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Increasing the success rates of underprepared students remains a pressing concern in higher education - and rightly so. Bettinger and Long (2009) noted many students enter college unprepared to think critically and handle rigorous college-level work. Most of these students are members of historically underserved and underrepresented populations, which make the problem even more disturbing and difficult to tackle. At some institutions, nearly two thirds of African American and Hispanic students fail to graduate within six years (Carey, 2008). Other marginalized student groups such as Native Americans, first-generation college attendees, and those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds also disproportionately fail to complete college because of poor preparation, inadequate secondary schools, and limited financial resources (Cabrera, 2008; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). This occurs despite ongoing efforts to eliminate the issue. One way colleges and universities have sought to improve retention and persistence of these students is through summer bridge programs. Although bridge programs vary from institution, many provide academic enrichment and intensive remediation for "high-risk" students the summer prior to their first year in college. Proponents of the programs believe they help raise student achievement and improve educational outcomes. However, what do summer bridge participants have to say? To what extent, if any, do they feel their participation in the program enhanced their educational abilities? This research project will utilize case study methodology to uncover the external factors bridge participants believed helped them to succeed in college.

HEAR OUR STORIES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EXTERNAL FACTORS AND MOTIVATING FORCES THAT HELP UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS SUCCEED

by

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Approved by

_____
Committee Chair

I dedicate this work to my great-grandmother Mildred Blount for her undying belief, constant encouragement, and steadfast support in my academic aspirations. You inspired me to succeed no matter the obstacles and to remain humble in the process. I am forever grateful to have you part of my life.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Leslie Brown has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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A person does not achieve success in life or reach a life-altering goal without the help from others. Whether it is professional, financial, or emotional, we often rely on the support of those close to us to help usher us through challenging circumstances in order to attain what might otherwise be the unobtainable. That *is* my testimony. In that regard, I would like to acknowledge the people who guided me through the grueling process of completing this dissertation as well as recognize several special individuals whose words of encouragement, thoughtfulness, and selflessness helped make this doctorate come to fruition.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Arnold Lane finished high school in 1999, he did not envision attending college. “I didn’t think I had a chance…because from my understanding, colleges looked at people who had 2.5 high school GPAs and above” (as cited in Harper, 2007, p. 65). Lane embodied many stereotypes society often associates with young black males. He grew up in a fatherless home in a crime-plagued city (Gary, Indiana) and was a low-performing student completing high school with a 1.90 grade point average. In 2004, Lane graduated from Indiana University with a 3.4 GPA and a degree in finance (Harper, 2007). He likely would not have had that opportunity had he not completed a rigorous, college preparatory program that provided intensive remediation before he entered IU. Lane received extensive academic support and guidance during the six-week summer program and throughout his first year in college to address his educational deficiencies.

Thousands of students like Lane - academically underprepared and from low socioeconomic backgrounds - enroll in similar programs yearly to gain college admission and improve their academic skills. Many researchers praise these pre-college outreach programs for increasing access for underrepresented populations and improving retention (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Jager-Hyman, 2004; Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005). Others question whether these programs can adequately raise achievement levels and prepare students for postsecondary institutions (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). That is fair given the

academic struggles and challenges many underrepresented students face in college (Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002). Pre-college programs, however, are not perfect nor are they the panacea to remedy all problems concerning college readiness; they are just one means of increasing enrollment for three historically underserved student groups: minorities, first-generation attendees, and those from low-SES backgrounds. Without them, many of these students would struggle academically or not get the same exposure to higher education as some of their White counterparts.

The introduction to this research will provide a brief overview of pre-college programs and their role in addressing academic and cultural disparities in higher education. Next, I will present the problem statement followed by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and the purpose of the study. Finally, the guiding research questions and significance of the study will be presented.

College Achievement

Lane's story, although uplifting, highlights a growing concern for university administrators and scholar practitioners: helping students persist to graduation. For the past several decades, persistence has been a buzzword in higher education – and that is no surprise. Nearly half of all students enrolled in college drop out before earning a degree. Because of those dismal statistics, the United States ranks 12th among industrialized nations when it comes to the percentage of 25-34 year olds with college degrees (Lewin, 2010). As such, the U.S lags behind countries such as Norway, Israel, Japan, and Ireland (OECD, 2012). The countries ahead of the U.S have smaller populations and fewer

people attending college. Nevertheless, many education leaders in this country find the degree attainment rates disconcerting.

Researchers have poured enormous efforts into uncovering causes for the decline. However, they continuously circle back to the same problems that have plagued students in higher education for years: lack of preparation, inadequate secondary schools, limited academic resources, and rising costs of tuition, all of which are contributing factors in limiting college access (Bush & Bush, 2010; Carey, 2008; Hancock, 2001; McCabe, 2000). These issues undoubtedly affect persistence; however, they shift attention off the people who affect persistence the most such as college administrators, faculty and staff, and policymakers. Much of the existing literature surrounding student persistence illustrates this problem. Although numerous higher education journals have published articles and literature reviews on persistence, "these studies [often] fail to consider the wide variety of influences that shape student persistence, focusing instead on discrete conditions, interventions, and reforms" (as cited in Reason, 2009, p. 659). In essence, they failed to identify what factors and resources students felt best helped them persist in college.

Many universities attempt to address problems with retention and persistence by offering pre-collegiate academic programs to prepare students for the rigors of college. Pre-college is a broad term describing programs that prepare K-12 students for college by enhancing their academic and social skills. Educators often use the terms "outreach,"

"intervention," "access," "pre-college," and "pre-collegiate" interchangeably when labeling these programs. Each attempts to improve the pipeline to higher education by exposing students early to college life and learning experiences.

Many of these programs start working with students as early as late elementary school or middle school. Others, like Upward Bound, work with students from the 9th grade until they graduate high school. Some programs, such as summer bridge, target first-year college students who are academically weak and may struggle without supplemental academic resources. Both Upward Bound and some university bridge programs provide intense remediation, enrichment, and intervention. Proponents believe they help students who might not otherwise attend college or who may dropout before finishing (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Patton, 2006). Others, however, such as Gandara (2007) argue few of these programs, "offer [long-term] systemic interventions... [and] without a more systemic approach, it does not appear that these programs can have a truly large effect on measured achievement" (p. 37). Or can they?

The influx of intervention programs suggests those who develop them believe otherwise. There are currently 1,000 academic enrichment programs nationwide (Gullatt & Jan 2003; Jones, 2003). The majority would credit Upward Bound as their model. Upward Bound was created in 1964 through the Economic Opportunity Act. This act, part of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society's "War on Poverty," leveled the academic playing field and made college more accessible for disadvantaged high school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Upward Bound provides educational opportunities for students from low-income families and those from families in which

neither parent holds a four-year college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This program started as a pilot in 1965 at 18 universities and expanded to 266 universities a year later (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Today close to 70,000 high school students at 1,200 colleges participate in Upward Bound (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The program serves students of all races, the majority being African Americans, who make up 45% of the participants (Cahalan & Curtin, 2004). They receive instruction in math, sciences, literature, writing and foreign languages (Walsh, 2011). Participants also receive tutoring, counseling, and mentoring. The program allows participants to experience university life in the summer by having them live on campus and take classes together as a cohort (Walsh, 2011).

Upward Bound is part of three federally funded support services known as TRiO. The other components include Talent Search Initiative, also started through the Economic Opportunity Act, and Student Support Services. Like Upward Bound, the other TRiO programs identify and assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Talent Search serves students in sixth through 12th grade by providing them and their families with information about college admissions requirements, scholarships, and financial aid. Student Support Services provides counseling and remediation for college students. The federal government allocated $848 million in 2011 to fund TRiO programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

The success of Upward Bound spurred the development of GEAR UP, another federally funded service designed to increase the number of low-income students

attending college by providing 6-year grants to states and local school districts (Bausmith & France, 2012). Just like TRiO, GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) attempts to eliminate disparities in higher education between low-income students and those from middle to upper-class families (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The program, which began in 1998, works with cohorts of students starting in the 7th grade and tracks them until they enter college (Bausmith & France, 2012). These students receive academic and support services (the latter usually in the form of tutoring and mentoring) as well as financial assistance to attend college (Bausmith & France, 2012). The federal government has spent more than $3 trillion providing GEAR UP services (Bausmith & France, 2012).

Following the lead of the federal government, nonprofit organizations and private foundations also provide pre-college outreach programs. Organizations such as the Gates Foundation, the Daniel's Fund, and the I Have a Dream Foundation also attempt to increase college access and success for low-income students. Other programs have emerged in recent years. These programs are not part of TRiO, but they follow its core mission. Most target students labeled "at-risk," a catchall phrase referring to students with middling grades but who possess greater potential. Students in this category often perform just well enough for guidance counselors and teachers to overlook their academic struggles. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is an example of one such program. AVID operates in 46 states and 16 countries (AVID, 2014). It targets low-income middle and high school students who have average grades but who have greater academic potential (Watt, Huerta, & Lozano, 2007). Program coordinators

screen applicants thoroughly before choosing students, who participate voluntarily and take college preparatory classes as a cohort instead of general or vocational classes (Watt, Huerta & Lozano, 2007).

Problem Statement

An increase of high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary education has done little to eliminate disparities in college degree attainment for underrepresented minorities, low-income students, and first-generation college attendees (Baum, Ma, & Payea 2010; Brewer, Stern, & Ahn, 2007; de Vise, 2009; Kirst, Venezia, & Antonio, 2003). Recent statistics illustrate the significance of this problem. On average, 60% of Whites graduate college within six years compared to only 49% of Hispanics and 40% of Blacks (Gonzales, 2010). The numbers are even more somber at some institutions where nearly two thirds of ethnic minorities fail to graduate within six years (Carey, 2008; Harper, 2007). This occurs despite mentoring programs and supplemental services aimed at reversing this trend (Ahn, 2010; Carter, 2006; Chellman, Crook, Holod, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2011; Cook & Cordova, 2007; Myers, 2003).

Many institutions offer summer bridge programs to strengthen retention and persistence. These programs, which run the summer before students' first year in college, offer extra academic support while also helping them connect with peers, faculty, and campus resources to integrate university life (Strayhorn, 2011). Many bridge participants are racial or ethnic minorities, first-generation college attendees, and those from low-income families. The overall purpose of many summer bridge programs is to help participants develop better study habits, build relationships with peers and faculty, and

utilize campus resources. A&M College's Bulldog Future Scholars Program (BFSP) aspires to help students reach each of those goals. The six-week residential summer bridge program started in 2009. It is open to students who have been admitted to A&M but whose standardized test scores are lower than the school's average. A&M College is a medium-sized historically black college located in the southeastern United States. It has slightly less than 11,000 students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programs. For each of the past six years, the university has selected 40 students to participate in BFSP. Students submit an application for the summer bridge program after being admitted to A&M. Program officials then select participants for BFSP based on the strength of their applications, recommendations, and telephone interviews. The university targets this population because it deems these students as "high-risk," meaning they are more likely to struggle academically and socially, which makes them more susceptible to dropping out of school.

Although some college leaders believe summer bridge programs can increase retention, two fundamental questions arise. First, what are the participants' perceptions of these programs? Secondly, in what ways, if any, do they feel the programs improved their efforts to stay in school? Most of the evaluative research of these preparatory programs focuses on the programs themselves and not the participants. In other words, most research consists of statistical data and conclusions drawn by observers or those who run the programs in regards to grades earned by the participants, re-enrollment rates, course completion rates, and graduation figures. Studies that do focus on the perceptions of summer bridge participants often do so using surveys, but that also has limitations.

Kelley, Clark, Brown and Sitzia (2003) asserted that while survey research has many advantages its data results often lacks depth. Although survey research and other quantitative measures can provide insight into summer bridge programs' level of influence on academic development, collectively they do not allow the participants to reflect on their involvement in the programs and what components, if any, aided in their development.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to evaluate BFSP at A&M College and investigate students' views about the program. This was done to discern their perceptions of the program and if they felt it helped them in their academic and social progress. The students in this research project were first-generation minority students who participated in the six-week residential program. During that time, the students took a math and composition course, participated in afternoon and evening tutoring sessions as well as attended workshops, lectures, and symposiums. This study was grounded in Harper's (2007) findings that suggested colleges and universities can raise achievement levels and improve the college experiences of underprepared minority students by utilizing "institutional agents, policies, programs, and resources" to move beyond deficit-oriented perspectives. In other words, instead of focusing solely on the participants' past shortcoming and/ their lack of cultural and social capital upon entering college, this study attempted to uncover how the bridge program assisted them in gaining access to resources and social connections (mentors, professors, and support staff) that helped them become successful.

My position as a writing instructor and professional tutor in the program provided access to the participants and allowed me to observe them in their classroom and residential settings. This study was important for several reasons. First, it examined a student population that has been historically underserved and one that lacks adequate access to higher education. Second, the ability of these students to persist and graduate could influence their quality of life. Although a high school diploma is a prerequisite for most employment, the path to a well-paying job is a college education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Beyond preparing students to enter the labor market, however, a university has an obligation to provide services to raise the achievement levels of its underserved population.

Researchers also have an obligation to study these programs to assess whether they meet their goals. The participants in the summer bridge program were all accepted into the university at which this study was conducted. However, their standardized test scores and/or high school grade point averages were below the averages for their incoming class. Many researchers have argued test scores and GPA are indicators of college success (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009). If the university admits these students despite them having low standardized test scores then it should provide programs and services to help them succeed and not flounder. Likewise, it is important for researchers to study these programs to determine what impact they can have on eliminating educational disadvantages for underserved students (Becker, Krodel, & Tucker, 2009; Brock, 2011; Domina, 2009; Fischer, 2007). Lastly, Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework has not been used to evaluate a summer bridge program at a historically black college.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study attempted to understand the phenomenon of how underserved student populations experience summer bridge programs and uncovered those experiences by evaluating the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program (BFSP) at A&M College. The program selects students statewide who have been accepted into A&M College but whose standardized test scores and/or high school grade point averages are below average for incoming freshmen. The majority of first-year students at A&M College graduate high school with a 3.26 GPA and have a combined math and reading SAT score ranging from 908 to 980 (College website, 2012).

The theoretical framework for this study will be an anti-deficit achievement model. Many researchers in an effort to explain why some students enter college underprepared embrace a deficit ideology that inexplicably focuses on the weaknesses of marginalized students and shuns their inherent strengths (Gorski, 2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework reverses this line of thinking by looking at what institutional practices universities and colleges should undertake to improve access and persistence. Harper and Davis (2012) argued strengthening college preparatory programs for marginalized students is one such effort. As Harper noted, this framework coupled with qualitative research methodology offers, "sophisticated understandings of how diverse populations of students navigate their ways to and through higher education…" (2007, p. 56).

Despite criticism that the effectiveness of summer bridge programs is difficult to quantify, research has shown that they help participants earn higher grades, remain in

school longer, and attain degrees (Evans, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In recent years, many researchers have produced numerous articles arguing in favor of using qualitative research methods when assessing such programs. Numbers can tell how many of these students passed or failed a class, the types of grades they earned, and how many graduated each year. Numbers, however, do not always provide context; therefore, they cannot fully explain why these things happen.

Although many researchers have argued in favor of anti-deficit achievement models when examining student achievement, Harper (2007) has been the foremost advocate of this framework. He has used it in several longitudinal studies of Black male students, including one of students aspiring to earn doctorates in education (2012) and another of African American males who overcame barriers - either institutional or personal - to succeed in college by maintaining grade point averages above 3.0 (2007). Those students had attended a range of colleges from historically black universities to Ivy League schools.

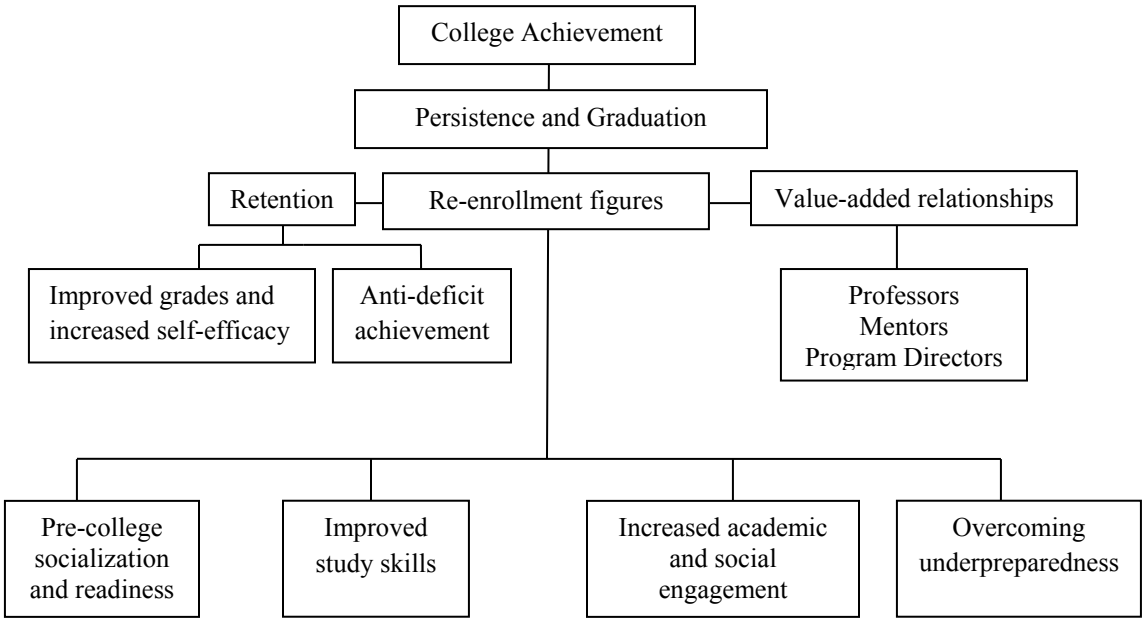
Although Harper and Davis (2012) do not seem to agree with many of the core values of Ogbu's (1978) oppositional cultural theory, they use it as a component of their 2012 study. In doing so, they rejected a key tenet of Ogbu's framework – the idea that Black students often feel as if they are part of a caste system on college campuses and that frames their relationship with their institution. In other words, many Black students persisted not because of institutional support but in spite of the lack thereof. This study will try to determine what specifically helped students in the BFSP to persist.

Figure 1 provided a conceptual representation of how an institution could incorporate an anti-deficit achievement framework to improve the academic achievement of its underprepared population and thus increase retention and persistence. The concept map illustrated the major initiative of BFSP and its intended outputs — overcoming underpreparedness, improved study skills, and academic and social integration within the institution. Ideally, these would lead to the most desired student outcomes of raising the academic achievement levels of BFSP participants. The major goal of BFSP is to improve the college readiness of its participants with the hope of increasing retention rates for students A&M deems "high-risk." In order to accomplish that mission, it has to focus on developmental skills needed to succeed in college, namely improving study habits and helping students become more engaged with college-level work.

Based on the proposed model, increased confidence in one's ability and higher self-esteem could contribute to several positive factors: improved grades and self-efficacy and possibly strengthened relationships with professors, mentors, and other campus personnel. Existing research can support these claims. Building relationships is a necessary part of raising student achievement and ensuring that students will persist in school (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997; Fries-Britt, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tinto, 1997, 2000).

Figure 1

Theoretical Concept Map. Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to Improve Academic Achievement of Underprepared Students



Each component in the theoretical concept map represents what should be a desired outcome of academic and social development. An anti-deficit achievement framework thus becomes an appropriate lens to examine the perceptions of students who participated in a pre-college readiness program and ask those students how they felt BFSP affected their academic and social development, their desire to stay in school, and their ability to persist. Incorporating this research lens can possibly provide an understanding of how participants raised their academic achievement levels, negotiated identity conflicts, and coped with balancing social demands with achievement in peer groups. In sum, I tried to determine if the summer bridge program was a contributing

factor in why the participants may have persisted and excelled in school instead of focusing on their shortcomings.

Although the students shared similar backgrounds in addition to their participation in BFSP (e.g. their commitment level in school, socioeconomic status, and campus involvement), the researcher anticipated some differences in perceptions because of contrasting experiences. In addition, the concept model merely served as a proposed guide for different stages students may enter while striving for academic achievement. Students may have taken divergent paths and formed different relationships with peers and faculty as they moved toward achieving desired educational outcomes. These experiences would likely influence their perceptions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate BFSP by examining participants' views on their experiences in the program. The study attempted to discern what effects, if any, the program had on underprepared students' perceptions about postsecondary participation, their academic development, and their ability to persist. I then compared participants' perceptions with BFSP's mission statement and intended goals to see if they aligned. The participants in this research study were first-generation and/or low SES students who graduated from high schools in the state where A&M College is located. In examining these students, I considered their perspectives of school resources, support services, and relationships built with professors and professional staff members. Through the interpretive lens of anti-deficit achievement, I tried to determine which intervention methods and program components, if any, aided in their college trajectory.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among participants of the Bulldogs Future Scholars summer bridge program?
2. What do BFSP participants feel helped them stay motivated while completing the summer bridge program?
3. What aspect(s) of BFSP did participants feel were most beneficial in strengthening their academic skills?
4. How do BFSP students manage to persist, despite transition issues, stereotypes, academic underpreparedness, and other negative forces?
5. In what ways, if any, did BSFP help participants achieve academic success?

Significance of the Study

In recent years, issues affecting academic development, retention, and persistence have attracted the attention of institutional researchers, college administrators, and program planners. Pre-college initiatives, namely summer bridge programs, have become a popular intervention measure to help tackle these issues. Often, educators determine the success and failures, and by extension the worthiness, of academic programs such as these on aggregated data. Although such measures can provide statistical insight into passing/failure rates, grades earned, courses completed, and degrees attained, they fail to provide a contextual understanding of how the programs affected their participants (Attinasi, 1992; Harper, 2007). Researchers must move beyond detached measurements and listen to the voices of those whom the programs serve in order to make accurate

determinations about their influence. Almost none of the existing research on pre-college programs attempts to do this, which illustrates the importance of this study.

An increased understanding of how BFSP assisted (or did not assist) in the academic and social development of its participants is important because it has pedagogical implications for scholar practitioners. Knowing what components helped improve the academic trajectories of the participants in BFSP can help program directors and planners of similar outreach efforts ascertain what initiatives to replicate for other underprepared students to improve academic achievement, campus integration, retention, and persistence.

Lastly, this study has significant implications for funding intervention programs for underserved student populations. Government spending on pre-college programs tops more than $1 billion annually (Nelson, 2013). That is a huge sum to be sure, but it does not even include funding for summer bridge programs. Considering the financial resources allocated to keeping these programs afloat, it is important for campus administrators, program directors, and education researchers to know whether that money is being spent wisely considering the funding constraints many institutions now face and will continue to see for the near future. Beyond financial concerns, knowing and understanding factors contributing to or impeding student development may help institutions revamp curriculum and programming models in order to improve the academic performance of summer bridge participants.

Definition of Terms

Anti-deficit achievement – A framework that attempts to understand how students of color persist through college while examining pre-college socialization, readiness, and college achievement (Harper, 2006).

High-risk students – Students whose backgrounds, grades, and standardized test scores suggest they will have difficulty completing a postsecondary degree. These students often include first-generation students and those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) – Any higher education institution founded after the Civil War and prior to 1965 whose primary mission was to provide a college education to African Americans (Gasman, 2013). Today, the government recognizes more than 100 public and private two-year and four-year institutions as HBCUs. These institutions still hold the designation of HBCU from the U.S Department of Education; however, today these schools serve students of all races and ethnicities.

First-generation student – According to the U.S Department of Education, a student whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree.

Low-SES – Low socioeconomic status. People are generally classified as either low-SES, middle SES, or high SES. Several indicators help define SES status including educational attainment, occupation, income level, and community standing (Davis, 2010).

Minority students – Could refer to any characteristic such as religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or race/ethnicity that marks the student different from dominant population on campus. In the context of this paper, the term will refer to students of color.

Persistence – The continued pursuit of a student in a degree program who maintains enrollment until graduation (Hagedorn, 2006).

Pre-college program – Any intervention program designed to increase access and exposure to higher education to secondary students. Some programs can begin working with students as early as elementary school.

Predominately White Institution (PWI) – An institution not designated as a minority-serving institution that has a majority White student population.

Retention – Staying in school until one completes a degree (Hagedorn, 2006). Others, however, have defined the term as the annual return of students each year to school.

Self-efficacy – A self-evaluation of one's competence to successfully execute a course of action necessary to reach desired outcomes (Bandura, 1993).

Social support – Assistance that helps students feel more connected to campus resources as well as faculty, staff, and peers. These supports, which emphasize networking and establishing positive relationships, help students succeed by building self-confidence and academic motivation.

Summer Bridge Program – A pre-college program offered at many universities nationwide to help students transition to college. These programs meet during the summer prior to the participants first year in college. Some colleges and universities design these programs specifically to help underprepared and underrepresented students. Those that do often offer intensive remediation in core subjects such as math and English while allowing participants to earn college credit for summer courses. It is important to note that bridge programs operate independently of one another. These programs are

created by individual institutions and while some may share core tenets and general philosophies, they each have their own mission and vision for helping students.

Underprepared students – Students who may be academically weak or lack the requisite skills needed to be successful in college without intervention measures. Many of these students are in need of remediation or developmental coursework (Bettinger & Long, 2009).

Underrepresented student populations – College students who are low-income, ethnic minority, and/or first-generation, (Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, & Lang, 2010).

Underserved student groups – Sometimes referred to as "historically underserved students," this group includes low-income students, minorities, and those who are first in their families to attend college (Green, 2006). This definition is similar to the one for underrepresented student populations. Until recently, many colleges and universities often overlooked the academic, financial, and social of students from these groups, hence the term "underserved." I use this term interchangeably with underrepresented student populations in this study.

Delimitations and Limitations

This qualitative case study was delimited because it was confined to only one institution, A&M College. It was further delimited by participant selection as it only focused on select students from the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program, a residential summer bridge program at the institution. The study excluded other students from the university, including many who participated in the bridge program but who did not meet

the criteria for this study. The final delimitation was the researcher's previous connection to the university where the study was conducted.

In addition to the delimitations, the study posed several limitations. First, the researcher has worked in the BFSP program as an instructor and professional tutor for four of the years it has operated. Although this provided him access to the participants, it also opens the possibility for potential biases. As an instructor and tutor, my proposition is that the program has unquestioned benefits as I have seen academic growth (improved writing and reading skills) in the students I have worked with over the years. However, the participants may not share my views; therefore, I wanted to hear their voices explaining their perspectives. As a qualitative case study, however, there is a chance for subjective bias on the researcher's part when it comes to analyzing the findings.

Another limitation of the study is that it only focused on one summer bridge program and thus cannot serve as a comprehensive evaluation of how well (or how poorly) all bridge programs operate. BFSP, in itself, presented some unique challenges. For instance, the program has lacked ethnic diversity since its inception. A&M College is a Historically Black College; thus, the majority of BFSP participants have been African American. To date, the program has only had one white student and several Hispanic and Native American students. Lastly, the BFSP students selected for this study were small sample; therefore, other participants of the program may not share the same experiences and reflections. Moreover, the findings yielded from this study may not be indicative of bridge students at other universities. Although BFSP participants may share some commonalities with them, the chances of experiencing institutional racism, a common

occurrence for bridge participants at Predominately White Institutions, was somewhat diminished. Lastly, as with all qualitative inquiry, the findings of this study are not generalizable to the entire population of past bridge participants at A&M College.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To conduct this study, it was necessary to examine the literature on pre-college outreach efforts, with a particular emphasis on summer bridge programs. Additional interest is given to why the federal government began funding such programs, how academic intervention programs affect students' transition and growth after entering college, studies concerning academic preparation of underserved student populations, and the ways in which these programs influence retention and persistence efforts. Thus, the literature review is organized around these topics.

The Federal Government's Role in Increasing College Access

Programs designed to increase access to higher education for underserved students have long been viewed as one of the best initiatives to eliminate enrollment disparities and ensure academic success (Alexander & Mitchell, 2010; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). As mentioned earlier, federal support for many of these programs began during President Lyndon Baines Johnson's administration with the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Gullatt & Jan 2003; Jones, 2003). However, outreach efforts even then were nothing new. Prior to the federal government's involvement, churches had been on the forefront of providing services to help prepare students for college (Jager-Hyman, 2004). For his part, Johnson felt the government should take up that mantle because he saw access to college, and education in general, as

a means of tackling poverty (Califano, 1999). By leveling the playing field, Johnson believed minorities and first-generation college goers would not only have greater educational access but that more citizens would have greater opportunities to financial prosperity (Califano, 1999). In addition, his educational advisors felt pre-college outreach programs would help eliminate the academic achievement gap separating minorities and first-generation students from their peers (Rampey, Dion & Donahue, 2008). Despite those initiatives, the gap persists more than four decades later (Jager-Hyman, 2004).

It is difficult to quantify the extent of the achievement gap during LBJ's tenure; the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the agency that compiles such statistics, did not begin collecting data on student achievement until the 1970s (Nettles, 2010). The earliest statistics, released in 1971, showed that by the time students entered their senior year in high school Whites on average scored 51 points higher on national reading tests than African Americans and 40 points higher in math (Rampey, Dion & Donahue, 2008). By 2008, that gap had closed to 29 points in reading and 27 points in math (Rampey, Dion & Donahue, 2008). The fact the gap still exists underscores the need for some form of enrichment services.

Problems Leading to Underpreparedness and Academic Disparities

The causes for the academic achievement disparities between Whites and some ethnic minorities (Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans) are multifaceted and complex. Some researchers have suggested that some racial minorities develop an oppositional defiance to learning, which causes many of them to perform poorly in school. For instance, Fordham & Ogbu (1986) posited that African Americans in

particular resist dominant cultural tendencies as a way to create an individualized identity. Their thesis is based on the development of Ogbu's (1978) oppositional culture theory, in which Ogbu contended Blacks resist the desire to strive for academic success because they see that Whites value education. Under this premise, African Americans purposely underperform in school as a way of disassociating with anything viewed as White as education becomes synonymous with acting "White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mandingo, 2013).

Many psychologists and sociologists disagree with Fordham and Ogbu's contentions. They counter that African-American students' low-performance in schools has nothing to do with resisting hegemonic forces. Instead, they argue that this occurs because far too many Black students have underdeveloped educational skills (Harris & Robinson, 2007). Moreover, they argue many Blacks deeply value education as a means of social mobility and economic stability. However, this fails to answer why the academic achievement levels of Black students - and by extension other people of color - linger behind those of White students.

Over the years, social psychologists, sociolinguists, educational researchers, multicultural specialists, and curriculum theorists have all proffered suppositions that explain the lingering disparity. Steele (1999) suggested that "stereotype threat" contributes to the gap. Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming - and unintentionally conforming to - a negative stereotype or characteristic of a cultural group to which one belongs. Such fear, Steele and Aronson (1995) hypothesized, becomes debilitating because it undermines a person's performance. While stereotype threat can affect any

stigmatized group, it has had profound effects on the performance of Black students (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Researchers have traced the roots of this phenomenon to early adolescence. Their findings suggest as children get older, their belief of negative stereotypes about themselves increases (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). The problem surfaces around middle school. Studies have shown that during this period high achieving Black males are more apt to embrace negative stereotypes about themselves than lower achieving Black males and Black females (Arbuthnot, 2009). This worsens in late high school. In their 2011 correlational study, Cokley, McLain, Jones, and Johnson found that among Black male students there was a negative relationship between age and academic self-concept, which, broadly defined, is the belief in one's academic abilities. The study also revealed a negative relationship between age and grade point averages. This meant that as students got older, their belief in their academic abilities decreased and their grade point averages dropped "sharply" (Cokley et. al, 2011).

Stereotype threat is one response to perceived racism, which may also help to explain why some Black students lack college readiness when compared to their White counterparts. Stereotype threat is not the only reason for the disparity in achievement levels. Others have suggested cultural mismatches - the institutionalized values internalized by educators, which may not align with the cultural values of the minorities they serve - is a main cause of achievement disparities (Au, 1980; Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1996; Irvine, 2003; Lee, 2004). Cultural mismatches occur when teachers are unable (or unwilling) to recognize the unique qualities of students from cultural backgrounds

different from their own (Harding, 2005; Irvine, 2003). When teachers fail to recognize their students' cultural identities or make incorrect assumptions about their academic capabilities, they cannot provide students with the learning opportunities they need to succeed (Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Thus, they perpetuate a longstanding problem of not understanding and appreciating the unique cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups.

Some believe the refusal of teachers to recognize the cultural differences in their students contributes to the achievement gap. Furthermore, they argue this lack of equity between students of color and Whites is a direct result of the curriculum schools employ and the lack of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002, 2004). Lastly, a number of researchers have cited pedagogical impediments such as deficit perspectives as hindrances to classroom learning (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings (2006, 2007) put this issue into further context by criticizing the discourse concerning the achievement gap. Much of the language is mired in deficit paradigms that fail to acknowledge disparities in health care, income levels, and educational funding for people of color, which are the real sources of the problem (Ladson-Billings, 2007). To overlook these premises is counterproductive.

Each theory about why some minority students underperform in school has some validity, further highlighting the complexity of this issue. They also illustrate the need for pragmatic solutions, though, it must be noted that no one program can eliminate all these problems. Ladson-Billings suggested that educators utilize culturally relevant pedagogy for students of color. This pedagogy would promote diversity, include multicultural

literature, and incorporate culturally inclusive learning materials (Guofang, 2012; Quaye & Harper, 2007). Pedagogy that is irrelevant and/or inaccessible to minority students and does not consider their diverse racial backgrounds, ethnic language, and social class experiences supports a deficit-oriented perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

How Higher Education Attempts to Address These Problems

This study did not attempt to answer the question of whether BFSP participants experienced any of the aforementioned problems (stereotype threat, cultural mismatches, and/or lack of culturally responsive teaching) in their elementary and secondary schools. Chances are some probably did, even if only in very subtle ways. If they did, it would be difficult to quantify what affect it had on their academic performance. One could conclude that there are multiple reasons for their academic weaknesses. Some are first-generation college students who reported that they received little academic support from home. Some are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Some admit that their study skills were nonexistent in high school. Others just did not do well on their standardized tests. As with other students, the reasons for their academic gaps are multifaceted.

When students of color from secondary schools fall behind their peers academically, few short-term fixes can completely erase those gaps. Those who graduate and make it into college have to play catch-up once they arrive. Each year, scores of students enter colleges and universities woefully underprepared for rigors coursework. The idea that too many students come to school ill-equipped to think critically, write, analyze, and navigate basic courses has been a longstanding complaint of faculty members for years. Although the complaints may have validity, some, like Harper

(2007), would say practitioners must go beyond merely complaining and find solutions that help students overcome their weaknesses so they can persist to degree attainment. Pre-college programs have proven beneficial in this area.

Just as they did when they first began five decades ago, many target students from disadvantaged backgrounds - the economically poor, minority populations, and marginally performing students, three groups that historically struggle in higher education (Perna & Swail, 2001). Most provide academic support in math, English, and science in addition to offering tutoring, mentoring, and college planning. Today, many programs also offer additional services such as workshops on financial aid and the college application process for parents and caregivers to boost their involvement in their children's education (Jager-Hyman, 2004). The programs remain popular, albeit underutilized and under-scrutinized. According to the Educational Longitudinal Service, only about five percent of all disadvantaged students take part in pre-college programs (Gullatt & Yan, 2003). The way programs administer services vary as some exclusively target high achieving students (e.g. those with grade point averages over 3.0, others who will likely be academic scholarship recipients, those in STEM – science, technology, engineering, and math – majors, and some who are bound to exclusive private universities). Programs such as these have not been included in this literature review, as many of the students participating in them were likely to have attended college and done well in their course work regardless of their participation in any outreach program.

For the purpose of this study, pre-college programs were broken into two groups: long-term programs that work with students over multiple years prior to their college

enrollment and short-term residential programs. The former category would include programs such as Upward Bound, AVID, and GEAR UP; the latter would include summer bridge programs. Each of the program types presents certain benefits while also facing unique challenges. Because the focus of this study is an evaluation of a particular bridge program, the researcher will focus specifically on them first followed by a broader discussion of pre-college programs in general.

The Influence of Past Retention Models

Summer bridge programs are one of many strategic models higher education institutions utilize to improve retention and persistence of students. When organized and funded well, these programs can help students develop better study skills and become more academically engaged. One cannot study retention and persistence in higher education, however, without acknowledging Tinto's contribution to the field. Tinto was one of the first to delineate the complex reasons why undergraduates dropped out institutions of higher education. He was also one of the earliest proponents of institutions taking responsibility to engage students by creating meaningful learning opportunities. Thus, Tinto (1975) developed the model of student integration that posited social integration and academic experiences – formal and informal – influenced student attrition. Many institutions use variations of this framework to inform their programmatic decisions.

Other researchers had developed a large body of literature on college dropouts prior to Tinto's conceptual model. However, much of their work failed to categorize the different reasons why students left school. This included students dismissed for academic

reasons, students who voluntarily withdrew for personal matters, those who transferred to other institutions, and students who left school temporarily (Tinto, 1975). Tinto contended the lack of distinction between temporary and permanent dropouts "often led institutional and state planners to overestimate substantially the extent of dropout from higher education" (1975, p. 90).

Using Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto likened college dropouts to people contemplating suicide. Just as Durkheim suggested people who failed to acclimate to society were more likely to commit suicide, Tinto believed college students who failed to adjust to college were more susceptible to leaving school without graduating. The inability to integrate into the academic culture often lead to colleges dismissing students because of grades (Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1988). Tinto steadfastly believed that to address retention issues in institutions of higher learning researchers had to understand all the barriers that prevented persistence.

Astin (1984, 1993) also made significant contributions to the study of retention and persistence. In his comprehensive longitudinal study of student involvement, Astin identified several institutional factors that affect students' involvement and learning (1993). Utilizing data on over 400,000 students from over 1,300 institutions, Astin (1993) identified academic engagement, positive interactions with faculty, service learning, multicultural curriculum, and involvement with peers through group projects, organizations, and socializing as significant influences on desired student outcomes. Though it predates Ladson-Billings theory by several years, Astin's discovery that a

multicultural curriculum influences student engagement supports the idea that culturally responsive teaching is necessary to increase engagement and equity in learning.

Both Tinto and Astin's findings are important because they highlighted issues affecting retention. However, their findings did not focus on students labeled underprepared or underrepresented in higher education. This is particularly so for Tinto, whose study included mostly White students at predominately White universities. This is not to say that Tinto and Astin's findings cannot be used to examine retention issues with minority students as some issues – finances, family responsibilities, and the desire to be in school – are universal and affect students of all ethnicities and backgrounds. However, minority students often face unique challenges, particularly as it relates to the type of institution they attend. Some institutions have a more nurturing atmosphere and thus help some students develop the self-efficacy needed to be successful in college (Allan & Clarke, 2007; Rayle, Robinson-Kurpius, & Arrendondo, 2006).

Bridging to Success

As a college instructor, I have worked in a bridge program and I have seen the positive effects it has on students. Bridge programs are usually residential in nature, meaning the participants live on campus for the duration of the program and attend classes as they become oriented to college life. Such programs typically convene for up to six weeks prior to a college's fall semester and offer students courses in writing, math, and college survival skills. The programs do not just focus on remediation as they also allow students to take some general education courses so they can earn college credits prior to their first year (Buck, 1985; Logan, Salisbury-Glennon, & Spence, 2000; Wolf-

Wendel, Tuttle, & Keller-Wolff, 1999). Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, and Albano (2008) noted contrary to some critics' beliefs, summer bridge programs raise the academic standards and expectations for its participants not lower them.

As such, research shows direct correlations between participating in summer bridge programs with earning higher grades, remaining in school longer, and attaining degrees (Evans, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The benefits do not stop there. Bridge program participants typically have higher levels of self-control, confidence, and self-esteem than nonparticipants do during their first few years in college (Ackermann, 1991; Fitts, 1989). In addition, students who took part in summer bridge programs reportedly developed closer bonds with peers and faculty members during their first year than students who did not attend a bridge program (Ackerman, 1991). Lastly, summer bridge students not only tended to become more actively involved in campus activities (Buck, 1985) they were also more likely to assume leadership roles in their campus community (Walpole et. al., 2008).

Not all researchers, though, have praised the results of bridge programs. Myers and Schirm (1999) acknowledged summer bridge could influence enrollment trends (i.e. help boost admission numbers) but found they had no effect on academic preparation. In fairness to Myers and Schirm, others, including those who support the mission of summer bridge programs, have made similar claims. For instance, Perrine and Spain (2009) conducted a two-year longitudinal study of a six-day pre-college/bridge program at Eastern Kentucky University to see if the program had an impact on grade point averages, retention, and credits earned. The two noted that despite the program being

modeled on Tinto's theory of student persistence (i.e. students ultimately do well in school because their orientation program helps them feel connected to their university), it did not always happen.

Based on their study, Perrine and Spain found older students who entered the program were more likely to drop out because of family obligations. They also discovered that when examining for race, students of color had higher attrition rates when there were disproportionally fewer students of color represented at the college. Ultimately, they found that the orientation program had little effect on any of their testing areas. However, a program that only worked with participants for such a short period may not yield any significant contributions. Strayhorn's 2011 research of a summer bridge program also revealed shortcomings. Although the program in his study helped participants improve their academic skills, it failed to help them integrate into the campus culture (Strayhorn, 2011). His study was based on statistical results gleaned from survey data. Helping students integrate into the cultural fabric of their institution is one of the primary goals in some bridge programs.

Transition and Growth

Despite some shortcomings, taking part in a pre-college program can be a turning point in a participant's life. The exposure to rigorous coursework, campus activities, and mentoring could help students evolve and develop confidence to succeed (Ackerman, 1991; Kallison & Stader, 2012; Strayhorn, 2011). When considering this, Schlossberg's Theory of Transition seemed an appropriate starting point when discussing pre-college programs such as summer bridge. This theory served as a useful theoretical lens for

examining how pre-college programs help participants mature and develop into responsible students. Schlossberg's Theory of Transition is a psychosocial model of development that examines how life events affect different realms of a person's life and his or her role in society.

Although this theory initially focused on adult development, many argue its conceptual framework also provides a lens for examining student development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). Schlossberg would likely agree with this notion since college students are on the precipice of adulthood when they enter school. She would also suggest that most students would acknowledge that entering college is a life changing moment and thus a key transitional period in their lives. Schlossberg's theory does not focus on pre-college programs, but there is an obvious connection. Students who enter into these programs are transitioning out of one phase in life and entering into another. Because some of these programs target "at-risk" students and those with subpar academic records, program workers (counselors, tutors, instructors, and directors) often have to help the participants develop new skill sets, and, in some instances, help them develop a general appreciation for education. This would be the very essence of a transitional moment, one that could influence retention at the postsecondary level.

Do pre-college programs enhance intellectual development? One of the biggest quandaries surrounding pre-college programs is how to assess them. Although many scrutinize the value of remediating students in these programs, state policy makers and college administrators continue to invest huge sums in them. Bettinger and Long (2009) posited that public colleges spend more than $1 billion annually on remedial

education. Others estimate that businesses and institutions of higher education spend almost $17 billion annually to teach students high school level skills (Greene, 2000). Because of that, more research is needed on the effectiveness of pre-college summer programs.

Some have suggested using quantitative data, while others have touted qualitative research methods. Gandara (2001) maintained institutions cannot draw definitive conclusions about pre-college programs without quantitative data. She has written primarily about the impact pre-college programs have on low-income Latino and Hispanic students. She noted many programs collect data on their participants, but few undergo thoroughly and statistically sound evaluations. Gullatt and Jan (2003) concurred as they contended many pre-college programs rely on unreliable data because they fail to use detailed measurements. In their research, they cited how few programs use control groups or measure outcome variables. This makes it difficult to conduct a statistical analysis of many pre-college programs. Gandara, Gullatt, and Jan also raised valid concerns regarding the limited assessments of these programs. Although they did not say the programs failed to have positive influences, their findings indicated researchers must be prudent in how they assess enrichment programs. That may allow them to determine more accurately whether the programs have a demonstrable impact on institutional access.

The problem with assessing pre-college and early intervention programs is just one of their weaknesses. Although proponents and practitioners quickly defend them, some question their long-term effectiveness. In their study of Upward Bound, Perna and

Swail (2001) pointed to statistics showing it failed to affect high school achievement or post-secondary enrollment. The statistics also showed close to half of Upward Bound participants dropped out of the four-year program after just one year. This is just one pre-college program, and one highly different from summer bridge; however, the findings should raise significant concerns. Upward Bound is the oldest, continuous running pre-college program in the country and one of the most heavily funded. If close to half of its participants fail to complete the program, how can it increase minority enrollment in higher education? Secondly, if the program does not help improve grades in high school, how can administrators accurately determine if it improves college readiness? Again, Upward Bound is different from summer bridge, but there are some similarities between the programs in that they both draw students from the same population groups - the underprivileged and underprepared.

Swail and Perna (2002) have long maintained that early intervention programs have little impact on improving problems in secondary schools. Their assertion is that pre-college programs' greatest strength is providing a "safety net" for students who fail to receive the academic and social support necessary for success in post-secondary education. While the consensus seems to agree pre-college programs can influence retention and persistence, there is still a lingering debate about how much.

Loza (2003) identified other weaknesses of pre-college programs, particularly as it related to diversity. He said pre-college programs, including summer bridge, often failed to accept Latino students who would benefit most from their services (2003). Loza took these programs to task for their selection criteria. As previously mentioned, many

intervention and pre-college programs target “at-risk” students. Some programs define at-risk differently than others. For instance, some describe these students as exhibiting chronic behavioral problems. School officials also slap this tag on students disengaged with school and on the verge of quitting. Others label students with extremely low grade point averages as at-risk. Still, some say even students with “good” grades (2.5 GPA or higher) can be at-risk if school officials, parents, and community organizations fail to help them reach their full potential (Pallas, 1989). As in all matters, the truth is complicated because in essence all of these definitions accurately describe an at-risk student. The problem arises, however, when programs set specific criteria for which “at-risk” students they will serve and which ones they will not.

Loza (2003) would argue many Latino students who fit part but not all the at-risk characteristics are excluded from programs that could influence them to continue their education beyond high school. He raised an excellent point, albeit from a narrow perspective. This is true for all students not just Latinos. Students from other underrepresented groups face similar challenges gaining acceptance into programs that could improve their access and transition to college.

Some educational researchers have produced papers in the past few decades calling for more comprehensive analyses of pre-college programs. Many of them question their ability to improve retention and persistence (Gandara, 2001; Gullatt & Yan, 2003; Jager-Hyman, 2004; Swail & Perna, 2001; Swail & Perna, 2002). What these researchers fail to realize is pre-college programs are just one factor in influencing retention and persistence. It seems these researchers are willing to stamp the label

"successful" or "failure" solely based on whether participants stay in school or drop out. This seems myopic. Numerous factors influence retention. As previously noted, many participants of pre-college programs come from low-income families. These students often face significant financial barriers staying in school. For some, attending college, even for only a few semesters, is a moral victory.

Villalpando and Solorzano (2011) reframed the question of *do* pre-college programs improve retention to *how* these programs improve retention. They examined the number of pre-college programs that include a mentoring component to benefit students. Many programs assigned students mentors based on their shared racial and cultural backgrounds. This allowed students to work with someone with whom they were comfortable and it enabled them to collaborate with a person of the same race or culture who had experienced some success.

Despite the positives, assigning students mentors is not always optimal because it is difficult to "replicate" its success on a continuing basis (2011). Research shows that strong mentors, though, can influence students and help increase their motivation. Other literature supported this notion. Gullatt and Jan (2003) highlighted the Sponsor a Scholar (SAS) program run by Philadelphia Futures, a non-profit organization, for successfully incorporating mentors in their pre-college program. That program pairs mentors with 9th grade students. The organization serves 500 low-income students with marginal grades. The SAS mentors work with students for five years. They begin mentoring students from their 9th grade year and work with them until after their first year in college. They get to

know the students personally during that period, and they interact with their family members.

SAS chooses mentors from the greater Philadelphia area and matches them with students based on shared interests, not race or gender. Gullatt and Jan cited a longitudinal study conducted by Mathmatica, which showed SAS participants with assigned mentors had higher grade point averages throughout high school and better attendance records during their first two years in college (2003). Gullatt and Jan (2003) and Villalpando and Solorzano (2011) cited studies proving pre-college programs improved retention when coupled with other services such as tutoring, financial aid advisement, and academic remediation.

The Challenges of First-Generation Students

In an existential reflection on life in his poverty-infested Queens, New York housing project, hip-hop artist Nasir Jones (1994) lamented how he was forced to write "in my book of rhymes, all my words past the margin" (track 4). It is the second line in the opening verse of his seminal classic "The World is Yours." African American Studies scholar James Peterson suggested in the book *Born to Use Mics* that Jones cleverly used "margin" as a metaphorical representation of his placement in society: on the outside looking in. One could debate the meaning of the line, but Peterson's analysis served as a poignant reminder that those outside the "margin" of society often lack a sense of belonging and find themselves on the periphery of the privileged. In educational circles, one of the groups of students who sometimes find themselves outside the "margin" is first-generation generation college students.

Heretofore, the prevailing focus on pre-college programs and student outcomes has been examined from the standpoint of how these programs affect ethnic minorities. Certainly, that group should be of concern for scholars and researchers because they have long been underrepresented and underserved in higher education, particularly by predominately white institutions (PWIs). However, this is not the only group that benefits from pre-college programs, nor is it the only group of concern when it comes to building success and improving retention and persistence efforts. First-generation students, as well as students of color, often find themselves on the margin of two cultures: that of their college community and one of the family and friends in their home community (London, 1989). Many times first-generation students will also be students of color and come from low-SES backgrounds. This compounds the problem of helping them to persist.

Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) explained that many first-generation students sever ties with previous associates, friends, and family members during their college experience as they deal with dual pressures to succeed in school while possibly rejecting heritage and cultural values by being in college. This is not unique to students of color as White first-generation students from low-SES backgrounds undergo the same challenges and conflicts experienced by some ethnic minorities (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek, 2006). Educational experiences that encourage students to develop supportive relationships with faculty, staff members, and peers can help them better deal with those challenges in route to achieving success in college because it promotes the acquisition of cultural capital (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini 2004; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010).

The Development of Cultural and Social Capital

Perhaps the greatest strength of pre-college programs is not in their ability to help participants improve their grades. On the contrary, the programs might best position participants to gain additional cultural and social capital needed to succeed in life (Maimer, 2003). Researchers often use the terms social capital and cultural capital interchangeably. In the narrowest sense, social capital refers to the relationships one cultivates in order to advance and gain opportunities (Coleman, 1988), whereas cultural capital develops through particular interests related to a person's social standings (Maimer, 2004). In other words, the former reinforces the adage "it's not what you know, but who you know," while the latter refers to the acquisition of tastes related to a particular social class. Thus, Maimer's definition suggested the higher a person's economic standing, the more cultural capital he or she possesses. Likewise, it infers as one gains cultural capital, the likelihood increases that the person will move up in social class as well. Maimer (2004) further clarified the distinction between the two forms of capital by contending activities such as social networking, student-teacher interactions, and parent involvement, all once deemed as cultural capital, are really forms of social capital.

Participants of pre-college programs are not devoid of either social or cultural capital (suggesting one lacks the latter is akin to suggesting that person's racial, ethnic, or community culture is unimportant). However, participants may be weak in these areas and thus some believe pre-college programs can be helpful. Although Maimer could not determine whether such programs had any impact on academic outcomes (e.g. higher

grades), her research yielded other findings. For instance, Maimer (2004) noted Upward Bound is instrumental in boosting cultural capital and increasing college enrollment by having students participate in summer residential programs, campus visits, and other academic trips. The exposure to postsecondary institutions likely sparked the interest of the participants and helped them realize there were other avenues for lifelong success after high school.

Strayhorn's (2011) research on the retention of Black and Hispanic males substantiated Maimer's claims. In his programmatic study, Strayhorn found students gained social capital - and by extension cultural capital - mostly from experiences outside the classroom. Pre-college programs perhaps contributed to these gains. His study revealed that Black and Hispanic males who participated in such programs earned higher grade point averages. Moreover, his research showed that Hispanic males made greater academic strides than their Black male counterparts did. Strayhorn did not know what caused the disparities; that notwithstanding, his overall findings seemed to run counter to other researchers.

Social capital and learning outcomes. Social capital theorists have noted the importance of a network with "closure" (Coleman, 1988). A closed network occurs when network members consistently and purposefully convey acceptable norms and resources that help more novice network members to reach an intended outcome (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). When breaking the cycle of first-generational status, Farmer-Hinton (2008) maintained school-based supports make it difficult for an individual to transition two worlds. In other words, these students often felt isolated from their families while in

college; however, from within their programs, they felt pressured to do better than their families. Perna, Walsh and Fester (2011) concluded that although pre-college programs helped increase parental involvement, many families endured economic hardships; therefore, many of the students did not enroll in four-year institutions. This affects education attainment levels in this country (Perna, Walsh & Fester, 2011).

Cultural capital and learning outcomes. Many researchers, notably Becker (1993) and Paulsen (2001), suggested the economic theory of human capital influences enrollment trends in higher education more so than pre-college programs. This theory posited a person will enroll in college if he or she believes the lifetime benefits and the cost of that endeavor outweigh other alternatives. Furthermore, a person has to not only consider the necessary financial resources needed to pay for college but also whether he or she is capable to complete the academic program in order to reap the future economic benefits (Paulsen, 2001). It is unclear whether participants in pre-college programs wrestle with all these questions, though it makes sense that many probably do. Since some do not have family experiences to use as a guide, perhaps a large percentage question their abilities to handle the rigors of college. This is why pre-college programs' ability to provide social and cultural capital becomes important. Pre-college programs instill a sense of confidence in its participants by helping them build capital, which can propel them through college (Strayhorn, 2011, 2013).

In his study of African-American males at a highly selective, predominately White institution, Strayhorn (2011) concluded pre-college programs can help students develop positive beliefs about their academic skills, and that in turn can positively affect

their first semester grade point averages. In another instance, Strayhorn (2013) found a statistical correlation between the academic success of Black male students and the amount of "grit" they possessed. In other words, Strayhorn was able to quantify how what sports coaches might label as intestinal fortitude – or good old fashion determination – accounts for how well a person can perform in college. Although pre-college programs can help instill or hone this trait, it seems that this is a characteristic individuals bring with them into the program.

Identity Development and Academic Engagement

Educators and researchers in recent years have produced a prodigious amount of literature on the influence social cultures have on learning. Culture in this instance refers to customs, practices, and beliefs of one's community. Educators say this is especially true for minorities who often eschew parts of their culture in order to assimilate into the mainstream. Educators say this is problematic and actually retards learning and academic growth. Deyhle (1995) shed light on this issue as it pertained to Native Americans when he stated minority students from low-income neighborhoods often feel ostracized and rejected by their community peers for having success in school and discussing college aspirations. Deyhle said many students from this group often feel as if they have rejected part of their identity and culture for trying to thrive academically (as cited by Oesterreich, 2000).

Deyhle's findings highlighted a major obstacle that many pre-college programs face. Many participants find it difficult to navigate their dual environments of home and college (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). This is not a responsibility that falls solely on

students, but it is one that demands institutional involvement because students, "should not be left to manage and resolve these differences on their own, especially when the college environment values conventions and traditions that students perceive to be alien or antithetical to their own," (p. 14).

Some pre-college programs incorporate students' cultures and backgrounds to prevent identity problems with race, class, and gender. This notion, however, counters what Tinto (1993) espoused in his model of student departure. This framework built on his earlier student integration model by focusing more on African-American students, students from low-income families, adult learners and transfer students (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto's theory of student departure is grounded in Van Gennep's (1960) anthropological model that depicted cultural rites of passage. His theory posited that students must learn to separate from the group with which they were formerly associated including friends and family members. During this period of transition and detachment (the researcher's words not Tinto's), the person would begin associating with members of the group to which he or she aspired to belong (Tinto 1993). In doing so, the person would adopt the normative values and behaviors of the new cultural group.

Both hailed and criticized, Tinto remains one of the most cited scholars when it comes to theories of student integration, retention, and persistence (Neuville, Frenay, Schmitz, Boudrenghien, Noël, & Wertz, 2007). Tinto surmised students' departure from college was largely determined by their background characteristics as well as their initial intentions and aspirations towards degree attainment. Those able to fit in stayed in school

and persisted; those unable to integrate the academic and social cultures at their college were more likely to depart or dropout. In essence, Tinto asserted that to integrate into college, a person had to remake himself (or herself) by shedding past cultural connections and associations. This is a difficult proposition for some minority groups and in many ways a hegemonic, Westernized view.

The inherent weakness in this theory is that it is not preventative and it does not take into account the cultural needs of students of color (Guiffrida, 2007). Colleges and universities cannot promote equity and cultural inclusion if they develop programs that ask participants of color to eschew their cultural backgrounds (Muses & Harris, 2010). As Kuh et al. (2006) noted, "students do not come to postsecondary education tabula rasa. Rather, they are products of many years of complex interactions with their family of origin and cultural, social, political, and educational environments" (p. 3). To think otherwise, perpetuates culturally biased assumptions, Kuh et al. asserted (2006).

Loza (2003) would concur with the assessment of Kuh et al. Loza maintained pre-college programs not only build intellectuality, but they build social and cultural capital as well. In essence, outreach programs help students increase their knowledge, learn how to interact with peers and professors, and navigate other social settings. Citing Boride, Maimer (2004) explained that students from middle and upper-class backgrounds possess more cultural capital than economically disadvantaged students. In short, students exposed to more cultural activities – field trips, arts, music, and drama – perform at higher academic levels than those who lack social capital. Maimer proved this premise through her longitudinal study on the acquisition of cultural and social capital through

pre-college programs. Her study revealed the correlation between attending cultural activities and class performance. Students who attended cultural activities in their pre-college programs and discussed academics with their families had higher grade point averages in high school (Maimer, 2004). This highlights how pre-college programs can expose students to new experiences, thus engaging them inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Students from low-income families and those with lackluster academic records in secondary school will face continued challenges attaining a college education. Their road to higher education will be paved with obstacles. This does not mean their obstacles are insurmountable. If anything, their challenges highlight the need for additional programs that increase their access to post-secondary education. These programs must be holistic – attending to social and intellectual needs – in order to prepare students adequately for the academic challenges present in college. This means programs need to start early (by the 9th grade), they should offer a wealth of services – tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and advisement – and they must involve parents and secondary schools. Students in pre-college programs need to take college preparatory courses and advanced level classes that will help ensure their success at the university level. Lastly, educators should eliminate the term “at-risk” from their lexicon. Educators and administrators use the term too arbitrarily to label far too many students, creating destructive stereotypes. Researchers should not get swept up in statistical minutiae when examining pre-college programs. Likewise, program administrators need to include tracking components to evaluate how

their participants progress. Following these steps will improve pre-college programs and provide more access to an upcoming generation of students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will describe the setting, the research perspective, and the research design for this study.

Setting

The study took place at A&M College, a historically Black college in the Southeast and one of the largest HBCUs in the country with nearly 11,000 students. A&M is a pseudonym for the institution. Founded in the 1890s through the Second Morrill Act, it was its state's first land grant institution of higher learning for African Americans. Despite battles with racism, economic hardships, and other difficulties, A&M College has continuously evolved and is now not only one of the premier HBCU in this country but one leaving indelible marks in the fields of technology, science, engineering, and business. The school graduates the largest number of African-American engineers at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and it produces the largest number of Blacks with psychology degrees each year (A&M College website, 2014). The university's School of Business and Economics has also developed into a powerhouse and is one of the institution's premier programs. Today, it is one of the leading producers of African-American certified public accountants (A&M College website, 2014). The university has made tremendous strides over the years and it has garnered accomplishments that make it one of the most important institutions in our nation. Throughout the years, the school has

produced many distinguished alumni including well-known civil rights activists, congressional representatives, judges, athletes, entertainers, and entrepreneurs. It is located in a city that was the site of many famous civil rights activities in the early 1960s with A&M students on the forefront of that charge.

Upon its founding, the mission of the university was similar to that of many Black colleges: to educate and nurture African American students who may not have had any other place to attend school. The mission evolved over the years with integration and equality. Nevertheless, the university still adheres to an unwritten mission like that of many HBCUs, which is to provide a haven for students who might have few postsecondary options while simultaneously becoming a research-intensive institution that attracts top students all nationalities and ethnicities. Its ranking as a high-research activity university from the Carnegie Classification - the foundation that ranks universities based on their level of research - attests to this commitment (A&M College website, 2014).

Program Description

A&M College is a historically Black institution that is part of a state university system comprised of 17 public colleges and universities. Although it is not its state's flagship university, A&M has long established a strong reputation for producing quality students; however, it struggles with the same challenges as many HBCUs: higher than average attrition rates and a large population underprepared for college level work. That makes the workload taxing for instructors of first-year students.

To address this problem, the state university system in 2008 launched a residential summer bridge program to improve retention at several minority-serving institutions. Two schools served as the pilot that first year. The initiative expanded in 2009 to include two additional schools, one being A&M College, to help build the academic skills of their most at-risk students. The program is part of a statewide effort to raise achievement levels for first-generation, underserved students entering college underprepared for college-level work. Most of the students who have participated in the program were from low-income families and qualified for Pell Grants (State University System, 2014), which typically go to students from families whose yearly income level is less than $40,000 (College Board, 2012).

The state university system now funds the residential summer bridge programs at five colleges – four HBCUs and one Native American-serving Nontribal Institution. Each institution has a unique name for its program to instill pride in the participants and to send a message of what the universities expects of them. These schools modeled their programs after a four-week academic boot camp for the U.S. Marines that began in 2002 (Stancill, 2006). In that program, enlisted soldiers attend class daily for eight hours at a community college where they receive instruction in English and math. Those who participate hope to land a better military job or improve their chances of attending college after completing service. Their class performance has far-reaching ramifications. Higher grades means the difference between working in a lower level (i.e. less desirous) job such as food service or qualifying for more competitive jobs in counterintelligence or as aircraft mechanics (Stancill, 2006). The Marines who participate in the academic boot

camp compete for limited program slots and earn work release time to concentrate on their studies.

Similarly, rising first-year college students compete for limited spots in the academic bridge programs. More than 600 students qualified for 40 slots in the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program in 2014.[1] The program directors at A&M whittle the number down by pre-screening applications looking at recommendation letters and high school transcripts. From there, they conduct phone interviews of students, which helps them further trim their list to the students whom they think will best fit (i.e. those who will not be behavioral problems and appear motivated to learn). Students have to buy into the idea that spending the summer away from family and friends and not working to earn money is a worthwhile choice. If they accept, they must totally commit to the program. They have very little free time as they are in class most of the day.

Replicating the Marines' program has been a challenge. Although the schools with these programs receive state grant funding, operating costs – tuition, fees, room, board, and books for students – are high; thus, the number of participants schools can accept is limited. The schools that incorporate the military-inspired academic program, including A&M College, pay for all the participants' expenses. This includes room and board and textbooks; because of this, the schools accept only in-state students. The learning environment is not relegated to the classroom as students go on overnight educational trips to places such as Washington D.C., Atlanta, Ga., and Charleston, S.C. I

[1] That number is slightly misleading, however, as it included out-of-state students whose SAT scores met the threshold for participating even though those students were not eligible to participate in the program.

was one of the instructors hired to teach two sections of a college study skills course in its inaugural year at A&M College.

During that first year, the program targeted conditionally admitted students with low SAT scores (below 800 combined math and verbal) or poor grades. To become acclimated to college, the bridge students took a seven-hour course load (a three-credit college math class, a three-credit writing class, and a one-credit study skills course). If they performed well in the six-week summer program, they gained full admittance into the university. Approximately 66 students participated during that first year; 53 completed the program (State University System, 2014). The program changed leadership several years later and with it, the program changed. To meet new state mandates, A&M's summer bridge program, as well as those at the other four universities, stopped accepting conditionally admitted students and instead took fully admitted students whose grades and/or standardized test scores put them in the lowest quartile of the university's first-year, first-time students (State University System, 2014).

About 40 students who are from the state where A&M is located are now admitted into the program each summer. Instead of taking a seven-hour course load, the students now take six credit hours consisting of a college math course and freshman composition course. They attend classes from Monday through Thursday starting at 8 am and concluding at noon. After lunch, they attend 90-minute supplemental study sessions Monday through Wednesday. Attendance for those sessions is mandatory. If students do not attend, they can be dismissed from the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program (BFSP). The program's math and writing instructors lead the sessions with peer tutors and

professional teaching assistants available to provide individual assistance. On Thursdays, students attend workshops and symposiums after lunch on career building, networking, health and wellness, and locating campus resources. They also participate in Greek Life chats and other extracurricular activities. These events are designed to help participants transition to college, engage with peers, connect with faculty and staff, and overcome the intimidation often experienced by first-year students.

Lastly, students attend nightly study hall sessions for two hours in the university library where they can receive professional tutoring. During the duration of the program, students are not allowed to leave campus unless all the program participants are attending a function or taking a field trip. I have taught and tutored in the revamped program for the past three summers and will do so again this year by teaching two sections of writing and tutoring each evening.

Research Perspectives

Qualitative inquiry was used as the research paradigm for this study. This methodology was chosen because it offers a nuanced understanding of how students navigate their ways through college and what experiences shaped their college trajectories. Understanding the latter may help scholar practitioners, college administrators, and policy makers develop better programs, infuse curricula changes, and provide more faculty development opportunities in efforts to improve the college going experiences of underprepared/underserved student populations. A qualitative approach provided an assessment filled with depth, complexity, and the voices of the research

participants, which in this case were current and former students who participated in a residential summer bridge program for "high-risk" individuals.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) described qualitative inquiry as being multi-method with the researcher taking an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the subject matter. Creswell (1998) perhaps provided a richer understanding of the broader methodological framework when he defined qualitative research as a "process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in natural setting" (p. 15). In this instance, the problem I will be brining into focus is the persistence efforts of underprepared students. A qualitative inquiry was warranted here because it allowed me to examine the thought processes and feelings of the study participants and that might not have been possible utilizing quantitative research methods.

Case Study

Of the five qualitative research approaches, I chose case study as the specific methodological framework for this project. Shavelson and Towne (2002) suggested case studies are optimal when the researcher wants to describe what is happening, what has happened, or how or why something did happen. Stake (1995) further asserted this point when he suggested case study is an overarching framework that allows the researcher to incorporate multiple methodologies while still using the case study as a bounded system with integral parts. Researchers often use case study when conducting in-depth examinations of one or more individuals in a program, an event, an activity, and/or a

process. In case studies, researchers collect a variety of information using multiple data collection procedures. Cases under investigation are bounded by time and activity.

The case under investigation in this study was a residential summer bridge program's role in affecting retention and persistence. I utilized case study because I wanted to understand how students who entered college underprepared for their expected coursework were able to overcome challenges associated with that and what, if anything, the summer bridge program (and by extension the school) had done to both ease their transition into college and help them persist. Although other methodological frameworks might have provided insight about this phenomenon, they may not have provided the rich descriptions and penetrating explanations that arose out of a case study (Yin, 2012).

Additionally, the case study of the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program emphasized the examination of a phenomenon within a real world, naturalistic setting as opposed to what Bromley (1986) called "derived" data. The latter would include the researcher deriving data from responses to a survey questionnaire or an instrument in an experiment (Yin, 2012). Lastly, since this study was an evaluation of a residential summer bridge program, case study was a viable option to examine and explain whether the program met its intended outcomes. Certainly, other research methodologies including quantitative approaches could have been useful in this regard. However, other methodological frameworks may not have allowed for the inclusion of participants' voices, which was one of the main goals of this study.

For this case study, I collected data from multiple in-depth interviews. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into documents. That data was later

coded for themes. In addition, I also relied on observation and kept field notes of those observations. Lastly, I reviewed internal documents provided to me by the university where the research was conducted and external documents from the state university system that funds the summer bridge program. The data obtained from other collection procedures was also coded for emergent themes. As previously mentioned, multiple data collection procedures is a key feature of case study research. Another important component of case study research is the unit of analysis, which Merriam (1988) and Yin (2009) defined as the study's area of focus. The area of focus in this case study were (BFSP) residential summer bridge participants at A&M College.

Research Design

In this qualitative case study, I observed and interviewed selected participants of the Bulldogs Future Scholars academic summer bridge program. I wanted to learn their stories and how they came to choose A&M College and their reasons for participating in the bridge program since doing so, for most of them, was voluntary. This research study examined the social and cultural agents that aided in their college going experiences and that helped them establish value-laden relationships. Ultimately, I wanted to uncover how these students defined success, what helped them achieve success, and what helped them overcome possible failures when the literature about these students suggested they are more likely to fail (drop out of college) than they are to succeed (graduate with a degree). This study will contribute to the body of research on underprepared/underserved students by explaining what programs and university initiatives enhanced or retarded their

academic growth. In examining a historically marginalized and oft overlooked group, this study's greatest potential contribution may be in providing a forum for their voices to be heard.

This study utilized narratives from the participants in this case study to explain how they overcame their academic deficiencies to persist in college and if their participation in the summer bridge program in any way influence their retention and persistence. My bounded system consisted of 14 individuals who participated in the six-week residential bridge program. They were further bounded by the fact that they were identified as "high-risk" students prior to their arrival on campus because of low grade point averages and/or standardized test scores. Although not a perfect barometer of future performance, standardized tests, along with high school grades, remain accepted predictors for undergraduate success (Cox, 2013; Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, Mattern, & Barbuti, 2008). The participants in this bridge program had grades or standardized test scores below average for A&M's incoming first-year students. The majority of first-year students at A&M College graduate high school with a 3.26 GPA and have a combined math and reading SAT score ranging from 908 to 980 (College website).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the exact grade point average a student would likely earn during his or her first year in college after having graduated high school with a 3.26 GPA. Many variables could influence that factor from possible grade inflation in high school to a student's commitment level in college. Nevertheless, high school grades are significantly reliable, even more than standardized test scores, in predicting college success (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008). This suggests that the

lower the bridge participants' grades were in high school and/or the lower their admissions test scores there could be an increased likelihood that they struggle with college level work and expectations without some form of intervention.

Participants

I interviewed 14 participants for this study. The participants included were all minority (13 African American and one Hispanic). Four of the study participants were male and the remaining ten were female. The participants were at different stages in their education. Two participants who were part of the inaugural summer bridge cohort have already graduated. Both of them are working full-time with jobs related to their undergraduate degrees. Three participants are in their fourth year at A&M College; two are in their third year and are on schedule to graduate in spring 2016; five are second-year students; and the remaining participants are second semester first-year students. With the exception of two students, the participants in this study had over a 2.7 grade point average. In fact, 10 of the participants in the study had over a 3.0 GPA. The two participants who have already graduated did so with honors. One of the participants included in the study with a sub 2.7 GPA was included because his story encapsulated elements many students endure in college: triumphs, failures, and the struggle to persevere when faced with failures. He has a 2.58 grade point average despite failing some classes and being unable to qualify for his major until his third year.

In selecting the participants, I employed what Maxwell (2005) referred to as purposeful sampling, in which "particular settings, persons and activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other

choices" (p. 88). The participants I chose for the study were a sample of the successful students who completed the bridge program. To include some diversity, I included males and females and one nonblack participant. Including the Hispanic student's voice was important because he faced his own set of challenges of being a Hispanic student at an HBCU.

The purposeful selection of these diverse participants was done for several reasons. First, interviewing students at various stages of their academic trajectories was important because I believed it would yield a rich, insightful perspective about the bridge program. Participants who had graduated or were in their fourth year of school had reached a maturation point in which their level of introspection, I thought, would be more profound than first-year students. In other words, I believed the older participants would be able to make connections to the program and their college experiences in ways that the younger ones could not. This did not diminish the need for the voices of first and second-year students. Their perspectives were equally important because they had most recently gone through the program and were in the process of putting to use what they had learned in BFSP. This included study skills, positive work habits, and tools for building meaningful relationships.

There are other reasons why I took a purposeful approach in selecting participants for this study. Recent graduates who participated in the program would yield a different but much needed perspective because they went through the program before it was redesigned to its current state. When BFSP began, it was a second-chance program for provisional students. These students were not fully admitted to the university. In order to

attend A&M College, they had to do well in the six-week program by passing their courses with a minimum of a C and getting recommendations from their instructors. Those who failed to do both were not offered admission to the institution. Therefore, the motivation for those students to participate in a bridge program was different from students who were able to attend the university without participating in BFSP. Simply put, the stakes were higher for the participants who entered the program during its first two years. The percentage of students who successfully completed the program at A&M College in 2009 and 2010 attests to this. During the first year, 80% of students completed the program and earned admission into A&M; however, that percentage plummeted in 2010 as only 61% completed the bridge program (State University System, 2014). There was added motivation for those students to succeed because otherwise they might not have been able to attend college – at least not at A&M.

Lastly, I believed looking at students at various stages in college, gave me a better understanding of the impact BFSP (Bulldogs Future Scholars Program) may have had and whether the program succeeded in helping participants improve academically. The small sample size of students whom I knew personally allowed me to use the rapport that I already had with them to gain greater insight into their perspectives and experiences at A&M College. I thought this would yield more robust results and give me an accurate picture of BFSP. Because of their grade point averages and involvement in campus organizations, the participants selected for this study would likely have taken full advantage of the program's offerings such as extended study hall sessions, tutoring, the opportunity to be part of a living-learning community, and mentoring. This level of

participation would also have helped them develop relationships with faculty and staff as well as other successful peers.

Description of the Students

The participants in this study included 13 African Americans and one Hispanic (four males, eight females), all of whom were former participants of A&M's Bulldogs Future Scholars Program. There were three African-American males, one Hispanic male, and ten African-American females chosen for the study. I selected these students based on the relationships I built with them as an instructor and tutor. I taught or tutored 11 of the 12 participants in the study. As an instructor at A&M, I had access to data about the program as well as access to the participants' transcripts and other pertinent information, which I reviewed. Appendix C contains the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct the study. Below are descriptions of the participants.

Graduates

Lindsey Williams graduated from A&M College in 2013 with a degree in dietetics. She was in the inaugural BFSP cohort in 2009. Although a self-admitted "C student" during her final two years of high school, Lindsey graduated from A&M with a 3.1 grade point average. She is originally from Rochester, New York but she moved south with her family when she was in elementary school. She enrolled in BFSP with the idea that she could graduate early if she attended summer school. Despite some obstacles, Lindsey managed to graduate in four years. This includes having a daughter during her second year of school, a year in which she had a 3.0 grade point average that fall and a 3.69 GPA in the spring – both while attending school full time. In order to graduate in

four years, Lindsey enrolled in summer school each year she attended A&M. She made the dean's list every semester except one while she was in school. During her time at A&M, she was a member of the dietetics club and Kappa Omicron Nu, a national honor society for students majoring in family and consumer sciences.

Mikayla Peters was also in the first cohort in 2009 and had the distinction of being co-valedictorian of that summer's class. She and Lindsey were roommates during their six weeks in the summer bridge program, and the two later shared an apartment while attending A&M. Like Lindsey, Mikayla was also born in New York. She lived in Norfolk, Virginia until the fifth grade before moving further south with her mother, two older sisters, and a brother who is six years younger than her. Mikayla graduated from A&M in 2013, finishing school with a 3.07 grade point average and a degree in criminal justice. She was president of the Criminal Justice Society and a member of the National Criminal Justice Honor Society while in college. During most of her four years at A&M, Mikayla worked full-time as a certified nursing assistant at a local retirement home. Her time at A&M was markedly different than her years in high school. In high school, Mikayla earned Ds and Fs and rebelled against studying. She did not plan to attend college and instead contemplated pursuing a singing career. It was not until Mikayla received her denial letter from A&M that she began to take school seriously. Although accepted into another university, Mikayla, with prodding from her mother, used the rejection letter as motivation to participate in BFSP so she could attend A&M and prove her detractors wrong.

Fourth-Year Students

Braxton Vorhees is a 22-year-old student at A&M College who participated in BFSP in 2011. Braxton is from a small, rural farming community where almost everyone in his hometown knows one another. As such, he is soft-spoken with a deep, southern drawl and an easy-going personality. Tall, slender, and light-skin, Braxton smiles constantly and has a self-deprecating humor that puts others around him at ease and makes him friendly and approachable. In high school, Braxton played on the varsity basketball and golf teams and was an "A-B student." His parents used sports to motivate him to do well academically (i.e. in order to participate in athletics, he had to remain on the honor roll). Braxton is an applied engineering and technology major and hopes to graduate fall 2015. However, he struggles in one of the key subjects essential to engineering and technology students: math. Braxton failed several advanced math courses during his first few years at A&M and that prevented him from applying to the applied engineering and technology program until his third year. He was technically an undeclared major before then. Despite the struggles in math, Braxton refuses to give up on becoming an engineer. He currently has a 2.58 GPA. Braxton worked as a residential summer counselor for BFSP in 2013. As part of his duties, he supervised 10 students in the residence halls making sure they obeyed rules and arrived to class and tutoring sessions on time. He also served as a tutor, teaching assistant, and confidant for the 10 students he supervised.

Toné Bennington is senior journalism major with a concentration in pre-law at A&M. She was born in Trenton, New Jersey and lived there until she started high school.

Her mother moved to the city where A&M College is located in 2007. Although she was very outgoing in high school, Toné was a self-described loner and distrustful of other people when she started college. Part of that stemmed from personal challenges she faced when she entered A&M. Just before she started the summer bridge program, her stepfather was sentenced to prison because of drugs. That left Toné bitter, and for most of the summer when she was in BFSP, she did not interact with her peers and made few friends. She regrets that now because for her BFSP was more than just academics; it helped her get through a critical juncture in life. As the oldest of her mother's five children, she commuted to school her first two years at A&M so she could stay home and help her mother raise her younger siblings. This prevented Toné from joining any organizations on campus. She has slowly become more involved during the last two years. She now works part-time in A&M's TRiO office as a clerk. Toné is a first-generation student (her mother dropped out of college her first year after getting pregnant with Toné), and she participates in several TRiO programs. She was a peer tutor in BFSP during the summer of 2014. Toné is scheduled to graduate in May and she currently has a 3.1 GPA. She plans to attend law school after she graduates.

Frederick Copeland is a broadcast journalism major and a drummer in A&M's nationally renowned marching band. He is very outgoing and academically driven. Frederick has a 3.2 grade point average and is a proud member of Kappa Kappa Psi, the national honorary band fraternity. Like his fellow cohort member, Toné, Frederick was initially withdrawn when he arrived at A&M in 2011 for the summer bridge program. His parents had secretly divorced during Frederick's senior year in high school but did not

tell him or his younger sister. Instead, his parents continued living together as if everything was normal. They did tell the program counselors and director when they brought Frederick to the university. Eventually, Frederick learned of his parents' divorce. Instead of becoming distraught, however, Frederick used it for motivation to do well in the program and throughout his time in college. I did not teach or tutor in the summer bridge program the year Frederick participated. However, he enrolled in a composition course that I taught in Spring 2012. For one of his essays, he wrote about his experiences in BFSP and his parents' divorce and how the former helped him endure the latter.

Third-Year Students

Tiana Bolden participated in BFSP during the summer of 2012. The following summer she worked as a residential peer counselor in the program. Tiana is from a tobacco-rich region known for its barbecue. She grew up in a strict, single-parent home where her mother emphasized school over partying. Because of that, Tiana did not have much of a social life in high school as she was not allowed to go out often. In fact, Tiana said she decided to take part in the summer bridge program so she could experience some freedom away from her mother. She thrived in the program earning B's in both her writing and math courses that summer. In addition to school, Tiana works third shift at a clothing factory. She is a social work major with a 3.23 GPA. She is also a first-generation college student and participates in TRiO.

Bonita Apperton also was a member of the 2012 BFSP cohort. She has a younger sister who participated in the program in 2014. Their mother, whom the sisters lived with, died that summer. Their mother's death has drawn them emotionally closer. They were

the first in their family to attend college and they are part of TRiO. Bonita majors in journalism and mass communications with a concentration in multimedia journalism. Although she said she finished high school with a 3.0 GPA, she described herself as a "mediocre" student back then – at least compared to her White counterparts. She attended an academically challenging high school that was highly competitive. For her, school was a struggle as most subjects – math, sciences, and foreign language – did not come easy for her. Her struggles continued in the summer bridge program. She earned a B in composition but only managed to earn a C in college algebra. Through studying and working with math tutors, Bonita has since improved. She currently has a 3.32 grade point average. She is a member of the National Association of Black Journalists and the student government association.

Second-Year Students

Dalilah Evergreen is a psychology student who participated in Bulldogs Future Scholars in 2013. She is outgoing, funny, and active in many campus organizations including the university's award-winning gospel choir and its mime ministry. In high school, Dalilah was a cheerleader. She said she hardly studied in high school but she said was still able to maintain a 3.6 grade point average. Despite that, she had doubts about getting into college and was surprised that she was accepted into BFSP. While in the program, she met her best friend Tiffani Jeter, who is also part of the mime ministry and gospel choir. She is so proud of being part of BFSP that she tells everyone she meets that she was in the program. She credits bonding with professors who worked in the program and establishing relationships with them for helping her acclimate to college. A first-

generation college student, Dalilah is part of TRiO. In the summer of 2014, she worked as an orientation student leader. Her duties included organizing orientation programs for incoming, first-year students as well as showing them and their parents around campus. Dalilah is also a member of a campus organization that helps develop student leadership skills.

Tiffani Jeter is the first-person in her family to attend college. She was raised primarily by her mother and maternal grandmother. Her mother dropped out of high school after she became pregnant with Tiffani. Together they live in a small, rural town where manufacturing jobs anchor the local community. Tiffani maintains she has always been serious about academics and loves to write. Her mother insisted that she use college to get away from their small town, where economic opportunities are limited. Therefore, she decided to attend A&M College and accepted the opportunity to participate in BFSP as a way to meet new people and get ahead academically. She earned an A in composition and a B in college algebra that summer. After returning to school that fall, Tiffani struggled to balance her social life with her academics. She admits that she partied and went clubbing "way too much" that first semester. As a result, she had three C's and finished with a 2.5 GPA. That spring, she rededicated herself to studying more and partying less because of her subpar grades. The last two semesters she has made the dean's list. She now has a 3.2 grade point average. In addition to being a member of the gospel choir, she is also part of TRiO.

Johnston Pendergrass is from the same area as Tiffani. He is the youngest of his parents' two sons. His older brother attended a large, predominately White college about

an hour from Johnston's hometown. Johnston briefly considered attending a community college or following in his brother's footsteps by attending a PWI (Predominately White Institution). At his parents' insistence, however, he decided to attend a historically Black college because they thought he might qualify for scholarships. His high school years were marked with little studying and little partying. Johnston spent most of his time at home, and, with the exception of attending an occasional basketball or football game, did not go out much and he did not interact with a lot of people. He vowed to be more socialable and outgoing in college. During his time in BFSP, he would often sit in the lobby with his peers and not in his room to force himself to socialize and make friends. In the fall, he joined the gospel choir. He performs in the mime ministry with Tiffani and Dalilah. A psychology major, Johnston currently holds a 3.23 grade point average. He is part of TRiO and he was a member of a cultural and mentoring program designed to improve the retention and persistence of minority male students. Johnston resides in one of the campus' living-learning communities.

Bobby Benítez majors in construction management and he is one of only a handful of nonblack students who have participated in the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program during its six years at A&M. He has a Hispanic mother, with whom he lives, and a White father. Bobby was extremely popular among his peers and he was one of three finalists for the best student award, which was chosen by the BFSP director. The student chosen for that award has not only done well academically, but he or she has exhibited a positive attitude, possessed leadership skills, and has helped others. Bobby struggled some academically during the bridge program. Nevertheless, he studied hard

and would often spend hours alone in the library so others could not distract him. He earned a B in composition and a C in math that summer. That fall, he continued studying alone in the library – even on days when he did not have class. His grades began to improve. Bobby made the dean's list Fall 2013 and again in Spring 2014. He now has a 3.07 GPA. He is proud of his grade point average and hopes to maintain at least a 3.0 because he desires to join a fraternity and several other organizations that have stringent academic requirements. Bobby is part of a mentoring group, and he was nominated by his professors to participate in a leadership development program.

Vivica Henderson is a first-generation student majoring in criminal justice. She is an only child who grew up in a single-parent home in a military town. She did not like high school and rarely studied. Typically, she only reviewed material the night before a test. Despite her poor academic habits, Vivica graduated high school a year early; she had just turned 17 when she began the summer bridge program. Her maturation level was different from her peers, and she admits that she struggled at times to fit in. In order to make friends, Vivica went out a lot during her first semester – to clubs, to bars, to parties. Her going out took a toll on her academically and physically. That fall she was rushed to the hospital after suffering from alcohol poisoning. The experience was an eye-opener as she began to party less and drew closer to her mother. She began spending more time alone and in the TRiO office. She no longer associates with many of the students who were in her summer bridge cohort, and she has distanced herself from other people she befriended outside of BFSP. She now has a 2.72 grade point average.

First-Year Students

Traci Tate is a second-semester first-year student majoring in laboratory animal science. Initially, Traci was going to forgo participating in the summer bridge program at A&M College. In fact, she ignored to the first few emails from the program directors encouraging her to attend because she was busy studying for her advanced placement (AP) biology exam. A prodigious writer, Traci excelled in English in high school but struggled with AP Biology. She attended a very competitive and academically challenging high school where she earned mostly B's. She earned B's in both her summer bridge courses as well. During the fall, however, she earned all A's. Traci is a member of a mentoring and retention program for minority female students.

Jennie Robinson is from her state's largest city. She did not do well in high school and there was a time when she did not think she would get accepted into any colleges. Jennie points to her final years in high school as evidence. She failed two classes her junior year and only did marginally better the following year as a senior. Jennie ultimately graduated with a 2.5 grade point average. A self-described procrastinator, Jennie said rarely studied in high school. She decided to attend the summer bridge program because (a) it was free and (b) because she was hoping that it would help her become a better student. She also wanted to be around other students like her who were also trying to better themselves.

Although she had a hard time adjusting to the strict schedule, Jennie eventually began to improve academically. She earned an A in composition, a class in which she won an award for being the top student. She earned a B in college algebra. She finished

her first semester with a 3.53 GPA. Jennie is very popular among her peers and is active in many organizations. A gifted singer, Jennie won a talent contest held among the summer bridge students. She is an intern with the student government association (SGA), a member of the gospel choir, and a writer for an online campus news publication. Jennie is also a member of two mentoring programs, including one that aims to improve the retention of minority females.

Data Collection

Data was collected for this study in the following ways: (a) one-on-one formal interviews with each participant; (b) observations conducted during class and tutoring sessions; (c) review of archival documents and reports from the state university system about each of the academic summer bridge programs it funds; (d) researcher's field notes. The individual student protocol was included (Appendix A).

Interviews

According to Seidman (1991), interviews are important in research because they reveal the experiences of other people and how those people make meaning of their experiences. Simply put, interviews reveal information that allows researchers to understand how other people's personal experiences shaped and/or changed them. This is especially important in case study research. As Kvale (1996) noted, qualitative interviews helps the researcher uncover how other people (i.e. research participants) make meaning of their lived experiences. Moreover, interviews allows the researcher to obtain data he or she would not be able to get through observation (Patton, 1987). Yin (2009) supported this point by contending open-ended interview questions yield richer (and more robust)

data than data derived from surveys, which typically utilize close-ended questions. In addition, Yin (2009) argued that if interviews are done properly in case studies they allow the interviewees to "construct reality." Finally, interviews allow for the triangulation of data obtained from other sources; thus, they can increase the credibility of the research (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 1995).

Each participant in this study was formally interviewed once with a follow-up informal interview conducted for data clarification when needed. Twelve of the interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 60 to 75 minutes. The face-to-face interviews were all conducted on campus with some taking place in the library, whereas others were done in classrooms. The researcher chose neutral settings where the participants would feel comfortable meeting. Two participants were away from campus during the time when I conducted most of the research for this study. Therefore, I conducted telephone interviews with them. Those interviews lasted approximately one hour.

I audio recorded and transcribed each of the in-person interviews for additional analysis. For the telephone interviews, I relied strictly on the notes I took during those conversations. After reviewing my transcriptions, I sent follow-up questions through email to further clarify certain points that the interviewees made. Lastly, I had numerous informal conversations with each of the participants to build rapport and strengthen trust. With the exception of the two participants who had already graduated, I saw each person who was part of this study on campus. I taught several of them in classes outside of the summer bridge program. I tutored others in writing. Several worked for me as counselors

during the bridge program. Each of these situations allowed for additional opportunities to talk with the participants, establish their trust, and develop on-going relationships with them.

Observations

Angrosino (2005) contended that observations are the building blocks to successful qualitative research. There are several forms of observation: participant observation where the researcher participates in activities along with those under study; unobtrusive observation where the researcher observes participants without their awareness; and reactive observation in which the researcher observes participants in controlled (i.e. experimental) settings. This study utilized participant observations, which DeWALT and DeWALT (2002) characterized as the process in which researchers gather information about participants in their natural setting. Although there has been debate about the extent to which researchers can effect or bias their findings during participant observation, many argue that it helps answer research questions and triangulate data gathered from interviews and other sources. I chose this method of data collection because I wanted to observe how the participants interacted with their peers, with counselors, and with other instructors. Furthermore, I wanted to observe how they would react when faced with challenging coursework.

As an instructor in the summer bridge program at A&M College, I was keenly aware of the program's mission, the types of students it admitted, and the challenges it faced (e.g. state funding, institutional support, and staffing). I also understood the challenges that the students faced. Like them, I was a first-generation student who also

attended a historically Black college as an undergraduate. I wanted to see how they faced their challenges, if they would develop confidence in their abilities, and if they would seek help when needed.

Review of Documents

In any research, there is a backstory. The backstory reveals the thematic elements that lead up to the main story. Case study is a multidimensional form of research that relies on a backstory (Wang, 2014). The researcher can usually find the backstory by examining archival documents and records, which serve as rich sources of information. By examining archival documents, the researcher can begin to see if certain themes emerge and further triangulate data. In this study, I reviewed participants' academic transcripts. This helped me determine whether they were being truthful about their grades. In addition to that, I also reviewed reports produced internally by the university and externally by the state university school system that funds the summer bridge program at five minority-serving institutions. The reports included data on program completion percentages, course completion rates, retention, comparisons of grade point averages of program participants versus those of nonparticipant first-year students, and graduation rates for all five summer bridge programs.

Reviewing this data allowed me to determine whether the program was meeting its intended outcome of improving retention rates for "high-risk" students. It also allowed me to triangulate data to see what the participants were getting out of the summer bridge program. Lastly, I reviewed newspaper articles on the program for the United States

Marines that inspired the creation of the summer bridge programs for at-risk students at the selected colleges.

Researcher's Field Notes

Field notes are recorded notes of observations and conversations conducted during the course of qualitative research. Field notes are important because they capture what the researcher cannot remember from observations or interviews alone (Thorpe & Holt, 2008). Although writing about ethnographic studies, Wolfinger (2002) echoed a similar point when he argued that field notes are vital to helping the researcher develop a tacit understanding of what he or she is studying. In essence, field notes are not only descriptive reflections of the researcher's observations but also of events, conversations, and other phenomena that the researcher witnesses. The descriptions should be of the physical setting where study participants interact, their role in the setting, and their communication with one another (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Reflections should include impressions that the researcher had while gathering data, unanswered questions or concerns that arise during the research, and insight on what was observed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

My field notes are a compilation of the following information: (a) my description of the summer bridge program; (b) my observations of students in class during the program; (c) my observations of students during study hall and evening tutoring sessions; (d) my interactions with students while they were in the program; (e) biases that could have influenced my observations; (f) my reflections on my observations; and (e)

perceptions and conclusions that I arrived at based on my research. The table below illustrates how my research questions align with my data sources.

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Questions	Data Sources
How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among summer bridge students currently enrolled in college?	Student interviews, Observations, Field Notes, Archival Documents
What, if anything, compels BFSP participants to pursue engagement opportunities on campus?	Student interviews, Field Notes
What aspect(s) of BFSP did participants feel were most beneficial in strengthening their academic skills?	Student interviews, Observations, Field Notes, Archival Documents
How do BFSP students manage to persist and earn their degrees, despite transition issues, stereotypes, academic underpreparedness, and other negative forces?	Student interviews, Observations, Field Notes, Archival Documents
In what ways, if any, did BSFP help participants achieve success?	Student interviews, Observations, Field Notes, Archival Documents

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis aims to identify emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings (Patton, 2002). Because of this, there is a close connection between data collection procedures and data analysis: The former influences the outcomes of the latter. Data analysis is a creative process that helps researchers make sense of the data they collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, the analysis helps to tell the stories of how underprepared and underserved students overcame academic deficits to succeed in college.

This study was primarily based on individual interviews, observations, field notes, and the review of archival documents. I used multiple forms of data collection in this study to achieve triangulation, which "develop[s] a more effective method for the capturing and fixing of social phenomena in order to realize a more accurate analysis and explanation" (Wolfram-Cox & Hassard, 2005, p.111). Social science researchers have long suggested that triangulating data gives a holistic picture and thick description of the research because the researcher gathers data in multiple formats (Gillham, 2000). This helps to balance the strengths and weaknesses of individual data collection procedures as well as improve the veracity of case study findings (Yin, 1994).

The researcher has worked in BFSP since its inception, and the program granted him the necessary access to review the program. The director of the program that is part of this study and the vice provost for academic affairs who oversees BFSP gave the researcher permission to review all documentations regarding the program. The researcher worked with the program director and the vice provost to identify potential

study participants. Their selection was based on their classification, gender, and academic records as described earlier.

After gathering data from each of the aforementioned sources, I analyzed and coded them to determine the emergent themes. Maxwell (2005) explained that coding is the most important procedure for categorizing data in qualitative studies. Categorizing the data helps the researcher better analyze what he or she has collected. To accomplish this, qualitative researchers have to separate their data into categories that can then help them compare components in the same category as well as those in different categories (Maxwell, 2005). Doing this helps the researcher draw logical conclusions about the data collected, generate theoretical concepts, and organize the data so that it can support the researcher's findings (Maxwell, 2005).

Participants were asked a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions about their high school academic experiences, their participation in BFSP, their academic experiences in college, their relationships with faculty and staff, and their use of campus resources. Each in-person interview lasted approximately 75 minutes while telephone interviews lasted about an hour. After transcribing and reviewing interviews, I requested follow-up interviews with some participants to clarify information that person provided.

The responses to the questions provided an in-depth look at each participant. By having them to reflect on their academic experiences in high school and in college, I wanted to see if their study practices and approaches to academics had remained the same, evolved, or devolved over time. If they changed, for better or worse, how and what caused those changes? Conversely, if they had not, then why? In addition, I believed this

research would reveal what services and initiatives of the university helped in their academic development. Each interview question was constructed to help answer the research questions driving this study. I have included a copy of the research questions (Appendix A) and the data collection protocol (Appendix B) in this study.

The coding of the data took place in several phases. First, I transcribed the interviews and then read each transcript. I then created two columns, one for the participant's response and another for the thematic code that emerged from that response. I did this for each participant. This allowed me to analyze similarities and differences in their responses. Additionally, I highlighted like phrases from their responses. Observational data, field notes, and notes from archival document reviews were coded similarly. I used the shared responses from each participant to create three broad categories: "Before BFSP," "During BFSP," and "After BFSP." From these categories, five topical themes emerged. I titled the themes "A Brighter Tomorrow," "Lean on Me," "A Change is Gonna Come," "Can't Nothing/Nobody Hold Me Down," and "Sky's the Limit".

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research presents unique challenges that test a researcher's ability to establish rapport with study participants, maintain proper boundaries with them, and manage emotional subjectivity (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007). Simply put, the qualitative researcher cannot become so close with participants that he or she loses the ability to remain objective. To say this is difficult is more than stating the obvious. England (1994) maintained that research is a shared space occupied by both the

researcher and the participants. Thus, the researcher as well as the participants can influence the research process, and by extension certain outcomes, because of their background, identity, perceptions, and biases (Bourke, 2014).

From the outset of conducting this study, I have been keenly aware of my positionality as an instructor examining a program that work for and studying students whom I have taught who have a similar background as me. In this section, I discuss these issues, the assumptions I made throughout the process, and how my positionality possibly affected this research.

I have worked in various capacities at A&M College since 2004. I have been a writing tutor, an instructor, and a public affairs specialist in institutional research. I even briefly worked in A&M's Graduate School office. In spring 2009, the assistant dean of my academic division asked me to teach in a summer program for "high-risk" students. At the time it did not have a name but it would later be called Bulldogs Future Scholars, named partly after the school's mascot and partly as a not-so-subtle message of what the university desired for these students. She was going to serve as the assistant director of the program and she wanted positive Black male teachers to work in it so they could possibly serve as role models for the students. I accepted her offer. It was one that changed my perspective on the students the institution serves and my views of education in general. My positionality is not only rooted in my professional attachment to the university but also from personal experiences of attending a HBCU. I acknowledge any subjectivity this brings.

Demographically, A&M is similar to my undergraduate alma mater. They are both located in the same state and attract the same types of attendees; in fact, that school is one of the universities that has a similar residential summer bridge program for underprepared students. Had such a program existed in the early 1990s when I began college, I might have been a candidate for it. I finished high school ranked 81 in my class out of approximately 250 students, not bad but not stellar either. My SAT scores were mediocre, but I managed to get accepted into a number of colleges, including several respectable Predominately White Institutions. I opted to attend a HBCU because I thought I needed to be in a nurturing environment.

Like most of the students who participate in BFSP, I was technically a first-generation college student. My father did not attend college and my mother dropped out after several years. Although my family always emphasized education and the idea of college was not an "if you go" but "where are you going," I understand and empathize with students who do not have a support system to guide them through that process. I had poor study habits in college, honed from not studying in high school; nevertheless, I graduated in four years. When I started working at A&M, I saw myself in many of the students I encountered. I still do each semester that I teach. Many of the students possess untapped potential, but they need a motivator to maximize that talent. I have tried to be that motivator.

I mention these biographical details because they shape my views as an African American and as an educator. I also mentioned them because I wrestled with whether these details would increase my biases during this research. I acknowledge that my

shared background with the participants, my professional experience, and my relationship to the program at the center of this study might constitute a bias.

Goodness and Trustworthiness

Effective qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to become actively involved in the data collection process and in interpreting how others derive meaning from their personal experiences. Thus, qualitative researchers must be credible and trustworthy. Stake (1995) implored qualitative researchers to remove their own assumptions and not impose narrow-minded views on their study participants. Instead, Stake (1995) suggested that researchers rely on protocols that that will help them understand their research in the same manner as their participants. Creswell (2007) described eight validation strategies for qualitative research to establish trustworthiness. These validation strategies include (1) prolonged engagement, (2) triangulation using multiple data sources, (3) peer review, (4) negative case analysis, (5) declaration of researcher bias, (6) member checking, (7) rich, thick description, and (8) external audits (Creswell, 2007).

I utilized multiple strategies prescribed by Creswell and other respected qualitative researchers to increase the rigor and trustworthiness of my research study and to reduce threats to credibility. This includes utilizing multiple data sources to establish triangulation (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009), performing member checks by emailing participants copies of their interview transcript to ensure its accuracy (Merriam, 2002), openly declaring my researcher bias (Brown, 1996), and including, where possible, rich thick description (Creswell, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources. This allows the researcher to compare and contrast findings. The term triangulation originated among surveyors measuring landscapes in geographic studies (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002). In that field, it was used to denote three independent measurements taken to pinpoint a geographic location (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002). The term has evolved and taken more of a metaphoric meaning in social science research. Just as surveyors wanted to verify the accuracy of a location, social science researchers using qualitative inquiry want to have data sources that corroborate one another and do not contradict a finding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) identified five forms of triangulation in qualitative inquiry:

- Data source triangulation (data collected from different people, or at different times, or from different places);
- Method triangulation (done through observations, interviews, reviews of archival documents, field notes, and/or the collection of artifacts);
- Researcher triangulation (using multiple researchers to see if they arrive at the same conclusion; most comparable to inter-rater reliability in quantitative research);
- Theory triangulation (using different theories, to explain a phenomena);
- Data type triangulation (use of mixed methods to examine data).

All five forms may not be applicable or practical for all studies. In this study, I triangulated data by data source and by methods. For data source triangulation, I interviewed participants who were in different stages of their educational trajectories.

This ranged from second-semester first-year students to participants who had graduated from college. I chose this range of participants for several reasons. Those who had already graduated may have been able to reflect differently on their college experiences than students who just started school. In addition, they went through a form of the summer bridge program that determined *if* they could attend college. Their motivation to succeed would likely be different from participants who could have opted not to participate in the bridge program and still attended A&M College. Lastly, using students who were in different phases of their education gave a holistic view of the challenges students face in college. Some of those challenges are unique to their level of schooling. For instance, a first-year student may deal with issues of adjustment and acclimation whereas a fourth-year student may deal with struggles of graduation and deciding what to do post-college.

Although my interviews with students yielded a wealth of data, I also relied on other data collection methods. I conceived this study three years ago. I have been observing students in the program, keeping field notes, and collecting archival documents since that time. Observing students in the classroom, on campus, and in study sessions allowed me to see how they interacted with their peers and faculty members. It also allowed me to see if they were utilizing the strategies taught to them in the summer bridge program. Keeping field notes of my observations and reflections served as another source of data that helped with creating rich, thick descriptions. Lastly, reviewing archival documents allowed me to see how administrators at the university and at the

state level assessed the summer bridge program. This also allowed me to compare the program at A&M to other colleges that had similar programs.

Finally, I declared my researcher bias in this study. I did this by stating my positionality in this study. I am an instructor at the institution where this study was conducted and I have taught and tutored in the program at the center of this research. I taught ten of the participants in this study; I tutored two others at various times while they were in the bridge program. Several worked as counselors in the program, and while they did not directly report to me, they had duties that I oversaw (e.g. tutoring).

Ethical Concerns

I followed specific research stipulations as mandated by the IRB protocol from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This included creating email and telephone scripts that outlined the nature of the study and informed the potential participants that their participation was completely voluntary. I sent follow-up emails or telephoned those who agree to participate to set up interviews. Each participant in the study was assigned a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. I also assigned pseudonyms to the program and the institution where I conducted the study. This, again, was done to maintain anonymity. While there were minimal risks for the participants, I wanted to protect their privacy because the responses to some of the interview questions dealt with sensitive issues (grades, relationships with peers, family turmoil, difficulties with academics, and social adjustment just to name a few). After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them into a document and coded each interview for themes.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the methodological framework for this research study and the ways it influenced the research design, the methods of data collection, and data analysis. This research utilized case study to evaluate a residential bridge program and explain how its underprepared participants excelled in school. I contextualized the nature of the study and described the participants at the center of this research. The chapter concludes with my positionality in the research and an explanation of the procedures that I took to establish the trustworthiness and goodness of the study.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings of this study. In addition to the descriptions and interview responses from participants, it includes some quantitative data in the form of charts and graphs on course complete rates, grade point averages, and retention rates of BFSP students versus non-bridge students at A&M College. There are also some graphs comparing BFSP to similar residential summer bridge programs at other institutions in the state where A&M is located. Chapter 5 presents recommendations and the rationale for further studies in the area of summer bridge programs for underprepared and underserved students.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to determine what ways, if any, a summer bridge program at a historically Black college influenced the academic development of students university officials labeled "high-risk." The six-week residential program for first-year students emphasized study skill development, intensive learning in structured settings, mentoring, counseling, and social bonding. The pre-college initiative, known in this study as Bulldogs Future Scholars Program (BFSP) at A&M College, aimed to improve the retention and persistence of students who entered the school with standardized test scores in the lowest ten percentile of first-year students. Participants in the bridge program were given unlimited access throughout the summer to support services in hopes of connecting them with campus resources, faculty and staff members as well as peer mentors. Utilizing case study design, the researcher examined the program by collecting data through (a) individual interviews with 14 participants; (b) observations; (c) reviews of archival documents; and (d) researcher field notes.

Overview of Themes and Subthemes

The initial data analysis for this research began with computer-assisted searches utilizing QSR International's NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software for the 100 most frequently used terms in the participants' interview responses that related to the

study's research questions. I did this to see if there were patterns that emerged from the participants' responses and to begin the initial coding process. As Klenke (2008) noted, however, qualitative researchers cannot rely on computer-assisted coding alone because they must "become physically involved with the data, touching pages, sorting sheets of notes, grouping notes, counting pages dedicated to various concepts, and connecting ideas…" (p. 304). Thus, I hand coded each interview transcript to identify the emergent themes from the data. I indentified 40 codes, which I later collapsed into larger themes.

Ultimately, this independent case study yielded five major topical themes (Klenke, 2008) based on three major transitional periods that each participant experienced: "Before BFSP," "During BFSP," and "After BFSP." "Before BFSP" focused on the participants' time in high school and the academic and social challenges each faced during that period. "During BFSP" explored the participants' experiences during the six-week residential bridge program. "After BFSP" examined the participants' time in college and the extent to which they utilized the skills and strategies taught during the summer bridge program.

Each category focused on different aspects of the participants' perceptions of their academic and social wellbeing. For instance, in "Before BFSP" participants analyzed their academic habits and social development in high school, what influenced them to attend college, and the motivation for participating in the summer bridge program. In "During BFSP" the participants reflected on their experiences in the six weeks in the summer program, the challenges they encountered in the classroom and with peers, and how the program affected them before enrolling in school in the fall. Lastly, "After

BFSP" focused on the participants' transition to college, how they learned to balance their social lives outside of the rigid structure of the bridge program, and what connections, if any, they saw in the success (and failures) they had in school vis-à-vis participating in the program. From these broad categories, the themes (a) "A Brighter Tomorrow," (b) "Lean on Me," (c) "A Change is Gonna Come," (d) "Can't Nothing/Nobody Hold Me Down," and (e) "Sky's the Limit" emerged.

The themes, taken from titles of popular rhythm and blues and hip-hop songs, represent the changes the participants went through both during and after the program. In the "Brighter Tomorrow" theme, participants explained why they chose to attend college and the fears they had about finding a college that would accept them. The theme "Lean on Me" illustrated the positive dynamics of peer support. For many participants, the summer bridge program represented their first time away from home and with it newfound freedom and independence. It also represented a time of struggle. The participants learned to "lean" on one another because they shared many commonalities: acclimating to a new environment, coping with a structured atmosphere, learning to study, and overcoming deficient academic skills. The social bonding experienced during the program helped some undergo seismic changes in their approaches to studying, forming relationships with instructors and peers, and utilizing resources for help. This theme was further broken down into two subthemes: (a) "Uncertainty" and (b) "Being Part of a Community."

The theme "A Change is Gonna Come" illustrated the shift in the participants' approaches to academics and their embracement of positive habits both during and after

the program. Subthemes identified here included (a) “Shedding old Habits,” (b) “Connecting to People,” and (c) “Campus Involvement.” The “Can’t Nobody Hold Me Down” theme signifies the participants’ development of confidence and self-efficacy after completing the program. Lastly, the “Sky’s the Limit” theme refers to the participants’ beliefs in their ability to succeed and how they felt they defied certain odds in overcoming the academic deficits they had entering college. Finally, this theme explored how the participants defined academic success and their future pursuits related to their academic and career goals. Although each theme is discrete, similarities and overlaps exist among them. For those instances, the interview data are described in places where they most logically fit.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. A Brighter Tomorrow	
2. Lean on Me	a. Uncertainty b. Being Part of a Community
3. A Change is Gonna Come	a. Forming Better Habits b. Connecting to People c. Campus Involvement
4. Can’t Nothing/Nobody Hold Me Down	
5. Sky’s the Limit	

As previously noted, the participants in this case study included 10 females and four males between the ages of 18 and 24, each of whom participated in the residential summer bridge program at A&M College from 2009 through 2014. The participants were first-generational college students who entered school with low standardized test scores. Two of them participated in the bridge program as part of their condition to attend A&M. Below is a demographics table of the study participants.

Table 3

Demographics Table

Participants	**n**	**%**
Gender		
Male	4	28.5
Female	10	71.4
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	13	92.8
Hispanic	1	7
Education Level		
College Graduate	2	14.2
4th-year student	3	21.4
3rd-year student	2	14.2
2nd-year student	5	35.7
1st-year student	2	14.2
GPA		
3.5-3.9	1	7
3.0-3.49	11	78.5
2.5-2.99	2	14.2

Throughout this chapter, data from this case study highlights and supports each theme. The data presented in this chapter includes indicators of the specific data type as well as the data's collection date. For example, an individual interview (II) conducted on July 7, 2014 is denoted as (II, 7/7/14). Another abbreviation in the chapter is (FN), denoting data collected as field notes. Evidence of observations and archival document review are also included within the chapter. Quotes from interviews appear intact as the participants originally said them; in instances where greater clarity and meaning was needed, some words enclosed in brackets were added to avoid confusion. This was also done to protect the anonymity of the study participants and the research site.

Themes and Subthemes for Research Questions

The research questions for this qualitative case study explored how underserved and underprepared students experience summer bridge programs and uncovered those experiences by evaluating the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program (BFSP) at A&M College. The six research questions that drove this research are listed below along with the indentified themes and subthemes that respond to each question.

Research Question 1: How were Aspirations for Postsecondary Education Cultivated Among Participants of the Bulldogs Future Scholars Summer Bridge Program?

Theme: A Brighter Tomorrow

Each participant was asked about his or her desires to attend college prior to enrolling in the summer bridge program at A&M College. All 14 acknowledged the importance of higher education. Although almost all of them expressed desires to attend

college, some were unsure if a university would accept them because of their lackluster academic record from high school. Jennie was one of those students. Her quote illustrated the uncertainty she had in high school concerning her future:

> Academically, I didn't do so well my first three years. Before my senior year, I didn't understand that in high school you had to do well in order to get into college. I thought college was something that happens automatically, and I was wrong. My junior year I failed two classes and received mostly C's and D's in my other courses. By my senior year, I was doing much better in school and was fortunate enough to get into college. I graduated high school with a 2.5 GPA. (II, 2/10/2015)

Jennie said her struggles in high school spurred her dedication to becoming a better college student and prompted her participation in the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program. She was proud of that decision because she knew it would help change her attitude about school:

> My main goal…was to be better than I was in high school. Coming to college I aspire to do everything I can to be a leader. This means joining large organizations, becoming involved in executive board positions, and achieving a high academic status. (II, 2/10/2015)

Although Jennie clung to the idea of going to college, Bonita and Lindsey were much more pessimistic about that prospect. Bonita doubted her abilities, which began when she entered high school:

> Academically, I performed mediocre in comparison to my Caucasian counterparts. The high school I attended was very competitive; therefore, it made my high school career difficult. I studied a few times of the week, but looking back on my experience, I believe I could have been more dedicated. Prior to enrolling in BFSP, my desire was to succeed in college [but] I was worried that I wouldn't be able to handle the college curriculum. (II, 1/27/2015)

Lindsey had even less confidence in herself prior to enrolling in the summer bridge program. “I always thought about going to college but my SAT and ACT scores weren’t high enough so I gave up” (II, 9/7/2014). Mikayla, Lindsey’s former roommate and fellow BFSP cohort member in 2009, had similar sentiments about college but not because of her low standardized test scores. Her vocal pitch rose as she enthusiastically gesticulated while describing her past disdain for school:

> Horrible. I didn’t like [it]. I didn’t like anything about school. I didn’t like going to school. After fifth grade and until the middle of high school, I hated school. I have always been a rebel. Just because I knew I had to go to school, I hated it. I like to learn, but I don’t like anyone forcing me to learn. You have to do this assignment; you have to turn this in; you have to do this; I didn’t like all that. I would do what I had to do to pass. I never studied until high school and then when I got to high school I barely studied and still passed. (II, 7/8/2014)

Mikayla continued by saying if it were not for her mother, she may have skipped college altogether to pursue a career as an entertainer:

> Initially college wasn’t in my focus. I have always been a person who wanted to do my own thing. And if I had the choice, I would have chosen to sing, I wouldn’t have chosen college. If I had my choice, I would have sung first and then got a degree later – or in between as backup. (II, 7/8/2014)

Other students, however, knew realistically that their path to success would have to be paved through college. For them, being a first-generation college student meant doing whatever it took to succeed. This was instilled in them by parents who were not afforded the same opportunities. Toné is one of those students. Born in a single-parent home, Toné was taught to value education at an early age and to use college as an avenue to a better life. For her, going to college was not an option:

> My mother was a teen mom. She went to college but dropped out because she had take care me, so she is very big into education. And she is all about me and the rest of my siblings getting our education. She will bend over backwards to make sure we get the best education we can and stay in school for as long as we need to. Pretty much she is very big into academics. She knows how hard it is in this world when you don't have the tools such as an education. (II, 7/17/2014)

Tiffani expressed similar feelings when reflecting on her college aspirations prior to attending A&M. She, too, was reared in a single-parent home headed by a teenage mother. Her quote explained why getting a college education was important to her:

> I have always wanted to go to college. My mother had to drop out of high school when she had me. I knew I wanted to go to college because there was nothing for me back home. There was nowhere I wanted to work. I had to get out of here. I wanted to get to do what my mother didn't do. While my mother wasn't one of those parents who tried to force college on me. She made sure that that dream didn't die in me. I always wanted to go to college. I got good grades in high school because I wanted to get scholarships to pay for school. My parents did not make enough money to send me to school. (II, 7/18/2014)

Likewise, college was always a part of Johnston's plans. He stated:

> College was instilled in me from the time I was in elementary going into middle school. It was always. My parents were like you're going to college or when my dad would say it best: 'When you're 18, you're getting out of my house.' I left the house when I was 17. After a while, I was thinking more in depth about what I wanted to do, like what I wanted to do with my life and all that stuff and how I wanted to impact other people. I thought do I really need to go to like a 4-year university or could I go to a community college and go from there. (II, 7/16/2014)

As with many incoming first-year students, the participants in BFSP had a mixture of anxiety, apprehension, doubt, and desire that influenced their decisions to join the summer bridge program. These feelings also influenced how they would interact with their fellow cohort members throughout their time in BFSP.

Research Question 2: What do BFSP Participants Feel Helped Them Stay Motivated While Completing the Summer Bridge Program?

Theme: Lean on Me

In his 1970s soul hit, R&B crooner Bill Withers sung, "You just call on me brother, when you need a hand. We all need somebody to lean on. I just might have a problem that you'll understand. We all need somebody to lean on" (Withers, 1972, side A). Simplistic in its lyricism, the song's message is one filled with inherent wisdom about help, hope, and reciprocity. Withers' song, more pointedly, the aforementioned verse, exemplified how participants of the summer bridge program used one another as a support system to study, to complete work, and to build their academic skills. Many are familiar with the African proverbs imploring the communal aspect of raising children. In the case of the BFSP participants, they were a village and all the members worked together to see that everyone in the program (i.e. the metaphorical BFSP village) succeeded. Bonita explained:

> The bond I created with my classmates was such a wonderful experience, especially going into my freshman year of college. Those classmates motivated me. Being around them, I knew I could and would achieve success if I put my mind to it. (II, 1/27/2015)

Tiffani expressed similar viewpoints. She identified several prominent factors that assisted her completion of the program:

> What I liked the most was even though some of us had challenges with work and back home, we could come together despite our differences because some of us didn't like each other. But we got together on one accord and helped each other with studying and we helped each other with work. I really liked the encouragement from the group, the counselors, and the professors. (II, 7/18/2014)

Tiffani's contention was evident during the evening study hall sessions in the campus library. During those sessions, students gathered in small groups of three or four or sometimes in pairs in the lower level of the library to work on assignments (FN, 7/23/2014). Whether it was reading each other's thesis statements for writing assignments or reviewing math concepts for their upcoming college algebra test, the students shared notes and offered tips and suggestions for improving one another's work and understanding their course material (FN, 7/23/2014). As they did this, professional tutors, peer mentors, and residential counselors walked around to groups of students situated at computers and study tables to make sure they stayed on task. Many nights the students mostly stayed focused on class work, but invariably their conversations ventured from school work to a range of social topics from gossip to music to crushes students had on one another (FN, 7/15/2014). Whenever students seemed to stray too far off task, the residential counselors and peer mentors helped them to refocus. They asked questions about the work or inquired about what the students understood or did not understand. They read over rough drafts and checked math problems for errors (FN, 7/29/2014).

Some students resented this. Vivica expressed this point when describing her experiences in study hall with tutors and counselors:

> Well it didn't help because I saw, like, how much studying that they tried to make us do during the summer time. I really didn't like that. I feel like I want to study when I know I need to study, which probably isn't good, but I don't like being made to study. (II, 4/15/2014).

Dalilah disagreed with Vivica's assessment, at least as it pertained to her. She contended that, "What helped me was knowing I had someone watching me at all times. Knowing this, is what kept me grounded and to know that my grades either make or break me" (II, 2/11/2015). Other participants also appreciated the constant monitoring of the residential counselors and peer mentors in the program and cited them as being critical to their success. Makayla described in detail why having counselors were so important to her:

> I think the mentoring was great. I never had a problem with any of the counselors and I think that's what made it even better. I was able to go to them and talk to them. I knew who I could talk to about this and that. I could snap my fingers and a counselor would be there. I don't know about the attitudes of the new counselors or if they did a good job picking them, but the counselors we had they were so thriving and they were young and they wanted to help us and they wanted to teach us. I could feel they wanted to help us. Sometimes you can meet someone and tell they don't want to help you or you can get that vibe that they don't want to help or you can tell by the tone of their voice that they are not that helpful. You don't want to ask them for help. But as far as help, [the counselors] welcomed us with open arms.
>
> All of the counselors that I met I still talk to now whether through social networking sites, phone numbers. They're always like 'Kayla, if you need anything, let me know.' I don't know if that is because I was so respectful to them and a lot of the other students disrespected them a lot. I actually hung out more with the counselors, all of them, more than I hung out with the students. (II, 7/8/2014)

Jennie agreed and said:

> My experiences in the program have influenced me to know that people are here to help me and all I have to do is ask. Simply attending classes is only a small portion of actually succeeding in classes. It's much more about going to office hours, going to peer mentors, and asking for help with writing that makes up a good grade. (II, 2/10/2015)

Although Jennie and Makayla cited the counselors and peer workers in the program as being important components for their success, others maintained their fellow cohort members were more critical to their wellbeing. For them, interacting with other students allowed them to discuss course material, form study partners, and offer encouragement to one another. Lindsey noted this when she said:

> Being in the program, I learned I could get more accomplished by working with other students. Counselors were helpful but classmates were even more helpful because we were in class with one another. They could always tell where I would get lost in the lesson and could help me understand the work. (II, 9/7/2014).

For Braxton, having peers around meant having opportunities to build relationships with students he may not have interacted with otherwise. Establishing those relationships was important because it helped him become more comfortable with others:

> During the program, we had to share a computer lab in the lobby and while some people had their own computers, a lot of people didn't. I did not have my own so I was often in the computer lab doing math homework. In there…we formed study groups and helped each other. That is probably the biggest difference than in the fall and spring – the camaraderie. In the school year you don't really know anybody or you may meet some people but you are more likely to be on your own. If I didn't come here for [BFSP], I would probably be more to myself… Being in the program taught me about going to get things done, meeting new people and having self-confidence in that aspect and knowing that you can achieve something and that you can do anything. (II, 7/21/2014).

Johnston also learned how to build relationships and form better study habits by working with his cohort peers. A self-described introvert in high school, Johnston reported that he rarely went out with friends or to parties prior to college. He also said he did not talk to many people outside a close-knit group of friends and his family. Because of that, he was determined to become more socialable in college. His main goal for participating in the summer bridge program was to improve academically and evolve socially:

> Definitely it gave a friend base. It gave me six weeks and I was like I am going to have to look at these people and their faces everyday so I was like I might as well go ahead and make friends with you all. By making friends, it was something that I had to look forward to. [Being in the program] was going to force anyone to have to come out of their shell, especially me because I wasn't that social. So it did influence me to not necessarily be more friendly but to interact more with people.
>
> For me, since I didn't interact that much with people in high school, I had to push myself. There were times when people were out studying and I'd be in my room. They'd be out [in the dorm] in the common area and I'd be sitting in my room on the phone. One time I was on the phone with one of my friends and she was like 'what are y'all doing' and I said 'I'm just chilling out talking' and she literally told me to get off the phone and go out there and hang with them. That was like the first week. She was like you are in college now so you need to go out there and be social with them. That was the most challenging thing. (II, 7/16/2014)

Vivica, one of Johnston's cohort peers, also felt being around other participants was just as beneficial as the classroom instruction she received. She said: "For people like me I know I can be socially awkward but given the chance I am a friendly person so therefore I feel just getting to know people more helps" (II, 4/15/2014).

Subtheme 1: Uncertainty. Although the majority of the participants reported that they valued their experiences in BFSP, some openly expressed desires to leave the program without completing it. A subtheme that emerged from the findings was uncertainty as it pertained to participating in the summer bridge program. Some of the uncertainty centered on rules and regulations the participants had to follow, being around dozens of other students every day for six weeks,[2] and on their ability to handle the coursework. Learning to live with new people was taxing for some. That was the case for Tiana, a 2012 BFSP participant. It took her a few weeks to embrace the idea of interacting with her peers:

> At first, I wanted to call my mother and tell her to come get me. I didn't like the curfew. I didn't like having to go to the library every night to study. I didn't like having a roommate or anything. However, as time passed and as my mother prayed for me, I became this very social person wanting to go to the library and not as much to study but also to help the other kids with anything they couldn't do. (II, 2/1/2015)

Vivica, on the other hand, never fully embraced being around others despite her desires for friendships. Part of that may have been her age. She started the program not long after turning 17. As previously noted, Vivica graduated high school a year early and was admittedly less mature than her counterparts were. Although she was only a year or two younger than her peers, she believed it might have affected her relationships with them:

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[2] Although the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program takes place when other A&M students are in summer sessions, BFSP participants are in self-contained classes, they live together on one floor in a residential hall segregated from other summer school students, and they are limited in how much they can socialize with those students.

> You know, I had really thought being around these people, you would form, you know good friendships. But from then I guess when you are just making friendships and your relationships with people are good but being around people for too long you realize that they are not always who you think they are. (II, 4/15/2015)

Dalilah did not have the same problem as Vivica, though they were in classes together during the summer bridge program in 2013. Dalilah spoke fondly about her time in BFSP, particularly when it came to her peers. She too expressed doubts and uncertainty in her abilities to cope in the program, but it was because of academics:

> I honestly did not believe I was good enough to get in. I was completely ecstatic when I was accepted into the program. [But] I was scared. I did not know what to think. What honestly kept me on my feet were my peers. I knew I was surrounded by smart, hard-driven individuals that wanted it as bad as I did – to succeed. I wanted it bad, so I never slacked off. (II, 2/11/2015)

Similarly, Bonita responded that being around peers in the summer bridge program helped erase lingering doubts that she had in her own abilities. She knew good grades where a precursor to success in college, but her struggles in high school with math, science, and foreign language, caused her to question if she could succeed. Residing in a living-learning community with other BFSP participants her first year helped allay her concerns. She explained these feelings when she stated:

> Socially, I did not believe that being a part of the program would provide me such a bond with my fellow classmates. This bond was carried on throughout the entire year, because as participants of the program, we were required to live on the same floor and dormitory my freshman year in college. Often times, I found myself when in need of help asking assistance of my fellow [BFSP] classmates. (II, 1/27/2015)

Subtheme 2: Being part of a community. When students enter college, they often become connected to others who share similar backgrounds, upbringings, social class, and beliefs. In essence, they become part of various subcultures that exist at their institution. Students at A&M, including those in the summer bridge program, are no different. Those participants often form a network or community as they are drawn together by the summer bridge program and by other shared circumstances. Those circumstances can range from being first-generation students to struggles they have with certain classes. Many of the summer bridge students formed partnerships to help one another study, understand and complete assignments, and transition to college. These partnerships evolved organically from the students spending time together socializing.

Although helping students to socialize with one another is a component of BFSP, some participants chose not to socialize with others during their time in the program. Toné was one of those students. In this regard, she served as an outlier in this research study as the majority of participants expressed positive views about their interaction with peers and the way those interactions helped them pass their summer bridge courses and successfully complete the program. Toné entered the program in 2011 filled with emotional turmoil and family strife. She said because of that she was extremely angry and she refused to communicate with others for most of her six weeks on campus that summer. In retrospect, Toné regrets the way she behaved. However, at the time she did not know how to cope with her feelings or how to reach out to others:

> Before I got into the program, my stepfather was incarcerated and about two months before I got here, I got into a fight with another student in high school. So when I came into this program, I had a lot of things personally and emotionally

> going on. When I was in this program, and, throughout college period, it was never academics that I struggled with; it has been more of people and emotional issues that I have struggled with. It's never been academics because I am the type of person that I know why I'm here and what I'm trying to accomplish and, at the end of the day, I never let anyone affect that. When I came into the program, I had a bad attitude. I have changed. I have truly changed over the years. I was one of those students who gave the counselors a hard time. I don't know why I did that because that's just not who I am today. I came into this program with a lot of anger. It caused me to lash out at others, not so much because I didn't want to be in class but not wanting to be bothered with other people in the program. It just forced me to be someone that when I looked back on it today I am glad I am not. (II, 7/17/2014)

Toné's fellow BFSP cohort member Frederick also struggled with family problems when he entered the summer program in 2011. Frederick is an honor student, a drummer in the A&M marching band, and a member of a fraternity on campus. He is an outgoing and active student leader in several organizations. His personality is the opposite of what it was when he was in the program. Frederick acknowledged that he was withdrawn when he first arrived at A&M. His mother and father secretly divorced during his senior year in high school; though, for appearances' sake, the parents continued living together without telling Frederick or his younger sister. It was not until after he arrived at A&M that Frederick learned of his parents' divorce. He wrote about that experience in his first-year composition course. He admitted that he was devastated at the time because everything he thought was true about his parents – their supposed happiness and togetherness – turned out to be false. Unlike Toné who distanced herself from her BFSP peers, Frederick relied on them to get through that difficult period:

> I was able to cope with the situation better because I was always keeping myself occupied. It meant a lot to me to have friends who could relate their experiences so we could share a common experience. I realized early on that I could not let

> my parents be my excuse for failure because at the end of the day I have to live my life. (II, 2/14/2015)

Johnston explained how being around new people in BFSP influenced him after he completed the program:

> It actually helped a lot simply because I built another network of people, not just on the basis of talking to people on the phone but with connecting to other groups and organizations. As far as friends, I've got people from all walks of life and I'm exposed to different cultures. Those friends had their own people so I was able to connect with them and it kept branching off from there. So I built my little network from the summer program. People that I met connect me with people that they know who may be able to help me. (II, 7/16/2014)

Ultimately, peer support developed through friendships in the summer bridge program proved beneficial for most participants. Many of the participants reported that the encouragement they received from peers gave them confidence in themselves. Likewise, many participants reported that being around other people driven to succeed made them more competitive. They reported having extra motivation to not fail because others around them were striving to become better college students and more responsible individuals.

Research Question 3: What Aspect(s) of BFSP did Participants Feel was/were Most Beneficial in Strengthening Their Academic Skills?

Theme: A Change is Gonna Come

Participants in BFSP were asked several questions about how they felt the summer bridge program influenced their study habits and in what areas, if any, the program had the biggest impact on them academically. While the overarching theme in

this section deals with change, there are three subthemes identified that examined the specific areas of change that helped participants exhibit positive academic behaviors. Those subthemes were (a) "Shedding Old Habits," (b) "Connecting to People," and (c) "Campus Involvement." This section is organized around those subthemes. Moreover, I discussed how those subthemes connect to the broader theme "A Change is Gonna Come." As previously noted, some of the participants in this study did not have many positive educational experiences prior to college. Most of that is attributable to poor study skills, deficiencies in certain subjects such as math and science, not taking school seriously, and/or a lack of motivation. Each of the participants in this study fit into at least one of those aforementioned categories. BFSP attempted to address those problem areas; however, the program was not a panacea for correcting all issues that contributed to underpreparedness.

Nevertheless, participants admitted that many of their problems with academics started with them. Most contended the summer bridge program caused them to look introspectively to determine what they needed to change to become better students. Their struggles would begin to dissipate and their change would come once they began to implement the strategies they were taught in BFSP, they said. Jennie's comment about her transformation illustrated the importance of the program:

> The strict schedule was a big adjustment but it taught the lesson that you have to always work in college and it reminds you that you are there to get your education first. I also loved the workshops we participated in throughout the week. These workshops really opened up my eyes to different aspects of life and having guest speakers – from Greeks, SGA, etc – really helped me make a serious plan for what is really available to me at [A&M]. (II, 2/10/2015)

Bobby posited similar viewpoints when commenting on what aspect of BFSP had the biggest impact on him:

> It was the tight schedule. You had to wake up early. We had a lot of study hours. I would say I thought I would have more time to spend with friends and family. It was kind of good because it helped us get a chance to make friends. And we had professors to help us one-on-one. (II, 7/11/2014)

Getting used to the long hours was difficult for many participants as they cited that as one of their biggest challenges. Tiffani asserted this when she said:

> The most challenging for me was getting up that early and going to class every day. During the summer time, I struggled getting up having the same routine. Getting up at 7 was hard. Dr. [Jones] told us not to stay up all night. But I would try to stay up all night. Most of the time I was writing a paper or doing homework when I couldn't sleep. But the next day I would be tired. Even though it was hard, I appreciated it during the semester. (II, 7/18/2014)

Mikayla also felt this way. She said at times it was difficult to function:

> The study hours in the evening oh, I hated that because I'd be so tired and burnt out from waking up at 5 something in the morning and getting in the shower and getting ready before all these other girls. I'd be up all day. You know we would be in class for like two hours and then in another class for two hours and then lunch time and then after lunch in the computer room to do some of our work and then in another class. The sun was exhausting and dealing with some of the people was exhausting. I was just ready to take a nap on my own time and wake and do my work. (II, 7/8/2014)

Participants in BFSP were in class from 8 am until noon and in afternoon study hall from 1 pm to 3 pm. Afterwards, they had meetings with counselors or workshops that lasted up to an hour, free time, and dinner before going to the library for evening study hall from 6 pm to 9 pm. The participants would appear emotionally and physically

drained some days; as a result, a few would fall asleep in class, including one student who, in an attempt not to fall asleep, stood at his desk during class only to fall asleep a short time later while standing (FN, 6/30/2014). Although that type of behavior was an aberration, it did occur.

Subtheme 1: Shedding old habits. Participants asserted that the summer bridge program helped them change how they approached school, particularly in eliminating undesirable habits. Braxton echoed this point when he said BFSP helped him develop "the study habits. That played a big role. Now in the school year I go straight to the library and knock out what I can. So the study habits was probably the most prevalent" (II, 7/21/2014). Traci agreed.

> [The program] influenced my study habits by helping me to take at least two to four hours out of my free time to study up on my courses and complete any work that I may have for [all] my classes (II, 1/27/2015).

Many of the study participants mentioned that the summer bridge program changed their study habits. Johnston was among those who felt this way. His comment succinctly sums up the attitude of expressed by his peers:

> I had those study habits. When I got my work in the fall, I was like I can manage my time. This is due then. I can work on this until then and all that stuff. I already had that plan basically. (II, 7/16/2014)

Bobby, a 2013 BFSP participant, still goes to the library daily. He said, "Now I study with a study partner or with different study groups so now if I need help I have other

classmates to help me" (II, 7/11/2014). Participants who said they rarely studied prior to college now do so regularly. Jennie is an example of such a student:

> My experiences in the program influenced me to take time out to study. Instead of just doing work whenever, I learned to have designated time throughout the day where I accomplish all the work I do. The program also made me learn to do work ahead of time. (II, 2/10/2015)

Tiffani also saw the value in the extended study hall sessions. She said in high school she did not study unless it was for exams. She felt much of what she learned then came easy to her. She now has a different outlook:

> My study habits have changed since summer school. I learned I got to set this time right here to study and set time to go talk with teachers or meet with study groups. I hated study hall. But it helped me a lot. In college, you are going to need that. (II, 7/18/2014)

Toné was another participant who said when she was high school, her study plans consisted of reviewing material the night before a test. That is no longer the case:

> I definitely don't study the night before. What [the program] taught me is that as soon as you get material start studying it, to take time out of your day for studying because a lot of times in college there are so many other things going on that you know that you should be studying or going to the library and doing your work, but you don't. So if I have an hour or two hours before my next class, I will go to the library or go to an empty room in my department and study. (II, 7/17/2014)

Mikayla also credited the summer bridge program for developing her study skills. However, she said the program changed how she viewed herself:

> I don't think my study habits would be as strong without BFSP. I wouldn't have been discipline. Coming from high school never studying and coming here I [had]

> to study. I do not know if I would know how to study if it weren't for the program. It helped me with my confidence level also. I was like, 'if you did it that time, you can do it again.' The A's that I got that summer set the foundation for me. It let me know that if I could achieve that, I could achieve it again. (II, 7/8/2014)

Mikayla was the valedictorian of her summer bridge class in 2009. She said one of her proudest achievements was giving the commencement address at the closing ceremony that August in front of parents, students, and faculty. Reflecting on that moment, she said:

> It made me care about my grades more. Prior to college I didn't care as much. I was like 'ah alright let me do this so I can pass in high school.' I got in to get out. Let me do what I have to do to get out. When I started in the fall, I wanted to make as many A's as I could. I didn't want to make a B. I didn't want to make a C. I could care less about a D. I wanted to make the A's I made before. (II, 7/8/2014)

Although she was not valedictorian of her summer bridge class, Bonita said she had similar emotions in 2012 when she finished BFSP.

> After completing the program, I felt as if I would do well as a first semester freshman. The program gave me many beneficial tools I needed to succeed and I felt confident that I could do it. Returning in the fall, I felt very little nervousness in regards to college life because I had already acclimated over the summer. (II, 1/27/2015)

Despite many participants reporting that they changed their study habits because of their time in the program, some acknowledged that their old habits have been difficult to eliminate. Frederick admitted he still has trouble "staying motivated" to do certain assignments (II, 2/14/2015). Dalilah noted that, "procrastination is my best friend and worst enemy at the same time, (II, 2/11/2015). Tiana, a third-year student at A&M,

candidly said, “The further I get into college, the less I study. I guess it’s because I was forced to do it [when I was in the program] versus now” (II, 2/1/2015). Here, Tiana seemed to blame her lack of desire for studying on the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program. This contradicted the positive comments she had about the program and its influence on her. She was not alone in this regard.

Several participants saw both positives and negatives in their time in the program, though most expressed the former outweighed the latter. Some complaints included the strict schedule, the mandatory curfew, the limited interaction with other summer school students, and the café food. What the participants failed to realized is that the program was modeled after military boot camp (II, 7/31/2014 with university administrator). Soldiers in boot camp operate on strict schedules. They have long days filled with grueling training. They have mandatory curfews. In short, their drill instructors tell them where to go, when to go, what to do, who to talk to, and when to eat. As civilians (i.e. students), these were foreign concepts.

Subtheme 2: Connecting to people. In addition to forming relationships with peers, participants in this study established meaningful, value-laden relationships with professors, support staff, and administrators. They cited those relationships as being instrumental in their development. In several instances, BFSP connected students to other resources. Jennie maintained this when she explained:

> Although the program had so many different resources that were helpful it was really the teachers that were picked to handle the program that contributed to my success the most. Because of their dedication to making sure we accomplished each topic and section of the class, we learned how to not only be responsible for

> ourselves, but how to handle college level work. Also, they gave us advice about succeeding in college and took their time to make sure we transitioned well into school. (II, 2/10/2015)

Bobby, on the other hand, saw support services as major influence in his evolution:

> The biggest impact was probably having the support from a lot of the people - the director, the professors, the tutors, the counselors, the people from TRiO. Even though [TRiO staff members] weren't there a lot during the summer, I feel like they were helpful in my development. Without BFSP, I probably would not be connected with TRiO. And getting connected with TRiO helped me connect to other people, other peers and faculty. Sometimes I can be stubborn and not ask for help. Knowing them made it easier. (II, 7/11/2014)

All of the participants in this study who are current students at A&M except for Frederick and Braxton are in TRiO. Those in TRiO credited it with helping them acclimate to college. Vivica explained:

> They help me even if it doesn't have anything to do academically. I know I can go talk with them. Even though you may want to talk with your friends about stuff and talk to your mom or your parents, sometimes you just want someone else to talk to. So knowing that you have people that you can go to, it helps academically or socially. (II, 4/15/2015)

Tiana agreed and said "The ladies in TRiO have been a big influence on my academic life" (II, 2/1/2015). Tiana could not elaborate to provide specifics on how the office influenced her. However, Tiffani's response provided the insight Tiana was not able to articulate. "When you connect with people you can find other people who can help you. You can't do it all on your own" (II, 7/18/2014). That seemed to be a prevailing notion among participants, a notion planted by the summer bridge program. Bonita supported this sentiment when she contended "The summer bridge program taught me

that if you need assistance to seek it. When you do not seek help when you need it, it makes the odds of a person succeeding very limited" (II, 1/27/2015). Toné, who splits her free time between caring for her four younger siblings and working part-time in the TRiO office, attributed most of her accomplishments and future aspirations to working with that program. She shared:

> I know everybody in that department and they know me personally and I have their cell numbers. I can honestly say that if I was not in BFSP I probably would not have enrolled in TRiO. I am really not the type of person who asks for help; I am more of an independent worker. I rather do things by myself. So if I would have never been in BFSP I would not have known the TRiO staff. I don't know if I would even be as successful a student as I am because as far as graduate school preparation, career exploration, internships, resume building, TRiO has helped me with all of that. (II, 7/17/2014)

Toné's point mirrored Bobby's views about himself: the unwillingness to ask for help in times of need. Toné saw that in many BFSP participants. In the summer of 2014, she worked as a peer mentor and tutor in the bridge program. She saw similarities between how she used to be to that summer cohort. It took her a long time to ask for help because of her independent nature. For years, she thought she could balance her school work and other priorities. As the oldest of her mother's children, Toné decided to commute to school to ease some burdens off her mother. After her stepfather was sentenced to prison, her mother was left to care for five children, including Toné. She lived home for her first three years of college, waking at 5:30 am to get her siblings ready for school. She arranged her class schedule so that she could be home when they arrived in the afternoon off the school bus while her mother worked. She cooked, checked homework, cleaned. She said at times she felt like a de facto single mother. After her

third year, she moved on campus even though her home is only a 10-minute car ride away from school. Toné said she did it because she finally wanted to have a true college experience. She began reaching out more to the TRiO staff. They eventually hired her for a part-time position as an office assistant. They also arranged for her to be a peer tutor in the summer bridge program. It was an enlightening experience for Toné. She had poignant observations of working with the summer bridge students:

> I do see similarities between my group and this group. A lot of students won't make it past freshman year. You do have your students who are really serious about their work and those who get distracted by their friends. A lot of times, and I've told them this, you are going to see that sometimes you are going to have to tell your friends no and sometimes you are going to have to be by yourself to get your work accomplished because hanging around your friends will not help you. I do see that a lot of them are ashamed to ask for help. (II, 7/17/2014)

Getting students to seek help when needed has always proven difficult for educators. That could possibly affect retention and persistence of underprepared students. That is why the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program implemented proactive strategies to connect students with campus resources to increase chances for their success (External Document Review, 2/2/2015). Therefore, in addition to connecting students to TRiO, the program also connects them with other resource centers on campus. One of those is the advising center for undeclared students, which several participants cited for aiding their transition and trajectory in college. For Braxton, the advisors always seemed to provide a boost in confidence when he most needed it. He noted:

> When I got here, my math scores were not that high on the SAT, so they classified me as undecided. When we came here, [the center for advising] always helped me with registering for classes and they always had an inspiring word for me to not

> get discouraged. Those math courses and those courses that you need to take to get into engineering started weighing down on me and I got some D's and F's. I started contemplating changing my major. I came back over [to the advising center] and they told me to try to do my best and to stay with it. Finally, I took calculus over the summer of my sophomore year and I passed it with a C. Even though it wasn't a high grade, they told they were proud of me. That really meant a lot at the time because I was on the verge of giving up. (II, 7/21/2015)

Tiffani also saw the benefits of working with the advising center. She shared:

> Being able to get tutoring or printing papers has been helpful. Also they offer workshops on things such as building resumes and dressing professionally; even though I know how to dress professionally, it was still helpful. This is getting you prepared for life after college. You never know what you might need. (II, 7/18/2014).

Subtheme 3: Campus involvement. Some researchers have noted that students who become actively involved on campus are more likely to remain in school and graduate (Astin, 1984, 1993; Roberts & McNeese, 2010). To encourage campus integration, BFSP holds workshops and symposiums with representatives of campus organizations and divisions. This not only allows participants to see what resources are available but it gives them insight about what different organizations such as fraternities and sororities have to offer. Each participant in this study reported being a current or past member of a campus organization. Some are members of the gospel choir (Tiffani, Jennie, Johnston, and Dalilah); one is in the band (Frederick, who is also an active member of the band fraternity); several are (or were) in honorary societies (Toné, Lindsey, Mikayla, and Tiana); some are in leadership development organizations (Bobby, Dalilah, and Braxton); and a few have participated in retention programs for underserved students (Bobby, Tiffani, Johnston, Dalilah, Jennie, and Traci). Participants had varied

reasons for what inspired them to join their organizations. Dalilah summed up her reason thusly, "I did not want to miss out on anything. I wanted to be known around campus – in a positive way. That's what led me to run for Ms. Freshman" (II, 2/11/2015). Braxton maintained joining an organization is good because "You get good leadership skills. If you do have something on campus that you can participate in, you should do it. It was a good, all-around experience for me" (II, 7/21/2015).

Research Question 4: How do BFSP Students Manage to Persist Despite Transition Issues, Stereotypes, Academic Underpreparedness, and Other Negative Forces?

Theme: Can't Nothing/Nobody Hold Me Down

The theme in this section explained how participants let nothing (e.g. people, pressures, or perceptions of themselves) stop them from attaining their goals. Study participants cited perseverance and motivation as key factors for persisting despite the university labeling them "high-risk," "underserved," and "underprepared." This stemmed from the confidence instilled in them during their six-week summer program. Although some were aware of their deficits, they optimistically believed that they would improve. Part of that, they believed, was because being in the program accelerated their maturation process as college students and reminded them of what they needed to accomplish. As Frederick succinctly put it, "This particular program set the path for me knowing how to manage my time wisely" (II, 2/14/2015). Tiana affirmed Frederick's premise. She said for her, "Academic success in college is prioritizing and time management. I say those two things because without one you don't have the other, and without neither of them, you will find yourself flunking out of school" (II, 2/1/2015). For Mikayla, it circled back

to gaining confidence and completing the summer bridge program, which greatly boosted her self-esteem. She explained:

> I did notice that once I started I was more competitive with my grades and what I wanted to achieve. And I guess I always thought, you know, I'm a very smart girl but I know that I could be smarter and I know that there were things that I could learn. In high school, I would feel like I'm smart but this course makes me feel stupid. But when I got in the program and I met some of the other students I was like 'what is my problem?' I was not nearly as bad off as I thought. (II, 7/8/2014)

Other study participants reported a change in attitude about school and a refusal to settle for mediocrity. Bonita revealed that:

> The biggest challenge for me has been staying focused when I am not performing well academically. This drives me to reevaluate myself and remind myself why I attended [A&M] and what I hope to gain from my collegiate experience**.** That is one of the most important things that always push me to my limit, and it has taught me the importance of attaining a degree and pursuing my dreams to become a broadcast journalist. (II, 1/27/2015)

What Bonita suggested is grit and determination helped her persist through difficult periods. For others, it was something different. For instance, sometimes making mistakes helped participants renew their focus and resolve. That was the case for Tiffani:

> I got two C's my first semester my freshman year because I was part of different organizations and going out and partying with my friends. I was really enjoying college life when I got back in the fall. One thing [the summer bridge program director] told us was that it's easy to bring your GPA down but hard to bring it back up. I had to get all A's and one B to bring my GPA up. That taught me to achieve more. I am proud of the mistakes I made because it taught me a lot. Being a part of college and being a part of BFSP has helped me and matured me. Even though it might get hard, it was worth it. (II, 7/18/2014)

Vivica also said poor judgment taught her a lesson and made her reassess her priorities:

> I have had my experiences first semester and I am learning from my faults that I made first-semester because I made a really big mistake and I am learning from that not to fall into peer pressure because it's so easy to forget about your work and you just want to go out and have fun and do whatever you want to do but you can't. Sometimes you have to say know; you have to do your work. It's okay not to go out sometimes. You can stay in your room find something else to do. You don't always have to do what your friends want to do. Sometimes you need some alone time. (II, 4/15/2014)

Vivica reported after a night of binge drinking, she passed out from alcohol poisoning. She said many of the friends she was with that night – including some who were part of her summer bridge cohort – did not realize the severity of the situation and left her sprawled on a bathroom floor in her residence hall. She said luckily someone discovered her and took her to the emergency room. Vivica's alcohol-induced episode illustrated a problem with peer pressure that all college students face: whether to follow the crowd. Vivica said she did that often her first semester and her grades suffered. She admitted that she was on a path to failing out of school as she spent the majority of her free time on the weekends at nightclubs and bars. The following spring, she said she changed how often she went out and with whom (II, 4/15/2014). Her GPA improved from a 2.46 to a 3.3 (Transcript Review, 2/25/2015).

Johnston said he developed a system to avoid succumbing to the pressures of going out to clubs and bars every weekend. He said he would only go out on Saturdays, if at all, and only if he did not have any work due the following Monday. He explained his reasoning:

> I was going to do what work I had earlier that week so I wouldn't have to wait and rush to get it done on Sunday. I knew how it was going to be. I didn't even go out on Sunday. I knew if I went out on Sunday and I got in late, I would not want to get up early Monday to go to class. I didn't want to rush myself to do anything. I didn't want to pressure myself to do anything. (II, 7/16/2014)

Johnston's response typified the type of behavioral changes many of the participants reported they exhibited to become more responsible students. Mikayla explained that she had a similar approach to Johnston's when it came to balancing her social life with academic responsibilities:

> One rule of thumb I always had was if I had something to do and I did not have time to do it later, I would do it before any activity I wanted to go to. Or if a person asked me out too late, I just wouldn't go. Not saying there weren't times I went and I had to get something done; it happened. But I made sure that I did not let it happen often. (II, 7/8/2014)

Other participants had some struggles with learning to say no to peer pressure. Even though she had family duties coupled with school commitments, Toné said she used to carve out several hours each day to socialize with friends on the phone, through social media, or in person. She said that on the surface being around others was not a bad idea; however, she realized it was becoming counterproductive as her time socializing increased while her time studying decreased. She said she decided in January 2014 to cut back socializing. An argument with a friend over a male and her grades influenced her decision. She explained:

> I used to be the type of person who needed someone to be my friend or pay me some attention. I would go the extra mile to make others happy instead of focusing on myself. I used to be an emotional person, a vulnerable person, a naïve person. I still felt like I needed to be around people. I realized I had to stop

> stopping my day to go hang out with people and take that time and energy and do something else. (II, 7/17/2014)

Problems with peer pressure were not the only challenges that participants reported facing. Many of them said they had to overcome feelings of self-consciousness when asking for help in order to persist. Lindsey's quote spoke to this:

> My experiences in the summer bridge program gave me insight as where to go to look for help. Sometimes you have to ask no matter how you think you might look to others. The counselors who looked over us were also helpful as to networking in this regard. If they couldn't help me in the subject I needed help in they referred me somewhere else. I learned not to feel ashamed. (II, 9/7/2014)

Others often wondered how some professors perceived them. Mikayla and Dalilah said they initially internalized negative feelings about this until they realized it was not helpful. Said Mikayla:

> Some teachers, and even when I got to college, some professors act like you should know this and have that kind of attitude. The first day of class, you walk in and they act like you should know. And 'you should know' makes you feel like, well, *you should know* [emphasis added]. And now I am afraid to ask for help because now I feel stupid even though I know I am not stupid. In school, I had to develop an attitude of I don't care what you think about me. If I have a question, I am going to ask it and I don't care what you think about me. (II, 7/8/2014)

Dalilah echoed those sentiments when she said:

> The biggest challenge has been with some of my professors. I always seem to pick the ones who do not care how they teach or what they teach and figure that they can just throw any grade at you in spite of their lack of accountability. I'm clearly tired of fighting this issue. (II, 2/11/2015)

Dalilah continued by explaining how she has come to accept her flaws. She said she would never identify herself as a "high-risk" student because why would she accept such a "derogatory" label? She contended she made good grades in high school; she just had weak study skills and did not do well on her SAT. That, she argued, should not define her:

> I was not truly successful until I made a couple of mistakes. And I embrace all of my mistakes, for they led me to my success pathway. I think many individuals become too boastful because they "made it." But the question that underlies everything is how did you make it? Did you really get it right the first time? Well if you did, kudos to you. However, my academic success was driven by a little bit of setbacks that only made room for my major comeback. [BFSP] was just everything I needed to get on the right track for my college career, and I tell *everybody* [emphasis added] who asks who I am, I first tell them I'm a [Bulldog Future] Scholar. (II, 2/11/2015)

Besides learning to overcome negative perceptions, participants believed learning to exhibit positive academic behaviors was the key to them staying in school. They credited the summer bridge program for this. "I really feel like it prepared me for college because it let me know what college would be like as far as class structure" said Toné (II, 7/17/2014). Traci maintained that, "The things that helped [me] were the times I set aside strictly for studying and looking back over my notes if I did not understand something. I learned to use a schedule" (II, 1/27/2015). Jennie set a schedule for her work as well: "Instead of just doing work whenever, I learned to have designated time throughout the day where I accomplish all the work I do. The program also made me learn to do work ahead of time" (II, 2/10/2015). Lastly, Lindsey offered what served as both an explanation for what helped her and a suggestion for future students:

> Academic success in college is utilizing resources you come across during and after college. Always complete an internship before you graduate and do all that you can while in college. That's what I did. Join groups, clubs, and make teachers your friends because they can always help and guide you in the right direction. When you graduate all of these skills are prodigious qualifications for your career. (II, 9/7/2014)

Research Question 5: In What Ways, if any, did BSFP Help Participants Achieve Academic Success?

Theme: Sky's the Limit

When asked if they were satisfied with their accomplishments, overwhelmingly participants said they were not. Many believed that they had yet to reach their full potential. They were asked about academic success, how they defined it, and whether they had achieved it. They had varying definitions. Some defined success as being able to remain in school until graduation. Some gave stock responses such as "doing the very best you can as an individual," or "achieving the goals that you set." Others said it was learning to "prioritize" or having "time management" skills. The participants, however, did reach a consensus on whether they felt they had achieved individual success: No. The prevailing attitude among them was that they had more to accomplish and more to prove to themselves and to others. Johnston expressed this view:

> I have grown as a person both academically and socially from my high school years. But I feel like I could still do more. I look at how my GPA dropped by just a couple of points last spring. I feel like I could have done more, I could have done better. I could have set aside time or got more tutoring or got more help with certain things. I am proud of what I have gotten but at the same time I feel like I could still do better. (II, 7/16/2014)

Vivica had the same assessment of herself:

> You can always do more [and] go further. Personally, I would say if I set a goal this semester to make all Bs in my classes. I would not feel like I achieved academic success unless I would be making all A's in my classes instead of B's because if I can make Bs in my classes, B's are not that far from getting A's. And yeah it is going to take more work, but if that's what you want then you have to go get it. (II, 4/15/2014)

Braxton also said he did not believe in remaining content. He said the key to academic success is not giving up when faced with adversity. Braxton should know. He has had numerous setbacks during his three years at A&M, most, he admitted, because of his own doing. Low SAT scores and failing grades in subsequent math courses in college prevented Braxton from declaring his major until the beginning of his third year in school. An aspiring engineer, Braxton did not have the requisite math scores to get into the program out of high school. Therefore, he had to apply to the school's engineering program after he enrolled. The determining criteria for him getting in: passing several advanced calculus courses with a minimum of a C. After several years trying, he finally passed the courses and was accepted into the program. However, he decided to change his major to applied technology, a program less rigorous than engineering but one that allows him to work in the area of his interest, robotics.

There are no easy answers to say whether Braxton has achieved success. He has had wild inconsistencies with his grades. A review of his transcripts showed that from semester to semester his fluctuating GPA rose and fell like the peaks and dips on an EKG test. He had a 3.2 after his first semester. Two terms later he had a 1.09, followed by a 2.2. Two semesters after that, he had a 3.6, which he followed up with a 2.0 and a 4.0

respectively. Braxton said there were times when he struggled with coursework and others when he was more focused on extracurricular activities such as intramural basketball or participating in organizations than his academics. He shared this willingly because he said he has no regrets:

> Some classes you may not do so hot in, but it's a marathon; you have to persevere. You may not do well in every class. I can attest to that. I have failed classes, but it's about getting yourself back up and trying again and doing what you can changing up what doesn't work and finding out what does. It's you know what you did wrong the first time and correcting yourself. (II, 7/21/2015)

In 2014, Braxton worked with BFSP as a residential counselor. He said he did so because he wanted to give back to a program that helped him. He explained:

> I know one thing: BFSP saw something in me. They saw a good investment in me; I guess they believed in me and wanted me to do well. I felt like it was only right for me to want to give back. They gave me so much and experiences that others didn't [get]. I saw helping the next BFSP students come through as something important. So I tried to use what I learned and things that I saw that worked to my own advantage to help them achieve. That was important to me because [BFSP] didn't have to give me a chance. Just from that aspect, I wanted to help the program. (II, 7/21/2015)

Tiana also worked as a residential counselor with Braxton. She too enjoyed the experience and said it helped her view the program in a different perspective:

> Being a student was exciting. However, being a counselor was amazing! I mean there was some rocky times and whatnot but it was never anything I couldn't overcome. I had the opportunity to have a voice with other students and have an influence on them. I loved it. (II, 2/1/2015)

Other participants reported that BFSP most helped in getting them to believe in themselves and in developing intestinal fortitude (i.e. grit) so they would not feel overwhelmed by challenges. They argued that success ultimately did not begin and end with grades; it was about how well a person responded to pressure. Tiffani reiterated this point in the following comment:

> Academic success to me is not all about getting the A's or the B's as long as you did your best and put forth the best effort. For me, it's giving your all to something and not letting anything stop you from getting in the way of your goals. Being a part of [BFSP] has helped me and it matured me. It showed me that even though it might get hard, don't give up. All the hard work in [BFSP] was worth it. (II, 7/18/2014)

Traci's comment supported Tiffani's assertion:

> The program taught me about achieving your own personal goals and going beyond those goals because by doing so I believe that you are proving your worth and intellectual capabilities in academics, which is an area where not many people excel in. (II, 1/27/2015)

Mikayla offered the same insight about the role BFSP played in her success. She said that the program changed how she perceived herself. She had negative self-perceptions prior to college, in part because of how she viewed school. She doubted her abilities and that in turn caused her to hate school. She described her transformation:

> If you can study and apply yourself and communicate with professors you will have success in college. I think I exceeded my expectations from where I was when I started college. Without BFSP, I never would have thought I would have graduated cum laude. In my mind, I knew I was going to graduate. I knew some people I went to high school with who did phenomenal in high school, I mean graduated with honors and everything, but went to college and graduated with lower grades than me. And it wasn't because they were hanging out partying, it

> was just because they weren't used to studying as much and putting in the hard work. (II, 7/8/2014)

Bobby reached the same conclusion about himself. He had a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality about achieving success.

> [The program] instilled a mindset of achieving the goals that you set yourself. Everyone wants to do great things and have a high grade point average. But [the program] taught us that academic success is about setting goals and being able to meet them. In general, we won't be given anything so you have to work hard for it. (II, 7/11/2014)

Toné felt the program not only influenced her academically, it made her to learn to communicate with other people, particularly when in need of help. She tried to instill that in other students when she worked as a peer tutor:

> It is okay if you're struggling with a subject; you can ask for help. Like I struggled in high school with math. I also struggled in college with math because out of a hundred and something credits I have on my transcripts I only have four C's and two of those C's are in math. What I should have done was went and got some type of tutoring and assistance when I needed it. (II, 7/17/2014)

In regards to her time in the program, she said:

> If I could do it all over again I would. And I recommend that anyone else considering it to do it also. I really feel like it prepared me... Even though there were not as many people in the [summer bridge] classes as others, the expectations of instructors were high and those standards made you improve. (II, 7/17/2014)

Not all participants thought BFSP had a significant effect on their academic performance or their success in college. When asked in what ways, if any, BFSP played a

role in her academic success Vivica responded, “I want to say yes it did, but I can’t really give a detailed answer. It did, but it didn’t” (II, 4/15/2014). Again, Vivica served as an outlier. She explained that the program was helpful in giving her a foundation for college and in getting acclimated to the campus. However, she said her attitude about studying had not changed since being in the program nor had she overcome her proclivity for procrastination. At the time of Vivica’s interview, she acknowledged that she had a five-page sociology paper due the following morning – one that she had not started. “Handling all my classes and all the work, my procrastination doesn’t help at all. I am trying to work on that” (II, 4/15/2014).

Summary

This chapter included a review of the research findings for this case study. The chapter began with an overview of the themes and subthemes that emerged from participant interviews, field notes, observations, and a review of documents related to the case study. In addition, I showed the relationships between the research questions and the themes and subthemes. Excerpts from participant interviews were used to show those connections. The interviews revealed that the participants saw a connection between their time spent if the summer bridge program and the success (e.g. graduating college, maintaining high GPAs, serving in leadership roles on campus) they had in school. Moreover, most of them believed the program instilled in them a work ethic to study harder, manage their time wiser, and seek assistance when needed. The interviews also revealed going through the program caused many of the participants to reevaluate

themselves and gain greater confidence in their abilities. Lastly, despite accomplishing their goals, the participants reported that they were not satisfied with their achievements.

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate a six-week residential summer bridge program at a historically Black college and investigate participants' views about their experiences in the program. This was done to discern their perceptions of the program and to uncover what effects, if any, the program had on their postsecondary participation, their academic development, and their ability to persist. Known as the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program, or BFSP, the program is for students labeled "high-risk" by A&M College. The university deemed the participants "high-risk" because they were in the lowest ten percent of admitted first-year students either because of low standardized test scores or low high school GPA. Although the program is open to in-state students of all backgrounds, it mainly attracts first-generation minority students. Thus, the participants in this study were Black and Hispanic first-generation college goers. Through the interpretive lens of anti-deficit achievement, I tried to determine which intervention methods and program components, if any, aided in the college trajectory of the research participants.

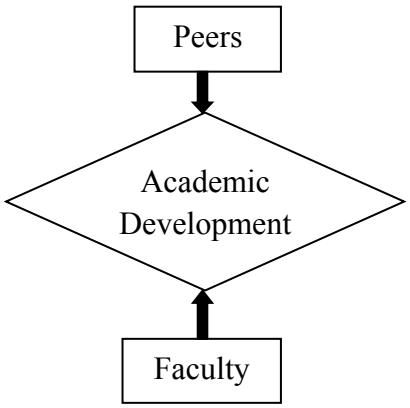
Harper (2010, 2012) originally developed the anti-deficit achievement framework as part of his study on Black male persistence and success in higher education. He based the framework on decades of research on Black males in education

and on "theories from sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education" (Harper, 2012, p. 5). The following table is a modified version of Harper's. Like the original, this model included questions that researchers could explore to better understand how underprepared students who participated in BFSP successfully navigated their way to college, through the summer bridge program, and toward degree attainment. The research questions, which are included within the framework, focused on three pivotal points in the lives of the research participants: their pre-college aspirations, their time in the summer bridge program, and their time in college after completing the program. In addition, the research questions attempted to uncover how BFSP influenced study habits, the use of campus resources, academic performance, educational experiences, and persistence among the study participants.

Table 4

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework with Research Questions and Themes

Pre-college Readiness	**BFSP**	**Post-BFSP Success**
Motivational Factors	**Summer Bridge Experiences**	**College Educational Experiences**
How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among participants prior to enrolling in the Bulldogs Future Scholars summer bridge program? **Theme** *A Brighter Tomorrow*	What do BFSP participants feel helped them stay motivated while completing the summer bridge program? **Themes** I. *Lean on Me* A. Uncertainty B. Being Part of a Community	How do BFSP students manage to persist, despite transition issues, stereotypes, academic underpreparedness, and other negative forces?

		**Theme** *Can't Nothing/Nobody Hold Me Down*
		In what ways, if any, did BSFP help participants achieve academic success? **Theme** *Sky's the Limit*
	What aspect(s) of BFSP did participants feel were most beneficial in strengthening their academic skills? **Themes** I. *A Change is Gonna Come* A. Connecting to People B. Shedding Bad Habits C. Campus Involvement	

The research questions were answered from interview data, field notes, observations, and a review of archival documents as reported in Chapter 4.

Research Question 1: How were Aspirations for Postsecondary Education Cultivated Among Participants Prior to Enrolling in the Bulldogs Future Scholars Summer Bridge Program?

Theme 1: A Brighter Tomorrow

All but one of the study participants reported that they had college aspirations prior to participating in the summer bridge program. Makayla was the only participant who expressed low motivation to attend college prior to enrolling in the summer bridge program. Despite that, she would eventually become the highest achieving student in her summer bridge cohort and later graduate with honors. How did this happen? Research showed that Makayla's transformation, though seemingly sudden, was not entirely surprising. When students, particularly first-generation and historically underserved students, felt a sense of belonging in school, took part in learning communities, and/or participated in high-impact academic programs, their educational and social engagement increased (Jehangir, 2010; Kuh, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). BFSP incorporated elements of high-impact practices (e.g. learning communities, first-year seminars, and common intellectual experiences).

Makayla initially was not highly motivated to attend college because her previous educational experiences eroded her confidence, which caused her to dislike school. What this study cannot determine definitively is whether Makayla was a statistical anomaly or if she always possessed the capabilities to succeed but just needed help developing the

confidence and foundational skills to perform well in college. This is a question that surrounds all the study participants.

As noted in Chapter 4, two participants – Jennie and Lindsey – said they were unsure if they would be able to attend college because of their poor grades in high school. Lindsey chose to participate in the program because it was her only way of getting accepted into A&M College, the school she had desired to attend throughout high school. Several others – Bonita, Dalilah, and Makayla – reported that they were not confident in their abilities to handle the coursework in college. The candor of these participants was revealing. It indicated that they doubted their abilities and perhaps placed unwarranted limitations on themselves coming into the program. Overwhelmingly, though, the participants wanted a postsecondary education despite their admitted academic weaknesses. As first-generation minority college students, the participants needed to develop time management skills, self-motivation, positive study habits, and the ability to prioritize goals to do well academically (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008).

The participants frequently cited the reason to establish careers with well-paying jobs and to have more opportunities as desires for pursuing postsecondary degrees. However, their responses varied when asked why they chose to attend A&M College. It should be noted that A&M was not the first or even the second college choice for a third of the participants. Bobby indicated that he only chose A&M – his second choice – because of its location (it is approximately 40 minutes from his home). He initially wanted to attend a school three hours away but decided to stay close to home so he could

be near his mother. He did not decide to attend A&M until late May of 2013 and as a result was waitlisted for the summer bridge program. Although this decision seems to have worked well for Bobby, some researchers argued that it could have been a potential mistake, one in which first-generation and historically underserved students often make. Choy (2001) as well as Horn and Nevill (2006) both maintained students from those groups often choose a college that is the wrong fit for them because of an institution's proximity to where they live.

For Braxton, A&M was his third choice. The two schools he wanted to attend ahead of A&M were large, predominately White institutions, one with a nationally ranked engineering program and the other, which is one of the top research institutions in its region. Both schools denied him, but Braxton does not have any regrets. Johnston also had A&M buried deep on his college list. He claimed that A&M was his "third or fourth choice" (II, 7/16/2014). Although some participants may have wavered in their decisions to attend A&M, no one was more adamant about not attending the school than Makayla. She explained her reasoning:

> … I got to my junior year in high school and my grades were okay to get into somewhere, but I didn't set myself up where I could get into anywhere good. I didn't think about it then. I didn't care; I just wanted to pass and get by. So, I applied to [A&M College] and [A&M College] denied me. I applied to [Western] and I got approved for [Western]. So, I said oh whatever; I got in somewhere and it's not a two-year college so that's fine with me and it's away from home and I wanted to be away from home. Well, [A&M] sent me a letter in the mail saying if I completed this program I could go here. I was like, oh I don't want that! I read the letter and I threw it in the trash. Then my mother went and took it out the trash because she saw me throw it in the trash. She was like but Mikayla. I was like, I'm going to [Western], [A&M] denied me the first time; I don't like being denied anything. I went and threw it the trash again and she went and took it out the trash and read the letter again because she gave it to me after she read and I read it and

> was like, oh, please! So I threw it out. Then she picked it up, read it and I was like momma no and she was like just go and try it and if you like the environment, you might change your mind. (II, 7/8/2014)

At her mother's insistence, Mikayla attended A&M instead of Western, which has a similar bridge program to A&M's. There is no way of knowing if Mikayla would have been successful at Western. What is clear is how Makayla and her mother's interaction fit into the broader landscape of educational research. Freeman and Brown (2004) postulated parents of first-generation African-American students often encouraged their children to attend college because they want them to get more education than they did. By doing so, parents hope that a college degree will help eliminate economic barriers for their children (Freeman & Brown, 2004). Although this is noble, Freeman and Brown (2004) found that first-generation African-American students in this situation often had difficulties developing self-motivation and avoiding negative role models because they felt they lacked parental support and guidance. Makayla offered a critical assessment of her mother's inability to motivate her to do well in high school:

> When I would come home and tell her I got an F or a D, she would be like oh, well make sure you do better the next time. She wasn't too, too, strict on my grades. She'd just be like do better the next time. The next was better, better enough for me to pass. (II, 7/8/2014)

Research Question 2: What do BFSP Participants Feel Helped Them Stay Motivated While Completing the Summer Bridge Program?

Theme: Lean on Me

Each study participant reported that being around other students from similar backgrounds striving for the same goals helped increase motivation levels. This happened despite some of participants not liking some of their cohort members. “You do see everybody everyday and sometimes you do get tired of seeing the same old people and sometimes they have attitudes” Braxton said (II, 7/21/2015). In fact, most of the participants said it was difficult being around their cohort members after several weeks in the program. The participants agreed the constant interaction with one another over time and the strict regulations were weaknesses of the program. The former revelation contradicts what the participants said in regards to being around peers helped them form a support system. What the participants are really saying here is that the two are not mutually exclusive. Although they enjoyed coming together and meeting new people and even helping other cohort members while in the summer bridge program, they eventually became bored with seeing and interacting with the same people every day for six weeks.

That disclosure does not diminish the fact that the participants learned to lean on their peers for emotional and academic support. The idea that some participants may not have liked everyone in their cohort or knew of cohort members who disliked one another is analogous to how people operate in group dynamics whether in school, on a job, or on a sports team. Personality clashes and minor interpersonal conflicts notwithstanding,

people are often able to set aside minor differences to achieve common goals. For BSFP participants, the goals were increasing their college readiness and earning higher grades.

Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) posited peer support for first-generation college students was instrumental in raising achievement and improving persistence rates. In their longitudinal study of Hispanic and Asian students at a West Coast university with a predominately minority population, Dennis et al. (2005) examined several issues affecting students including peer support and they ways it influenced grade point averages and how students handled college-related issues. The study revealed a moderate negative correlation between students' lacking peer support and their college GPA ($r = -.30$) and their ability to adjust to college ($r = -.38$) when controlling for ethnicity, SES, gender, and high school GPA (Dennis et al., 2005). Although the correlations were not strong, taken together, their findings indicated that the lack of peer support negatively influenced GPA and college adjustment (Dennis et al., 2005). The study conducted by Dennis et al. may not be generalizable to the BFSP population as it took place at a different institution with different types of students. They do share the commonality, however, of being first-generation college goers. It would not difficult to surmise then that they would face some of the same struggles and challenges, which supports the hypothesis that peer support was crucial in helping the BFSP study participants earn higher grades and persist in school.

Subtheme 1: Uncertainty. Participants' perceptions of their academic abilities prior to college fell into four distinct categories: poor, mediocre, good, and excellent. Three of the participants – Mikayla, Lindsey, and Jennie – categorized themselves as

weak students before they arrived at A&M. Three others – Traci, Bonita, and Vivica – identified themselves as subpar while five –Bobby, Braxton, Dalilah, Johnston, and Tiffani – thought they were strong academically despite an occasional struggle in a difficult course. Toné and Frederick, who were coincidentally in the same summer bridge cohort, described themselves as excellent high school students. The participants' perceptions were largely influenced by their grades. The students in the first group reported that they barely had above 2.0 grade point averages. The majority of the participants in the other groups reported having above 3.0 GPAs, though it should be noted that the researcher could not verify the accuracy of that information.

The way participants viewed themselves prior to college is important for several reasons. For those who already thought they were weak academically, it seemed to buttress their belief that would also struggle in college. Although participants in the other categories had higher opinions of themselves, almost all of them also reported feeling anxiety, stress, and uncertainty in how they would fare in the bridge program and later in college. The two outliers were Johnston and Toné, who both maintained that they never doubted their abilities or had any fears while in the program. In this regard, all of the students displayed varying levels of self-efficacy. Their thoughts and beliefs affected their motivation levels and influenced how they thought they would perform academically.

Johnston and Toné's view of themselves as well as the participants who self-identified as strong high school students raised a fundamental question: If these participants saw themselves as academically sound then why did the university see them

as ““high-risk””? The seven BFSP participants who did not consider themselves underprepared for college are not unique. In a phenomenological study of Hispanic high school students in California, Bolden (2011) found that participants saw themselves as college ready even though their standardized test scores indicated otherwise. Cole (2011) discovered similar trends in his examination of anti-intellectualism among 460 Black students attending both HBCUs and PWIs. That longitudinal study revealed that having high levels of academic self-concept (a person's perception of his/her academic abilities) entering college significantly influenced academic achievement among research participants (Cole, 2011).

Despite having obvious low standardized test scores, the seven BFSP participants who had high academic self-concept was consistent with the research of Awad (2007), Choi (2005), and Gerardi (2005) that posited grade point averages influenced college students' perceptions of their academic abilities. In other words, because these participants reported having high GPAs in high school, they viewed themselves as college ready. This also explained why the BFSP participants who reported having low grade point averages in high school had higher levels of uncertainty in their abilities to perform well in college. In this regard, these participants used the bridge program to help overcome feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, and low self-esteem about their academic abilities. Bonita agreed with that assessment and said:

> Being afforded the opportunity to begin my college experience, prior to fall enrollment gave me confidence and an upper hand in comparison to other college freshman. Taking math and English over the summer was a rigorous challenge for me. I am so grateful that the program had tutors available to assist me in my academic struggles. (II, 1/27/2015)

Jennie echoed Bonita's observations. She added:

> Before arriving on campus, I felt like [the program] would be like a summer camp. My experience within [BFSP] met up to my expectations without the summer camp part. It was an intense six-week program, and the work was very rigorous… we had a schedule for every minute of our day. I was not expecting to have absolutely no time; however, as I stated earlier, that's how college can get sometimes. (II, 2/10/2015)

"Rigorous," "challenging," and "confidence" were all terms mentioned frequently by the study participants. The prevailing belief was that the rigor of the program helped them gain confidence, which either reinforced the perception of high academic self-concept among some or improved low levels of self-esteem among those who reported academic struggles in high school. Although not explicitly noted as a program component, BFSP seemed to utilize elements of an anti-deficit achievement framework as a way of helping participants with low academic self-concept overcome that stigma. As mentioned in the first chapter of this study, the anti-deficit achievement framework is an alternative to deficit ideology, which in the milieu of higher education focuses on educators' perceptions of students' weaknesses instead of their strengths. It would have been very easy for the program to make the participants aware of their ""high-risk"" status and that they were recruited into the program because their test scores and/or GPA placed them in the bottom 10th percentile of A&M's admitted students. That was not the case as the summer bridge program officials did not inform participants that they were among the lowest-performing students in their incoming class.

Instead, program officials presented BFSP as an opportunity to get an early start in college because of their commitment to learning, dedication to school, and hard-

working ability.[3] By framing the program like this, the participants did not see themselves as inferior to their first-year, non-bridge counterparts. Interviews for this study revealed that participants who did not believe in their abilities built confidence and self-efficacy based on experiences with faculty, mentors, and peers.

Subtheme 2: Being part of a community. One of the mindsets instilled in participants is that they are part of a community; as such, it is important for them to help one another whether by forming study groups or offering encouragement. In other words, their success, to some degree, is tied to the success of others. This is perhaps why some participants said during interviews that, despite having differences with some of their cohort members, they would work together because they were all after the same goal: to succeed in college. This attitude was not relegated to academics as it also included leisurely activities as well. Jennie explained, "My most favorite part of the program was the activities planned only within the students in the program. With everyone's help and working together as a team, we created a talent show, fashion show, and went bowling" (II, 2/10/2015). The greater idea that the summer bridge program tried to promote was for participants to become involved in campus activities whether through socializing with clubs and organizations or participating in TRiO or living-learning communities. Participants were introduced to these concepts during their six weeks in summer bridge.

Ultimately, Research Question 2 attempted to answer what helped motivate participants to succeed during their time in the summer bridge program. Based on

[3] This is how the program was presented to students beginning in 2011. The 2009 and 2010 cohorts participated under a different programming model, one that operated as a second-chance opportunity for conditionally admitted students. Those students knew their status prior to participating.

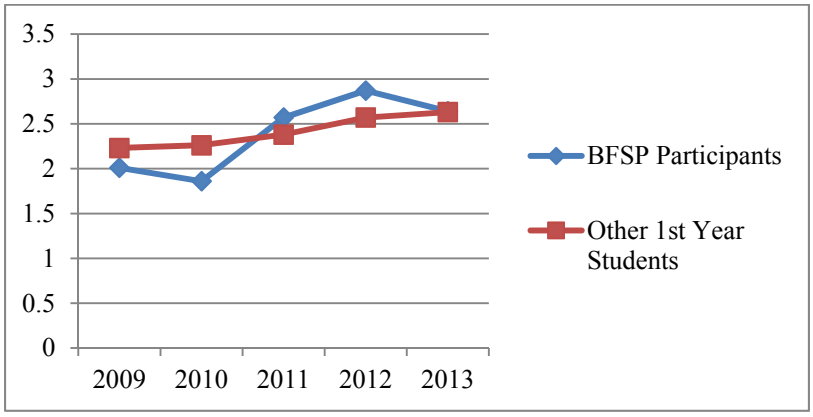
observations and participant interviews, the answer is multifaceted. In part, they helped motivate one another. Faculty and mentors also played a role in their success because they offered encouragement and challenged the participants to not settle for excuses. Dalilah noted this when she said:

> I loved AISP; my professors were great. But it was always that one professor who stayed on me, and saw something in me, that I did not see in myself. It's always that one or maybe two professors that outrank all the others ones. The one that you remember when you're old. For me it was my English professor who always aggravated me about my papers and spent numerous amount of time with me until I got it right. I needed that. (II, 2/11/2015)

Many researchers, notably Rubie-Davies (2006), have documented how teacher expectations influence student outcomes. In short, teachers who assign negative labels to students treat them differently and that can affect how they learn. Conversely, scholars have reported a linkage between high teach expectations and high student motivation (Meece, Anderman & Anderman, 2006). However, Williamson and Blackburn (2010) pointed out that a teacher merely having high expectations does not raise student achievement; they must also provide support to see positive gains. Although the aforementioned findings were based on studies of secondary schools, they can apply to college, specifically the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program. The program saw positive gains in student outcomes (course completion rates and GPA) when comparing summer bridge participants to non-bridge, first-year attendees. Table 6 illustrated this.

Table 5

Cumulative GPA of BFSP Students vs. 1st Year Students at A&M College Since 2009



It should be noted that while the 2009 and 2010 cohorts had lower grade point averages after their first when compared to other first-year students, the participants in the program at that time were academically weaker than those who have participated in BFSP since 2011. BFSP compares favorably to similar residential summer bridge programs in the region. Tables 7 and 8 showed that BFSP participants had higher grade point averages than participants in other programs over the past three years. Those tables show the cumulative GPA in the fall and spring semesters from 2011 to 2013.[4] During those years, BFSP participants had an average cumulative grade point averages of 2.57, 2.87, and 2.64 respectively while other first-time, first-year students had GPAs of 2.38, 2.57, and 2.63 respectively.

[4] Statistics for the 2014 cohort will not be available until after the completion of the 2014-15 academic year.

Table 6

Cumulative Fall GPA of Summer Bridge Students at A&M College Versus Students in Similar Bridge Programs in the State

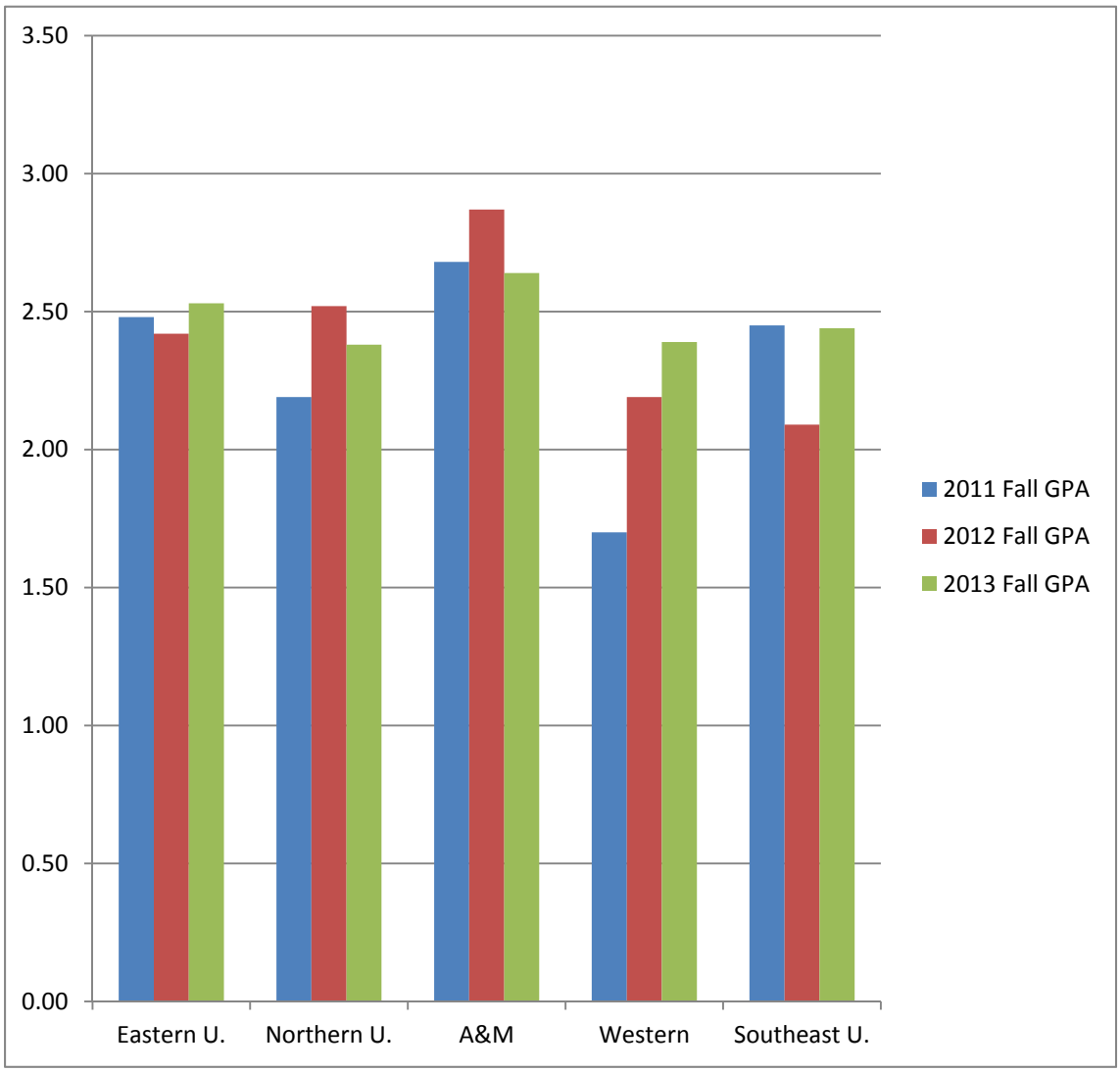
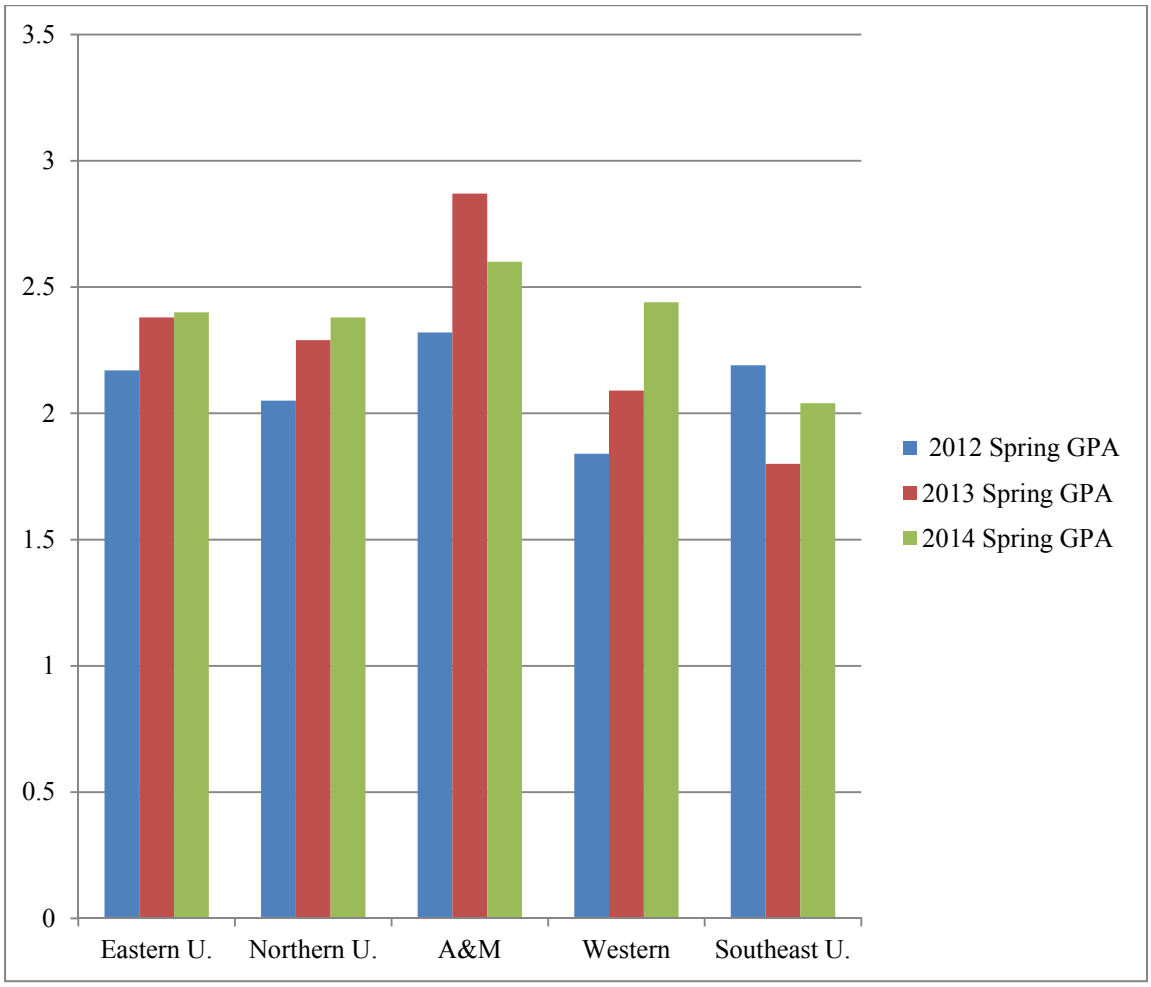


Table 7

Comparison of Cumulative Spring GPA of A&M Summer Bridge Students and those from Similar Bridge Programs in the State System.



Research Question 3: What Aspect(s) of BFSP did Participants Feel was/were Most Beneficial in Strengthening Their Academic Skills?

Theme: A Change is Gonna Come

Overwhelmingly, research participants felt the strictness of the program (e.g. study requirements, limited access to students outside the program, mandatory library sessions four nights a week as well as curfews) were both helpful and unwarranted. On one hand, 12 of the 14 participants (86%) reported that the constant studying was a positive motivational tool that influenced them to study more in college. The two outliers, Tiana and Vivica, reported that they study less now than when they were in the summer bridge program. Both said being forced to study while in the program made them abhor studying to the point that they rarely do it. Of the 12 that reported BFSP influenced them to increase their study habits, most said they either never or rarely studied in high school, so they did not know how to study once they were in the program. For them, the summer bridge program helped to develop study habits, which they recognized as being a long-term benefit. Many of them said they would not have known how to prepare for classes if they had not enrolled in BFSP.

Although, many of the participants recognized the rigidness of BFSP as a necessity in some regards, they also felt the program's regulations were too paternalistic. Students could not be on their cell phones during supplemental instruction and tutoring sessions. With the exception of laptops, electronic devices were also prohibited during classes. Participants could not leave campus unless it was with the entire cohort. Students were not permitted to wander on campus during breaks. They had curfews in which

everyone had to be in his or her room by midnight. Tiffani did not like all the rules, but she said she understood why students had to follow them:

> We had a whole bunch of good times and a whole bunch of bad times. As for the bad, there were many people not following the rules. That taught us what to do and what not to do. Not everyone is raised the same. There were people sneaking out and breaking curfew. Everybody thinks they are grown. (II, 7/18/2014)

Bonita, on the other hand, disagreed that all the rules were necessary. She said:

> I believe certain parts of the program were too strict such as the implementation of bed checks. Although, we had not officially begun our fall semester, bed checks is something I associate as a method utilized for monitoring children. As college students, I believe students are capable for knowing when it is time to go to bed and when they are permitted to go and come. If they are not capable of monitoring this, then they may not be cut out to handle what college life entails in regards to being a successful student. (II, 1/27/2015)

BFSP took an old-fashioned approach in monitoring student behavior and in ensuring they remained focus on studying and completing class work. The summer bridge program was not a time for partying, roaming the campus freely, or socializing; it was a period for participants to adjust to college and strengthen their academic abilities without the distractions and peer pressure present during the regular school year. Regardless of the participants not embracing some of the program's policies, they appeared to have had positive effects on academic achievement. As noted in table 5 in this chapter, BFSP participants had slightly higher grade point averages than their first-year, non-bridge counterparts. Is there a correlation between strict rules and student outcomes (GPAs, hours earned, or cognitive development)? There is no way one could affirm that based on this study's findings because qualitative research is exploratory and

not generalizable to an entire population. Moreover, this study did not try to quantitatively assess the program to determine which specific components had an effect on student achievement. Therefore, it would be difficult to say with any certainty that specific program components caused specific outcome results. The researcher acknowledges this caveat.

However, having worked in the program for four of the six years of its operation and from interviewing participants in this study, the researcher concluded that limiting distractions helps *some* students perform better and develop better academic habits. When compared to their BFSP counterparts, other first-time, first-year students since 2011 had slightly worse student outcomes (fewer semester hours earned, lower grade point averages, and retention rates). These students also deal with far more distractions than BFSP participants. It is not known what effects, if any, distractions may have had on student achievement since there were no statistical significance tests done in this research. However, research has shown different forms of distraction affect academic achievement. Research on how distractions affect academic performance dates back to the 1960s (Baker & Madell, 1965). Recent research has shown laptop usage in the classroom (Fried, 2008; Hembrooke & Gay, 2003; Wurst, Smarkola, & Gaffney, 2008) and cell phones (Burns and Lohenry, 2010; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013) impede learning. By eliminating these distractions as well as social distractions, the program appeared to have had at least some short-term, positive effects on grades.

Subtheme 1: Connecting to people. Participants said one of best aspects of BFSP was the program's ability to connect to campus resources. Many of the summer

bridge participants were first-generation college goers and qualified for TRiO services. BFSP has partnered with the TRiO office at A&M to identify students for additional support. The participants started working with TRiO while they were in the summer bridge program. The TRiO office also provided peer tutors during summer bridge. These tutors were also part of TRiO so they served as unofficial mentors for the participants. In addition, the workshops and symposiums held during summer bridge also connected participants to campus leaders and other program directors on campus. Braxton explained why this was helpful:

> Developing better study habits was most definitely the most prevalent aspect of the program. The other was finding resources on campus. Dr. [Jones] had us going to different talks with different heads on campus. Some would be at Starbucks and they were optional. I would always go. Finding out who was in charge of things and getting resources and finding out who to ask for help. Just knowing the people who were in charge of things behind the scenes was important. (II, 7/21/2015)

Because of the summer bridge program, BFSP participants utilized student support services early. That meant those who needed personal counseling met with counseling services. In addition, participants formed relationships with academic counselors, tutors, and faculty members the summer before their first semester. Some study participants were unsure if they would have connected with TRiO or any of its support services had it not been for the summer bridge program. In addition, the summer bridge participants met with campus leaders in the Student Government Association (SGA), fraternities and sororities, and other student organizations. This influenced organizational participation and connected to the last subtheme discussed in this section.

Subtheme 2: Shedding bad habits. Although some of the participants in this study saw themselves as strong high school students, all of them said they had some bad habits that affected their academic performance. Asides from not studying, participants identified procrastination as the major impediment to their success. Many said prior to the summer bridge program they waited until the last minute to complete assignments. After completing the program, half of the study participants said they still suffered from procrastination. However, those who admitted still procrastinating said they were trying to overcome that problem. They realized its effect on their performance, but they blamed some of their procrastination on off-campus jobs (Tiana), commitments to campus organizations (Dalilah, Tiffani, Braxton, Jennie), and laziness (Vivica).

Explaining why the study participants could shed some bad habits and not others is difficult. They were able to see the intrinsic values of changing their study habits, forming or participating in study groups, visiting professors during office hours, and utilizing campus mentors because they believed each lead to earning better grades. Yet they could not stop procrastinating even though they admitted it was a detriment to their academic performance. This showed that some habits become so entrenched in their academic behaviors that overcoming them will take long-term effort.

Subtheme 3: Campus involvement. Becoming involved in campus activities was important to the participants in this study. As mentioned in previous chapters, all of them were involved in at least one organization or program at A&M. Several held leadership positions in their organization. Others were seeking opportunities to become more active on campus. Jennie, for instance, recently ran for sophomore class president. Braxton and

several of his friends started an organization to inspire leadership and volunteerism among Black males. The group performs community service projects at local elementary schools where members mentor younger Black male students. They get motivational speakers to hold forums to discuss how to network.

The participants in this study were inspired by the summer bridge program to become campus leaders. They said they were taught that attending college meant more than just going to class and earning good grades. Both of those were important, but it was only one aspect of their duties. The participants said the program instilled a sense of confidence in them; in doing so, they believed they could accomplish almost anything they desired. Studies showed that student involvement and engagement directly improves GPA. Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012) found a positive correlation between GPA and campus involvement. In a study that tracked the attendance of two student cohorts, results showed that as the number of campus activities the participants attended or were involved with their grade point average increased. Conversely, that study showed that students involved in few campus activities had lower GPAs. The participants in this study involved in multiple organizations all had grade point averages above 3.0. The two outliers here were Braxton, who was involved in several organizations and Vivica who was only involved with TRiO.

Research Question 4: **How do BFSP Students Manage to Persist Despite Transition Issues, Stereotypes, Academic Underpreparedness, and Other Negative Forces?**

Theme: Can't Nothing/Nobody Hold Me Down

As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study, persistence has become an increasingly important issue in higher education as policy makers hold colleges and universities accountable for the number of graduates they produce each year. This has become an assessment of institutional effectiveness measured by the development and implementation of active classroom learning strategies, how well institutions meet students' academic and social expectations, positive experiences with academic advising, and, ultimately, improved retention rates. BFSP participants reported that while their time in the summer bridge program was not perfect, the program helped them gain confidence and that appeared to help them overcome their academic deficits and transition to college.

One might argue that students overcoming transitional challenges, stereotypes, and academic underpreparedness through confidence and grit (i.e. determination) are a conclusion too convenient to reach. However, an analysis of the data supported this contention. The majority of the study participants reported being in the summer bridge program helped them to gain confidence that they could handle college level work. These students also received additional resources (i.e. tutoring and mentoring) and were introduced to campus programs that facilitated their academic and social development (e.g. TRiO, living-learning communities, gender initiative programs for improving retention). They believed they succeeded in large measure because the bridge program

officials (administrators, professors, tutors, and mentors) instilled confidence in them and equipped with them with the basic study skills they needed to do well in college.

Quantifying how much these factors influence the persistence of BFSP participants is difficult. To date, there has not been a comprehensive quantitative study on BFSP or any of the related summer bridge programs. In 2014, the agency that oversees state universities where A&M is located did conduct an external review of BFSP and the other four summer bridge programs for underserved students. The report, however, only included basic statistical data regarding "graduation rates, average time to degree, and student academic performance" (State External Report, 2014). That review showed that BFSP had positive effects on some student outcomes, but it was unclear how the program affected other areas. For instance, there were negligible differences in grade point averages between the summer bridge students and all non-bridge, first-year students at the five universities. From 2008 through 2013, 1,793 students participated in five summer bridge programs, including BFSP (External Document Review, 2/2/2015). Those students had a mean grade point average of 2.32 (SD = .12). During that same period, 23,917 non-bridge, first-year students enrolled in the five universities with summer bridge programs for underserved students (External Document Review, 2/2/2015). Those students had a mean GPA of 2.34 (SD = .28). There did not appear to be a significant difference in the mean GPAs of the two groups as evident by the Cohen's effect size value (d= 0.17), which indicated a low effect size between the two groups. In other words, the difference in GPA between the two groups was trivial.

Thus, GPAs may not be the most accurate assessment of the summer bridge program. Even if the grade point averages of the summer bridge students were slightly lower than their non-bridge counterparts, one could make the argument that it does not matter. Although state program officials would likely contend that having students with high grade point averages is important, the fact that the summer bridge students had slightly lower GPAs was not entirely surprising. As noted, these students ranked in lowest tenth percentile of admitted students because of low standardized test scores and/or low high school grade point averages. If we accept that standardized test scores and high school GPA are indicators of future success in college, then it makes sense that the summer bridge students had slightly lower grades at the university level as compared to their peers. A better comparative assessment of BFSP – and by extension the other summer bridge programs – is retention rates. At A&M College, the retention rates for summer bridge students surpassed non-bridge students from 2011 through 2013. For instance, 95% of the BFSP summer bridge cohort from 2011 re-enrolled the following year compared to 73.5% other first-year students (State External Report, 2014).

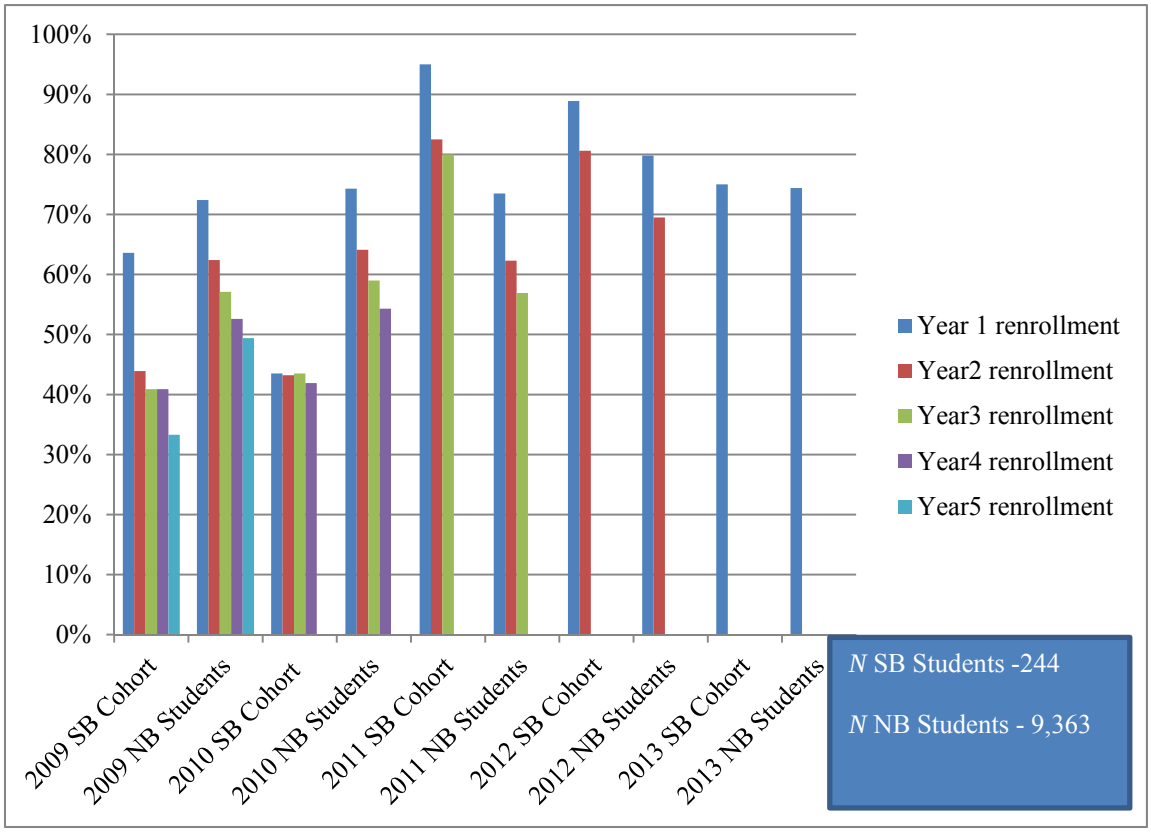
The chart below illustrates the differences in retention percentages from 2009 through 2013.[5] The 2009 and 2010 BFSP cohorts had lower retention percentages than other first-year students; however, those cohorts entered college prior to the increase of statewide minimum admission requirements. Again, the students who participated in the summer bridge program those years were conditionally admitted students with even lower GPAs and standardized test scores than participants have had since 2011.

[5] Retention percentages for 2014 were not available at the completion of this study.

Table 8

Re-Enrollment Percentages for Summer Bridge Students and Non-Bridge, First-Year Students

SB = Summer Bridge Students
NB = Non-bridge Students



Research Question 5: In What Ways, if any, did BSFP Help Participants Achieve Academic Success?

Theme: Sky's the Limit

At the close of each individual interview, BFSP participants were asked a two-part question one being to describe their definition for academic success and secondly if they felt they had reached it. Not surprisingly, answers varied for the former. In separate interviews, Johnston and Mikayla both described academic success as being able to attain a desired goal. Lindsey, on the other hand, maintained that a person reached academic success when he or she capitalized on opportunities such as internships and networking for jobs (II, 9/7/2014). Bobby contended academic success was maintaining good grades and having a stellar GPA. When asked to elaborate, he said that meant earning A's and B's and having over a 3.0 (II, 7/11/2014). Braxton summed up academic success as the ability to persevere through adversity (II, 7/21/2014). Likewise, Dalilah likened academic success to a popular gospel song: "we fall down but we get up," (II, 2/11/2015).

Although the participants did not agree on how to define academic success, most of them reported not completely achieving their vision of it. Each participant, including those who have graduated, said they had more to accomplish and that they were not satisfied with their current achievements. Goals varied depending on the participant's class standing. For Traci, a second-semester student, that meant maintaining her 4.0 GPA. For Jennie, it meant establishing a more prominent leadership presence on campus by becoming sophomore class president. For Toné, it meant being accepted into a prestigious law school. And for Mikalaya, one of the two graduates in this study, it meant

qualifying for the basic training program for the U.S. Marshals, her dream job. These are lofty goals, particularly for a group the state deemed "high risk" (State External Report, 2014) for college enrollment. What gave them the confidence that they could achieve? The first step in that process was becoming college ready, which most BFSP participants attributed to their participation in the summer bridge program. Moreover, the participants said BFSP put them ahead of many of their peers by getting them off to a good start. Earning good grades during the rigorous summer bridge program made them believe they could do well in other classes. To use the military analogy from Chapter 3, the BFSP summer bridge was boot camp for the enlisted participants. Once the participants completed basic training, they were better prepared to tackle their larger mission: completing college. Thus, they interacted with other driven students and connected with faculty members who advised clubs and organizations in their major.

Despite some missteps, the participants overwhelmingly said they had a singular focus of doing well and not dropping out of school. That mindset helped them achieve success. Had they not attended the summer bridge program, they might have struggled entering college because they would have left on their own to build social connections with faculty and peer mentors in addition to improving their academic skills. If that had happened, they might not have developed the confidence and self-efficacy needed to be successful. These are all speculative notions to be sure. However, one could logically reach such conclusions given the participants weak academic background entering college.

Lastly, participants indentified faculty members in their majors for helping them achieve academic success. Establishing relationships with those professors helped some land internships, financial assistance, and confidants to navigate the college terrain. Being able to connect to powerful networking agencies on campus and in their discipline was instrumental in helping participants make value-added relationships with key faculty and staff members. They agreed this increased their intellectual engagement and encouraged them to strive harder to reach their desired goals.

Implications

Administrative Suggestions

The Bulldogs Future Scholars Program has many positive components that help students transition to college, improve their study skills, build relationships with faculty and peers, and persist to graduation. Despite the positives, the program has its flaws. Several administrative adjustments could improve the program's stability and long-term viability at A&M College. The findings of this study suggest four administrative recommendations for strengthening BFSP: (1) hire a full-time administrator to oversee the program, (2) make stronger connections to guidance counselors at high schools that serve as feeders to A&M College, (3) increase the online and social media presence of the program, (4) collect and analyze data on the program participants for greater institutional assessment.

Recommendation 1: Hire a Full-Time Director of BFSP

The administration at A&M College has never hired a full-time director to run this summer bridge program. Instead, the school has assigned those duties to various

faculty members who have had full-time jobs and responsibilities in other areas such as teaching, researching, and academic advising. As such, A&M has seemingly followed an unofficial mantra of many HBCUs: do more with less. Admirable as this may be, the patchwork formula for running the program is problematic for several reasons. For starters, not having a permanent person in charge of the program diminishes its stability. BFSP has had turnover in its leadership positions as a result of this problem. In seven years, the program has had six directors. In fairness, the program has had co-directors for three different years. However, none of them works with the program now. Some have retired. One left A&M to run a similar bridge program at a large, research-intensive PWI in the Midwest. The last two co-directors said they voluntarily stepped down because of lack of institutional support, which they said sapped them of their desire to lead the program. One of the former co-directors explained why she asked to stepped down: "I loved working with the students, I really did. But for the pay and the amount of work that was involved on top of all that I had to do with my teaching, it just wasn't worth it," (II, 10/31/2014).

The former co-director's attitude speaks to a larger problem with the constant turnover in the BFSP leadership position. Saddling full-time faculty members with the administrative responsibilities for the summer bridge program is burdensome. As the previous program administrator noted, it is difficult to balance other work responsibilities with leading the summer bridge program. The BFSP program director(s) is/are responsible for recruiting and selecting the 40 summer bridge participants. The director(s) also has/have to hire and train student counselors and coordinate with the TRiO office to

select peer tutors. In addition to that, the director(s) must secure housing for the participants, devise an itinerary for all program activities, and organize an overnight field trip as well as several local field trips (e.g. to the mall, the museum, or area stores). At many institutions, directing a summer bridge program is a full-time position. By investing in a permanent director, A&M sends the message that it is no longer interested in playing a game of musical chairs but is instead committed to keeping the program stable.

Hiring a full-time director would benefit the program in other ways as well. Part of the director's duties is following up with students throughout their first year to ensure they are taking the right courses, are participating in campus programs, are passing their classes, and staying on track for reenrollment. In essence, the director serves as a mentor to enhance students' first-year experiences. Having a permanent person overseeing BFSP provides for greater monitoring of grades and retention.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Connections with Guidance Counselors at High Schools that Serve as Feeders to A&M College

A number of public high schools in the state where A&M is located serve as feeder schools for the university. Establishing relationships with the guidance counselors at those schools could help program officials identify potential candidates. This is important because it would help BFSP officials select students who are likely to take full advantage of the summer bridge program. In other words, connecting with high school guidance counselors might help program officials select more participants like those in this study.

This recommendation ties specifically to the research findings of selecting highly motivated students to participate in the program. Students motivated to be in the program are more likely to take advantage of the opportunities it provides. There was a clear delineation between the types of students who participated in BFSP during its first year of operation and those who participated after the minimum college entrance requirements rose. Although some students successfully completed the original program, the latter model proved more effective when comparing the two structures. The results of this study suggests that utilizing guidance counselors at the top feeder high schools to the university could help improve the quality of students BFSP serves. Although the school should want to help as many students as possible, it must focus on developing strategies that will help students who exhibit the potential to be successful in college.

Recommendation 3: Increase the Online and Social Media Presence of the Summer Bridge Program

Many universities and colleges advertise their summer bridge programs on their websites. Often there is webpage for the program that visitors can access from the university's main website. That page has links that provide a description of the program, its components, expectations, eligibility requirements, and instructions for applying. Some even include a mission statement. In short, a potential candidate or parent can read about the program and decide whether they are interested in it. Although not everyone has computer access, having information about the program online is a convenient way for people to learn what the program has to offer.

A&M College does not advertise the Bulldogs Future Scholars Program online. By not doing so, it may be missing potential students. Currently, the university sends automated emails about the program to students who qualify based on their standardized test scores and high school grade point averages. Although this form of communication is convenient, many of the participants in this study said they ignored those emails when they received them. Some of them said they hardly checked their email and when they did, nothing in the BFSP subject line caught their attention. Talking to guidance counselors about summer bridge programs influenced their decision to attend A&M.

BFSP program officials should not only consider adding a webpage through the university's website, but they should also consider utilizing social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to connect with potential students. This could serve as additional avenues to advertise the program and let students learn how they could benefit from participating in it.

Recommendation 4: Collect and Analyze Data on the Program Participants for Greater Institutional Assessment

Assessments in higher education serve several crucial roles. First, it can validate the existence of programs and the continuation of educational practices. Secondly, it shows whether students are learning and if they are meeting certain educational outcomes. Overall, it shows faculty members and administrators evidence about student learning, professional effectiveness, and program quality. BFSP does not seem to have conducted an in-depth, thorough study of its students. Statistics have been kept on GPAs,

course completion rates, and re-enrollment figures. That provides some insight but not enough.

Program officials should consider conducting a broader assessment of the summer bridge participants. This relates the research finding dealing with retention and persistence. This study found that the summer bridge program could have a positive influence in these areas, but at best, this is anecdotal. More comprehensive assessments are needed whether in the form of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods. The program administrators could review several aspects of BFSP. For instance, they could develop a survey to measure what institutional integration, programmatic strengths, and student satisfaction. A mixed-methods approach could yield rich information that includes participants' voices about their summer bridge experiences coupled with quantitative data that measures the participants' personal and affective benefits from participating in the summer bridge program.

There are other areas of BFSP that could also be measured. For instance, the program features a living-learning community that BFSP officials should assess. Administrators could focus on quantitative measures such as the living-learning community's impact on student outcomes (e.g. GPAs, course completion rates, retention rates, and graduation rates). This could be done by utilizing surveys with Likert-scale items. Doing so, would provide statistical data for analysis. Program administrators could also rely on qualitative research methods to evaluate different aspects of the program. One-on-one interviews and focus groups could allow administrators to learn participants' perceptions of faculty, mentors, and other programmatic structures.

Assessments are needed to help program officials accurately determine whether they are meeting students' needs. University administrators could use them to determine what programmatic changes, if any, they should make. Administrators at the state level could use the assessments to determine whether to continue funding BFSP.

Program Suggestions

In addition to administrative suggestions, the findings of this study suggest several recommendations for improving the daily functions of the summer bridge program. The first programmatic recommendation includes increasing the training for residential counselors and peer mentors who work in the program. After first few years of the program, administrators used high achieving former BFSP participants to serve as residential counselors. The idea was that those students could also serve as mentors for the new participants. The only problem with that was some of the residential counselors were only a year or two older than the new participants. Some of the participants in this study said because of that at best the saw their counselors as equals and, at worst, they just did not respect some of them. Johnston was outspoken on this issue. "They were doing the same things we were doing" he said in reference to some of the counselors allegedly testing the demarcations of the program. While Johnston's contentions could not be substantiated, he raised valid concerns. Could having young counselors in authoritative roles be problematic? Did the program administrators properly train the counselors to work with the summer bridge students?

I am not assessing blame on the program officials nor am I suggesting that they did not provide student counselors with guidance in how to perform their duties.

However, given the frequent turnover in the leadership position and limited time program leaders had when heading BFSP, it is a reasonable conclusion that more training could be provided to future counselors and peer tutors. The university should provide peer tutors and residential counselors more training opportunities in conflict resolution, relationship building, and effective leadership. Too often, residential counselors and peer tutors are hired in late spring or early summer. With summer bridge starting in July, that leaves limited time for training. Identifying qualified students earlier could provide more time for training. Another recommendation would be to use graduate students as residential counselors and tutors. This retains the peer mentoring component but with older, more mature students. Implementing these recommendations could help the program run more smoothly.

A final programmatic recommendation is for BFSP administrators to implement a more rigorous process for screening applicants. In the past, the program has required students to submit an essay, recommendation letters from high school officials, and participate in brief telephone interview. Given the time and job constraints, that was probably as much as a part-time administrator could do. Other institutions with similar bridge programs like A&M require students and parents to do face-to-face interviews during the screening phase. This allows those program administrators the opportunity to meet the students and families in person to gauge their potential interest and commitment. This is something A&M (and other institutions) should consider doing.

Future Research

This instrumental case study attempted to increase the understanding of whether a residential summer bridge program at a HBCU influenced the academic achievement and college trajectory of its participants. The study examined participants' views on their experiences in the program to discern what effects, if any, the program had on underprepared students' perceptions about their postsecondary participation, their academic development, and their ability to persist. Most research on summer bridge programs tends to be quantitative in nature and does not investigate the participants' views about their experiences. Therefore, the findings of this study have implications for future research.

Additional qualitative studies could focus on underserved and underprepared summer bridge students at Predominately White Institutions. Hearing their voices and their experiences may provide a perspective missing from this study. Because underserved and underprepared students are largely students of color, those participants might have dealt with issues such as institutional racism, cultural acceptance, developing meaningful relationships and how each influences academic engagement and persistence. This study focused mainly on Black students at a HBCU. An interesting study might be to examine the views and perspectives of other students of color (e.g. Hispanic, Native Americans, and Asian Americans) who participate in summer bridge programs at historically black colleges or at predominately white schools. It would interesting to learn what shapes their experiences as being a minority at minority-serving school or at a majority-serving institution.

Future studies could also include more interviews with faculty and staff who work with summer bridge programs. That could allow for more triangulation of data. A broader, cross comparative case study could be done analyzing multiple institutions could provide even more understanding about how these programs affect student development. There are four other schools in the state system where A&M is located that has similar summer bridge programs for "high-risk" students. The governing system funds all the programs. Randomly sampling participants from those institutions and gathering their stories would yield a richer picture of the programs. Although A&M shares some similarities with the other institutions (they are all minority-serving schools), the students ultimately are different. Therefore, the findings of this study are not generalizable to the other institutions. However, if a researcher analyzed all the institutions equally in one study, he or she could thoroughly evaluate the summer bridge programs by drawing conclusions that are more definitive.

Future studies could also employ quantitative research methods as well. The state has not conducted a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the programs to assess how much they affect grade point averages, retention rates, or graduation rates. Such studies are needed. There are raw statistics available, but substantive exploration is necessary to determine if the state should continue funding these programs.

Summary

The 14 participants in this study each experienced varying levels of achievement after participating in a six-week residential program for "high-risk" students. Some had finished college and were trying to establish their careers. Others had achieved high grade

point average and were becoming campus leaders. A few faced some roadblocks but they continued striving to overcome their challenges. Each credited their participation in the summer bridge program for helping them to improve academically and socially as well as to reach some of the goals they set for themselves while in college. In addition to the summer bridge program, the participants said the faculty and staff who worked with them instilled a level of confidence that made them feel they could accomplish anything.

This study indicated that "high-risk" students could succeed in college if surrounded with highly motivated peers to help them stay focus, faculty who will challenge them, and campus resources to ensure they have a support system. Additional research is needed to examine how summer bridge programs influence the retention and persistence of historically underserved and underprepared students. This will not only help HBCUs improve how they raise the achievement levels of these students, but it will help all institutions because that should be a concern of all.

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APPENDIX A

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Questions

1. How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among participants of the Bulldogs Future Scholars Summer Bridge Program?

2. What do BFSP participants feel helped them stay motivated while completing the summer bridge program?

3. What aspect(s) of BFSP did participants feel was/were most beneficial in strengthening their academic skills?

4. How do BFSP students manage to persist, despite transition issues, stereotypes, academic underpreparedness, and other negative forces?

5. In what ways, if any, did BSFP help participants achieve academic success?

Interview Questions

1. Where are you from?
2. Tell me about what you were like academically and socially in high school.
3. What courses, if any, did you struggle with in high school?
4. Describe your study habits in high school?
5. How did you first hear about the (BFS) program?
6. When you were first told about BFS, or when you first read about it, what were your initial thoughts about the program?
7. What made you want to participate in the (BFS) summer Bridge program?
8. What did you want to accomplish?
9. What were your expectations of the program before you arrived on campus?
10. Before you arrived on campus, in what ways, if any, did you think the program would have an impact on you as a student?
11. What were your aspirations and desires for college prior to enrolling in the summer bridge program?

12. In as much detail as possible, how would you describe your six-week experience in the bridge program?

13. In what ways were your experiences similar to or different from your initial expectations?

14. What aspect(s) of the summer program did you find most challenging and why?
15. What aspect(s) of the program did you like least and why?
16. What aspect(s) of the program did you like most and why?
17. What aspect of BFS, if any, had the biggest impact on you academically and why?
18. Describe your feelings in detail after you completed the BFS program.
19. How did your experiences as a summer Bridge student influence or not influence your aspirations for college?

20. What were your academic goals after the program?
21. What activities, clubs, organizations, mentoring groups, and/or peer groups are you involved in on campus?

22. Which on-campus academic resources, if any, have you utilized since you have been in school? How often and why? This includes the writing center, the math and science learning center, peer tutors, professional tutors, etc.

23. How did your experiences in the summer Bridge program influence you or not influence you when it comes to using campus resources?

24. How did your experiences in the summer Bridge program influence or not influence your study habits?

25. In what ways, if any, do you experience peer pressure when it comes to participating in social or extracurricular activities instead of academics?

26. If you have faced negative peer pressure when it comes to pursuing your academic goals, how did you handle those situations?

27. What, if anything, has been the biggest challenge(s) you have faced when it comes to your academics?

28. What is your current grade point average and how does it compare to what you expected/wanted to have by this time?

29. If you were able to meet or exceed your expectations what were some of the things that helped you?

alternative

30. If you were unable to meet or exceed your expectations, why do you think that has happened?

31. How do you define academic success in college and why?

32. If you could trace your time back to the Bridge program, are there any things from BFS that you can say helped you achieve success? Whether yes or no, explain in detail why.

33. Since being in college, and this includes your summer in BFS, what things, if any, have helped you the most in attaining you academic goals?

34. What campus resources, if any, have you found helpful since being in college and why?

35. How have your experiences with professors influence or not influence how you view college?

36. How would you describe the relationships you have with professors?