel approach to understanding how and why summer bridge programs are successful,
will allow student success administrators to craft summer bridge programs that better meet the
needs of incoming students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Over the past two decades, colleges have become increasingly focused on the academic success of their enrolled students for a host of reasons. Morally, colleges have moved away from a “sink or swim” mentality where student attrition was unavoidable and the fault of the student to a more nurturing environment where administrators and faculty work toward better supporting students in their academic and extra-curricular pursuits. Economically, student success has a profound effect on a college’s bottom line. If students are successful, they persist at the college and register for more courses, which results in more tuition money to the college. The other side of this economic coin is a form of college consumerism; students and parents are increasingly expecting higher levels of service for their tuition dollars.

Further complicating this picture are the cultural, social, and economic disparities in academic performance among different student populations. Students without college-educated parents and those from lower socioeconomic groups disproportionately underperform academically, tied largely to a diminished capacity to transition to the role of a college student (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). Many first-generation students and students from lower socioeconomic levels lack the cultural/institutional capital that aligns with the environment of a college campus, leading to habitus and the understanding of how college works. Therefore, these high school students have significant difficulties transitioning into college students, and they wind up caught in a liminal phase, stuck between two identities and unable to transition fully to a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2007). The discomfort associated with the liminal phase—mired in a limbo where they belong neither to an old identity nor to the new identity of a college student—typically leads students to disengage from social and academic life at a college and ultimately leads to a withdrawal from college (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009).
In response to both this student success campus climate shift and the disparities in achievement among students, colleges have increasingly developed academic success programming to help students acclimate to the rigors of college-level work. Intensive one-on-one and small group interventions such as tutoring, academic coaching, and intrusive advising seek to provide the tools necessary for students to transition into the role of college student and excel. Since the late 1990s, large-scale programs like First Year Experience courses and summer bridge programs that attempt to reach more students using a proactive approach have also become popular. While the approaches are different, the aspirations are the same; colleges helping students transition from high school students, through a liminal phase, and ultimately a successful assumption of the role of college students through an infusion of cultural/academic capital (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009).

This literature review examines how colleges are responding to the academic underpreparedness of so many of their students through reactive and proactive academic success programming approaches. First, an examination of why some subpopulations of students are not prepared for college-level work and how they are unable to effectively transition from high school students to college students due to a lack of cultural and academic capital that is appropriate and critical for the college environment is necessary. An overview of the myriad programs that colleges have historically deployed to help students transition through this liminal period between high school student and the adoption of college student identities follows. Finally, an extensive look into one specific academic success program that has shown great efficacy in helping students to transition from high school to college in order to better acclimate to college-level work and the related identity of a college student—summer bridge programs—concludes this chapter. Summer bridge programs bring students on a college campus in the
summer before their first semester and typically run a few weeks. Summer bridge administrators typically target three major groups for recruitment: a target population such as first-generation or low-income, students who test into developmental education, or students in traditionally difficult majors such as STEM (Sablan, 2014). During this time, these students take college-level courses, build rapport with faculty and administrators, and form cohorts with similarly situated students, frequently creating strong personal bonds, affinity for the college, and informal support networks. The development of these cohorts of similarly situated students in a largely consequence and judgment-free summer environment are especially integral to the success of summer bridge programs because many at-risk students who do not possess high levels of cultural capital feel a stigma associated with seeking the kind of help provided by summer bridge programs (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Most importantly, summer bridge programs transmit the appropriate cultural capital for the college environment or field, which leads to the development of habitus, or the feel for the game. Taken in total, all of these positive outcomes lead to a mitigation of “belonging uncertainty,” a negative mindset associated with student doubts about their academic skills and their ability to successfully acclimate and assimilate to a college campus (Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Summer bridge programs are a cost effective, intensive, and high touch approach that colleges can use to help more incoming students persist and graduate. Very few empirical studies of summer bridge programs and liminal studies in a higher education context exist, and no studies have viewed the role of summer bridge programs through Pierre Bourdieu’s lenses of cultural capital, field, and habitus. This literature review, therefore, seeks to place summer bridge programs within this cultural capital context to better understand how and why summer bridge programs are effective at helping students transition to college.
Lack of appropriate cultural/academic capital leads to difficult student transitions

Many incoming students to America’s colleges are not prepared for the academic and social challenges that await them. In many high schools, gross disparities exist between successful and underperforming schools, especially as it relates to self-efficacy, self-advocacy, and self-image. Birky (2013) refers to the underperforming districts as engaging in a pedagogy of poverty. This pedagogy stresses giving directions, monitoring progress in assignments, and punishing those who do not follow directions or who fail to make satisfactory progress (Birky, Chazan, & Morris, 2013). This secondary educational culture limits exposure to the cultural capital that students need to thrive in the college environment. Also, this educational culture does not give students the critical thinking skills and intellectual independence necessary to thrive in college-level work where rules are more fluid, assignments less prescriptive and proscriptive, and faculty less managerial.

Furthermore, most colleges tend to privilege higher social class sensibilities (Oldfield, 2007). Frankin (2014) further asserts that colleges view markers such as male, white, and middle/upper class as the hallmark of the educated. The combination of poor secondary school preparation and the cultural and social mindset on college campuses creates a deadly cocktail for academic success for the first-generation and lower socioeconomic students. Within this framework and environment, academic failure might not be objective and meritocracy could be an illusion (Franklin, 2014). Making matters worse, typically the highest achievers in this academic model land in faculty and college administrative posts, perpetuating this inequality by making and enforcing rules that mirror the college experiences, cultural sensibilities, and mindset of these insiders (Franklin, 2014). All told, some subpopulations of incoming college students face a deck stacked against them. Worse still, the myth of college egalitarianism and meritocracy
coupled with dismal college preparation and no self-awareness surrounding this lack of college preparation forces these students to blame themselves when their academic efforts fall short of their aspirations.

How do students from these underrepresented groups make sense of a college cultural context that varies greatly from their previous experiences? As stated above, many lack the metacognition, an understanding of high culture that informs college cultures, and the guidance from experienced college graduates to effectively navigate these college landscapes. Furthermore, many of these students find themselves in dialogue with radically different voices, and students in this context struggle with the “meanings, expectations, and orientations of others” (Lico & Luttrell, 2011, p. 670). In the attempt to help more first-generation and poorer students graduate, colleges cannot ignore the privilege inherent in the American higher educational system. This confrontation cannot come from the government or other outside force; rather, this movement must (and has started to) come from within the academy (Franklin, 2014). The best example of the residue of this movement is the proliferation of academic success programs focused on college student-identity formation and other intrusive academic supports designed to help students effectively transition from a high school student through a liminal stage to the role of a college student by providing the cultural capital necessary to succeed in the college environment.

**Liminality, Cultural Capital, and Habitus—Betwixt and Between Identities**

From Latin for “threshold,” liminality is a helpful concept to understand this transition from high school student to college student (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). According to Palmer, O’Kane, and Owens (2009), “the transition between one place (home) and another
The liminality framework actually covers three distinct phenomena, only one of which is the actual liminal stage. The first stage is separation or divestiture, and the hallmark of this stage is leaving one identity behind, either unwillingly (as in the case of the military in basic training, for example) or willingly such as the decision to attend college. The next stage is the liminal stage—the between or betwixt phase—marked by a lack of identity or self-concept that is in flux and confused. During this liminal phase, the divestiture of the previous identity is made plain while the subject attempts to navigate toward the new identity of college student. The final stage—incorporation—is the completion of this identity creation cycle. Students who have made it to the incorporation stage are full-fledged college students and ready to assume the role and responsibilities inherent in that identity. This identity construction is a “mutually co-constructive interaction between individuals and social structures” (Beech, 2011, p. 285). In other words, colleges, through their structures and practices, help students who are willing and able to transition to the incorporation stage of the student identity formation.

The liminal stage is one of uncertainty, ambiguity, and self-doubt. It is critical, therefore, that students transition through this liminal stage quickly and effectively or the consequences can be severe and irreparable. Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens (2009) argue that a student has six to eight weeks to feel a sense of belonging on a college campus or attrition could likely occur (p. 38). This transition through the liminal stage, if done effectively, requires constant student reassurance that they belong in college and can assume the role and identity of a college student. For the subpopulations of students under study in this review—first-generation students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—a massive disconnect exists between faculty expectations and student interpretations of those expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007).
Moreover, first-generation and lower socioeconomic students typically have poor inferential skills as they relate to college faculty expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007). This wide chasm exists largely because incoming members of these subpopulations do not effectively transition into the role of student. Beech (2011) argues that “university management has a limited capacity to intervene in the liminal space” by asserting that students believe that university faculty and administration do not understand their struggles (p. 52). This assumption is not supported, however, by the myriad programs colleges effectively deploy in order to help students transition through the liminal stage.

Intentional, proactive transmission of cultural capital to at-risk students can facilitate the transition to college-level work and the assumption of the role and identity of college students. Pierre Bourdieu, the creator of the concept of cultural capital, described it as the possession of the understanding and appreciation of high culture, and the higher social status that this understanding and demonstration engenders (Bourdieu, 1996). Where Bourdieu was eager to understand the French higher education system, subsequent scholars of higher education have taken Bourdieu’s ideas, developed them further, and applied them to the United States system of higher education in an attempt to understand why students, especially first-generation and lower socioeconomic students struggle with the transition and acclimation to America’s college campuses. Before exploring how cultural capital, field, and habitus affect college student, an in-depth exploration of these terms is necessary.

While many scholars differ on the definitions of these terms, for the purpose of this project, cultural capital is a set of cultivated, culturally relevant skills, attitudes, assumptions, and knowledge that act “as a form of currency in the social realm” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5). Cultural capital is a resource of power that allows those who possess the right kind of cultural
capital (that cultural capital that is appropriate for and aligns with the field/environment) to receive awards in the form of acceptance, enhanced legitimacy, and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1996). Related to cultural capital, the field is the space or environment in which one produces, gains, and demonstrates levels of cultural capital. Alignment between cultural capital and field is critical. High levels of academic capital, for example, would pay handsome dividends on a college campus, but the same type of cultural capital would yield little benefit, if any, on the floor of an automobile factory. Finally, habitus occurs when the cultural capital of an individual aligns well with the field that the individual inhabits. For those experiencing high levels of habitus, interacting with the environment appears effortless, and the individual just appears to belong in that environment. Conversely, when the cultural capital of an individual is out of alignment with a field, the actor will feel self-conscious and appear out of place.

Further complicating this picture are the definitions and perceptions surrounding the deployment of cultural capital are varied and continuously evolving. For example, Winkle-Wagner (2010) asserts that three forms of cultural capital exist: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital is the internalized cultural touchpoints and mores, an inward facing cultural capital. Objectified, on the other hand, is the outward manifestation of cultural capital through the conspicuous consumption of society’s markers of high culture. Finally, institutionalized cultural capital is the ways in which society’s structures reflect and perpetuate dominant cultural tastes, with college campuses being the prime target of Winkle-Wagner’s scholarship. Krarup and Munk (2014) also contribute to the nuance of cultural capital studies by their delineation of cultural capital between a real and symbolic resource. Real resources include cultural participation (opera) and cultural possessions (baby grand piano) where symbolic cultural capital deals more with affect, playing a role perceived by others as
aligning with higher class sensibilities. Whereas real cultural capital cannot be taught nor developed, symbolic cultural capital can be cultivated under the right conditions.

One point with which almost all cultural capital scholars agree is the American educational system assumes a fair amount of cultural capital (Sullivan, 2001). On a college campus, cultural capital is a power resource where students can exchange it for social rewards (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). This idea of cultural capital as currency challenges the American educational notions of meritocracy in the admissions process because, according to cultural capital theory, students who acquired high levels of cultural capital early will be rewarded by increased chances of acceptance in upper-tier colleges, where they will likely have access to even more cultural capital (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Once students arrive on college campuses, another meritocracy is undermined by a lack of cultural capital as well. According to Sullivan (2001), a high level of pedagogical inefficiencies exist on college campuses because many incoming students do not possess sufficient cultural capital and therefore do not understand what faculty want or expect, leading to poor grade outcomes. Also, students with low levels of cultural capital are more likely to have negative dispositions toward education and are more likely to self-select out of college (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

According to Collier and Morgan (2007) successful students master the role of college student, and the possession of cultural capital helps in the development of this role. These student role experts, according to Collier and Morgan (2007), are overwhelmingly non-first-generation students precisely because cultural capital is necessary in the development of this role, and these non-first-generation students receive the necessary cultural capital at home. Furthermore, college success is tied not only to explicit knowledge but to the implicit understanding of how to demonstrate that knowledge, a type of college student performance.
Dumais and Ward (2009) build on Collier’s theory, arguing that two conceptions of cultural capital exist: operationalized, which is the traditional definition of cultural capital as the appreciation of high culture; and strategic interactions, which is the timely demonstration and deployment of this cultural capital at advantageous times. College-educated parents inculcate their children with both the operationalized and strategic forms of cultural capital so the cultural capital exhibited by these middle/upper class, non-first-generational students appears self-evident and natural, and faculty pick up on this effortlessness and overprivilege these students, leading to an overestimation of their academic performance (Dumais & Ward, 2009). Taken in total, this combination of multiple forms of cultural capital, the understanding of how to deploy it, and the knowledge of college and its systems leads these privileged students to understand the rules of the game, what Bourdieu refers to as habitus (Dumais & Ward, 2009). As students with neither cultural capital nor habitus witness those who possess both, confidence erodes. These students will ultimately self-select out of college because they see how effortless it appears to be for others, even if that effortlessness is pure affect and illusory. While a lack of cultural capital and habitus can be a significant impediment to the transition to the role of a college student, the effects of this shortage are mitigated the longer the student is in college (Dumais & Ward, 2009). The challenge facing colleges is transmitting enough cultural capital and habitus to students to get them through the liminal period and into the role of a college student, preferably before the halfway point of the first semester (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009).

Problems, however, exist with cultural capital as a framework to understand American higher education. First, with the spike in college access over the past few decades, the pursuit and possession of higher education credentials are less likely to differentiate between high and low culture in the United States, as they did in Bourdieu’s study of the French university system.
(Bourdieu, 1996; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Furthermore, on a more macro level, cultural capital has the potential to be determinist and fatally so. For example, Winkle-Wagner (2010) wonders if cultural capital is a theory of domination rather than salvation (p. 81). She further asserts that cultural capital largely “does not alter domination but rather explains how domination is perpetuated” (p. 83). Krarup and Munk (2014) also tap into this debate by wondering if cultural capital raises all ships or if it reaffirms relationships—student empowerment and fluidity versus student disempowerment and stasis. The work of Tramonte and Willms (2009), however, mitigates these potentially troubling ramifications of Bourdieu’s theory by distinguishing between static—the “expression of the family’s socioeconomic advantages”—and relational—“resources and experiences” that students can deploy to “interact strategically”—cultural capital, which, the latter, reinforces and supports the ideas of student empowerment inherent in Collier and Morgan’s approach detailed above (p. 201).

**Reactive Academic Success Programs**

Colleges have taken many reactive approaches to students struggling with their coursework or with their acclimation to college. On the surface, reactive academic success programs have many strengths. Superficially, at least, reactive programs bring help only to those who need it, saving both financial resources and manpower. Reactive programs also are more direct, and their benefits tend to be more immediate than proactive programs. A student who is struggling to grasp a concept in calculus, for example, can see a tutor and get immediate assistance, and the results are usually more easily measured and assessed. Using the same example, a director of a tutoring department can run grade reports on students who received tutoring in calculus versus those that did not receive tutoring in order to measure how effective mathematics tutoring is for students. Reactive programs also tend to be intensely personal,
sometimes even one-on-one, which creates a personal touch. Finally, these reactive services are the most familiar and long-standing academic success programs on campus so they are familiar to administrators and easy to transplant and deploy. For all of these reasons, many reactive academic success programs exist on college campuses today.

Without a doubt, the most popular reactive academic success program is tutoring. Tracing its lineage back to the earliest universities, tutoring helps students grasp difficult academic material outside of class time, often in a one-on-one setting, allowing for a personalized touch. The efficacy of tutoring is unquestioned. For example, a study at East Stroudsburg University found that students who used tutoring were almost 14 times more likely to graduate from ESU than those who did not use tutoring services (Rheinheimer, Grace-Odeleye, Francois, & Kusorgbor, 2010). Tutoring, however, is not without significant issues. First, because most tutoring programs take a one-on-one approach, the costs associated with running a tutoring program can be prohibitive. Departments can sidestep the economic issues by hiring peer tutors and paying them from federal work study funds, but oftentimes the quality of the tutoring slips when compared to a professional tutoring staff. The stigma surrounding tutoring can also be a significant barrier to receiving the help (Rheinheimer, Grace-Odeleye, Francois, & Kusorgbor, 2010). The most at-risk students are either afraid to ask for help, do not possess the self-advocacy skills to seek help, or do not possess the cultural capital or habitus necessary to know that tutoring services exist and are likely free to current students (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Like many reactive academic success programs, those students with high levels of cultural capital and habitus know where and how to seek out tutoring help, and, ironically, are usually the least likely to need the tutoring assistance in the first place.
A more recent development in reactive academic success programming is academic coaching. Proponents of academic coaching assert that tutoring and counseling are insufficient to promote learning and academic achievement. Students, especially first-generation and lower socioeconomic students with low cultural capital and habitus, do not have the time management or academic skills necessary to succeed, and coaches can help provide skills such as textbook reading, note taking, and test taking strategies (Barkley, 2011). Coaching is holistic and comprehensive where coaches combine advising, academic success, and career guidance in order to help students acclimate and succeed in college (Neuhauser & Weber, 2011). Coaches seek to create an environment where students can engage in self-discovery, build self-awareness, and create self-accountability (Vander Schee, 2007). These three factors—self-discovery, self-awareness, self-accountability—can lead to self-authorship, the “concepts of reflection, planning, goal setting, and individual support” (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010, p. 27).

Studies clearly demonstrate that coaching, like tutoring, works. For example, researchers who studied students who received academic coaching at Stanford observed that these students persisted at greater rates than those that did not receive coaching. Specifically, coached students persistence rates were 5.3% higher 12 months into a coaching program than those who received no coaching (Bettinger & Baker, 2013, p. 2). Even after these coached students stopped seeing a coach, they still persisted at a greater rate, demonstrating that self-accountability and self-authorship had taken root. Coaching, however, is not a panacea. Faculty can be resistant to coaching programs, believing that it is unnecessary hand holding of undergraduates. Furthermore, colleges deliver most coaching programs in a reactive manner, relying on students to string together a few poor semesters and landing on probation before connecting the student with the coach. Oftentimes, this reactive coaching intervention is too late; the student has
accepted that they are not college material and are halfway toward withdrawal. Finally, proactive coaching programs have only limited utility and reach because underperforming students typically are passive, possess poor metacognition, and have a lack of self-knowledge (Vander Schee, 2007). In other words, these students typically do not know what they do not know, are not particularly interested in seeking out help, and would have difficulty identifying where and how to secure that help if they did become motivated enough to seek help.

A Proactive Approach to Student Success—Summer Bridge Programs

While the success of the reactive academic success programs detailed above cannot be denied, these types of reactive programs are not as effective in helping first-generation and lower socioeconomic students acclimate to college, transition to the role of a college student, and succeed academically, primarily because these reactive programs focus on symptoms and not the causes of the academic difficulties for first-generation and lower socioeconomic students. These students face unique challenges, and proactive academic success approaches like summer bridge programs meet students where they are, provide an environment where it is safe to grapple with these challenges, and most importantly, deliver academic success services that these students may not even realize that they need.

Many barriers exist for first-generation and lower socioeconomic students to acclimate to college and assume the role of college students. The lack of cultural capital and habitus detailed above in this literature review lead to some significant consequences for students in these subpopulations. First-generation students, for example, are at greater risk for early departure from college, especially in the first 30 credits attempted. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) assert that these students are under a heightened risk because they occupy multiple sites of oppression such
as social, cultural, and economic. This domination and exploitation, according to Lohfink and Paulsen (2005), is perpetuated through structures (colleges) and agency (those who run them). Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) study demonstrated the academic costs students pay in an economic context; for each $10,000 in family income, a student’s persistence rate went up by 2%. Cultural and educational goals, likewise, played a role in the persistence rates of first-generation and lower socioeconomic students. For example, if a student aspired to a degree higher than a BA/BS, the persistence rate for that student jumped by over 7% (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, social considerations play a crucial role in student persistence and success for first-generation and lower socioeconomic students. Socially dissatisfied students are less likely to persist and graduate (Gerardi, 2005). Finally, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that if a student was satisfied with their social life on campus, their persistence rates increased by almost 17% percent.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of cultural capital and habitus, first-generation and lower socioeconomic students may not understand the importance of campus engagement (Pike & Kuh, 2005). More commonly, as students begin to struggle academically, they understandably start to shed non-academic pursuits and obligations in order to spend more time devoted to their studies, inadvertently cutting themselves off from the campus, their support networks, and their best chance at academic success. Certain sub-populations of students, most notably African-American males, may actually have a net-negative support system of both friends and family who actively discourage the pursuit of higher education by the student (Murphy, Gaughan, Hume, & Moore, 2010). This well-intentioned but ill-advised approach leads to a self-feeding cycle of academic destruction.
Clearly colleges must take a structural approach to this issue, one that does not focus on the deficits and perceived academic underpreparedness of first-generation and lower socioeconomic students; instead, colleges must identify and pursue ways that they can empower and educate first-generation and lower economic students by providing them with the cultural capital and confidence needed to build their own habitus, which will allow them to push through the liminal period and assume the identity and role of a college student. Summer bridge programs are excellent vehicles to accomplish these academic success goals for first-generation and lower socioeconomic students who merely need a better understanding of how to be college students.

**History and Overview of Summer Bridge Programs**

Summer bridge programs trace their lineage to the 1960s and the Economic Opportunity Act. The decade and a half following the end of World War II saw Americans in unprecedented levels seek a college credential, largely owing to the GI Bill and the nascent Civil Rights Movement. Many of these new students were non-traditional students in an early Twentieth Century sense—first-generation and from lower social and economic strata. American colleges would no longer be the exclusive province of the wealthy and cultured as more Americans saw education as a tool of social mobility and increasingly had access to the nation’s colleges and universities.

In response to this changing educational landscape, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act into law as a part of his war on poverty. TRIO, three federal educational programs targeting at-risk and underprivileged students, came out of the Economic Opportunity Act (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The authors of the TRIO programs—Upward
Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services—recognized that student success directly tied to the educational achievement of a student’s parents (Balz & Esten, 1998). The implicit recognition was that first-generation and lower socioeconomic students needed significant assistance in navigating the college experience. Their lack of institutional knowledge was causing otherwise capable students—oftentimes motivated with high aptitude—to drop out before earning a college credential.

Consequently, the overarching goal of TRIO was to help students overcome social and cultural barriers through early interventions and lasting relationships (Balz & Esten, 1998). Administrators and faculty members were to be partners in this process, helping students acclimate to college and embrace their new role as college students. If students did not possess the level of cultural capital necessary to build a sufficient habitus, college staff and faculty would help provide it. TRIO led the way in the shifting away from a student deficit model. Today, when students fail to achieve, many college leaders view their college’s academic success services as deficient, not the students (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

With this change in philosophy in mind, administrators and faculty began to create summer bridge programs to better support incoming students who may not possess all of the tools necessary to succeed in college. Summer bridge programs typically are multi-week, intensive, on-campus programs that provide academic support, a basic orientation to the college, and informal support networks between students and students with faculty and staff. Some of the longer programs, Rowan University’s program for example, allow students to take remedial math or English courses as well as some credit offerings as a way to build positive academic momentum and confidence for the fall semester (Rowan University, 2015). As the name implies, colleges typically deliver summer bridge programs during the summer before incoming students
begin their studies. While many colleges accept any applicant who wishes to participate, most schools specifically target subpopulations that they deem at-risk, typically first-generational and lower socioeconomic students. Also, as the name implies, these programs serve as a bridge or a conduit, helping to shepherd students from high school students to college students. In essence, the overarching goal of summer bridge programs is to provide the cultural capital, support, and confidence necessary for students to transition effectively through the liminal period between high school and college student identities.

Studies demonstrate that the need for programs like summer bridge programs is profound. Academic preparation is an important predictor of enrollment and success in college (Strayhorn, 2011). Yet, a high percentage of college students are underprepared for the rigors of college-level work (Kallison & Stader, 2012). According to Strayhorn (2011), more than a third of incoming students require some level of remediation, and first-generation students are disproportionately represented in this remediation group. Students who place into remedial work have a greater challenge in transitioning to college, and longer time periods spent in remedial education is negatively correlated with degree completion (Wathington, Pretlow, & Bartnett, 2016). Summer bridge programs have proven useful in addressing academic skills competency by allowing students to either take remedial courses or credit courses in a supportive and low-stakes environment. Also, because of the high touch, personalized service provided by summer bridge programs, students also see an increase in self-efficacy, a confidence boost and momentum that carries into the fall semester (Strayhorn, 2011).

The summer bridge program at the University of Arizona—called the New Start Summer Program (NSSP)—is illustrative of the efficacy of summer bridge programs. The New Start Summer Program is a six-week summer bridge program that has served over 13,000 incoming
freshmen at the University of Arizona (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). While enrollment is open to any interested student, the NSSP focuses on traditionally underserved populations, especially first-generational and lower socioeconomic students. The program delivers an expansive curriculum that stresses both academic and social components of college matriculation, and the common thread that runs through both is personal resilience. Participating students receive instruction on study skills such as test-taking, time management, note-taking, and textbook reading strategies. Students also receive a robust campus orientation, not just geographical (i.e. where things are located) but more importantly what services the college offers (tutoring, library services, etc.) and the procedures required to access those services. By all accounts, the NSSP has enjoyed a great measure of success. According to Cabrera, Miner, and Milem (2013), participation in the NSSP is a “significant positive predictor of both first year retention and Grade Point Average” (p. 489). Perhaps more importantly, the University of Arizona realized a 10% jump in retention for participants in the NSSP as compared to those who did not participate in the summer bridge program (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013, p. 493).

**Summer Bridge Programs Build Academic Capital and Mitigate Low Persistence Rates**

The retention results attached to the New Start Summer Program at the University of Arizona are not surprising, considering that summer bridge programs address most of the obstacles that incoming students from at-risk populations face, especially the thorny issue of student engagement. The structure of summer bridge programs necessitate a level of campus-student integration consistent with Tinto’s model of student departure, which states that a student’s voluntary decision to leave a college results from:
the failure of the academic and social systems of the college or university to interact reciprocally over time so as to produce the level of academic and social integration necessary to maintain the enhance that student’s commitment to the institution (Ryan & Glenn, 2002, p. 298)

According to Tinto (1993) and Ryan and Glenn (2002), a student’s academic failure is less about academic aptitude and more about the commitment of the student to the institution and themselves. Summer bridge programs can effectively address this commitment issue by facilitating a high level of academic and social integration before a student even begins his or her first semester at the college and well before the first six weeks, a critical threshold for student integration and engagement (Ryan & Glenn, 2002). With this narrow window of time in mind, colleges cannot wait and take a reactive approach, waiting for students to seek out help after they realize that they are in academic dire straits. By the end of the first semester, the die is largely cast.

If integration is largely the passive act of a student being absorbed by the college environment, student engagement is the opposite side of that coin—an active approach to interact with the campus environment. Like Tinto (1993) and Ryan and Glenn (2002), Museus (2008) ties low graduation rates not with academic misfires, but instead of campus integration, Museus sees campus disengagement as the main culprit. Museus (2008) argues that associating with a related subpopulation can lead to empowerment, and summer bridge programs can be the tool by which students begin to affiliate with like-minded students, forming informal support networks. Summer bridge programs can validate the culture of first-generation students by creating programs that celebrate that status while working toward mitigating the related effects of low cultural capital and habitus. Organizations or self-identified groups of students such as those that
form in summer bridge programs can be the vehicle by which campus engagement takes place, leading to higher graduation rates, especially among at-risk populations like first-generation students (Museus, 2008).

Considering that almost half of college students are first-generation students, colleges must help these students solve the obstacles standing in the way of their success (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). As compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation students studied by Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke (2011) worked more hours, had more dependents, suffered greater levels of stress, felt less prepared for college work, felt less supported by parents and guardians, and engaged less on campus. This toxic academic cocktail leads to persisting and graduating from college at lower rates (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). According to Mehta et al. (2011), three approaches best alleviate the symptoms of this toxic cocktail—programs specifically for first-generation students, living-learning communities, and interactions with similarly situated peer students. All three of these approaches occur in summer bridge programs, making them an effective and comprehensive vehicle to help first-generation students transition to college students.

In short, summer bridge programs bring the right kind of academic supports to at-risk student populations like first-generation students at the right time, namely before the halfway mark of the first semester when irreparable academic damage starts to occur. Summer bridge programs recognize that for many students “academic success is a product of personal and environmental characteristics as well as non-cognitive variables” (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, p. 224). Furthermore, many students, especially first-generation students, need someone who can provide mentorship, guidance through college processes, and emotional support, and summer bridge programs make those student to college resources connections proactively and
early. Summer bridge programs also provide peer support, which is vitally important to academic success (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Finally, summer bridge programs can also help to shift colleges out of the deficit model of academic success where students who are underperforming are to blame for their lack of achievement.

Conclusion

Summer bridge programs are an effective approach to get at-risk students such as first-generation students through the turbulent liminal period between high school students and college students. Summer bridge programs achieve this difficult task by taking a proactive approach, giving students the information and support they need before they know they need it. The first six to eight weeks are critical for the persistence, retention, and overall graduation of all students, but especially first-generation students, and summer bridge programs get students off to the best start possible, even before the beginning of their first full semester on campus. Since many first-generation students possess little, if any, cultural capital, lack habitus—the rules of the game and how it’s played—and therefore have difficulty assuming the role of a college student, summer bridge programs are critical in building that cultural capital and habitus necessary for student success.

With all of the benefits of summer bridge programs, summer bridge programs have not caught the attention of researchers and a surprising dearth of summer bridge program studies exist. Strayhorn (2011) laments this fact in his most recent summer bridge article where he asserts that summer bridge program empirical studies are in short supply. In this article, Strayhorn (2011) details his study of underrepresented populations (first-generation, certain minority subpopulations, and lower socioeconomic groups) and asserts that, to his knowledge,
his study is the only one of its kind—no other summer bridge studies that focus on underrepresented populations exist. Furthermore, no summer bridge articles that look at the deployment of summer bridge programs at community colleges exist, probably owing to the fact that few community colleges have dormitories, making a summer bridge program difficult to execute. Considering the demonstrated efficacy of summer bridge programs and the relative lack of secondary literature devoted to the study of summer bridge programs, it appears to be a topic that is ripe and overdue for a closer examination.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Summer Bridge programs, one to five week programs that focus on helping students get a head start on college by providing exposure to college in the summer before the first semester, are gaining popularity as an enrollment and retention strategy among both two and four-year institutions. Most existing Summer Bridge program scholarship measures success outcomes and details the “what,” “when,” and “where” of Summer Bridge programs (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). While a small number of two and four-year schools have summer bridge programs nationally, the development of summer bridge programs with solid theoretical underpinning is crucial to ensure that these efforts are providing as much critical assistance to students as the creators of these programs intend. Without understanding why and how Summer Bridge programs work, however, schools undertaking these programs may not craft sound approaches to helping incoming summer students make the transition to the role of college student efficiently and effectively. In a broad sense, I am interested in examining how and why Summer Bridge programs help empower students to transition from high school to college students through the intentional transmission of cultural/academic capital and habitus to these incoming students.

Northampton Community College has a small, boutique Summer Bridge program that boasts impressive persistence and transfer/graduation results for a small handful of students (approximately 20) each summer. For my study, I explored how and why this particular Summer Bridge program is so effective in helping these students transition to the role of a college student within the context of Northampton Community College. Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:
3. How did the summer bridge program at Northampton Community College provide incoming students with the institutional knowledge, assumptions, and feel for the “college game” (habitus) needed to successfully transition to the role of college student?

4. What types of academic and personal supports work best within a summer bridge program? Why did these specific supports help transmit the cultural capital necessary to play the role of a college student?

According to Creswell (2013), a case study “is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the case(s)” (p. 100). With this guidance in mind, I chose a case study because, in many ways, my research topic, interest, and scope are the hallmarks of this approach. I sought to answer the “why” and “how” of Summer Bridge program success, which is a critical component of a case study (Yazan, 2015). Baxter and Jack (2008) also state that a case study approach is appropriate when a researcher believes that understanding context is critical to the study. Finally, I created a study with clear boundaries—a small number of students participating in a Summer Bridge program at Northampton Community College—and the case study approach is an excellent candidate for studies within specifically “bounded systems” (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, and Robertson, 2013, p. 1267). I undertook an instrumental case study approach that sought to understand the broader implications of Summer Bridge programs nationally through a focused and in-depth study of one Summer Bridge program at Northampton Community College.

Qualitative Research Approach
In this research project I applied a qualitative research approach. A qualitative study has many hallmarks that make it a logical choice to use in the study of summer bridge programs. First, a qualitative approach seeks to couch a study in the natural setting of the individuals or program under consideration. By studying individuals in their natural setting, a qualitative study allows for a direct and authentic observation as opposed to quantitative studies that oftentimes pull participants into a laboratory and outside of their environment. Qualitative studies also stress open-ended questions that allow for a deep description of events in the direct words of the participants instead of filtering those experiences through a survey instrument or an aggregation of data. Researchers are also “key instruments” in a qualitative study; direct interactions and interpretations forwarded by the researcher are an integral component of the qualitative study process (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Consequently, researchers must not only acknowledge their biases, but in the case of certain qualitative approaches—critical theory approaches, for example—researchers embrace their biases and role as advocate. While both quantitative and qualitative researchers must be mindful of positionality concerns, of course, the role of positionality plays a more profound role in a qualitative study, although this role does not stamp out the value of a case study or qualitative research generally (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Qualitative studies also rely heavily on both inductive and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning—identifying patterns and building interpretations from the specific to the abstract, from individual to group—is critically important in the process of meaning making in a qualitative study. Reversing this inquiry, however, is equally important by checking these abstract, group inductions reflexively against the specific data in a reiterative process that ensures that the data interpretation is proceeding accurately and responsibly. This inductive and deductive recursive process oftentimes leads to what Creswell (2013) referred to as an “emergent
design.” Emergent design acknowledges and accepts that the study may evolve radically over time and in unanticipated ways, and qualitative researchers should embrace this reality.

Perhaps the most important aspects of a qualitative study are that participant’s experiences are privileged first, and qualitative studies use open-ended descriptions of these experiences to take a holistic approach to understanding a particular phenomenon. While researchers cannot effectively divorce themselves from a qualitative study, qualitative researchers must privilege the lived experiences as described by the actors themselves over all other sources of data. Qualitative studies seek to explain events, programs, or experiences in the direct words of those who lived those experiences, drawing on direct quotations where appropriate to fully capture the experience. By allowing participants to describe their own experiences in their own words in an open-ended format with only minimal guidance from the researcher, qualitative researchers can better facilitate a holistic approach and understanding to the study in question as opposed to the typical quantitative approach that oftentimes fits participant experiences within an existing structure such as a survey. With these many benefits in mind, taking a qualitative approach to the study of summer bridge programs is the best way to understand this important program.

Fitting within the qualitative tradition, I crafted this project in a constructivist-interpretivist approach to meaning making. The constructivist-interpretivist approach assumes that no single, objective reality exists, but rather individuals engage in crafting individual realities based on perspective, perceptions, and precedent. Research conducted under this paradigm takes a hermeneutical approach that recognizes that meaning is “hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). In the context of this research project, the interview questions helped participants achieve this deep reflection in order
to make individual meaning making manifest. Through this interviewing approach, researcher and participant co-construct meaning through the act of dialogue and subsequent interpretations of that dialogue. In essence, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm asserts that reality cannot be divorced from the subjective experience of individual actors interacting with their environment. In other words, no objective reality exists to either prove (positivist) or disprove (post-positivist), and reality is constructed solely through everyone’s lived experience. Due to the highly individualist nature of constructivism-interpretivism, the perspective gleaned from this approach is both idiographic and emic (Ponterotto, 2005). Idiographic approaches privilege the individual and seek to understand individual actors as “unique and complex” and the writing of idiographic studies are typically very detailed and do not lend themselves easily to broader generalizations (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). Similarly, emic components of constructivist studies focus on “constructs or behaviors that are unique to an individual” as opposed to etic characteristics that transcend individual experience (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). For this particular study of individual experiences in a summer bridge program, taking a qualitative approach using a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm made the most sense, and using a case study approach to attempt to construct this lived, individualist reality provided the best chance to meet these research goals.

Researchers developed the case study approach in contradistinction to ethnography. While ethnography sought to understand how a culture worked, it did not allow for a more granular understanding of individual experience effectively. The case study approach, by comparison, allows the “in-depth understanding of a single case” or the exploration of “an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Case studies are versatile, and researchers can use this approach in either a qualitative or quantitative study (Yin,
The case study approach, of course, begins with the identification of a case, which can be a group of people, an organization, or a project. The key to the case study is its bounded, contextual nature; it should rest within certain times or places and have clear limits (Yin, 2014). The closeness of the researcher to the study and its context is important in providing a nuanced description of the phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The intent of the study is also critical to the case study approach. A case study can seek to illustrate a unique case (intrinsic case) or it can explore a particular issue by choosing a case or cases that best highlight the problem under study (instrumental case) (Creswell, 2013). The use of theory can be critically important in a case study, as it facilitates the transferability of the singular case to different or larger groups (Yin, 2014).

Significant challenges exist, however, within the case study approach. Some critics have criticized the case study approach because it lacks scientific rigor, and in many cases, the results are not generalizable to contexts outside of the study in question (Noor, 2008). Researchers can also find difficulty in placing proper boundaries in their study; without proper boundaries, the case study can run the risk of being overly broad and unwieldy (Creswell, 2013). Many case studies do not have clear and clean beginning and ending points, and researchers can struggle with setting these effective bookends to keep their projects manageable (Creswell, 2013). Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest using time and place, time and activity, or definition and context to set effective boundaries to a case study (p. 546). Baxter and Jack (2008) also cite difficulties in writing reports related to case studies because the narrative focus can get lost in the “mounds of interesting data” that are ultimately not related to the project but yet researchers feel compelled to include (p. 555).
Participants

I attempted to recruit approximately 10-12 Northampton Community College students who participated in NCC’s Summer Bridge program in 2014 or 2015. My rationale for recruiting 10-12 students was I believed that 10-12 students would yield 7-8 students who participated in the study; the extra students allowed for some attrition in the early stages of the study. I chose to target only the 2014 and 2015 students because they were the easiest to locate, have the strongest ties to the college, and the best recollections of their experiences. Originally I planned to exclude all NCC students who did not participate in the 2014 or 2015 Summer Bridge cohorts from the recruitment efforts, but one student from the 2013 cohort heard about this study and requested to participate. Every student in this study was between the ages of 19-23. Every student was low-income as demonstrated by Pell Grant Title IV eligibility, and every student but two were first-generation students. The disproportionate representation of low-income and first-generation students is this study was not surprising because the Smart Start program at NCC stresses these student characteristics during the recruitment process.

Procedures

After receiving Northeastern’s IRB approval, I contacted the two coordinators of the Summer Bridge program in order to identify the participants in the past two program cohorts. After receiving the rosters from the past two cohorts, I contacted these participants by e-mail in order to identify willing candidates to participate in the study. Once I had enough students for the study, I scheduled meetings with the students to describe the study and solicit their participation in the study. During these initial conversations, I informed each potential participant that they would receive two ten-dollar gift cards for participating in the study, one after the initial interview and the second upon completion of the subsequent member verification of their
interview transcript. Once I had received seven firm commitments, I ceased my recruitment efforts.

I asked each member of the study to participate in an oral interview of approximately one hour at a location mutually convenient for both the participant and me. The questions posed during this interview revolved around the student’s experiences and impressions of the Summer Bridge program at NCC. After the transcription of these interviews, I asked each student to participate in a 30-minute follow-up interview in order to verify the accuracy of the transcription and to clarify any ambiguity in the transcript. I recorded each interview using two separate devices—a digital recorder and an iPhone—in order to preserve the record and ensure redundancy in the event of a technical malfunction in one of the devices. I offered to document the interviews manually in the event that a student objected to being recorded, but no student accepted this offer. Once I completed all of the interviews, I sent the recordings to a transcription service, and when I received these transcripts, I used MaxQDA, a qualitative data managing system, to code the data.

**Data Collection**

A case study seeks to understand the why and how of a particular phenomenon embedded within a specific context. In my particular case study, I want to understand how and why Summer Bridge programs help incoming high school students transition effectively to the role of college students. A bit more specifically, I sought to understand if the Smart Start program provided meaningful transition assistance to these incoming students, and, if the program did, how it provided these students with the institutional knowledge, assumptions, and feel for the “college game” needed to successfully transition to the role of college student. To achieve this goal, giving voice to the individual participants in Northampton Community College’s Summer
Bridge program is paramount. I used semi-structured interviews with Summer Bridge participants from the previous two cohorts. This approach allowed student participants to describe in their own words how and why they felt the Summer Bridge program facilitated this critical transition to the role of college student. I used students from the previous three year’s cohorts because I thought some perspective and reflection on the experience would yield a richer description than relying on those students who recently participated and may not yet possess the metacognition necessary to fully process their experiences. I also examined the guiding philosophy of the program as well as studying all documents related to the execution of the weeklong program.

Data Analysis

Since my primary data collection technique was interviews, coding was my primary method of analysis. According to Creswell (2013), the primary steps in coding the data are: “reducing the data to meaningful segments and assigning names, combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data” (p. 180). Creswell (2013) describes a data analysis spiral where after data is collected and managed, a researcher then reads, describes, classifies, interprets, and finally represents findings (p. 183). This spiral represents a linear yet reiterative process of data interpretation, meaning making, theory refinement, and reporting (Eisenhardt, 1989). A researcher enters this spiral after data collection and organization. From this early step, the researcher enters the reading stage where he/she primarily relies on the writing of analytic memos to help provide order and some tentative ideas regarding interpretation. Key concepts hopefully emerge during this stage that will inform the next step, interpreting the data. Codes, the aggregation of text into smaller groups of related information, is the hallmark of this step. A researcher can then take similar codes and place them
into themes or “dimensions of information, and researchers should strive to reduce their number of research codes down to five to seven themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). Researchers need to take caution, however, not to get too granular with the coding process, opting for too many discrete codes instead of looking to consolidate themes where appropriate (Yin, 1981). These themes inform the interpretation phase of the research where the researcher will examine the themes and attempt to organize these themes into larger units of abstraction so the researcher can make sense and draw meaning from the assembled data.

**Ethical Considerations**

Upon meeting each participant for the first time, I described the goals of research generally and the specific goals of this research project. I then explained the role of the individual participants in this study, namely providing a description of their experiences and impressions of NCC’s Summer Bridge program and how these descriptions would lead to a better understanding of how and why this program is exceptionally successful. I then walked each participant through the informed consent document, encouraging each participant to ask any questions he/she may have. After both the participant and I were satisfied that the participant understands the undertaking, I asked the participant to sign and date the document. I stressed after the signing of the document that the participant may withdraw consent at any point and end their participation in the study.

I made every reasonable effort to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. I used a pseudonym on all electronic files for each participant. At no time did the participant’s real name appear in any transcription or notes. I kept the key that linked pseudonyms to participants in hard copy, separate from my office and laptop, and locked in a drawer. All electronic files were saved under the pseudonym and placed in a password-protected folder off of the desktop under a
fictitious name known only to me. The researcher and the Primary Investigator were the sole people with access to any of these electronic or paper documents, and the data collected during the interviewing process was used for this specific research project.

**Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is paramount, but can be more difficult to achieve than in quantitative studies. In qualitative studies, researchers cannot realize quantitative study concepts of validity and reliability as easily or effectively, leading some positivist quantitative practitioners to question the appropriateness of taking a qualitative approach. Nevertheless, researchers can demonstrate a high level of trustworthiness in a study. Shenton (2004) detailed four criteria that are indispensable to a researcher hoping to demonstrate that a qualitative study is trustworthy: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Shenton (2004) argues that credibility seeks to answer the question of how closely do the conclusions in a study mirror reality. According to Shenton (2004), researchers can take many steps to prove that a qualitative study is credible. First, a researcher must be intimately familiar with the culture within which his or her study resides in order to fully capture the experienced reality of the participants. Researchers can further claims of credibility by taking random samples of participants in order to avoid selection bias, and researchers should give the opportunity for people to refuse to participate in the study. Triangulation, the use of varied sources, can also help to mitigate claims that a study does not accurately reflect reality. Iterative questioning, a process by which the interviewer asks the same question in different ways, can uncover untruthful respondent answers. Finally, member checks allow participants to clear up
ambiguity and correct imperfect transcriptions. All of these techniques can help a researcher prove high levels of credibility in a qualitative study.

Transferability is another critical component in evaluating the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Many scholars argue that transferability does not and cannot exist in a qualitative study because of the singular nature of the phenomenon studies, but recent scholars of qualitative studies have since debunked that myth. First, a researcher seeking transferability must present a clear and detailed rendering of both the environment of the study and the study itself so a reader understands both fully. By providing enough background and study detail, the researcher can provide enough information to allow readers to draw appropriate comparisons with other studies. In some cases, multiple research studies are similar enough that a case survey approach is appropriate, where a subsequent researcher can study multiple case studies and generalize from their individual, specific findings (Yin & Heald, 1975).

The third component of a trustworthy qualitative study, dependability, seeks to demonstrate that if a subsequent researcher performed the same study in roughly the same context, then that researcher could reasonably expect to observe similar results. To achieve a high level of dependability, a research must provide enough detail so a subsequent researcher could understand the project well enough to replicate it. The handmaiden of this sufficient detail is transparency. A qualitative researcher must not hold back information but instead must divulge the entire extent of the study, even those stubborn pieces of evidence that seem to contradict or confound.

Confirmability is the fourth and final essential component to prove trustworthiness in a qualitative study. The analogue to confirmability in a quantitative study is objectivity, the idea that the researcher is a detached and dispassionate observer and recorder of information with no
cheering interest in the outcome nor preconceived biases or prejudices that could potentially taint the findings. This level of detached objectivity is impossible in a qualitative study, and in certain cases, undesirable. Instead, in order for a qualitative researcher to achieve confirmability, the researcher must explicitly state his or her biases and predispositions in the form of a positionality statement.

For my study, I buttressed the credibility of my study by grounding my study firmly in the culture of the summer bridge program and the college generally. I also sought to get a good cross section of participants, and I ensured that all participants understand that they do not have to participate in the study as a consequence of their enrollment in the summer bridge program. I also conducted thorough member checks as a part of the interview protocol to ensure that I captured the words and experiences of the participants accurately. I addressed the transferability of the study by providing enough of a context and background that readers will be able to draw parallels with other studies. This study was dependable because I detailed, in exhaustive terms, the steps I took in the research process, ensuring transparency and reliability. Finally, I addressed the confirmability of the study by placing my positionality front and center in both the research and the written report.

**Limitations**

As with any study, limitations exist in the ability of this research project to accurately capture the reality of the lived experiences of these participants. First, the size of the participant pool is approximately fifty students and particularly small, raising issues of typicality. Moreover, the method of participant selection might lead to selection bias where those students who had the most positive experiences might be the most likely to offer their experiences in interviews, which could skew the results in unintended ways. Transferability of results, likewise, is a concern. Very
few community colleges have a summer bridge programs organized like NCC’s, so it might be
difficult to draw precise parallels between institutions. Researchers, especially quantitative
researchers, also criticize the case study approach, attacking its lack of rigor or the difficulty of
generalizing to broader implications (Yin, 2014). Also, the use of social reproduction and
cultural capital theories have limitations and may be an imperfect lens by which to view summer
bridge programs although the selection of an appropriate theoretical framework can help keep a
case study narrative focused and tightly written (Yin, 1981).
Chapter 4: Findings

Overview of Project

The purpose of this case study was to investigate, describe, and understand the experiences of Northampton Community College students in a small-scale, boutique summer bridge program that targets low-income and first-generation students. Specifically, this study sought to demonstrate how and why this summer bridge program—the Smart Start program—enjoys tremendous success in transitioning these at-risk students to the rigors of college-level work and life. To this end, this study employed a qualitative data collection method of semi-structured interviews in order to study and better understand how and why NCC’s summer bridge program works through the eyes of students who participated in the program. This chapter begins with an overview of Northampton Community College’s Smart Start program, a summer bridge program that brings transitioning high school students to campus for a week in the summer before they start their first semester at NCC. This chapter then transitions into a discussion of how the interviews were organized and conducted. The transcription and interview coding protocol follows. Next, brief biographies of the seven student participants are provided to contextualize the interviewees. Finally, an in-depth exploration of each of the four emergent themes from the interviews highlight the lived experiences and intellectual and personal takeaways of the seven participants of NCC’s Smart Start program.

Overview of Northampton Community College and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Nestled in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains, Northampton Community College has educated the residents of Northampton and Monroe counties as well as residents outside of the area for almost fifty years. Boasting an enrollment of
approximately 12,000 full-time and 25,000 part-time and continuing education students spread over three physical campuses and online, NCC delivers over one hundred degree and certificate programs ranging from liberal arts to allied health to applied technology. NCC is one of only a handful of America’s 1,200 community colleges to have residence halls, and NCC routinely sends transfer students to some of the nation’s most prestigious universities. Notwithstanding these niche markets, NCC’s primary mission is to provide low-cost, high quality education to students for whom a college education seemed out of reach due to socioeconomic, cultural, or other barriers to college. While most community colleges focus on access—anyone with a high school diploma or an equivalency can attend—NCC has always equally focused on student success, serving as a stakeholder to help students not only access an education but also to facilitate matriculation through a student’s educational program to ensure more students get what they came to NCC to earn—a college credential.

The main campus of NCC, which hosts an overwhelming majority of NCC’s students, is located in Bethlehem, a city of approximately 125,000 citizens in eastern Pennsylvania on the New Jersey border. Bethlehem is a significant part of the Lehigh Valley metropolitan area, which covers Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton, and the overall population of the Lehigh Valley is upward of 500,000 people, making it the third biggest metropolitan area in Pennsylvania after Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. In addition to NCC, the Lehigh Valley boasts over a dozen colleges and universities, from regional state schools to colleges with national reputations for academic excellence. The Lehigh Valley area has been diversifying economically and racially over the past few decades as the opening of the national interstate I-78 has created new and easy access from the region to northern New Jersey and New York City. Despite this increase diversification, Northampton County is overwhelmingly middle class and white according to the 2010 Census
Interestingly, the diversity data at NCC demonstrates a significant level of diversity in these metrics when compared to the county NCC serves. When compared to the 2010 Northampton County Census, NCC is more than twice as diverse racially/ethnically and a majority of NCC’s students are Pell Grant eligible, a reliable metric to predict low-income status among students (Northampton Community College Fact Sheet, 2017).

**Overview of Smart Start Program**

Started in 2008 in an attempt to help a small cohort of at-risk students better acclimate to NCC and persist in their studies by providing an extended orientation to college through meaningful interactions with faculty, the Smart Start program at Northampton Community College is a 4-day, 36-hour summer bridge program for 20-25 incoming first year students that is run once each summer. The two administrators responsible for the program, Elba Carides and Beatriz Sanabria, who run the program entirely from start to finish, are volunteers, although the Dean of Students does give both release time to organize and execute the program. Elba and Bea advocate for resources, schedule outside speakers, set the agenda, and organize the events for the week. They are also responsible for actively recruiting students into the program, typically targeting first-generation students from low-income families who identify racially/ethnically as underrepresented subpopulations at NCC who also typically have a GPA between 2 and 2.5. In pursuit of their recruiting goals, Elba and Bea reach out to teachers, guidance counselors, and principals at local high schools to identify students with high potential but low resources and support. After identifying approximately thirty to forty students, Elba and Bea contact each student through a mailing that invites the student to apply for the program. In addition to the promise of a program that will aid in their acclimation to college, the mailing also guarantees $100 toward textbooks for any student who attends and completes the Smart Start program.
The Smart Start program at Northampton Community College has run since 2008 and boasts impressive results in student retention and graduation/university transfer. The Smart Start program initially grew out of a Pennsylvania funded student success program called ACT 101, a program at NCC that focused on providing intrusive and proactive academic and personal supports to “at-risk” students like first-generation and students from underrepresented racial/ethnic populations. In Pennsylvania, ACT 101 has enjoyed decades of success in helping economically disadvantaged students reach their academic goals through in-semester supports, but the program is largely reactionary, helping students acclimate only after they have entered the NCC pipeline. Due to the reactionary approach of the program, the supports were oftentimes too late to save a student who was struggling to acclimate and assimilate to NCC. An opportunity existed for a proactive support for these at-risk students, and the administrators of this nascent Smart Start created a 4 day, 32-hour summer program that sought to invite students to arrive early on campus to orient and assimilate them to NCC’s campus before the start of fall courses. Specifically, these early administrators focused the program on six major competencies/topics that they felt were critical to a student’s successful transition to college: financial aid, time management, study skills, connections to faculty, understanding the college environment, and self-discovery/knowledge. Armed with this new curriculum, the Smart Start administrators contacted guidance counselors from local high schools, seeking to identify students who met their “at-risk” criteria—first-generation, low income, underrepresented racial/ethnic subpopulations—who would best benefit from this intrusive, proactive approach. The high school guidance counselors enthusiastically embraced the concept and thus began a decade-long, mutually beneficial relationship between the NCC Smart Start administrators and the counselors at the local high schools. They capped the initial cohort at twenty students to ensure personalized
attention, and in future years, the number of students participating in the Smart Start have vacillated between fifteen to twenty-four, depending on counselor referrals and interest in the program from the students nominated by the guidance counselors. The itinerary from last year’s Smart Start is illustrative and representative of past efforts and includes MBTI assessment, study skills training, inspirational/motivational conversations, a campus tour, lectures covering college academic orientations, and various visits to critical college offices like advising, counseling, and financial aid.

Due to retirements, the administration of the program has changed hands a few times since its inception nine years ago, and the two administrators currently responsible for the Smart Start program are Beatriz Sanabria and Elba Carides. Bea and Elba both work as full-time, tenure-track professors in the counseling department—counselors who have teaching responsibilities (primarily in developmental education and college success) in addition to their counseling duties—who volunteer their time to run the Smart Start program because they deeply believe in the mission of the program. Their responsibilities in the program run the gamut from advertising to recruitment to the actual delivery of the program, and the execution of such a successful program is all the more impressive because the Smart Start is currently unfunded and unstaffed formally, leading Elba and Bea to cobble together funding from various departments scattered across the college.

The Smart Start Program Administrators—Elba Carides and Bea Sanabria

Emigrating to the United States from Costa Rica at the age of 12 with only her mother and low prospects, Bea has been a licensed social worker since 2005 and has worked at NCC since 2013 as a counselor and Alcohol/Drug counselor. When Bea and her family arrived in the United States in 1988, her mom had one year of experience living in the United States, and Bea
spoke very little English. Her family went from belonging to a majority to becoming a minority overnight. Bea describes her early inability to speak English as having a bandage covering her mouth; she knew what she wanted to convey, but did not know how to say it. Bea detailed her difficulties in high school as an immigrant and a first-generation student and American. Even though she attended a private high school that boasted exceptionally high college attendance rates for graduates, Bea does not remember being asked where she was intending to apply for college. After graduation, she attended a local community college and felt adrift and disconnected from the college. Due to the multiple identities she possessed—immigrant, poor, inner city, minority, first-generation—Bea, on paper, had all of the necessary ingredients to fail. Bea believes that if something like the Smart Start program existed for her, she would have had fewer difficulties acclimating to college and would have completed her degree sooner. Bea eventually wended her way through her undergraduate education in ten years, earning a BA in sociology and subsequently a MSW.

Bea remembers her long, arduous journey through college and the lack of support or clear guidance, and those memories drive her to participate in the Smart Start program. She especially enjoys working with students in a different context because as an alcohol/drug counselor, she is oftentimes reacting to students who have wandered significantly off course and have been doing so for many years. The Smart Start program, by comparison, allows Bea to provide proactive support to motivated students, which allows her to help students in a different way. Due to her upbringing, struggles, and her wending academic path, Bea understands the unique challenges facing the Smart Start students, and her story, which she shares freely, assuages the anxiety of incoming students and normalizes struggle as part of the learning process. Bea’s favorite part of
the Smart Start program is watching the cohort coalesce in such a short period of time and how
the student participants ultimately become the best support for themselves and each other.

Born in Puerto Rico, Elba Carides graduated from the University of Puerto Rico-San Juan
with a bachelor’s degree in education. One of her professors who was highly influential in her
life transferred to East Stroudsburg University, a state university in Pennsylvania, and he
convinced Elba to pursue her graduate education at ESU, where she ultimately graduated with a
MA in public health. After graduation, Elba worked for a time in community-based
organizations as an AIDS/HIV educator before landing at NCC as a computer skills instructor for
community (non-credit) education. Elba described one of her core values as creativity and
teaching provides an outlet for that passion. While she worked in this capacity, she discovered
that she was spending a significant part of her class time addressing the issues that undergird
profound poverty, which awoke in her a desire to help students pursue a college education,
especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. NCC, recognizing this passion, hired her as a
counselor even though she did not possess a counseling degree at the time. Instead, her
department used her in primarily a support and educator role while the school paid for her to
complete her counseling degree. Once Elba completed her counseling degree, NCC hired her as a
full-time, tenure track faculty member in the counseling department where she has worked for
over a decade.

She has also overseen the Smart Start program since its inception in 2008, and Elba is
particularly proud of the positive effect that the Smart Start program has had on its close to one
hundred participants. Elba describes herself as an underdog who loves underdogs and when she
looks at the faces in the incoming Smart Start cohorts—first-generational, racial minority,
socioeconomically disadvantaged—she sees herself two decades prior. She is passionate about
helping the Smart Start students because she wonders who will do this work if Bea and her do not. Without the Smart Start program, Elba believes that NCC will lose a lot of these students, wasting untapped potential and missing the opportunity to break generational cycles of poverty through a NCC education.

The results of the Smart Start program are astonishing and laudable. For the past two years, the participants of the Smart Start program retained at a rate of over 20% higher than students who did not participate in the program (Northampton Community College Smart Start Data, 2015). These excellent results are all the more noteworthy when considering the fact that most of the students recruited into the program are disadvantaged economically, socially, and culturally in a higher educational context. With this impressive track record in mind, I wanted to understand how and why this summer bridge program was so effective at helping students perform at high levels, persist, and ultimately reach their educational goals, especially when compared to NCC’s lower historical student persistence and graduation/transfer data.

**Overview of interview process**

With this goal in mind, I wanted to understand the lived experiences of the students who participated in the Smart Start program. I contacted Elba and Bea and asked them to help me identify seven or eight Smart Start participants who they thought would be interested in participating in an interview. I hoped to uncover if these participants thought that the Smart Start program was effective in preparing them for college-level work and if so, why they believed the program was effective. I reached out to twenty former Smart Start participants by e-mail and seven responded to my message, indicating that they were interested in participating in my study of the Smart Start program. I scheduled two meetings with each of these seven participants. I used the first meeting to explain the project in detail and to review the informed consent
documents. The second meeting was the actual interview. All seven students were still current NCC students and ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-two. These students all self-identified as underrepresented racial/ethnic subpopulations at NCC, and all students were identified by their high school guidance counselors as students with high promise but who had underperformed academically for various academic, social, economic, and personal reasons. All but two were first generation students, although a third student cited an older sister who graduated from a four-year university as a strong influence on her as she attempted to acclimate to college.

Leading up to the interview, I crafted close to fifty questions, but after reviewing these questions for redundancy and irrelevancy, I was able to winnow that list down to twenty-three questions that sought to uncover the lived experience of participating in the Smart Start program. The questions, broadly stated, covered three categories: student background and biography, experiences surrounding the actual participation in the program, and reflections on if or how the Smart Start summer bridge program helped them transition to NCC and college-level work. During my actual interviews, however, I did not rely robotically on the scripted list of questions, opting instead to use those written questions as a loose framework while “going off script” when an intriguing student response triggered a follow-up question. I also skipped questions that participants inadvertently answered earlier in the interview. In short, I attempted to structure this interaction more as a conversation and less like an interrogation. This more conversational approach, I think, influenced the results because it appeared that the students were better able to relax, which yielded a richer and fuller description of their experiences in the program. I recorded each interview on my iPhone using the Voice Record Pro application on the phone. This application has many features, most notably the ability to convert the audio files to MP3, a
versatile format. After recording all seven interviews, I began the transcription process, which allowed me to better familiarize myself with the interviews while also creating a written documentation of the interview. All told, I recorded approximately 410 minutes of audio data spread over seven interviews that ranged from forty-two to sixty-one minutes in length.

**Biographies of participants**

**John:** John was born in New Jersey and moved with his mother to Lehigh County, a county adjacent to Northampton County, when he was in first grade after his parents divorced so John and his mother could be closer to her parents. When John was in elementary school, his mother attended Northampton Community College and earned an associate’s degree from NCC. John’s grandparents, both college educated in India, were instrumental in raising him, and, as a result of their educational experiences, both his mother and his grandparents emphasized education to John from an early age. Despite this emphasis on education, John was unsure of his plans post-high school until his sophomore year in high school when one of his science teachers identified John’s potential and took an active interest in John and his education. During his junior and senior years, John had some difficulties building friendships with peers, but he effortlessly connected with his high school teachers who also encouraged John to pursue post-secondary education. Despite having to pay twice the normal tuition because his home of record is outside of Northampton County and therefore not eligible for the county tuition subsidy, John chose Northampton instead of his in-county option of Lehigh County Community College because of his mother’s NCC attendance and the excellent academic reputation of NCC among his high school teachers. After receiving the Smart Start mailer, John immediately called Bea and enthusiastically accepted the offer. He is currently a second-year student at NCC, majoring in chemistry, and he ultimately hopes to work in the medical field, either as a practitioner or in a lab
supporting medical research. During his interview, John stressed the personal contacts he made with faculty and classmates and the college knowledge he acquired as the primary reasons he felt the Smart Start program made him successful, both academically and in his integration to the campus community at NCC.

**Eddie**: Eddie is a second-year chemistry student from Pen Argyl, a tiny, rural feeder high school to NCC. Originally Eddie was from New Jersey, but he moved to Pen Argyl with his father when his parents separated before Eddie started kindergarten. Eddie did not have a relationship with his mother, and he grew up with his father who also lived in the home of his paternal grandparents. Eddie’s father moved out when Eddie was in high school, and Eddie continued to live with his grandparents after that event. Eddie described himself as a slacker and goofball in high school who did not take his studies seriously, and he shared that he was more interested in using marijuana than studying. Neither of Eddie’s parents nor his grandparents attended college, although his grandparents did stress education in the home, but not always in productive ways. One example of how they tried to convince him of the importance of college was their constant comparison of him with a childhood friend whose performance in middle and high school was significantly stronger than Eddie’s. This memory was especially meaningful for Eddie because both Eddie and this friend later attended NCC, and Eddie is now excelling and his friend is not. Eddie credits the Smart Start program in this success and his educational transformation. Eddie did not remember applying for the Smart Start program, although he later suspected that his high school guidance counselor forwarded his name and contact information to Bea and Elba. Interestingly, Eddie hung up on the counselor (Bea) when she called to invite him to join the program, but after discussing the phone call with his grandfather, he quickly called Bea back and accepted the offer to participate in the Smart Start program. While Eddie found the program
effective all around, he specifically credited the college knowledge he received and the personal contacts he cultivated with fellow students and faculty as the primary reasons he thought the Smart Start was effective in transitioning him from high school to college-level study.

**Michael**: Michael is a lifelong resident of Northampton County, and is currently a second-year student at NCC. Michael, an African-American male, began his secondary education in the Wilson School District, an overwhelmingly wealthy and white suburb of Easton, Pennsylvania, one of the three metropolitan hubs of Northampton County. Michael described these experiences at Wilson as alienating, difficult, and racially charged, and he was relieved when his family relocated to Bethlehem, which allowed Michael to attend Liberty High School, a significantly more racially diverse high school. Michael was unsure of his plans after high school graduation, but he cited two pivotal moments in high school that helped him clarify his post-secondary plans. First, admissions counselors from various colleges visited Michael’s high school and opened his eyes to the possibility of a college education. Second, Michael spoke with various co-workers at the grocery store where he worked. Many of his co-workers had worked as stockpersons for decades and had no prospects. They impressed upon him the power of education, and through the eyes of his co-workers, he saw a dead end for his life without a college education. Since Michael lived within walking distance of NCC, he decided to walk through campus one day, and the beauty of the campus, the diversity of the students, and the general bustle of the college made a deep and lasting impression on Michael. He applied and enrolled the following month. Throughout his interview, Michael repeatedly referenced the college knowledge he learned as well as the differences between high school and college that the instructors focused on during the program. He also described the powerful connections he built with students and faculty, and he
especially relies on those connections as sources of advice, guidance, and mentorship during his NCC tenure.

**Charlotte**: Charlotte is a second-year student majoring in Liberal Arts with a focus on history. She hopes to someday work as an archivist or curator at a museum. Charlotte’s mother did not attend college, but her father graduated from Bloomsburg University, a four-year university within the Pennsylvania state system where he majored in business management. Interestingly, Charlotte’s mother highly encouraged her to participate in the Smart Start program, but her father, a college graduate, thought it was a waste of time because his acclimation to college, according to him, was easy, and her participation in the program would entail missing a week of work and the related earnings. Her mother was especially enthusiastic about the program because the child of a friend of hers had participated in the Smart Start program and had a positive experience in the program. This former participant ultimately graduated from NCC, transferred to a university, and is currently successfully working in business. From a young age, Charlotte thought of herself as going to college, but she was unclear as to what degree to pursue. When she originally matriculated to NCC, she was a culinary arts major because she studied culinary in high school and liked cooking. But she discovered early on that the program was not what she expected—the chaos of a bustling kitchen during a rush unnerved her—and she did not like it. The Smart Start administrators—Bea and Elba—helped Charlotte to change majors by describing how her coursework could translate into other degree programs, facilitating the paperwork, and generally assuaging her anxiety about the entire process. Charlotte stressed the personal connections she made with faculty and fellow students as the primary benefit of participating in the Smart Start program, although she also spoke extensively about the college knowledge and study skills she picked up from the faculty.
Josephine: Originally from New Jersey, Josephine moved to Northampton County with her family in kindergarten. Josephine bounced around quite a bit within the Bethlehem School District during her secondary education, attending both high schools in Bethlehem as well as completing her junior year in an online academy administered by the state of Pennsylvania. Josephine credited this jumping around as instrumental in her academic and personal development, stating that she had a wealth of experiences and had the opportunity to meet new and different people at each school she attended. After graduating from high school, Josephine took a year off to work at a high-end retail clothing store, and she said that this work experience helped her understand what it was like to carry adult responsibilities. This work experience also helped give her perspective about her perception of NCC as the “Thirteenth Grade,” a pejorative term tossed about by some students and members of the community to describe NCC as merely an extension of high school, because she does not interact with her classmates from high school. She is also more focused on why she is at NCC as a result of her time in the workforce. Initially, Josephine wanted to be a fashion designer, but when she learned there was a math requirement for the major, she switched her degree to art, which has allowed her to pursue her interest in drawing and painting. During her interview, Josephine primarily focused on the college knowledge that she acquired and the differences between high school and college stressed by the Smart Start faculty, although she also credited the personal contacts she made as a big reason she felt the program was helpful to her college transition.

Anna: Anna moved with her mother many times while she grew up. By her estimation, she attended more than ten schools due to the constant moving. While her mother used Easton, Pennsylvania as a hub because her parents lived there, her mother moved with Anna to both Florida and Texas multiple times during Anna’s childhood. Anna does not believe that the
constant moving affected her academically, but she does think that it impacted her ability to build long-term and meaningful friendships, especially in Pennsylvania, because she was in Pennsylvania and then gone elsewhere so frequently during the formative years of her life. Family is important to Anna, and she stressed that her family supports her decision to go to college, and since she is the first in her immediate family to go to college, she believes her family derives a sense of pride from her accomplishments. Anna specifically cited her grandfather as a tremendous influence on her decision to attend college and major in criminal justice. Her grandfather is fifty-four and works in construction, despite the toll it takes on his body. She respects his commitment to their family and does not want to let him down by not doing well. Her grandfather also unwittingly steered her in her degree choice because she fondly remembers watching police shows on television with him when she was a child, which ignited within Anna a desire to work in law enforcement. Anna believes that the personal contacts that the Smart Start program facilitated with faculty and fellow students was critical to her success. She also referenced the college knowledge that she acquired from the program multiple times during her interview.

**Melissa:** Born in Colombia, Melissa immigrated to the United States with her family when she was a year and a half old. Her family had no money nor connections, and the family was largely unstable financially until Melissa was nine, when her father finally leveraged his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Colombia and landed a software engineering position in New York City. Due to her family’s new found wealth, Melissa could attend a private high school in Northamton County, Notre Dame High School, a very small Catholic high school with an excellent academic reputation. Since English was Melissa’s second language, she shared during her interview that she struggled at times in high school because she had difficulty
comprehending what she was hearing and reading. She compensated for her initial difficulties with English by working harder, and she credits these struggles with building her strong work ethic. She also shared that she wants to honor the sacrifices of her parents, and she believes the best way to do so is to excel in her studies.

Her mother attended NCC a few years ago to satisfy a lifelong goal of a college education, ultimately graduating with an associate’s degree in business management in 2012. Melissa cites her mother as an inspiration for her to attend college and to choose NCC specifically. Melissa is currently a second-year student studying communication design, and she hopes to start a business that designs websites. Melissa cited multiple facets of the Smart Start program that she believes made her successful in acclimating to NCC and ultimately earning high grades, including the development of personal contacts, the transmission of college knowledge, and the sharing of inspiring stories.

**Discussion of interview coding protocol**

Once the transcriptions were complete, I imported the transcripts into MaxQDA, a program designed to allow easy and effective analysis of qualitative research. MaxQDA automatically numbered my transcription, making the identification and location of interesting answers and quotations quick and easy. Using MaxQDA, I coded the interviews twice, seeking to identify interesting responses in each interview as well as comparing interviews for common themes. After my first round of coding, I identified twenty-five themes in the interviews that related to my research inquiry, and on the second pass, I eliminated irrelevant codes and consolidated others, leading to seventeen primary codes. With all seven interviews considered, I had almost a thousand separate code entries. MaxQDA allowed me to quantify these codes, both among individual respondents and in the aggregate, facilitating the analysis of the interview data.
and the identification of prominent themes among the interviewees. As a result of this coding analysis, four major themes emerged from the analysis, listed below (with percentages of occurrence):

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**Discussion of themes**

**Personal contacts:** The most popular theme in the interviews was the personal contacts that each participant made with fellow students, faculty, and staff. Every participant cited as a positive influence on their college experience the multiple contacts they made during their Smart Start experience, contacts that lasted well beyond the four days in the summer.

The connections the students made fell into three major categories. The first category was the connections they made with one another. They also described the numerous connections they made with faculty and staff during their four days in the Smart Start program. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the Smart Start participants described the profound positive impact that their connections with Bea and Elba had on their college transition and subsequent success, especially their ability to inspire and mentor the Smart Start participants.

During the first day of Smart Start, Elba and Bea intentionally placed the students in multiple interactions with one another to build cohesion and rapport within the group. Multiple icebreaker activities and group projects highlighted the first day of Smart Start, which allowed
the students to become familiar with one another through activities designed to facilitate student interactions, self-discovery through the administration and interpretation of a MBTI, and the sharing of that self-knowledge. Bea and Elba, cognizant of the awkwardness inherent in compelling twenty teenagers who are not acquainted to interact with each other, take center stage, leading the students through the exercises as active participants while also tempering the extroverts and those overcompensating and coaxing conversation out of the shy and introverted. All seven participants cited these intragroup connections facilitated by these group activities as critical to their acclimation to college. A bond through a shared experience occurred in this environment, leading Charlotte to observe that “we went through and experienced this program together and it helps us understand one another.” Despite the limited time for interactions, these bonds were strong and long-lasting. Melissa said that the “bond from that group was really surprising” while Michael stated that during the program “we were pretty close even though it was only four days.”

In addition to these meaningful bonds between students, other interpersonal connections happened as well. Many of the participants shared that the connections they made with faculty and staff outside of the Smart Start program were instrumental in helping them acclimate to college. On the second and third days of Smart Start, Elba and Bea take students around campus on an extended orientation, introducing them to various administrators in order to learn more about the student services provided by NCC. Most of the interviewees cited this extended tour as useful, as Elba or Bea introduced Smart Start participants to representatives from Advising, Career Services, Library, and the Learning Center. One such interaction with Frank Pologruto, the Director of Student Life, led to a work-study job for Josephine and a subsequent letter of reference from Frank.
An English and Criminal Justice faculty member also addressed the group, and two participants cited these conversations as the reason they sought out these faculty members when it came time to select classes. The English faculty member shared his struggles with his acclimation to college, which helped normalize education as struggle for some of the Smart Start participants. The Criminal Justice faculty member, a former NYPD detective and one of the first police officers on the scene after the 9/11 attacks, also shared her struggles with college, but also gave the Smart Start students her philosophy and “rules for life,” and Eddie shared during his interview that he wrote these rules down and has them close by his bedside as a source of inspiration. These students felt that they knew the faculty member and the faculty member knew them. Finally, Elba and Bea invite previous Smart Start graduates back to address the class each year, and this conversation had a profound impact on Michael, who said “when [you] hear from other college students and what they have been through, you don’t have to make the same mistakes.”

While these intragroup and faculty/staff connections are important, all seven stressed the relationships they build with Elba and Bea the most. Elba and Bea are the first contacts these students personally made with NCC, most speaking with one or both of them before the Smart Start program even began. Many of the participants cited their infectious enthusiasm, and Eddie stated that Elba and Bea were indispensable to the program and they “made me feel important.” In addition to the moral support provided, Elba and Bea assisted the Smart Start students in more tangible ways. For example, when Charlotte was experiencing angst over changing majors from culinary arts to liberal arts, she turned to Elba who helped her make sense of the graduation ramifications of the switch. Charlotte also felt that Elba gave her a fair and sympathetic hearing, helping Charlotte make a difficult decision with lifelong impact. Likewise, Anna was tripping
over some opaque college systems, but in financial aid and not advising like Charlotte. Desperate
and confused over a misunderstanding in financial aid that had the potential to defund her
financial aid and derail her semester, Anna enlisted Elba’s help. About this pivotal moment in
Anna’s tenure at NCC, Anna related that:

“[Elba] was like, don’t worry… I got you. She helped me out and she got [the FAFSA] done for me. That was pretty awesome, and I knew with Elba, it’s like, if you want something done, she will do everything involved and help you out…”

All seven participants shared stories about Elba and Bea that demonstrated how a caring
administrator who is focused on the welfare of students can make a profound difference in how students acclimate to college and persist in their studies.

**College Knowledge/Academic Capital:** College has scores of hidden rules, obscure
organizational quirks, and murky customs. Examples of these quirky customs include the naming
of offices (Bursar, Registrar, etc.), rituals like convocations and commencements, and academic
policies like co/pre-requisite courses. Furthermore, many hidden rules and academic differences
between high school exist. There are course syllabi to be encountered for the first time, office
hours where professors are available to provide help and conversation, and fewer tests/grading
opportunities. Many students struggle to learn these hidden rules of college, instead relying on
what has produced successful academic results during their high school careers. This
understandable but misguided approach oftentimes leads to struggles and disillusionment when
these students attempt to play college by high school rules. Administrators and faculty seeking to
help students acclimate to college are left with two approaches. The first is to change the college
organization itself, which given the firm entrenchment of tradition in higher education would
likely be very difficult to accomplish in any meaningful and widespread way. This type of
poststructural approach is also beyond the scope of this study. The other approach is to help students understand the college environment in which they find themselves and provide the information, guidance, and the cultivation of an attitude necessary to succeed in this foreign environment. The Smart Start program at NCC takes the second approach. The Smart Start administrators focus on three major pieces of academic capital. First, they cover academic etiquette, how students interact effectively with faculty and staff both in person and through electronic communications. The second major piece of academic capital the Smart Start administrators focus on is time management/course registration, helping students effective structure and manage their time and choosing correct courses for their major. Finally, the Smart Start program curriculum seeks to familiarize students with academic and personal services on campus including disability services, counseling, advising, and career services. As John succinctly put it, “The Smart Start program is an education on how to pursue an education.”

Many of the Smart Start students referenced understanding college academic etiquette as crucial to college success. In the context of the program, academic etiquette is defined as the proper and commonly accepted ways to interact with faculty and other providers of campus services, both in person and via e-mail communications. First, most interviewees said the Smart Start program taught them that faculty will not chase them down for missing assignments or for failing examinations like teachers did in high school, but that if you go to a professor and ask, they will help. Also, some of the respondents emphasized the importance of understanding the syllabus, stating that a firm grasp of the syllabus (due dates, grading rubric, etc.) will spare the embarrassment of posing an obvious question to a faculty member. The Smart Start students also focused on communications with faculty during the program. They learned, for example, that passive engagement in class is not sufficient. Michael shared that “you can’t come to class and
just sit there and be quiet. You have to talk to your professors.” With respect to e-mail communications, John learned how to write a message “the right way,” communicating clearly, formally, and respectfully without using text language, and he also discovered “what questions are good to ask and what questions are left to private conversations” in order to help ensure that communications are fruitful and not counterproductive by unwittingly insulting a faculty member.

Interviewees also focused on the time management and course registration components of the Smart Start program. Elba and Bea stressed the importance of time management to college acclimation heavily throughout the program, emphasizing that studying was largely self-directed and self-scheduled, college scheduling was largely unstructured and course times scattershot, test and paper deadlines enforced, and distractions plentiful and attractive. This emphasis on time management had a profound impact on some of the participants. Eddie, for example, shared that “time management is critical. I tell everyone that I have a weekly and semester calendar and [other students] think that I’m crazy but it’s nice to be able to look and see what I have in two weeks, especially if it’s a major project.” Similarly, Josephine stated that “a planner is great. And because I learned how to use a planner and manage my time, I’m less stressed.”

The course scheduling and registration components of the Smart Start program also made a lasting impact on the participants. On a macro level, interviewees felt empowered when they understood their academic programs and what courses they needed to take to graduate. On a micro-scheduling level, the Smart Start program, in the words of John, helped him to choose “the right classes at the right time,” keeping him in proper course sequencing while also scheduling his courses at times when he is freshest mentally and ready to learn.
Finally, the Smart Start program helped to familiarize these incoming students with the services available at the college such as disability services, counseling, advising, and the tutoring center while helping connect them to the administrators and faculty responsible for providing those services through tailored visits to these respective offices. Since she was surrounded my myriad services scattered across campus, Josephine shared that she was initially intimidated and mystified by the sheer volume and scope of the different campus services, but by the end of the week she understood what the Bursar did, how to navigate financial aid at NCC, and how to access library services. Josephine also realized that NCC did not have a principal when she met the president of the college, again highlighting how K-12 sensibilities and schemata can stubbornly hold on long after high school graduations and serve as barrier to college assimilation.

Elba and Bea also helped students familiarize themselves with Blackboard, the Learning Management System used at NCC, and some Smart Start students shared that they were surprised at how few of their classmates could navigate this crucial online backbone of many NCC classes in their first fall at NCC. The Smart Start students, by comparison, felt empowered through the Smart Start program to navigate the oftentimes counterintuitive and Byzantine program that serves as the touchstone and document repository for many of NCC’s courses, both on ground and online. Overall, the students in Smart Start shared that they felt empowered to step onto NCC’s campus in the fall and succeed, a sentiment best summed up by Melissa who, upon completion of the program, said “I was just excited to start college. I felt prepared.”

Transitions/Differences between high school and college: All of the participants in this study spent a fair amount of time exploring and elaborating on the differences between high school and college expectations and experiences. These responses fell into three major categories: college
expectations, “13th Grade” concerns, and differences between college professors and high school teachers.

The college expectations ran the gamut from the mundane to the stressful. For example, Josephine remembered learning in Smart Start that she did not need to ask to leave class if she needed to go to the bathroom. She also remembered Elba stating that if you don’t turn in an assignment, faculty will not chase you down nor remind you the assignment is not submitted like many teachers did in high school. Eddie remembers a sterner admonishment: “[Elba] emphasized the fact that we’re not being spoon fed like we were in high school anymore.”

Some Smart Start students were more anxious about the perception that they were entering the “13th Grade” at Northampton, a criticism leveled at the community college for decades. Locally, the “13th Grade” is a term of disapprobation used toward NCC to describe the institution as merely an extension of high school, both in a perceived lack of academic rigor and the composition of the student body, which is overwhelmingly recruited from eight county school districts. Admittedly, since approximately one in four graduates of the eight school districts in Northampton County attend NCC, this latter criticism has some base in fact (Northampton Community College Fact Book, 2016). Josephine worried that “I’m going to see everyone I went to high school with.” But the Smart Start program addresses this perceived slight, not by denial but through enlightenment and empowerment. For example, Michael learned that “you can’t just hang out with people from your high school. You need to make sure that you hang out with a different amount of people so you get a different experience.” The intragroup personal connections detailed above helped many of the Smart Start participants break out of their high school comfort zone, make new connections, and break the “13th Grade” stereotype.
Finally, most of the Smart Start students were astonished to learn about many of the differences between high school teachers and college professors. Elba and Bea always invite tenured faculty members to meet with Smart Start students in a question and answer session, and this question and answer period stood out in the minds of a few participants. Josephine was struck by how the faculty members sat in a chair or on the desk in the classroom and talked to us “like we were normal people.” Similarly, Charlotte learned from this experience that faculty are approachable. John’s takeaway was that he understood “how a professor thinks as opposed to how a high school teacher thinks.” To a person, Smart Start participants learned that college expectations were that students are adults and accountable for the performance of their work, and a student’s education rested solely on their shoulders, which came as a surprise to many of the interviewees. Considering the differences between high school and college, Michael summed up the experiences of the majority of the Smart Start participants neatly when he said “Smart Start helps prepare you for college. It shows you that college life is different than high school life.”

**Inspirations/Family Support:** Another major theme that emerged from the interviews of the Smart Start participants was the role of inspirational stories and family support. Every interviewee cited sources of inspiration from both within and outside of the Smart Start program and how these inspirations left a positive, lasting impact. The discussions about inspirations during the interviews focused on three main sources of inspiration: fellow students, family members, and NCC faculty and administrators, especially Elba and Bea, the two administrators responsible for the organization and delivery of the program.

Intragroup inspirations and support cut across most of the interviews. Many of the participants felt that the shared experience and sacrifice of giving up a week in the summer to attend the program helped them form strong bonds within the group. For example, John said that
when he looked around the room at individual students he “felt like I met this person in a special way.” John also shared that these bonds with these classmates lasted well beyond the initial program experience, stating that it was invaluable “finding someone who I can talk to and understands what I’m going [to college] for and what I want.” Similarly, when Charlotte was considering making a profound change in academic focus from culinary arts to history, she said she received significant emotional support and reassurances from classmates that she was making the right choice for her future. Anna and Charlotte also cited the visit from previous Smart Start graduates as influential and inspirational, and this past summer Josephine spoke to the newest Smart Start group. To a person, the Smart Start participants drew strength and inspiration from peers, and the program helped build a support structure for these students that existed independently from the administrators and faculty responsible for the program. The positive effects of this component of the Smart Start program cannot be overstated because even though NCC provides a robust menu of student support services, ultimately NCC students interact with one another significantly more than with administrators and faculty.

Inspiration and support from family was also a significant thread that ran through the answers of the Smart Start students. John stated that “education formed a strong backbone in my family,” and he stressed that his mother and grandfather highly encouraged his pursuit of education. John chose NCC instead of his in-county community college because his mother attended NCC and stressed the value and quality of NCC’s education to John. Like John, Melissa’s mother attended NCC during Melissa’s childhood and highly encouraged Melissa to take advantage of NCC. Melissa’s mother also strongly suggested that Melissa take advantage of the Smart Start program when she saw the advertising flyer in the mail. Charlotte’s mother, likewise, pushed Charlotte to participate in the Smart Start program because she was friends with
a mother whose daughter was satisfied with her experience in the Smart Start program a few years earlier.

Many of the students described the pride and stress they felt from being the first in their immediate family to go to college. Michael shared that college was very important to his family, and Anna felt stressed over her performance in college, stating that she did not want to let her family down with a poor academic performance. Melissa, similarly, wanted her family to feel like the sacrifices they made to move her family to the United States from Columbia were worth it by excelling in the classroom and on the soccer field. Interestingly, none of the Smart Start students described this family pressure as negative or intentional but rather it stemmed from their own internalized expectations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, all of the students credited NCC’s staff and faculty—especially Elba and Bea—for providing high levels of support and inspiration to them both during and after the program. A few of the participants cited the visit from the tenured faculty members—Vertel Martin and Kelly Allen—as inspirational. Kelly shared his own academic struggles as an undergraduate, and for Michael, this story left a lasting impact because he saw his own academic struggles as part of the educational experience and not just as his shortcoming. Like Michael, Eddie found inspiration in this meeting with faculty. He discovered intrinsic motivations after hearing Vertel share her story about being a captain in the New York Police Department and a first responder during 9/11 and her subsequent career as a professor of criminal justice at John Jay College and NCC. Eddie shared that “I want to be like them [Vertel and Kelly]. That was a big driving factor too. They gave me this little nudge and now I have to keep swinging.” Most of the Smart Start students discussed the positive effect that the visit with Vertel and Kelly had on them. By describing higher education as difficult and the struggle as part
of the process through their personal stories, these faculty members assuaged anxiety related to starting something new and normalized the disorientation and apprehension that many of the students were feeling during this week.

Students especially cited Elba and Bea—the Smart Start program’s two main administrators—as sources of inspiration for them. They shared TED talks that dealt with self-actualization and motivation with the students as well as stories about accomplished NCC alums like Roger Ross Williams who won an Academy Award in film, leading Josephine to proclaim during the interview that “I want to do that!” More important than the videos and stories, however, were Bea and Elba themselves. Eddie observed that “Elba and Bea have this charisma about them. I felt like they were all high energy and always made me feel good.” Eddie further credited Elba and Bea for motivating him indirectly because he would tell them he was doing well, which would make him work harder because he knew that they were going to “hold me to my word.” When Melissa won the NCC Female Athlete of the Year award, she said that she received a message from Elba and Bea saying that they were very proud of her, and this note held great meaning for Melissa because it demonstrated their care and commitment to her, even though she was no longer a participant in the Smart Start program and Elba and Bea no longer had regular contact with her. John wished that every NCC student had this Smart Start experience because:

It would be great for all of the students to know that someone is out there watching out for them and cares about how they are doing and how school is going.

Strong relationships, personal stories, and words of encouragement, even packed into a time period as short as four days in a summer bridge program, can go a long way in helping students acclimate and excel in college.
**Other noteworthy but underrepresented themes:** The four themes detailed above accounted for roughly seventy-three percent of the total entries coded, leaving thirteen codes remaining in the analysis, representing roughly twenty-seven percent of the coded entries. Most of these codes only appeared once or twice in an interview and did not rise to a level of noteworthiness. Some themes, however, are noteworthy in their absence; they formed a significant portion of the Smart Start program’s curriculum but interviewees surprisingly cited them only a few times; even when asked specifically about study skills, orientation, and co-curricular programming, students only provided superficial answers before steering their responses back to the four dominant themes of this study. For example, the Smart Start program spent a significant amount of time discussing college-level study skills such as note-taking and learning styles (and how those styles should inform the organization of study time and studying strategies) and yet students spoke very little about the study skills portions of the Smart Start curriculum. Only Charlotte mentioned the note-taking lesson, and both she and John discussed how the preferred learning style they uncovered during the Smart Start program should inform how and when they study. Otherwise, the participants did not spend any appreciable time discussing the study skills lessons delivered during the Smart Start program. Similarly, although the administrators of the program invested significant time physically orientating the participants to the campus, the Smart Start students in this study spoke very little about this physical campus orientation they received. One student, John, stated that after attending the NCC mandated orientation earlier that summer, the physical orientation during Smart Start felt redundant and unproductive. Finally, while many of the participants subsequently connected with co-curricular and extra-curricular programs on campus, nobody cited the program specifically as making that connection for them.
Considering the short-term nature of the program, it is understandable, of course, that the program cannot possibly cover all college-related topics in a satisfactory manner. Despite the time challenges associated with such a short program, the last theme to emerge from the interviews was the profound transformative power of the program. For example, Charlotte shared that the program “gives you that head start to college, especially if you are just getting out of high school.” Eddie echoed Charlotte’s sentiments, stating “[The Smart Start program] changed me and really helped me prepare for college.” Finally, Michael summed up his Smart Start experiences:

I’m thankful that I went through the program because I don’t know how I would have been well-prepared without going through that. I was put at ease that [the first semester] wasn’t going to be so bad.

Clearly, the students who participated in this study gained a great deal of college knowledge, confidence, and personal connections that helped them successfully transition to college and NCC specifically.

Conclusion

In light of the relatively low costs—both in manpower and financial resources—to administer the program and the tremendous benefits accruing to these incoming NCC students, the Smart Start program apparently represents a good value with high upside for these “at-risk” students. Smart Start students who participated in this study made strong personal connections with fellow students and NCC staff and faculty, learned how to negotiate a college campus and its resources, and understood how their college experiences were probably going to be significantly different than their high school ones. They also left the program excited to start college and inspired to do well in their studies. In light of the many challenges facing incoming students, especially those students from historically
underrepresented subpopulations—racial, low income, first-generation—the Smart Start program represents a low-risk, high-reward program that helps students successfully transition from high school to college and succeed in their college-level studies.
Chapter 5: Implications

This study sought to understand how and why summer bridge programs are effective at helping students acclimate to the college culture and assimilate into a college environment successfully. Through this specific qualitative case study approach, this study suggests that Northampton Community College’s summer bridge program—the Smart Start program—is instrumental in helping students who are primarily low income, first generation, and from underrepresented racial/ethnic subpopulations transition successfully to the role of college student at rates that far exceed similarly-situated students who did not participate in a summer bridge program. The seven student interviewees who participated in the Smart Start program all credited the program with providing the skills, knowledge, and mindsets necessary to transition to college. These results not only suggest the sound strategy of investing more human and financial resources by NCC into this exceptional program, but the positive outcomes from this program, in a more general sense, highlight how summer bridge programs are a sound strategy for other community colleges in the United States. This project also suggests that summer bridge programs can provide the college knowledge/knowhow, mindsets, and personal connections that students need to acquire in order to most easily transition to college.

I contacted approximately twenty Smart Start students from the previous three cohorts and invited them to participate in this summer bridge case study. Of those students, seven accepted the invitation to join the study. These seven students were all still currently Northampton students, and most were on the verge of graduating within the next year. All seven students were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, and all identified with underrepresented racial/ethnic subpopulations. All but two were first-generation students, although a third cited an older sister who graduated from college in 2012 as a college resource
that closely mimicked a parent who graduated from college. I spent approximately an hour with each interviewee where I conducted a semi-structured interview of twenty-three pre-scripted questions, although in many cases I added follow up questions to clarify or amplify a response where appropriate.

These seven Smart Start students who volunteered to participate in this case study all cited common experiences of the program that helped them acclimate to college-level work and assimilate to the NCC college culture. Specifically, four major themes emerged from these student interviews: personal connections with faculty/staff and other students, the transference of college knowledge (cultural/academic capital), inspirations/motivations/family supports, and the differences between high school and college. Taken in total, these outcomes that students emphasized provide a road map for summer bridge program administrators looking to maximize the positive effects of their programs.

The first theme, personal connections, was the most frequently cited component of the summer bridge program by the participating students. Interviewees cited the personal connections they made with the two main administrators of the program—Elba and Bea—both as conduits to resources and as models of academic behavior. Bea and Elba also connected students, through the summer bridge curriculum, to other faculty members on campus, and some of the students sought out these faculty members when they returned to campus for mentoring or signed up for classes with these influential faculty members. Finally, and perhaps most important, the Smart Start program effectively connected students to one another. Since students typically see one another much more often than college faculty or staff, these connections led to meaningful intragroup supports for students.
Participants also cited the transmission of college knowledge/academic capital as a noteworthy and important component to the Smart Start program. Specifically, students described facets of academic etiquette—how to interact effectively with faculty and staff—as critical to their transition. Similarly, students spoke at great lengths about how Elba and Bea stressed the visible and invisible differences between high school and college. The rules subtly change between high school and college, and the Smart Start administrators clued these incoming students into these differences in ways that were meaningful and memorable. All seven students felt empowered to interact effectively with faculty, navigate the college environment, and begin their studies at NCC after participating in the Smart Start program. Finally, the importance of sources of inspiration and motivation to the Smart Start participants cannot be understated. Every student interviewee found inspiration to pursue their education through their interactions associated with the Smart Start program. Elba and Bea shared their personal stories of overcoming hardship, which resonated with the student participants. Likewise, Elba and Bea connected the students with other faculty and staff on campus who provided inspirational stories that helped motivate students to work hard. The students also found inspiration and motivation to succeed from fellow students. Finally, many of the interviewees stressed the profound inspirational power of their immediate families as sources of academic and personal motivation.

Studies of summer bridge programs suggested that some other themes would likely be present in the interviews, but many of these themes were notably absent from the recollections of the interviewees (Strayhorn, 2011). Most notably, the interviewees did not spend much time discussing the cultivation of study skills like note taking, despite the facilitators devoting a significant amount of time in the summer bridge curriculum to those tasks. Similarly, the physical orientation to the campus fell flat for most students who participated in the Smart Start
program. Some interviewees went so far as to suggest that the orientation was redundant and a waste of valuable time because they had already been orientated to the campus during the new student orientation program earlier in the summer. Finally, while Elba and Bea stressed the importance of co- and extra-curricular programming to college assimilation and success, very few interviewees spoke at any great length about being inspired to pursue those opportunities after participating in the Smart Start program.

**Limitations**

As with any study, some significant limitations existed within this specific research project. Although qualitative studies do not demand the sample sizes needed for legitimate quantitative research projects, this particular qualitative study only examined the lived experiences of seven participants. Considering more than a hundred students have successfully completed the program, this study could have too narrowly-focused a view of the typical experience of students who participated in the Smart Start program. Another potential limitation is the interviewer/interviewee relationship. Prior to this study, I had interacted with each of the interviewees on a limited basis, but this familiarity may have discouraged students from sharing information that they deemed as disparaging the Smart Start program or Northampton generally. Along similar lines, the questions posed may not have been optimal for generating thoughtful responses. Furthermore, the theoretical framework—cultural/academic capital—artificially limited the interpretations of the student responses, let alone my biases and positionality as it relates to this theoretical framework and its application to the responses. Finally, selection bias is likely present in this study. Those students most likely to agree to participate in the study most likely had positive experiences within the program and were therefore predisposed to share more positive experiences and insights during the interviews than the average participant.


**Suggestions for future research**

Strayhorn (2011) lamented that very few empirical studies of summer bridge programs exist, and since the publication of his article, that landscape has not improved much. Many community colleges and four-year universities are beginning to implement summer bridge programs or have been running programs for years, and yet very few of these administrators or faculty are formally reporting on the efficacy of the programs. Researchers need to study more summer bridge programs on a cross-section of higher education—community colleges, liberal arts colleges, regional universities, and major research universities—to learn how summer bridge programs are conceptualized, executed, and assessed. Along with this study, an inquiry into the appropriate amount of time needed to effectively educate and empower students is needed, considering summer bridge programs currently run from a few days to almost six weeks, likely leading to inefficiencies on both poles. Administer too short a program, and the program is ineffective at transmitting all of the knowledge and mindsets needed to empower students to succeed; take too long to administer a program, and the program becomes unnecessarily expensive and unwieldy.

Further studies should also critically examine the curricula of these summer bridge programs to ensure that they are effective in delivering the knowledge and mindsets needed to help students acclimate to college. Part of the current challenges surrounding effective curricula is the dearth of studies detailed above; without a robust scholarship surrounding summer bridge programs, well-intentioned administrators and faculty are likely crafting curriculum ad hoc, informed by anecdotal evidence and instincts and divorced from best practices. Researchers should also examine the role of summer bridge programs in helping historically underrepresented populations transition to college, programs that target underrepresented racial/ethnic
subpopulations and first-generation students like this study, but also those that target other unique populations like student-veterans, such as the Warrior-Scholar Project (Warrior Scholar Project, 2017).

**Implications**

The implications of this study are significant for a host of reasons. First, and most locally, this study demonstrates the efficacy of NCC’s Smart Start program. Second, on a larger scale, this study helps to highlight the impact that summer bridge programs can have nationally for community colleges and universities who seek to facilitate the transition of students to their campuses, especially historically underrepresented populations who have disproportionately struggled during these transitions and felt the subsequent lack of academic success. Finally, this study helps to frame what topics are important to students as they transition to college-level work and life, helping those responsible for creating summer bridge programs to better conceptualize and deliver more effective curriculum to the students they seek to help.

The implications of this study for Northampton Community College and the Smart Start program are vast. First, this study reinforces what the limited quantitative data surrounding the graduation/transfer rates of these students suggests, namely that students believe that the Smart Start program is highly effective at delivering the knowledge and mindsets needed to successfully transition to college in both a curricular and co/extra-curricular sense. In the past, the administrators understood that the program was effective because of the exceptionally high persistence/graduation/transfer rates, but this study can help explain *how* and *why* the program is succeeding at such high levels. This study also provides insights into the end-user of the program—the students—to better understand why they think the program was effective in their
transition to college. Relying solely on the quantitative data and the administrators first-hand experience provided a one-way and incomplete interpretation of how and why the Smart Start program was highly effective, and this study helped give voice to the student experience in this program.

This study could also be helpful to college administrators in a more macro sense, a national context. Summer bridge programs, as stated earlier, suffer from a lack of empirical scholarship, and this study could comprise a small brick in a developing edifice of inquiry. While this microstudy focused on one program at one community college, many of the results of this study are arguably generalizable to a larger, national context. Students, more than ever, need help as they transition from high school to college, and schools interested in forwarding a student success agenda on their campuses should study summer bridge programs as typified by the Smart Start program at Northampton.

Finally, as these colleges on a national level are studying summer bridge programs in order to refine existing programs or develop their own, this study could assist those administrators in both a substantive and theoretical sense. The most popular themes that emerged from the interviews—college knowledge/academic capital, personal contacts, inspirations/motivations, and differences between high school and college—provide a road map for programming and curriculum for a summer bridge program. In a broader, abstract way, social reproduction theory and the related concepts of cultural/academic capital, field, and habitus can provide the theoretical underpinning and intellectual grounding to ensure that the curriculum has some theoretical touchstones to keep it grounded. These related concepts can also serve as a unifying thread through a curriculum in order to build coherence and coalescence for a curriculum and program.
Significance of Project

Northampton Community College’s summer bridge program—The Smart Start program—is highly effective at helping students transition to college life, assimilate into college culture, and succeed at college-level work. Through this program, students learn the college knowledge, build the personal contacts, understand the differences between high school and college-level work, and acquire the motivation to persist and succeed at Northampton. Programs like the Smart Start are especially adept at helping historically underrepresented populations such as first-generation, low income, and racial/ethnic minorities made this difficult transition well. In light of recent national, state-wide, and local trends in higher education policy that focus on increasing access to college for students who historically have been disproportionately underrepresented on America’s college campuses, inexpensive and effective programs like summer bridge programs should proliferate among campus leaders who value completion and equity as much as mere access. This study can provide an early roadmap for administrators and faculty who, in light of these recent access-driven trends in higher education, want to help more of these historically underrepresented students get what they came for, a college degree.

National Context—More Underprepared Students Coming to College

Significant political and cultural buzz circulated around President Obama’s proposal to make community colleges tuition free in participating states during his second term in office. According to a New York Times article on January 8, 2015 written by Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Tamar Lewin (2015), President Obama articulated a federally-funded program that would make community college tuition free in participating states for millions of Americans. This proposal would cover students enrolled at half-time or greater who maintain at least a 2.5 GPA and are
making “steady progress” toward completing a program. Under this proposal, the federal government would cover 75% of the cost of tuition while shifting 25% to participating states. States opting out of the program would receive no federal aid. This plan closely mirrors other similar efforts in Tennessee, Chicago, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, but with a wrinkle—The President’s plan was a “first dollar” in plan that covers tuition costs up front instead of backfilling any need after federal and state grants are awarded to the student. Experts conservatively estimate that 7.7 million Americans attend community colleges for credit, and according to David Leonhardt, the plan could cost upward of 15 billion dollars a year to execute.

While this federal interest in funding underrepresented students in America’s community college is almost certain to wane in the Trump administration, this dialogue elevated community colleges into the federal educational discourse and has had a sizeable impact on both existing and developing local and state programs with similar goals. This increase in underrepresented students will pressure colleges to help these students move past mere access and into academic success, and college administrators will likely take proactive approaches like summer bridge programs to help in this transition to college.

Two notable, recent examples of local and state governments funding free community college for qualified students are Chicago and Tennessee. In both Chicago and Tennessee’s plans, if a student meets certain academic and geographic requirements, the local or state government will pay for any outstanding tuition balance. In the city of Chicago, for example, students who graduated from the Chicago Public School system in 2016 or subsequent years with a 3.0 GPA and who test completion-ready in math and English will be able to attend any of the seven City Colleges of Chicago on full tuition and textbook waivers. In Tennessee, the older and more robust Tennessee Promise provides free tuition to Tennessee high school students
interested in pursuing an education at one of Tennessee’s community colleges. The Tennessee Promise layers on an additional mentorship opportunity where high school students are paired with a mentor to help them during the college application and FAFSA process.

While the nascent program in Chicago is still too young to assess, the Tennessee Promise has already demonstrated tremendous enrollment growth across Tennessee’s community college system. In the first year of the program, enrollments jumped six percent system-wide, and some campuses saw individual gains of close to twenty percent (Tamburin, 2015). While attributing this jump solely to the Tennessee Promise can be difficult, the number of full-time community college students matriculating straight to Tennessee community colleges from high school increased by fourteen percent (Tamburin, 2015). These early numbers are promising for the efficacy of the Tennessee Promise as a driver of enrollment, but some unintended consequences have risen from its implementation. Many of these Tennessee community colleges did not have sufficient physical plant infrastructure to handle this tremendous influx of students, leading to insufficient numbers of class sections, larger class sizes, and a lack of parking. While all of these shortages are important and hard to overstate, the most important shortage fell on the human capital side. Faculty, advisors, and counselors are all stretched thin. But arguably, the most important shortage fell on the student services front, those personnel charged with helping to guide students through the labyrinth of higher education, and many of these students will be underprepared and undersupported, financially, socially, and academically. The Tennessee Promise certainly was a boon to admissions and access to Tennessee community colleges, but if students are not supported, then will they graduate? In other words, access is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to graduation and/or transfer to a four-year university.
The programs in Chicago and Tennessee have special and immediate importance for Northampton because NCC has recently undertaken The Northampton Promise, a fifteen-million-dollar capital campaign to fund a derivative of these scholarship programs. Any student from one of the eight funding school districts who meets basic academic requirements will be able to attend NCC tuition free. Given the cost of tuition at NCC, the amount of money invested in the Northampton Promise will easily hit millions of dollars in the first decade of the program, forever positively changing access to a Northampton Community College education. Access, of course, is not enough to fulfill this “promise.” Completion, either through graduation or transfer must be the ultimate goal; access, in and of itself, is not sufficient, and Northampton must make a concomitant attempt to ensure these students availing themselves of the Northampton Promise complete their programs or meet their academic and personal goals.

Community colleges like NCC have some significant shortcomings in degree/credential completion (Bragg & Durham, 2012). Historically, community colleges have been better at getting students in the door than out the other side with a credential. A lack of academic K-12 preparation is certainly a root cause along with students who may lack direction and seek a community college education to figure out the direction of their life. Due to this lack of academic preparation, many community colleges students require remediation, a curricular quagmire where many enter and few emerge. According to an article published in the Harvard Educational Review, over 40% of incoming students took a remedial course, and of these remediation students, only one in four would ultimately graduate (Dowd, 2007). A more recent study paints an even bleaker picture, citing that less than 19% of full-time students graduate in four years with a two-year degree (Harbour & Smith, 2016). As Tandberg, Hillman, and Barakat (2014) stated eloquently in their study of performance funding for community colleges: “it is not enough
to simply get students in the door of these colleges; rather, they must also have support structures in place to aid in degree completion” (p. 3).

Related to the observation of Tandberg, Hillman, and Barakat (2014) above, how will these community colleges fund the academic, social, and psychological services necessary to ensure that these students do not merely arrive in large numbers, but also depart with a meaningful credential such as a degree, certification, or diploma? Colleges will overwhelmingly absorb these costs up front because, if Tennessee is any indicator, the students will arrive in droves and quickly (Tamburin, 2015). Without sufficient infrastructure and student services, we should expect to see many more Americans join the already 22% of their countrymen and women who attended college but did not complete a credential if this proposal goes through (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 766).

If the future of higher education is the teaching of more students who are underprepared for college-level work and life through programs like those in Chicago and Tennessee, then intense, on-time supports like summer bridge programs will be critical in ensuring that students are positioned to succeed in their studies. Summer bridge programs can be the figurative bridge in the title, helping high school students transverse the sizable chasm between high school and college. While summer bridge programs can be expensive to staff and run, these costs are minimal when compared to the ethical and economic gains associated with the investment in retaining and graduating more students. In light of the admissions boon on the horizon through the Northampton Promise, NCC can and should invest more resources in the Smart Start program to fully realize the promise inherent in the Northampton Promise.

**Ramifications of this study and the Northampton Promise for the Smart Start Program**
The Smart Start program must be brought up to a larger scale than its current iteration of one section of twenty students. Given the profound success of the program, this scale up is imperative on both moral and economic grounds. Northampton is morally compelled to help more historically disadvantaged students persist and graduate, especially since the college knows that a program currently exists that has demonstrated the sustained ability to move students through NCC and to graduation/transfer. Economically, NCC should invest in helping students persist because for every additional semester a student remains at NCC, the college receives thousands of additional dollars in tuition. An ancillary economic benefit of student persistence and graduation is the positive repercussions in the local and state economy, as more college graduates enter the local and/or state workforce. Some additional investments are necessary, of course, to build this program to scale, but the advantages of such a scale up far outweigh the negatives.

The costs, both financial and in manpower, are not insignificant in this scale-up. If the college ran six Smart Start cohorts reaching approximately 150 disadvantaged students, the program would easily outgrow the 2 current part-time administrators of the program, Elba and Bea. A full-time administrator should oversee and grow the Smart Start program or Elba and Bea should be granted more designated time to the program that would equate to one full-time administrator. A full-time administrator (or the equivalent) would be able to administer these six summer sessions that would, for all intents and purposes, consume each summer in either actual programming or the planning of that programming. This summer bridge coordinator could also devote more time to cultivating more and deeper relationships with faculty and other administrators on campus, leading to better mentorship opportunities and the facilitation of more
interactions between faculty and the Smart Start students. The participants in this study cited those interactions as inspirational and motivating.

This full-time administrator would also have months in the fall and spring to partner with the eight sponsoring school districts to recruit students most suitable and appropriate for study in the Smart Start. An ancillary benefit of such a partnership and approach is the stronger relationships that would form between NCC and the school districts of Northampton County, and these strengthening relationships could lead to myriad other partnerships between the two entities including developmental math and English remediation in the high schools and the development of a more robust dual enrollment program. The cost of this full-time administrator would likely be more than offset by the increase in tuition dollars by orders of magnitude.

A few other benefits would arise from the expansion of the Smart Start program especially as it relates to the college success course at NCC. Currently, all incoming first-time students must enroll in a one credit college success course (COLS 101). The curriculum in this course focuses on an extended orientation of students to the campus and the services available to NCC students. While the Smart Start program covers most of the COLS 101 curriculum and more outside of the curriculum, Smart Start participants do not receive credit for the COLS 101. Some of the interviewees complained that this arrangement was unsatisfactory because they felt that after the Smart Start program, the COLS 101 curriculum was redundant and moot. Instead, NCC should award credit for the COLS course to graduates of the Smart Start program, and moreover the COLS dean should recruit these summer bridge graduates as mentors for specific sections of the COLS course that target at-risk populations, providing a peer support and personal connection that pay dividends in the context of the Smart Start program.
Finally, the COLS 101 course runs in two forms each fall—an eight-week and a sixteen-week version. The grade performance and persistence outcomes for students in the eight-week format far exceed those in the sixteen-week format, but due to lack of classroom space, NCC cannot run all COLS 101 fall sections in the eight-week format. By running six Smart Start programs each summer and articulating COLS 101 credit for those cohorts, NCC will free up an additional six sections of the eight-week version of the COLS 101 course, leading to better outcomes not only for the Smart Start participants but also for those students in the additional eight-week COLS 101 fall sections.

In addition to engaging in intra-industrial conversations within solely higher education, NCC should also reach backward toward its K-12 partners in the area, especially the eight school districts that form the backbone of NCC’s student body. For too long, colleges have played the blame game, wagging a finger at secondary education institutions for sending students ill-suited and unprepared for the rigors of college-level work. Instead of this unproductive monologue of blame and casting aspersions, colleges like NCC can and should help to address these gaps in cultural capital and institutional knowhow while the students are still in high school. NCC is currently exploring an expansion of its dual enrollment program, and cohorting these dual enrolled students through the use of a summer bridge program in either the summer leading to the senior year or the summer immediately preceding the first college semester could be a sound strategy to not only drive student success but also enrollment.

Finally, Northampton Community College must take an aggressive approach to assessing this program and reporting those findings to both peer institutions and other similarly-situated schools nationally. A sound assessment strategy would help the administrators demonstrate the power and efficacy of the Smart Start program and serve as an advocacy tool for increases in
funding and manpower. NCC is not alone in attempting to help underprepared students from underrepresented subpopulations succeed in college-level work, and NCC’s Smart Start program can provide a clear roadmap for other institutions to follow as they institute their own summer bridge programs that fit best within their institutional context.

John, one of the participants of the Smart Start program, said it best when he described the Smart Start program as “an education on how to get a college education.” Too many students arrive at Northampton certain that they need a college education, but too few understand how to get that college education. This knowledge and knowhow gap is especially pronounced among certain underrepresented subpopulations and especially among low-income and first-generation students. Programs like NCC’s Smart Start program can help empower students to overcome these initial deficiencies by providing the academic/cultural capital, personal connections, inspirations, and motivations needed to succeed at college. There are difficulties, however, inherent in referring to these incoming students as deficient because the college culture is foreign and few incoming students are prepared, which is the failure of educators, both in the secondary and postsecondary arenas. The underpreparedness and subsequent achievement gaps of our students is not solely or even mostly the fault of our students, and this deficiency should be reframed for what it is—an institutional and teaching gap on our college campuses. Summer bridge programs like the Smart Start program at NCC can help address these gaps inherent in our higher education system in order to empower students to better navigate our opaque structures, acclimate to our unique culture, and succeed in our classrooms.
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