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COMMENTARY

The Bridge and the Troll Underneath

Summer Bridge Programs and Degree Completion

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College graduation rates in the United States are low both in real and relative terms. This has left policymakers and leaders of these institutions looking for novel solutions, while perhaps ignoring extant but underused programs. In this study, our research examines the effect on degree completion of "summer bridge" programs, which have students enroll in coursework prior to beginning their first full academic year.

Some scholars have attempted to explain low rates of degree completion by pointing to poor academic preparation among a growing proportion of college students. This is evidenced by the high numbers of students requiring remediation upon entering college. Unfortunately these remedial sequences are often non-credit bearing have been linked to student discouragement and retention problems. Others have emphasized the role of early academic momentum in bolstering degree completion. Clifford Adelman's research shows that students with higher rates of course-taking and credit accumulation are more likely to finish college on time. These two perspectives converge in the examination of summer bridge programs, as they both address concerns about academic preparation and boost early momentum.

Our research uses the nationally-representative Beyond Postsecondary Study (BPS) college transcript data as well as data from one large university system to assess the effects of summer bridge programs. The analysis utilizes a quasi-experimental technique called propensity score matching to account for selection effects among students.

In the national data, we find that at community colleges and less-selective four-year colleges, students who attend bridge programs are ten percentage points more likely to finish degrees within six years. Furthermore, while the effects of bridge programs on degree completion occur across student subgroups, heterogeneity tests reveal that effect sizes are larger for black and Hispanic students (compared to whites, Asians, and others),and larger among first-generation college students, and students with lower GPAs in high school.

While the national data clearly suggest that bridge programs assist students in completing their degrees, these data are not sufficiently detailed to suggest *how* this effect is produced. We turned to data from a large university system. With these data we knew why students had enrolled in bridge programs—students who required remedial coursework were eligible to enroll. This university system further restricts students from beginning certain coursework until they successfully complete assigned remedial courses. These data suggest that, on average, students who enroll in bridge programs: a) were more likely to be retained into their second year, b) passed a larger proportion of their courses, and c) attempted and earned more credits in their first two years than comparable students who did not attend bridge programs.

Broadly, our findings suggest that colleges could fruitfully make more use of bridge programs to bolster both retention and degree completion, especially among high-risk populations. But given that some other studies, including a Randomized

Controlled Trial, have found mixed effects, we recommend that college administrators first document the impact of their own existing bridge programs as a first step before expanding their current offerings. But our research also implies another perspective on this mixed evidence. Though the national data showed only long-term effects, we found strong immediate effects of bridge programs in one large university system where these programs directly addressed the institution's highly consequential remediation policies. Here, beyond the general effect on academic preparation, this particular bridge program specifically increased academic momentum by allowing students to avoid remedial sequences that research has shown to have serious negative consequences. This suggests that bridge programs are only one part of a complex puzzle of boosting degree completion.

For the full study, see Daniel Douglas and Paul Attewell, "The Bridge and the Troll Underneath: Summer Bridge Programs and Degree Completion," American Journal of Education Vol. 121, No. 1 (November 2014), pp. 87-109.

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