

**"I know that I should be here":
Lessons learned from the first year performance of borderline university applicants**

**Evaluation Report
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Research Summary

At many higher education institutions, admissions decisions often rely on test scores and high school grades; yet, they are less reliable predictors for applicants close to cutoff points. Since applicants falling slightly below cutoff, i.e., borderline applicants, are often from underrepresented backgrounds and diverted to two-year institutions, this may potentially jeopardize efforts to increase campus diversity. Using a mixed-methods approach, two studies investigated an “admissions experiment” designed to increase campus diversity by admitting 34 first-generation college borderline applicants into a summer bridge program. Study 1 compared program participants’ performance to two comparison samples of regularly admitted students ($N = 1447$). Compared to a matched sample, borderline students performed better after the first semester and comparably after the first year. Study 2 identified program components that helped or undermined participants’ first year adjustment and performance. Results suggested several program improvements that might enhance underrepresented students’ performance and experiences on four-year campuses.

Introduction

We studied way more, we're getting better grades than [our classmates], they're slacking off, they don't care, but we're the ones that aren't supposed to be [at the best university in the state]. Like, that frustrated me... because I know that I should be here.... I don't understand how they picked the kids that they did in that [admission] process.

Jessica, Borderline Applicant & Bridge Program Participant, 2014

Given the opportunity to begin at a four-year university, do *borderline* applicants falling “just below an admissions cut-off,” like Jessica, “study more” and “get better grades” than classmates meeting standard admissions criteria? Does Jessica’s claim have merit, given the limited reliability of commonly used admissions criteria, i.e., standardized test scores and high school grades, that exclude borderline applicants? While most reliable at the upper and lower levels of their distributions, test scores and grades are less reliable predictors for borderline applicants, as is any psychometric tool. While practical and useful, treating test scores and grades as precision-instruments for admission decisions might be complicating institutional efforts to increase diversity on four-year campuses by increasing diversion to two-year programs.

Diversion is a likely path for students who come close to but fall just below the cutoff of admission to a four-year program (Breland, Maxey, Gemand, Cumming, & Trapani, 2002). These students are considered potentially capable of university-level work, but encouraged to pursue a two-year program to prepare for the presumably more rigorous work at four-year campuses. The issue, however, is that low-income, racial-ethnic minority, and/or first in families postsecondary-aspirants are disproportionately more likely to be diverted to two-year institutions (Choy, 2001; Hagedorn, 2008). Since only 16.2 percent of all students beginning at two-year institutions complete a four-year degree within six years, transfer program diversion represents a barrier to increased diversity at four-year institutions (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014). Given these patterns, would setting an admission cut-off a little lower be an equitable way to divert fewer students and increase diversity on four-year campuses — if, in fact, underrepresented groups are more likely to fall just below admission cut-offs due to such factors as poor quality preparatory programs and resources. Such a policy does not lower standards; it shifts an arbitrary decision point and admits students capable of academic work in a four-year program.

One way to investigate this issue, and the focus of studies reported here, is through a “natural” experiment. Two studies investigated an “admissions experiment” designed to increase campus diversity at a mid-sized, mid-Atlantic state university. The initiative admitted 34 borderline applicants, provided they agreed to participate in a summer and first-year academic support and guidance program, what we call the *University Scholars Program*. To investigate outcomes of this “admissions experiment,” in Study 1, we compared the demographic diversity, high school grades and test scores, and university performance of borderline applicants relative to two samples of regularly admitted students. Then, in Study 2, we explored first-year experiences and adjustments of the borderline applicants in the program and at the university.

University Admissions Assessment Tools: Reliability and Criticisms

When determining who is prepared for a four-year institution of higher education, traditional admissions criteria often rely on standardized test scores (SAT or ACT) and high school GPAs to predict the likelihood of college success (Breland, Maxey, Gemand, Cumming, & Trapani, 2002). A meta-analysis of 109 studies examined the relative predictive power of these academic factors, e.g., ACT scores, high school GPAs, and non-academic factors, e.g., self-confidence, social support, on the retention of full-time students enrolled in four-year postsecondary institutions (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). While a combination of both factors was the strongest predictor of retention, explaining 17% of the variability, analyses revealed differences in the predictive power of academic factors. High school GPA was a stronger predictor (moderate strength of .246) than ACT scores (moderate strength of .124).

Similar patterns are found among studies focused on student performance (Atkinson, 2001; Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, Mattern, & Barbuti, 2008; Noble & Sawyer, 2002; Zahner, Ramsaran, & Steedle, 2012). For a sample of 4467 college sophomores and seniors, high school GPA was the single best predictor of college GPA (Zahner, et al., 2012). Other investigations reported high school GPA accounted for a large portion, approximately 30%, of the variance in first-year college GPA (Atkinson, 2001; Kobrin, et al., 2008). Noble and Sawyer (2002) expanded these findings by examining the predictive values of ACT scores and high school GPAs at different levels of self-reported college performance (moderate college GPAs at 2.0, 2.5, and 3.0 versus high college GPAs at 3.2, 3.5, and 3.7). Using data from 219,435 first-year students from 301 different postsecondary institutions, they found that high school GPA was somewhat more accurate than ACT scores at predicting moderate levels of first-year college GPA, but that both were effective. In this study, however, high school GPA was not a reliable predictor of higher levels of college GPAs, yet ACT scores were effective predictors at all levels of college GPA. Other work (ACT, 1997), however, found that at higher levels of college GPA, high school GPA and ACT scores were equally as accurate.

Despite the mixed findings on which components are most predictive, high school grades and standardized test scores remain the most commonly used measures in college admission procedures. Relying on these tools for admission decisions potentially creates problems for campuses seeking to increase diversity. For instance, students from low resourced schools —typically students who are low-income, racial-ethnic minority, and/or first in families to attend college (first-generation college students) — have less access to courses (Choy, 2001) that help them do well on standardized tests. Moreover, past work has highlighted the racial and income bias of standardized measures (Jencks & Phillips, 2001; Steele & Aronson, 1995); for example, past work has found a strong positive link between parental income and test scores (Orlich, 2007). When relying on these traditional measures for admissions decisions,

students from more diverse backgrounds may disproportionately be labeled as “not prepared” or “not ready” for a four-year college program.

Sedlacek (2004; 2005) proposed an expansion of traditional measures to include non-cognitive approaches of assessment to account for varying cultural experiences of diverse students, including experiences of discrimination related to gender, race, and social class. Non-cognitive variables — those related to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, e.g., positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understands and deals with racism — provide a holistic view of student potential and ability (Sedlacek, 2005). Similar to findings by Lotkowski et al. (2004), Sedlacek recommended that, to improve predictive value of student success in college particularly for diverse students, non-cognitive measures should be added with current traditional measures.

In the current study, the admissions office relied on a final ranking system to determine acceptance to the university. The final ranking was a calculated number based primarily on high school GPAs and standardized test scores. The borderline applicants were those with a final ranking below the cutoff admission baseline. Based on self-reported status as low-income and/or first-generation, students below the cutoff were further scrutinized for acceptance to the University Scholars Program. Additional weight was given to personal statements, letters of recommendations, and a personal interview from which a score for non-cognitive measures was assigned. Given these differences in admission guidelines, the present study seeks to understand how these borderline applicants compare in demographic diversity, high school grades and test scores, and university performance to two samples of regularly admitted students.

Admitting Diverse Students: Challenges and Solutions

While there is no research, to our knowledge, on borderline applicants as we define them here, there is work that sheds light on how low-income, first-generation, and ethnic-minority students fare in both two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions. A disproportionate number of these students begin at two-year institutions (Choy, 2001; Hagedorn, 2008). While a large number of these students aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree, only 14% transfer to a four-year university and only 5 percent actually obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years (Bradburn, Hurst, & Peng, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wine et al., 2002). Yet, their counterparts — students who are high-income or continuing-generation, i.e., students with at least one parent who has graduated college — who begin at two-year institutions are five times more likely (24%) to obtain a bachelor’s degree. For many reasons it is appropriate for low-income, first-generation, ethnic-minority college students to begin at two-year institutions, but they are seven times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree if they start at four-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wine et al., 2002).

Students who begin at four-year institutions, however, are not without challenges. When compared to middle-class White students, low-income, first-generation, and ethnic-minority college students are less prepared academically for college (Bui, 2002), demonstrate lower belonging on campus (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007), and earn lower grades (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Across public and private institutions, low-income, first-generation college students also demonstrate higher attrition rates and lower educational attainment (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wine et al., 2002; Sirin, 2005). Approximately 60% of these students leave after their first year, a rate four times higher than their counterparts. Moreover, only 11% of these students obtained a bachelor’s degree after six years, whereas 55% of their counterparts did so. In general, underrepresented students encounter more financial, cultural, social, and academic challenges than their middle-class White peers.

Regardless of whether students start at two-year or four-year institutions, one important consideration is to develop programs that help students succeed and graduate once they are admitted. Comprehensive first-year support programs, for example, were designed to promote and enhance student success by providing a series of services, including but not limited to: a seminar course; remediation services; exposure to campus resources; mentorship; connections with peer, staff, and faculty; and a summer bridge component. Summer bridge programs, often lasting 2-6 weeks, offer selected students the opportunity to adjust, both academically and socially, to the campus before the start of the academic year (Adams, 2012).

While colleges and universities provide these support services to students in need, is it the case that these programs promote higher achievement and first-year retention? Past work often focuses on the effectiveness of single programs or single elements of a program, i.e., the seminar course, making it difficult to draw general conclusions about the overall effects of these support programs (Kezar, 2000). Reviewing the literature on the varying types of summer bridge programs is beyond the scope of this paper; instead, we discuss a few selected papers that include similar components as the University Scholars Program.

Myers and Drevlow (1982) evaluated a bridge program at the University of California, San Diego that targeted 30 incoming freshmen from underrepresented backgrounds. Similar to the University Scholars Program, 20% of participants were admitted to the university without meeting general admissions requirements. Also similar, the aim was to integrate students into the university campus rather than focus on remediation services. Compared to non-program participants, i.e., those who chose not to or were unable to attend the program, bridge participants demonstrated the lowest attrition rates at the end of the first three years in college. The study did not report, however, on student experiences in the program and what elements of those experiences may have shaped positive outcomes.

To address student experiences, two studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA; Ackerman, 1991) and Bronx Community College (BCC; Rita & Bacote, 1997) explored the effects of a bridge program for samples of predominantly Latino and African American students. Compared to the average campus first-year retention rate of 83% at UCLA, 93% of the bridge participants persisted after the first year in college (Ackerman, 1991). By the end of the first quarter, 75% of bridge participants reported feeling like they were “part of the UCLA community.” At BCC, 93% of bridge participants persisted after the first year and an overwhelming number (80%) reported that they felt “part of the campus community” (Rita & Bacote, 1997). While these studies demonstrate the positive benefits of bridge programs, they rely only on self-reported measures and do not include a control or comparison group.

A study on a summer bridge program at Rutgers University (RU), with a sample of 95 students mostly from African American (28%) and Latino (36%) backgrounds, focused on changes in resiliency and social support (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007). Similar to the University Scholars Program, the RU program offered college coursework in English and math, courses on leadership training, recreational activities on the weekends, and an end-of-the-summer awards ceremony for program participants. Also similar, bridge participants were first-generation college students and were conditionally accepted to the university if they passed summer coursework. In a pre- and post-test design, researchers found that participants experienced increases in peer support, but that no differences in resiliency were found, perhaps due to the high resiliency levels of

the students before participation. No data on college GPA or retention rates were reported on these samples.

Together, these studies provide important insights on the effectiveness of summer bridge components, but there are some limitations. First, none of these studies utilize both quantitative, e.g., college GPA, and qualitative, e.g., student experiences, measures to explore the effects of bridge programs and the elements of the programs that help shape student experiences. We argue that a mixed-methods approach helps to give a holistic picture of the effects of such programs. Second, while the majority of the work on bridge programs focuses on underrepresented students already accepted to the university, very few (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Myers & Drevlow, 1982) focus on borderline applicants, those deemed “not qualified” for university workload. In focusing on borderline applicants, we can closely examine how university admissions criteria may or may not exclude capable samples of diverse students by comparing their performance with two varying samples of admitted students. Using a mixed-methods approach, the purpose of the present work is to examine the admissions rankings and university performance (Study 1) and the experiences (Study 2) of borderline applicants in a bridge program and at the university.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the impact of the University Scholars Program (USP) on the performance of diverse students identified through the regular admission process as not “academically prepared” for a university workload. Students were provisionally admitted to the university if they agreed to participate in the USP. The USP was designed to offer the preparation and support program administrators believed necessary for unprepared students to succeed in the university environment. To assess the relative performance, i.e., college grades, of the Scholars, two comparison samples were constructed. Sample 1 matched the academic credentials of the USP Scholars on conventional criteria, e.g., high school grades and SAT/ACT scores. Sample 2 represented students with slightly better credentials than the Scholars and Sample 1. It was expected that Scholars and Sample 1 would perform at comparable levels, but that both would earn lower grades than Sample 2.

Method

Setting

The USP was operated during the 2014-2015 academic year at a mid-size state university in the eastern United States. In fall 2014, the undergraduate population at the university was approximately 17,500 students (57.8% female). The racial breakdown of the undergraduate population indicated that it was a predominantly White campus: 75.7% White, 5.1% Black, 7.1% Hispanic, 4.4% Asian, 0.1% Native American, 3.9% International, and 3.7% Two or More Races or Unknown. A small number of students were from first-generation college (9.7%) and low-income (7.7%) backgrounds.

The USP Structure and Program

The USP was created as a result of discussions highlighting a need to increase campus diversity efforts. In response, the USP was designed to assist an ethnically diverse group of low-income, first-generation-college students in their transition to the university. The program targeted students denied admission using standard criteria, but who were on the cusp of qualifying. Admission to the university and the USP was contingent on participation in a summer program focused on readiness for university life

and academics. Students who successfully completed the summer program were invited to enroll for the fall semester as full-time students and required to participate in a support program during their first academic semester.

The summer component was a 2-week program that took place just prior to the fall 2014 semester. The program included the following requirements: (1) 10 sessions each of English, Math, and a first-year seminar; (2) a series of structured experiences designed to help students reflect on their personal goals and values; (3) discussion of what it means to be a student scholar; (4) orientation to campus resources; (5) social activities to help students develop a strong peer support network; and (6) a closing ceremony for students and parents. During the semester, the program included participation in the following: (1) a living-learning community in a residence hall; (2) a two-credit first-year seminar; (3) regular group meetings during the academic year; and (4) one-on-one meetings with program staff to address individual needs.

To facilitate the USP, there was a team of 24 Peer Mentors and 3 Program Leaders. The Peer Mentors were a diverse group of upperclassmen hired to serve as role models and program mentors for the Scholars, as a way optimize student belonging (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015) and performance (Marx & Roman, 2002) at the university. The Peer Mentors participated in a one-week intensive training led by Program Leaders prior to the USP. During training, Peer Mentors learned what behaviors to model, what types of messages to provide the Scholars, and what activities to conduct during the program. The Program Leaders included 2 administrators from the admissions office — both who had experience running a similar type of program at another institution — and 1 administrator from a student support program on campus.

Program leaders, based on previous experience with underrepresented applicants, used a “tough love” approach. In their judgment, many capable students from poor, minority, and non-college-educated households lacked an understanding of university scholarship, had poor study habits, underused campus resources and support, and did not regulate their classroom behavior to maximize learning. They believed, based on experience at other campuses, that strict supervision and blunt talk was essential in raising student expectations and awareness. In practice, this meant the 2-week summer orientation program was operated as a “college boot-camp” in which the Scholars’ schedules were highly structured and supervised, with limited free time and access to family and friends. In addition, in many sessions the messaging was challenging: Scholars often heard that “they did not belong” according to standard admissions criteria, and that they needed to prove that they did.

Scholars Sample

Students were recruited from various local high schools that served the targeted demographic. The goal was to recruit three groups for a total of 90 students: 1) those selected to participate in the USP (treatment); 2) those waitlisted for invitation into the program (comparison 1); and 3) those denied invitation into the program (comparison 2). In reality, administrators were only able to recruit and interview a total of 34 students. In constructing the interview protocol, the administrators utilized a non-cognitive assessment approach (Sedlacek, 2004). In addition to measures of high school GPA and core units completed, the interviews probed for the following 6 criteria: realistic self-appraisal of strengths and weakness; coping with adversity; positive self-concept; commitment to short-term and long-term goals; initiative to seek mentoring and support; and overall fit in the program. Students were rated on a scale from 1 (negative rating) to 3 (extraordinary rating) on each of the 8 criteria, and a total score was calculated for each student ($M = 20.06$, $SD = 2.34$; range 16 to 24). Nineteen students with ratings of

24-21 were marked for “automatic acceptance” into the program. Twelve students with ratings of 20-17 were marked to be “waitlisted” for the program. One student with a rating of 16 was marked as “denied acceptance” into the program. We did not have selection data for 2 students.

Despite the interview scorings, because of low recruitment numbers, all 34 students were invited to participate. At the time of the summer program, all but 3 Scholars were of consenting age (18 years old) to participate. Parental consent to participate was obtained for the 3 minors, as well as their assent. One invitee dropped out in the first few months of the first semester for financial reasons, and another was expelled from the university for personal reasons unrelated to his or her academic or program performance. The remaining 32 invitees (hereafter Scholars) constituted the sample for the study reported here (*Mean Age = 17.94, SD = .35*).

Comparative Samples

To assess the representativeness and relative performance of the Scholars to other non-program students at the university, we included two random samples of students generated by the admissions office. Similar to the Scholars, these samples of students were also residents of the state. Students were matched based on their final rankings — calculated from SAT/ACT scores and high school grades — recorded in their university admissions portfolio. This ranking, in addition to other ratings of application materials, e.g., personal statement, letters of recommendation, etc., determined whether an applicant met admissions standards.

Sample 1 consisted of 202 undergraduate students (*Mean Age = 18.05, SD = .36*). The final admissions rankings of Sample 1 (*Mean Ranking = 67.51, SD = 2.50; Range = 55 to 70*) matched the rankings of the Scholars (*Mean Ranking = 66.94, SD = 5.14; Range = 55 to 70*), $p > .45$. This range of scores is on the lower end of admissions qualifications. Despite having similar final rankings to the Scholars who were initially denied admission, we make the assumption that acceptance of the Sample 1 was determined by other components of the application packet.

Sample 2 included 1245 undergraduate students (*Mean Age = 17.97, SD = .60*). The final rankings for this group were higher (*Mean Ranking = 78.33, SD = 4.18; Range = 71 to 85*) than the rankings for Sample 1 ($p = .00$) and the Scholars ($p = .00$). We included Sample 2 in our analyses to provide another benchmark for interpreting Scholars’ performance.

Demographic and Achievement Measures

For all 3 samples, university records provided demographic information, e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, income status, college generation status, and high school achievement measures, e.g., SAT scores, GPAs. Official university grades were obtained for each Scholar during the fall 2014 semester, the spring 2015 semester, and the academic year. Because of restricted access to student records, only aggregate grade information was available for Samples 1 and 2 for the fall 2014, spring 2015, and the academic year.

Findings and Discussion

Sample Comparisons

Table 1 provides a brief overview of relevant demographic information for the 3 samples. The Scholars comprised of 66% female, 59% underrepresented minority (e.g.,

Latino, Black), 100% first-generation college, and 69% low-income. The demographic breakdown of Sample 1 was 48% female, 24% underrepresented minority, 13% first-generation college, and 22% low-income. The demographic breakdown of Sample 2 was 56% female, 19% underrepresented minority, 20% first-generation college, and 24% low-income. Thus, compared to the other 2 samples and aligning with the goals of the program, the Scholars included more females, non-White students, first-generation college students, and low-income students.

The samples also differed significantly on measures of prior achievement. In terms of high school grades, Sample 2 earned higher grades ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .33$) than both Sample 1 ($M = 2.81$, $SD = .26$, $p < .01$) and the Scholars ($M = 3.01$, $SD = .48$, $p < .01$). A similar pattern was observed for SAT scores. Sample 2 scored better on the SAT ($M = 1687.16$, $SD = 156.18$) than both Sample 1 ($M = 1560.90$, $SD = 128.53$, $p < .01$) and the Scholars ($M = 1405.63$, $SD = 145.62$, $p < .01$).

Contrary to expectations, and despite having been ranked lower and denied acceptance by the normal admissions process, the Scholars earned higher high school grades than Sample 1, $p < .01$. The opposite pattern was found for SAT scores: Sample 1 scored higher on the SAT than the Scholars, $p < .01$. Given that grades and SAT scores constitute the final admissions rankings of students, this suggests that SAT scores trumped grades for determining the admission of students on the cusp of qualifying. That is, Sample 1 may have been accepted based on their higher SAT scores compared to the Scholars.

University Performance

Their first year academic performance indicated that the Scholars performed better than expected for students identified as “on the cusp of admissions.” Despite “below cutoff” admission rankings — suggesting a lack of readiness for university-level work — in the fall 2014 semester, the Scholars average GPA was 2.79 ($SD = .66$). Of the 32 scholars, 2 (6%) were placed on academic probation, 15 (47%) earned a GPA of 3.0 and above, and 8 students (25%) were named on the Dean’s List signifying outstanding academic achievement.

How did Scholars perform compared to Samples 1 and 2? Given only aggregate means and standard deviations were available for the two comparative samples, we calculated effect sizes, using Cohen’s benchmarks (1988), to determine how large the differences were in performance among the groups. During the fall semester, the Scholars earned higher grades ($M = 2.79$, $SD = .66$) than Sample 1 ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .73$). This was a large effect ($d = .71$). Sample 2 also earned higher grades ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .74$) than Sample 1, a moderate effect ($d = .58$). Contrary to expectations, and surprisingly, there were negligible differences in fall grades between the Scholars and Sample 2; the effect size was small ($d = .11$). That is, the Scholars earned similar grades to Sample 2, the group with higher admissions credentials.

In the spring semester, the Scholars earned slightly lower grades ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .99$) than Sample 1 ($M = 2.45$, $SD = .77$), although these differences were small ($d = .25$). As expected, Sample 2 earned higher grades ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .77$) than both the Scholars ($d = .66$) and Sample 1 ($d = .40$); these effect sizes were large to moderate. Finally, examination of performance for the academic year indicated that, again, Sample 2 had higher grades ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .63$) than the Scholars ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .68$, $d = .35$) and Sample 1 ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .58$, $d = .55$), which varied from small to moderate effect sizes. The Scholars earned slightly better grades than Sample 1, but this effect size was small ($d = .20$).

These performance patterns highlight two important issues. First, despite being “on the cusp of admission,” how does the relatively successful performance of the Scholars inform current university admission policies for underrepresented communities? What aspects of admission processes might help better predict performance for students besides high school grades and SAT scores? These were the main two components that figured in the final ranking calculation of the Scholars who were initially denied admission but whose overall first year performance was comparable to students for whom the admission process had led to acceptance. Second, given the relative success of the Scholars, what impact did the USP have on their experiences and performance at the university? Based on the scope of the present project, we address the second question using the analysis of focus group interviews and use the results to critically discuss current admission polices.

Study 2

Study 2 examined the experiences of the USP Scholars in their first semester at the university using the method of focus groups. At the time the focus group interviews were conducted, neither the interviewers nor the Scholars knew their first-semester grades. We were interested in exploring what components of the USP helped to foster and facilitate performance and belonging on campus, and which elements were not as helpful. More specifically, Study 2 addressed the following question: What perceptions did the Scholars have regarding their first semester in college and the role that the program played in preparing them for a learning challenge they were determined by the admissions process “unprepared to meet”?

Method

Sample

All 32 Scholars from Study 1 were invited to participate in focus group interviews. During a class announcement, Scholars were told the purpose of the interviews was to “assess the effectiveness of the program by inquiring more about the experiences of the participants”. Of the 32 program Scholars, 29 students participated in the interviews. Scheduling conflicts prevented the inclusion of the remaining 3 Scholars. Consent forms were provided and reviewed during the class announcement and, again, at the beginning of each focus group interview. At the time of the interviews — conducted at the end of the semester — all Scholars were of consenting age (18 years or older), and all offered consent to participate.

Procedure

Focus group interviews were conducted during finals week of the fall 2014 semester. The interviews followed a semi-structured format consisting of 14 questions centered around three major themes: 1) detailing first-semester experiences; 2) describing first-semester highlights and challenges; and 3) discussing the impact of the program in shaping first-semester experiences. An additional wrap-up question probed for experiences not captured during the interview. See Appendix A for the list of interview questions. The interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length. To accommodate students’ schedules, two separate interviewers conducted the interviews in groups of 3-5 students. There were a total of 7 interview groups. At the end of the interviews, students were given the principal researcher’s contact information and thanked for their participation. An independent research assistant later transcribed the interview audio-files.

Coding Scheme Development

Two of the authors (RC & RG) independently read one randomly selected interview transcript and identified the most prevalent themes. In addition to the themes introduced by the interviewers, the review identified recurring topics raised by Scholars during the interviews. For example, the interview protocol did not address racial problems, yet in several of the seven interview sessions multiple Scholars raised the topic and offered detailed accounts of race-related incidents. In discussion, the two researchers reviewed the themes they identified and arrived at a common set of coding categories. Categories were dropped or merged together if they had low occurrence. The final coding scheme included 13 categories organized by four larger themes. See Appendix B for category labels, descriptions, and examples of the coding categories.

Coding Procedure

The same authors independently coded three transcripts; these three transcripts were used to develop the coding categories. A code of "1" was applied if a category was present in the interview, and a code of "0" was applied if a category was absent from the interview. For the three interviews independently coded without discussion, agreement between the two coders ranged from 71% to 100% on the larger categories, and 50% to 100% on detail codes (overall *Mean Agreement* = 87.25%). After calculating the reliabilities and determining coder reliability, the coders discussed and resolved all coding discrepancies to ensure that the final codings used in analyses were as accurate as possible. After reaching an agreement about the coding, one author (RC) coded the remaining four interviews.

Findings & Discussion

Frequencies of themes discussed during the focus group interviews were calculated and are presented as "Lessons Learned" from the USP pilot program. Table 2 provides a list of themes and frequencies.

Evaluating the Program: Lessons Learned

Advantages of exposure to academic and social resources. In discussing the benefits of the pilot program, 21 students (72%) discussed the importance of early exposure to campus resources. For example, one White female student explained the important role the USP played in her accessing resources that she would not have otherwise enjoyed, and the success she achieved: "They opened us up to a lot of resources. Like, I probably wouldn't have even known where to ask or find out about things, like the writing center.... So, if it wasn't for this, I don't think that I would've been as successful as I have been." A Black male shared her sentiment, "Well, I felt like if I did not go through the program, I wouldn't know about anything that's on the campus."

Other students, like a Black female student, discussed the advantage that USP-provided exposure gave them over other non-program students. She commented: "We were given information that helped us; and, sometimes people who were regularly admitted don't even have access to such information and must work harder to get that information. So, I feel that that was good." For a Latino male, the advantage was obvious when he noticed classmates struggling in the classroom: "A lot of people outside of the program... definitely had a much harder time because they didn't know about the resources on campus... which could have helped them before their exams."

Based on these advantages, students also assumed the responsibility of helping other students. For example, a White female described a situation where she could use her knowledge about resources to help a fellow classmate:

I know people on campus. I went to seek resources the other night like the math center and this girl was really confused because she didn't know where to go for this specific number. I had the whole list on my phone, like contacts that you can't get easily. I wouldn't have been able to do that if it weren't for the [USP] program. It really just made me informed of all my resources. I know lots of people in our building that wish to be in the program because we have all these study plans, we know where everything is, and we have contacts with people who can help. It was really just a great experience.

A similar experience occurred for a Black female who observed a girl in her math class confused about the process of financial aid: “[When this girl] dropped two of her classes she placed herself below the mandatory credit requirements. This is when I explained to her that we learned how to deal with these issues at financial aid services. So, there are definitely a lot of resources that we learned about that a lot of people here have not.”

The exposure to resources also extended to social relationships with older students, including exposure to the experiences of the Peer Mentors. Specifically, ten Scholars (31%) explained how the Peer Mentors became an important academic and social resource in their first semester at the University. One White female explained:

One of the peer staff members was the same major as me, so she would like talk to me about it and stuff. I really like how they stressed the first semester and the idea of "Don't slack off" so that you don't have to spend the rest of your career in college trying to make up for the slack. I thought that was very beneficial because I see a lot of the kids on my floor who are already messing up. They're sinking and I keep telling them but they don't realize that they are going to have to work so hard to make it up. So, I thought that that was very beneficial that they stressed [the idea of not slacking off] to save us time.

There was strong agreement among Scholars that early exposure to campus resources provided advantages over other students. This knowledge seemed to provide some confidence among the Scholars, as they were better equipped to deal with common problems that occurred for students.

Over-preparation lessens the college workload shock. Another commonly mentioned benefit of the program was that it lessened the shock of the semester course load. For example, 22 of the Scholars (76%) described how the strict structure of the summer, particularly long days and scheduled study hours, fostered high expectations for the regular semester. The students were surprised at how “easy” the workload was during the semester. One White female described that while program strictness was “annoying,” it was something that benefited her: “[The Program Leaders] made it seem like it was going to be twenty-four, seven studying. So, it wasn’t such a shock when school actually started. [It] was kind of annoying at the time because we didn’t understand what it was doing for us. Now, looking back I’m grateful for the experience.”

A Black male supported the idea that the program prepared you to do well at the university: “[The program [does much more] than simply bringing you on campus, they increase your readiness to excel [at UD] by showing you how to be on top of things and how to become a great student on campus. They kind of set the expectation of how you

could build yourself.... So, the program makes you a better student at [University]...." A White female credited the program to changing her studying behaviors:

I kind of expected it to be harder, I guess... [T]he program came and we studied like non-stop and at first that kind of scared me because I thought it was even harder than I originally thought it was going to be. But, then, I like how they put me in this mindset where you have to study non-stop. So, then, when college came, after my classes...I would go directly after class and read all day. At the start of the day, I would just get all my work done and then I would have free time. I wasn't like expecting to have free time. But, I like how they disciplined us before we came so that I expected to get my stuff done.

Students related this high expectation to their positive performance in the semester. One White female simultaneously expressed surprise and concern at the ease of the semester:

[D]uring the scholars program I felt like it was like "go-go-go!" and do your work. It's like no down time, so I felt like I was trying to get so much done when it was impossible to do so much work in such a condensed amount of time.... I was so scared coming here because I thought that it was going to be so hard... I told a Peer Mentor that I was so nervous for next semester because this semester was so easy. I got really good grades, or at least good grades for me, because the grades I have right now when compared to my high school grades are amazing. I remember telling my Peer Mentor that I was really so scared because I am doing so well. How is this really so easy for me right now?

While the Scholars may have felt overwhelmed and annoyed by the strict scheduling and excessive workload, these components had "over-prepared" them for the relatively "less demanding" workload during the regular semester.

One-fits-all messaging is ineffective. One major topic addressed in all interviews was the effectiveness of the main message used during the summer component. To encourage Scholars to work hard, a "tough love" messaging dominated many interactions with program staff. Scholars were told that because they were not accepted into the university and did not technically "belong" on campus, they would need to work especially hard to "prove that they belonged." They needed to prove themselves worthy of being university students, or they would fail to "pave the way for the next cohort of Scholars." While this message was delivered to all students with the best intentions, there was mixed responses from the Scholars.

For example, 24 Scholars (83%) expressed some form of strong dislike or frustration with the "tough-love" messaging. Specifically, Scholars felt, as one group of two Latinas and two Black females agreed, that the messaging was un-motivating and sparked feelings of rejection: "I can still remember how I felt about [the message]. It made me feel rejected from the rest of the community." One White female highlighted some of the lingering effects and insecurities associated with the message: "I feel like [the message], 'You don't deserve to be here,' kind of like stuck with me and I really don't deserve to be here and that I still deserve to be in high school. But, if they were more motivating and kept saying you can be here, you deserve to be here, and show us that you deserve it, I would feel more like a college student." Another White female described similar lingering effects and feelings of rejection, "I actually feel like crap about myself right now. That kind of thing sticks with me and I think about it a lot. I walk around on campus and see people that are completely belligerent, or like you think you work so hard but you don't deserve to be here but they do." One Latina supported this

sentiment, “[The messaging] was kind of like breaking us down and trying to build us up, but they belittled us...and this was an issue too because it was a constant reminder that made me feel as if ‘I’m really not supposed to be here.’”

Some Scholars explained the reason for disliking and rejecting the messaging was, in part, because it did not apply to them. That is, they believed they were students who had worked hard in high school and felt that they deserved regular admission to the university, especially when they witnessed the lack of effort among non-program classmates. One White female, for example, explained:

We studied way more, we’re getting better grades than them [our classmates], they’re slacking off, they don’t care, but we’re the one’s that aren’t supposed to be here. Like, that frustrated me to know that because I know that I should be here definitely. I should’ve been first picked because all the stuff that I was in. Like, I did a lot of volunteering hours and I did everything that [the university] required...and that wasn’t good enough. So, for them to sit there and yell at my face, ‘You’re not supposed to be here,’ is just beyond frustrating. I don’t understand how they picked the kids that they did in that process.

One consequence of delivering this type of messaging was that it impacted Scholars’ desires to be affiliated with the program. As one White male stated, “Unfortunately, some people don’t like admitting that they are [USP] scholars.” Another White female in the same group added, “Students feel disappointed in it.” One Black female elaborated on these arguments:

It was embarrassing to say, ‘I’m a [USP] Scholar.’ Even though they wouldn’t necessarily know what that means . . . Then, you have to go into a whole explanation about what [USP] scholars is, what they did in the two week program, and you have to be like, ‘I wasn’t regularly admitted [and] I had to go through a two week program to prove that I could be here.’

While the majority of the Scholars disliked or disagreed with the summer component messaging, six Scholars (21%) found the messaging motivating. When reflecting on the messaging, one Black male indicated, “I didn’t really find it discouraging, but more motivating . . . I thought okay we were specially admitted, so that’s a challenge. If he really wanted to discourage us, he wouldn’t even have the program in the first place. He wouldn’t have wasted his time on us.” Another White male shared this perspective, “I think that [the message] made some people want to fight to be here...and like I personally desired to demonstrate that ‘I deserved to be here’. So, in this aspect it was motivating. It was kind of like ‘I want to prove you wrong and throw it in your face.’” For another Black male, the message motivated him to do well in college in order to be a better role model for his younger sister and others in his community, “I think of all the kids in my neighborhood who don’t have fathers and a lot of opportunities that other people have. Every time that they bring up that we are the first group that can pave the way, um, I just use that as motivation for me to do better.”

While the messaging seemed to motivate a few of the male Scholars, the majority of female Scholars disagreed with the messaging — suggesting that perhaps the “tough love” approach is more effective for males. One White female supported this argument, “Well, I think that the ‘you don’t deserve to be here’ tactic works for guys; and, I understand that with coaching. You tear guys down; and, then, guys want to prove themselves and build themselves up. But, a girl does not.” Yet, there were two White females in two separate interview groups who agreed with the male Scholars. For example, one White female said, “I feel that it wasn’t negative at all; [he] just wanted to

get our attention to make sure that we would take it seriously and to work our hardest." One observation to mention is that these two female Scholars had each been the only female in an otherwise all-male focus group. It is possible that the male members of the group, those who found the messaging more acceptable, influenced the perceptions of these particular female Scholars.

First Semester Experience: Lessons Learned

Gaining independence as a highlight. Given the majority of the Scholars came from first-generation and low-income backgrounds, prior research suggests they are likely to come from home contexts that are more interdependent (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Stephens et al., 2012). In being the first in their families to transition into a middle-class university context, these students may be experiencing the luxury of independence for the first time (Lubrano, 2003). Indeed, 14 Scholars (48%) mentioned that college was making them more independent or mature. One White female mentioned, "Um, the highlight would be having more independence, doing a lot more on my own, and seeing a positive result of that . . . studying all the time and getting good grades on the tests I take." Another White female commented on how others in her family also recognized this transition to independence, "I feel like since I got to college... I'm starting to find my way . . . In my family, I was always looked at as 'the little baby.' I feel like everyone is finally understanding that I'm maturing and college has helped me do that . . . [I]t gives me responsibility but at the same time freedom."

For other students, however, developing independence was fraught with challenges. Eight Scholars (28%) mentioned difficulty balancing school and home responsibilities, or the misunderstandings that occurred at home. For example, one White female stated that her mother did not understand the workload at the university, "I don't think that my mom understands why I'm on campus at very late times. I'm actually on campus doing stuff that needs to get done.... She didn't go to college, and she doesn't realize how difficult it really is." One Black male explained a similar challenge:

Life at home versus life at [school] is like living in two different worlds... Like, you could ask my mom about the major that I've declared at [University] and she wouldn't have any clue; and, it's not that she doesn't want to help, but more of a situation where...she doesn't know how to help. She's knows that I'm going to figure it out . . . [Y]ou wish to have something to fall upon...but once you are here . . . it's just like, 'Oh, my mom can't help me very much.' [T]he USP was a good experience in that although I didn't have my mom here to help me I could rely on other people for help.

For this student, the program was able to offer the additional support that he could not necessarily find at home.

Adjusting to a different workload. One common challenge that 24 Scholars (83%) reported was encountering large differences in work and study expectations required in high school and in college. For example, one Black female explained how her high school failed to prepare her for college:

Scholar: For me, getting fresh out of high school and then coming to [University] would have been a complete disaster. At my school, there were days and practically months where I wouldn't have homework, so there was nothing to study for and I couldn't explain half the things we had learned in class. High school was more about passing than actually learning, so I could be absent for a

couple of days; and, when I would return I could just copy the work that I had missed and turn it in.

Interviewer: Do you feel as if your high school let you down?

Scholar: Yes, definitely!

In general, the first semester was a positive experience for the Scholars, but they still encountered many challenges related to differences in the university environment and in the home and high school environments.

Being at the University: Lessons Learned

Discussions about race critical to the college transition. One theme expressed during interviews was the issue of being a person of color on a predominantly White campus. The racial composition of our groups included: two all-White groups, four mixed-race groups, and two all-minority groups. Perhaps not so surprisingly, only the groups with all students of color (7 Scholars total, 24%, 5 Black, 2 Latina) discussed issues of race; thus, it was difficult to know how students of color in the mixed-race groups felt about this issue. Of the seven Scholars in the all-minority groups, only two Black females attended a predominantly White high school (64% and 65.1% White). The remaining five Scholars attended schools that ranged from 23.5% to 42.3% White.

While the majority of Scholars ($n = 24$, 83%) reported feeling happy or proud for being at the university, for students of color, this excitement was also coupled with realizations that the campus lacked racial diversity. One Black female, who came from a more diverse high school (42.3% White, 36% Black, 14.7% Latino) described:

[This University] was my first choice school, so I'm happy that I'm here. But, I also didn't know what I was getting myself into. . . . I wasn't aware that the population only had 4.9% African-American students. So, coming to an institution that is 75% predominantly White is something that I had to adjust to. It was just weird, not seeing anyone that looked like me. It was just weird to be able to walk around, even in my residence hall, and not see anyone that I could relate to just because of the way that we looked.

Another Black female, who came from a majority Black high school (56.7%), expressed a similar conflict in looking different from others, “[W]hen I first came here I was like wow. . . . That's one of the reasons I don't eat at the dining halls. I'm like where am I going to sit? Everyone else looks alike and I'm like, I'm different. I don't eat at the dining halls because there are no African Americans.”

One Black female explained that diversity issues discussed in the USP's summer component were those related to stressors arising from income disparities on the campus. But she added that there was not a thorough discussion about racial diversity, “They leaped over the fact that there was a lack of [racial] diversity . . . and that to me was disturbing. I didn't realize how many White people there were I feel that we should have been told that, so we could deal with that in the Scholars Program.” Despite shock of a predominantly White campus, these Scholars, as this Black female indicated, found support in a cultural center on campus, “I found out about resources.... If there are any problems, I know that there are people that I can go to.”

Issues of race were also encountered in daily experiences of awkward student interactions, micro-aggressions, and racism. One Latina explained her perceptions about other students on the campus, “I feel like [the students] are very judgmental and they don't try to talk to you if you don't look, act, talk, or are from the same place as they

are . . . I think it's more for minorities. Minorities still get no chance . . . [W]e will all know each other, yet nobody else at the university will know us. . . ." One Black female described how awkward student interactions led to conversations about her fit at the university, "I would just feel that everyone is not accepting of the African American students. Some students would even say things like, 'Oh, you must be here because of a minority scholarship.' It's just disrespectful for one; and, two, you don't think I would be here unless I was a minority." Another Black female discussed the experience of hearing racial slurs from other classmates and the stress it caused her:

Scholar. I feel like, um, [when] people look at me at this university . . . they're either shocked that I'm here or wondering why and how I got here . . . and that is extremely uncomfortable because college is a mixture of people, or at least it should be. When a university lacks that [a diverse student body] it's troublesome.

Interviewer. How do they communicate that to you?

Scholar. Um, well, I have personally experienced racist remarks at this university. Um, just like people saying the 'N' word around me or asking me why they can't say the 'N' word around me. As soon as I hear that I ask them not to say it because it's kind of like disrespectful . . . and I'm questioned all the time like, 'Why can't I say the 'N' word?' For one, I just don't like explaining myself to other people.

Interviewer. Do you feel attacked sometimes?

Scholar. Yes! It's just like why are you asking me why I feel disrespected by the 'N' word . . . why can't you just know that I feel disrespected and you just stop doing it . . . It just frustrates me a lot.

One unexpected finding, given the goals of the USP, was racial micro-aggressions committed by fellow Scholars. Two Black females mentioned such experiences. For example, one was not only hurt by a comment made by a White male Scholar, but also wondered how other White students felt about minorities:

[A White male] told me, 'Oh, you're here on a minority scholarship and I have to pay for my entire tuition to be here.' He didn't know anything about my financial aid package, but he assumed that I was here because I'm Black, poor, or the school needed me to be here. That made me feel horrible and I was extremely offended. If he was someone who was close to me and had been with me in the Scholars Program for the two weeks, what did he think about everyone else who was there? What did he think about all the other Black people on campus? How did he feel about other minorities like Hispanics? If he felt comfortable enough to say that to me, then how do other White people feel who come from an even more privileged background than him? It hurt.

The other Black female described how she wanted more discussion about race in the program, so that there could be more understanding among the Scholars:

I know part of [the] curriculum was to deal with coping with racism, but I feel like it was never addressed seriously and I was never asked for my opinion on how I felt to be here as a minority...um... and I don't think that it helped that people who were not from a majority weren't asked how they felt about other minorities being there. It was expressed to me by a White person in the scholars program that they felt like they were the minority in the [USP] and that they had never been around so many minorities...they were kind of shocked. They were like, 'wow, there's a lot of people who are not White right here' and I was like, 'Well, that's how it feels to be me all the time.' They couldn't even fathom it.

The unique experiences of Scholars of color highlighted a need for the USP to discuss issues of race more extensively. These conversations might have better prepared students for the racial demographic of the campus and negative race-related encounters they experienced.

Program Scholar Connections: Lessons Learned

Frustrating and helpful program connections. In general, Scholars reported more frustrating experiences (26 examples, 63%) than positive experiences (15 examples, 27%) with the USP cohort. More specifically, 14 Scholars (48%) felt disconnected from other scholars. One main reason was because they believed other scholars did not take the program seriously or that they took advantage. One White female said:

Um, to be completely honest, being with the [USP] scholars is frustrating in how we like have to be together because some of them don't study; and, it's really frustrating to me that they ask for my notes and like stuff like that when they don't show up to class. It's like they just expect me to like kind of do it for them. It's just frustrating because I go to class everyday, I do my work, and then they are like, 'Well, we are scholars and we are supposed to help each other.' It's like I'd love to help you, but you need to help yourself first. And, then, it's just frustrating when I go to class and they are like, 'Oh, I studied so hard, I did this, I did that, I always go to class,' and it's like no you don't...you're lying. It's just frustrating.

The remaining Scholars felt connected to the cohort, and identified other members of as a source of academic and social support. One Black male, for example, explained:

[M]eeting the scholars...served as a "backbone" kind of thing, which was a peak experience for me. I figured that throughout the semester I always had to come back to a Scholar or someone who was involved in the program and that basically helped me get through everything else. For me, having the opportunity to meet and simply know the scholars at a personal level was a peak experience. I didn't know how much help they were going to be. But, now that I look back I'm like, 'Yeah, it was definitely a great time getting to know them.'

In general, there was strong agreement among the Scholars that the connections made within the program, with the Leaders, Peer Mentors, and Scholars, benefited them. Scholars were grateful for the exposure to these social resources before beginning their coursework on campus.

Concluding Discussion

The "admissions experiment" results suggested it might be possible to increase campus diversity by contingently admitting an ethnically-diverse sample of low-income, first-generation college borderline applicants. Study 1 concluded that during the first semester in college, the Scholars who participated in the bridge program performed comparably to a comparison sample with slightly better admissions credentials, e.g., high school grades and tests scores. Yet, as anticipated, differences emerged after the spring semester and the first year in college, with the comparison sample performing better than the Scholars. It is noteworthy that Scholars earned higher grades after the first semester and similar grades after the spring semester relative to a comparison sample with matched credentials. These findings suggest that summer bridge programs may be effective tools for facilitating university success for borderline applicants, particularly those from more diverse backgrounds. This is consistent with findings of other investigations (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Myers & Drevlow, 1982).

Using focus group interviews, Study 2 examined the experiences of borderline applicants in the USP and at the university. We found that particular components of the program helped the Scholars in their transition to the university, including being exposed to both academic and social campus resources and participating in a highly-structured summer program that helped to lessen the shock of the college workload. On the other hand, the majority of the Scholars agreed that the “tough love” messaging was not the most effective way to motivate students who were identified as borderline applicants. Finally, the bridge program neglected to address the challenge of being a minority on a predominantly White campus, including being viewed and treated as “different” by White students, including White program Scholars. While the aims of the program were to help facilitate a smooth integration to the campus, many Scholars of color were left underprepared to deal with issues of race and racism on campus.

Students’ experiences also varied once they began their first semesters at the university. During the transition, a large number of students described the challenge of adjusting to a new workload compared to high school and the opportunity to develop more independence. That is, they enjoyed being free to choose classes, design their schedules, and pursue personal interests. A subset of Scholars explained the difficulty of balancing the positive aspects of independence with familial pressures, often encountering a mismatch or conflict between the two competing domains. These experiences are supported by other work highlighting the mismatch in cultural values, and the negative effects on performance and well-being, for first-generation college students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Stephens et al., 2012).

Taken together, the present studies contribute to the existing literature on the effects of summer bridge programs on student outcomes in two important ways. First, we examine a unique subset of student participants in an “admissions experiment.” These were students who originally denied acceptance into the university, but were given a “second chance.” To our knowledge, this sample is understudied. Second, we utilize quantitative and qualitative measures to examine student performance and experiences, and to offer some insights on identifying which components of the program helped students and which undermined student progress.

One important insight, for example, is how our findings inform current university admission policies for underrepresented applicants. Specifically, in terms of admissions criteria, we found that the Scholars earned lower test scores but higher high school grades than the matched comparison sample. The Scholars were ultimately denied acceptance into the university, suggesting that test scores trumped high school grades when determining who was “prepared” for the university. Yet, given persisting social class and race differences on standardized testing (Jencks & Phillips, 2001; Orlich, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and that high school grades are commonly found to be better predictors of college performance (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004), perhaps it is worth revisiting the use of traditional cognitive measures as sole indicators for admissions criteria. As Sedlacek (2004) suggests, non-cognitive assessment tools, such as those that helped to identify the Scholars, may be a more culturally appropriate way of capturing students’ abilities and readiness for the university workload.

We can also draw important insights for university staff, mentors, faculty, admissions personnel, and others who work with underrepresented students to consider when designing their own support programs. First, exposure to academic and social campus resources proves vital for all students, but particularly those who are the first in their families to attend college. Second, students benefit greatly from a highly structured summer program to help them learn how to better manage their time and to set high

expectations for the semester workload. As one Scholar expressed, “I like how they disciplined us before we came so that I expected to get my stuff done.” Third, given the likely adversity that these students encounter before coming to the university, we recommend that programs think carefully about the overall message delivered to program participants. That is, in our sample, the “tough love” messaging that instructed students to “work harder to prove that they belonged on campus” was not only discouraging but also stigmatizing for students. Some Scholars ultimately changed the way they identified with the program, i.e., some students distanced themselves from the program. Programs should work to include multiple messages of encouragement and high expectations to reach and motivate their diverse audience.

Finally, based on the experience of our Scholars of color and the recent events occurring for students of color across college campus (Watanabe & Song, 2015; Wing Sue, 2010), we recommend that program curriculums incorporate more race-related discussions. Before beginning at the university, students should have a platform to learn about and to ask candid questions about the experiences of students of color on college campuses. Specifically, programs should consider including various workshops on race-related issues, inviting current faculty and students of color to speak on panels, and creating an on-going service that helps students tackle race-related issues as they arise throughout their undergraduate careers. While some students are able to find outlets, like cultural centers and one-on-one mentoring, to supplement the lack of resources on confronting these race-based issues, it is not guaranteed that all students will find such outlets. Instead, students will feel less integrated on campus and learn to cope in ineffective ways, like “avoiding the dining halls” or leaving the university altogether.

There are some caveats to our findings. First, our study focuses on one bridge program, making it difficult to generalize its application to other institutions — a limitation shared with other investigations (Kezar, 2000). Yet, many benefits and challenges Scholars described have been supported by past work, e.g., campus resources, structured scheduling, limited diversity. Second, we used a non-random, “natural admissions experiment” to compare the Scholars’ performance with two other samples. Future work should include a randomized clinical trial to augment the evidence base, and should deploy a mixed-method approach. As in the present study, first-person accounts provide valuable interpretive insight into the meaning and implications of statistical results.

What of Jessica’s claim represented in the title of this study? Given the performance patterns among our groups, perhaps there is some credibility in her claim that borderline applicants “study more” and “get better grades” than classmates meeting standard admissions criteria. Certainly her claim and our findings suggest admissions practices that draw “red lines” might be unintentionally ruling out an effective way to promote diversity on four-year campuses. Thus, admissions policies might benefit from reconsidering the traditional ways of assessing “readiness” for the university in order to target diverse students who, as Jessica put it, “should’ve been first picked”.

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Appendix A
Study 2: Interview Protocol

Theme 1: The Semester Experience

1. If you could describe your first semester in a few words or phrases, what would they be?
2. How do you feel about being here at the University of Delaware now?
3. Do you feel like you belong here as a student? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel connected to other UD students? To the campus?
5. What was easy about the transition to college? What was difficult about the transition?
6. Do you feel like you were prepared for the academics and life at UD?
7. If you knew what you know now about being a student at UD, what you do differently? What would you do the same?
8. What are some differences in life at home and life at UD? What are some similarities?

Theme 2: Highlights/Challenges

9. What was the highlight of your semester? Why was this a highlighting moment?
10. What was the most challenging part of your semester? How did you deal with this?

Theme 3: The Program

11. What ways did the program help you?
12. What ways did the program not help you?
13. What are some challenging moments that you remember as a Scholar in the program? What are some positive moments that you remember?
14. What would have helped you be more successful this semester?

Wrap-Up Question:

15. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us that we did not ask or missed?

Appendix B
Study 2: Coding Scheme Categories

Category	Examples
First Semester Experience <i>Descriptions of students' experiences in the first semester of college</i>	
Academic Issues	"I have to study more in college than I did in high school;" "I have more responsibilities to juggle"
Positive Transition	"College is giving me more freedom;" "I got good grades;" "I made new friends"
Difficult Transition	"I did not do so well in my classes;" "I go home often;" "Classes are difficult"
Family Issues	"My family doesn't understand how demanding school is;" "My family supports me"
Being at the University <i>Students' general experiences of belonging and preparation for the university</i>	
Identification with College	"I feel comfortable at the university;" "I'm proud to be a student here"
Surprise at Being Admitted	"I was not expecting to attend this university"
Peer Connections with University Students	"Other students have similar values as mine;" "Other students make comments about my 'unfair' admission"
Academic Preparation in High School	"I took challenging courses in high school to prepare for college"
Program Scholar Connections <i>Students' connections with other scholars in the program</i>	
Frustrations	"Other scholars don't take the program seriously or study;" "I don't feel close to the other scholars"
Positive Experiences	"The scholars are good source of social support"
Evaluating the Program <i>Students' evaluations of the effectiveness of the program</i>	
Program Benefits	"The program introduced me to helpful resources on campus;" "The program prepared me for the academic workload"
Program Leaders	"The program leaders were my role models;" "I don't connect with the program leaders"
Programs Criticisms	"The program was too structured and strict;" "The program messaging was not motivating"

Table 1

Study 1: Demographic Information for Scholars, Sample 1, and Sample 2

	Scholars N = 32	Sample 1 N = 201	Sample 2 N = 1245
Gender			
Male	11	104	543
Female	21	97	702
Ethnicity			
White	12	141	903
Black	12	33	114
Latino/Hispanic	3	8	33
Asian	0	11	92
Multi-ethnic	5	8	103
White/Asian	1	1	9
White/Latino	2	3	52
White/Black	2	3	17
Black/Latino	0	1	12
More than 2 Races	0	0	5
Unknown/Not Reported	0	0	8
College Generation Status			
First-Generation	32	27	244
Continuing-Generation	0	174	1001
Income Status			
Low-Income	22	44	293
High-Income	10	157	952

*Table 2**Study 2: Frequencies of themes and categories from group interviews*

Category	Number of Examples (%)
Evaluating the Program	N = 318
Criticisms	47% (<i>n</i> = 148)
Benefits	43% (<i>n</i> = 136)
Program Leaders	11% (<i>n</i> = 34)
First Semester Experiences	N = 186
Positive Transition	41% (<i>n</i> = 76)
Academic Issues	24% (<i>n</i> = 45)
Difficult Transition	23% (<i>n</i> = 42)
Family Issues	12% (<i>n</i> = 23)
Being at the University	N = 80
Identification with College	53% (<i>n</i> = 42)
Peer Connections with University Students	26% (<i>n</i> = 21)
Surprise at Being Admitted	11% (<i>n</i> = 9)
Academic Preparation for College	10% (<i>n</i> = 8)
Program Scholar Connections	N = 41
Frustrating Experiences	63% (<i>n</i> = 26)
Positive Experiences	37% (<i>n</i> = 15)